History audiobook scripts

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The Bread That Started a Revolution

Revolution, France · Adult (40–55) · Light French · 45 seconds

The bread in Paris in the summer of 1788 was not merely expensive. It was inedible — black, dense, cut with chalk and clay by bakers who had run out of flour. A working family in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine spent eighty percent of their income on it. Eighty percent. On bread that made them sick. Marie Antoinette did not say "let them eat cake." But the reason that lie stuck, the reason it spread across Europe within weeks and has never quite died in three hundred years, is that it felt precisely true. You don't need a spark to start a fire when the whole city is already dry.

The Mapmaker's Confession

Partition, South Asia · Mature (55+) · Neutral British · 45 seconds

By the time Cyril Radcliffe boarded his plane back to London, he had already burned his notes. He refused his fee. He never returned to India and he never spoke publicly about what he had done there — not once, in the thirty years he had left to live. He had drawn a border through a country he'd visited for five weeks, in a language he couldn't read, through villages he'd never seen. Fourteen million people were moving because of lines he'd made with a pen. He knew it. He went home, and he was quiet about it for the rest of his life, and I think that silence tells you everything the documents cannot.

Fire Over Dresden

War, WWII · Adult (40-55) · Neutral British · 45 seconds

The first wave hit at ten minutes past ten. By the time the second wave arrived two hours later, the fires from the first had grown large enough that the pilots could see Dresden from sixty miles away — a glow on the horizon like a second sunrise. Down in the cellars, survivors of the first raid were emerging into streets where the asphalt was on fire, where the thermal column rising from the burning city center was generating winds strong enough to pull people off their feet. A firestorm is not a fire. It is a self-sustaining weather event. It pulls in its own wind. It does not need you to feed it. Dresden burned for three days.

Cannae: The Perfect Killing

Ancient, military · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 45 seconds

Here's what Hannibal understood that the Romans did not: a larger army is only an advantage if it has room to use itself. He put his weakest troops in the center and let them bend. Bent deliberately, absorbing the Roman push, falling back in a controlled arc while his cavalry collapsed the flanks. By midday on August 2nd, 216 BC, seventy thousand Roman soldiers were surrounded on all sides, pressed so tightly together they could barely lift their weapons. They were not killed so much as suffocated by a geometry Hannibal had spent two years designing. Military academies still teach Cannae. They teach it because nobody, before or since, has done it better.

The Last Tsar's Last Morning

Revolution, Russia · Mature (55+) · Neutral British · 45 seconds

Nicholas was told to wake his family and dress them warmly. He was told they were being moved for their safety, that White Army forces were approaching Yekaterinburg. He did not know, as he helped his son down the stairs at two in the morning, that the boy he was carrying would be dead within the hour. The family was brought to the basement. Chairs were carried in — Yurovsky said it was for a photograph. Then the squad entered. Alexandra had just enough time to make the sign of the cross. The detail that stays with me, after everything: Nicholas's last instinct, before he understood what was happening, was to step in front of his children.

Lenin at the Finland Station

Revolution, Russia · Adult (40-55) · Neutral British · 45 seconds

When the train pulled into the Finland Station on the night of April 3rd, 1917, nobody in the crowd quite knew what they were looking at. He was short. He wore a round hat. He had been in exile for seventeen years and he was forty-six years old and he walked out onto the platform and immediately began telling the people who had come to welcome him that everything they had done so far was wrong. No coalition government. No cooperation with the bourgeoisie. No waiting. The Mensheviks in the crowd thought he'd gone mad from the train ride. He hadn't. He had simply decided, years earlier, exactly what he was going to do when this moment came — and the moment had come.

Harriet

American history, abolition · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 45 seconds

She traveled at night, in winter, through swamp and forest, with a group that included a sick infant she had dosed with paregoric to keep from crying. She moved on the North Star when it was visible and on intuition when it wasn't. She had a gun. She used it once — not on a patroller, but pointed at a man in her group who wanted to turn back. "You'll be free or you'll die," she told him. He kept walking. She brought all of them through. Then she went back. This was her third trip. She would make about ten more. Not one person who traveled with Harriet Tubman was ever caught.

