

The causes and 'outbreak' of World War One edited A view from the UK

Basic Information

World War One, and in particular, the causes and outbreak of the war are particularly high profile in history education at the moment, given the impending centennial anniversary of the outbreak of the war. Another reason for the continuing attention to the causes and outbreak of the war is that even after a hundred years of academic writing about the topic, there is no overwhelming consensus of professional historical opinion about which country was most responsible for the war, what were the main causes of the war, or why the war started in 1914 rather than some other date.

Reference to the curricula

World War One has always been a standard topic in history teaching in the UK, and under current National Curriculum arrangements, is one of only four compulsory topics which students must be taught (the other compulsory topics are Slavery, the Holocaust, and World War Two. World War One will also be a topic which students 'should be taught', in the proposals for the new National Curriculum for history, to be introduced in September 2014. Students may well study this topic as 14 year olds, and again if they take the Modern World History option at examination level. Text books invariably give some attention to the outbreak and causes of the war, partly because of the perceived importance of the war as a major event in British history, but also because the controversies of interpretation which are part of the topic, make it a very useful example of a topic which can help students to understand that there are different views about the causes and outbreak of the war, which makes it well suited to the current frame of curriculum planning which is based on the use of 'enquiry questions' to frame curriculum planning.

Learning objectives

In terms of learning objectives, we would hope that at the end of the period of study, students would have a sound grasp of the events leading up to the war, and an understanding that there is a range of views about what factors led to war, and which countries were most responsible for the outbreak of war. Moreover, as well as understanding that there is no consensus amongst professional historians about these issues, some theories have more validity than others, and it is not the case that all theories have equal validity. Interpretations of the past can be validated by the strength of evidence underpinning them, and that there is a community of practice of experts in this field, who question and test

the theories that are advanced in this field.

How the outbreak of World War One is covered in the UK: textbooks, popular history magazines, and newspapers

Students in the UK sometimes study this topic at the different age levels. World War One is a compulsory topic in the National Curriculum for History, so all students study the topic at the age of 13 or 14. At this level, brief attention is given to the outbreak of the war, with substantive focus tending to spend most of the curriculum time on the war on the Western Front.

At GCSE exam level (15/16 year olds), for students who have chosen to continue with the study of history, there is more detailed treatment of the outbreak of war, with coverage typically focusing on the crises leading up to the war, 1905-14, and causes of tension (arms race, colonial rivalry, alliance system etc). For students studying A level history (16-18 year olds), syllabuses which included the First World War would expect students to have some grasp of the historiography surrounding the outbreak of war, and the differing views of historians on which country was most responsible for the outbreak of war, why the war broke out in 1914 and not at another time, the extent to which the situation in the Balkans was responsible for the outbreak of war and other contested aspects of the outbreak of war.

The approaching centennial anniversary of the outbreak of World War One has brought about a plethora of magazine and newspaper articles about the causes and outbreak of war, which many eminent UK historians have contributed to. Different views are expressed, particularly over whether Great Britain should have entered the war or stood aside. Niall Ferguson is quite critical of Britain's role in the lead up to the war, but several other historians (for example, Gary Sheffield) have argued that we had to get involved or accept German hegemony over Europe. There are therefore some interesting comparisons with the debate in Germany – see below.

We feel that one of the key things that learners get out of the project is that historians, journalists and politicians disagree about the past, but there are ways of trying to ascertain which versions of the past are most trustworthy and authoritative.

The way of presenting the "outbreak" of World War One in German textbooks

A closer look into curricula and textbooks is useful to get an idea of how the start of World War One is presented in German popular history magazines. In Bavaria, the start of World War One is always embedded within the complex of "Imperialism and WWI", dealing with four major subjects:

1. Crisis in the Balkan, assassination of Sarajevo and the "path to war"

2. The industrialized war and how people experienced this war at the front and at home
3. The landmark year