Pompeii, Afternoon of the 24th

Ancient, disaster · Adult (40-55) · Neutral British · 1 minute

It is one in the afternoon on the 24th of August, 79 AD. The mountain has been shaking for four days, which is unusual but not alarming — Vesuvius shakes. A column of ash and gas is now rising from the summit, shaped, as Pliny the Younger would later write, like an umbrella pine. Most people in Pompeii are watching it. Some are packing. The fuller on the Via dell'Abbondanza has left a load of laundry still in the press. A dog is chained outside a bakery on the Via di Nola. The bread is in the oven. We know all of this because eighteen hours from now, all of it will be sealed under twenty feet of volcanic material, exactly as it is, in this ordinary afternoon that has no idea what it is.

The Unsinkable Hour

Disaster, maritime · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 45 seconds

At 2:17 in the morning, the band stopped playing. This is the detail survivors mention more than almost any other — not the cold, not the screaming, but the moment the music stopped. For two hours and forty minutes they had played waltzes and hymns on a tilting deck in the North Atlantic in April, and then the angle became impossible and they stopped and each musician made whatever choice he made next. The bow was under. The stern rose until the ship was nearly vertical, and then the lights went out — all at once, not in sequence — and the sound that witnesses described from the lifeboats was unlike anything they had words for. Eight hundred yards away, in the water, fifteen hundred people were still alive.

Inside the Manhattan Project

War, science · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 45 seconds

By the spring of 1945, Germany was finished, and everyone in Los Alamos knew it. The bomb had been built to stop Hitler. Hitler was dead. And yet the work continued — because stopping felt inconceivable, because the bureaucratic momentum of one hundred thirty thousand people and two billion dollars does not simply halt, and because several of the men involved had convinced themselves that what they were building was so terrible it would make war itself obsolete. Oppenheimer believed this. He would stop believing it approximately thirty seconds after Trinity. Leo Szilard circulated a petition asking Truman not to use it. Sixty-nine scientists signed it. It was classified and buried. The bomb was ready in July. There was a target list.

A Disease with No Name

Medical, modern · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 45 seconds

In the summer of 1981, a doctor in Los Angeles named Michael Gottlieb wrote a case report about five young men — previously healthy, all gay — who had developed a rare pneumonia that almost never appeared except in patients whose immune systems had already been destroyed by something else. He filed the report because he didn't know what he was looking at. The CDC published it on June 5th. By the time it was printed, two of the five men were dead. By the end of that year, 270 cases had been reported. By the end of the following year, it would be 1,600. The government would not hold a press conference about it for four more years. The president would not say the word publicly for six.

The Night the Wall Came Down

Cold War, Germany · Adult (40-55) · Light German · 1 minute

Günter Schabowski had not been in the meeting where the decision was made. He'd been given a note just before the press conference and told to announce it, and the note did not specify when the new travel regulations would take effect. So when a reporter asked him directly, Schabowski shuffled his papers and said — live on East German state television, on the evening of November 9th, 1989 — "immediately, without delay." He was wrong. The regulations weren't supposed to begin until the next morning. But the broadcast went out, and within hours ten thousand people were at the checkpoints, and the guards had no orders and no phones were being answered, and eventually a lieutenant colonel named Harald Jäger just made a decision and opened the gate. That's how it ended. A bureaucratic miscommunication and one man who didn't feel like starting a massacre tonight.

Gold in the Pan

American West · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 45 seconds

The forty-niners have been romanticized so thoroughly that it takes some effort to see what the Gold Rush actually looked like from the ground. It looked like twenty-three-year-old men dying of cholera in tent camps. It looked like the California Native population — one hundred fifty thousand people in 1845 — reduced to thirty thousand by 1870 through massacre, forced labor, and introduced disease. It looked like a Chinese laborer working a claim that the law said he could not own, in a state whose highest court had ruled he could not testify against a white man. The gold was real. About five percent of the people who came for it found enough to matter. The other ninety-five percent built California anyway, because they had nothing left to go back to.

Sitting Bull's Last Winter

American West, Indigenous history · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 45 seconds

He was shot by Indian police officers — men from his own people, employed by the agency — on the morning of December 15th, 1890, during an attempt to arrest him for allegedly supporting the Ghost Dance movement. He was fifty-nine. Two weeks later, at a creek called Wounded Knee, the 7th Cavalry killed between two hundred fifty and three hundred Lakota men, women, and children, most of them unarmed. Twenty soldiers received the Medal of Honor. They have never been rescinded. I don't tell you this to make you angry, though anger is a reasonable response. I tell you because a history that ends at the treaty and doesn't follow the treaty to its conclusion is not history. It's a press release.

The Emperor's New Map

War, Europe · Adult (40-55) · Neutral British · 1 minute

Napoleon invaded Russia in June of 1812 with the largest army ever assembled on European soil — six hundred thousand men — and a set of maps that were, in several critical areas, badly out of date. Roads marked as passable were not. The distances were longer than anyone had planned for. He captured Moscow in September to find it empty and on fire — the Russians had burned it themselves rather than surrender it — and waited five weeks in the ruins for a peace offer that never came. When he finally retreated in October, winter had arrived early. Of the six hundred thousand men who crossed into Russia that June, fewer than one hundred thousand came back.

Wu Zetian's Mirror

Ancient, China · Adult (40-55) · Neutral British · 45 seconds

Every source we have on Wu Zetian was written by men who had professional and personal reasons to despise her. She had restructured the civil service in ways that cost the old aristocracy their inherited positions. She had executed rivals. She had, most unforgivably, ruled — openly, unapologetically, for fifteen years as the sole sovereign of the Tang dynasty in a Confucian society that held female rule to be a disorder of nature. So when the official histories describe her as a seductress, a murderer, a woman who killed her own infant daughter to frame a rival — you have to ask the question any good historian asks: who wrote this, and what did they need to be true? The answer shapes everything that follows.

Three Days in Memphis

Civil rights · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 45 seconds

He had not wanted to go to Memphis. He was exhausted — those who were with him in those last months describe a man barely sleeping, preoccupied, carrying something they didn't have a name for. He gave his last sermon on the night of April 3rd, and it was extraordinary, the kind that made people weep who had heard him a hundred times before. He talked about longevity. He said he would like to live a long life. He said it didn't matter to him now. The next evening, at six-oh-one on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel, he was talking to a musician below about a song he wanted played at the rally. Those were, as far as anyone can reconstruct it, the last words he said.

The Bones Under the Car Park

Archaeology, British history · Adult (40-55) · Neutral British · 1 minute

On the 25th of August, 2012, archaeologists excavating a car park in Leicester found a skeleton with severe scoliosis, an iron arrowhead lodged among the bones of its upper back, and a skull opened by the blows of bladed weapons. The University of Leicester press office drafted a cautious statement. Nobody wanted to say what everyone was thinking. The DNA results took six months. When they came back, they confirmed something that changed, in a very specific and British way, the relationship between the public and history — which is the discovery that history is not over, that it is still physically present, that the man whose reputation Shakespeare destroyed and whose body had been missing for five hundred and twenty-seven years was, in fact, under a parking space in the East Midlands. Richard the Third had been found.

Timbuktu's Burning Libraries

Modern, Africa · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 45 seconds

When Islamist militants occupied Timbuktu in 2012, one of the first things the city's librarians did was start moving manuscripts. At night, in secret, they carried bundles of medieval documents — astronomy, mathematics, theology, medicine, some of them seven hundred years old — out of the Ahmed Baba Institute and into private homes, hiding them under beds and in grain sacks. When the militants eventually burned the library, most of what they burned were decoys. Approximately three hundred forty thousand manuscripts survived. Most of them are sitting, right now, in nondescript buildings in Bamako, hundreds of miles to the south, waiting for a stable enough future to be properly catalogued. Most of them have never been read by a Western scholar. We have almost no idea what is in them.

The Vote She Never Cast

Women's history, American · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

Elizabeth Cady Stanton died in 1902, eighteen years before the Nineteenth Amendment passed. Susan B. Anthony died in 1906. Sojourner Truth in 1883. Ida B. Wells lived until 1931, long enough to vote, though not long enough to see the Voting Rights Act that would, decades later, make the right she had fought for real for Black women in the South. What I keep returning to, writing this last chapter, is the particular kind of hope required to spend a lifetime fighting for something you are certain you will never live to see. Not optimism — optimism is easy, it's just a personality type. Hope, the deliberate kind, is a choice made in full knowledge of the odds. These women made it every day for seventy years. I think we owe them more than a paragraph in a textbook. I think we owe them the attempt to actually understand what that cost.

The Great Stink

Victorian, public health · Adult (40-55) · Neutral British · 1 minute

In the summer of 1858, London stopped being able to ignore its river. The city's sewage had long flowed straight into the Thames. Then came a hot June. The water dropped, and the smell rose.

The newspapers called it the Great Stink. In the new Houses of Parliament, on the riverbank, the curtains were soaked in chloride of lime to keep it out. It did not work. Members who had spent years avoiding the cost of a sewer system found they could not bear to sit in the chamber.

Within weeks, the money was approved. The engineer Joseph Bazalgette built more than a thousand miles of sewers.

Parliament had acted to get rid of a smell. Most people believed disease travelled on bad air. It did not. Cholera was in the water. But the sewers took it out of the water anyway, and after a last outbreak in 1866, in a district not yet connected, London's cholera epidemics were over.

The Molasses Flood

Disaster, American · Adult (25-40) · Neutral American · 45 seconds

On the fifteenth of January, 1919, it was unusually warm in Boston. A little after noon, in the North End, a steel tank fifty feet tall and full of molasses split open.

More than two million gallons came out at once. The wave was taller than a man, some said far taller, and it moved faster than a person could run. It knocked buildings off their foundations and bent the girders of the elevated railway. People and horses were caught in it, and the harder they struggled, the tighter it held them.

Twenty-one people died. Around a hundred and fifty were injured.

For decades afterward, residents said, on hot summer days, the neighborhood still smelled sweet.

Halifax, Five Past Nine

Disaster, Canada · Adult (40-55) · Light Canadian · 90 seconds

At quarter to nine on the morning of December the sixth, 1917, two ships collided in the narrows of Halifax Harbour. One was a Norwegian vessel, the Imo, heading out. The other was a French cargo ship, the Mont-Blanc, coming in. She was carrying nearly three thousand tonnes of explosives for the war in Europe.

The collision was slow, and the damage looked small. But it started a fire on the Mont-Blanc's deck, and her crew, who knew exactly what they were carrying, took to their lifeboats and rowed hard for the far shore.

Nobody else knew. People came down to the waterfront to watch the burning ship. Across the city, in houses and schools and offices, they came to the windows.

At about five past nine, the Mont-Blanc exploded. It was the largest explosion human beings had ever caused. Around two thousand people were killed and nine thousand injured, many of them by glass from the windows they had been watching through.

Down at the rail yard, a train dispatcher named Vince Coleman had been told to run. Instead, he went back to his telegraph key and sent a warning to stop an incoming passenger train. He was killed at his post.

The train stopped.

What Left Ireland

Famine, Ireland · Mature (55+) · Irish · 1 minute

In the autumn of 1845, farmers across Ireland dug up their potatoes and found them black and rotting in the ground. A blight had crossed the Atlantic. It would come back, year after year, for most of the next decade.

For about a third of the population, the potato was not part of the diet. It was the diet. When it failed, there was nothing underneath.

Around a million people died, of hunger and of the diseases that follow it. At least a million more left, many on ships so crowded and fever-ridden that they became known as coffin ships.

And through all of it, Ireland went on exporting food. Grain, butter and livestock left Irish ports, some of it under armed guard, past people who could not afford to buy it.

Before the famine, Ireland had about eight and a half million people. The island as a whole has still not returned to that number.

The Boundary Stones

Plague, English village · Adult (30-45) · Neutral British · 90 seconds

In the late summer of 1665, a parcel of cloth arrived from London at a tailor's house in the Derbyshire village of Eyam. It was damp, so the tailor's assistant, George Viccars, hung it by the fire to dry. Within days he was ill, and soon he was dead. The cloth, it seems, had carried fleas, and the fleas had carried the plague.

By the following spring, the dead were being counted in dozens. The village's young rector, William Mompesson, and the minister he had replaced, Thomas Stanley, made a proposal. If Eyam stayed where it was, the plague might stay with it. If people fled, they would carry it into every town for miles.

Eyam agreed to close itself. A boundary was marked out with stones. Neighbouring villages and the Earl of Devonshire left food and supplies at the edge, and were paid with coins left in holes filled with vinegar, which people hoped would make them clean. Church services moved outdoors, so the congregation could stand apart.

The plague burned through the village until the autumn of 1666. At least two hundred and sixty people died, among them Mompesson's wife, Catherine.

As far as anyone can tell, the plague went no further than the boundary stones.

The Treasure Fleets

Exploration, China · Adult (30-45) · Neutral American · 1 minute

In 1405, a fleet sailed from China larger than any Europe had ever sent to sea. Well over two hundred ships, by the usual estimates, and nearly twenty-eight thousand men, under the command of a court official named Zheng He.

Over the next twenty-eight years, he led seven voyages. His fleets reached Java and Sri Lanka, Calicut on the coast of India, Hormuz at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, and the coast of East Africa as far as Malindi.

They carried silk and porcelain out, and brought back envoys, spices and, famously, a giraffe, which was presented at the Ming court as a qilin, a creature of good omen.

After Zheng He died, around 1433, the voyages stopped. The court turned its attention inward. Within a few decades, it would be European ships coming the other way.

Twelve Seconds

Invention, American · Young adult (18-25) · Neutral American · 45 seconds

It is a little after half past ten on the seventeenth of December, 1903, on the sand at Kill Devil Hills, North Carolina. The wind is cold and strong. A handful of people from the area have come out to watch, and one of them, John Daniels, has been put in charge of a camera he has never used.

Orville Wright lies flat on the lower wing. His brother Wilbur runs alongside, steadying it.

The machine lifts. It stays up for twelve seconds and covers about a hundred and twenty feet.

They fly three more times that morning. Then a gust flips the machine over and wrecks it. It never flies again. It does not need to.

Reactor Four

Disaster, Soviet Union · Adult (40-55) · Neutral British · 1 minute

At twenty-three minutes past one on the morning of the twenty-sixth of April, 1986, the operators of Reactor Number Four at the Chernobyl power station, in Soviet Ukraine, were running a safety test. It went wrong in seconds. A surge of power, then explosions, and the reactor lay open to the sky.

The town of Pripyat, about two miles away, was home to nearly fifty thousand people. It was not evacuated until the following afternoon. Residents were told to pack for three days. Most of them never went back.

The Soviet government told the outside world nothing. It was a nuclear plant in Sweden, more than six hundred miles away, that raised the alarm, when workers arriving for their shift set off its radiation monitors. Only then did Moscow issue a statement. A few lines, read out on the evening news.

Eureka

Colonial, Australia · Adult (30-45) · Australian · 90 seconds

In 1854, if you wanted to dig for gold on the Ballarat fields in the colony of Victoria, you needed a licence. It had to be paid for whether you found any gold or not, and most men did not. Police went out hunting for unlicensed diggers twice a week, and a man caught without his licence could be chained to a log until his case was heard.

The miners could not vote. They had no say in the laws that governed them.

That spring, their anger boiled over. At a mass meeting on Bakery Hill, they raised a new flag, a white cross and stars on a blue field, and burned their licences. Days later, some of them built a rough timber stockade on the Eureka lead.

Before dawn on Sunday the third of December, with most of its defenders gone home for the night, soldiers and police attacked. The fighting was over in around a quarter of an hour. More than twenty diggers and six soldiers died.

Thirteen men were tried for high treason. Melbourne juries acquitted every one of them. Within a year, the licence had been replaced by a cheap miner's right that came with the vote, and one of the stockade's leaders, Peter Lalor, was a member of the colony's parliament.

The City on the Lake

Conquest, Mexico · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 1 minute

On the eighth of November, 1519, Hernán Cortés, a few hundred Spanish soldiers and thousands of their Indigenous allies walked along a causeway across the waters of Lake Texcoco, toward the capital of the Mexica, Tenochtitlan.

It was one of the largest cities in the world. Perhaps two hundred thousand people lived there, more than in any city in Spain. It rose from the lake on an island, joined to the shore by raised roads, with canals for streets, gardens on the water, an aqueduct carrying fresh water from the hills, and a market so large and orderly that it astonished the men who saw it.

One of those soldiers, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, wrote decades later that some of them wondered whether what they were seeing was a dream.

Less than two years later, after a siege and an epidemic of smallpox, the city lay in ruins. Mexico City was built on top of it.

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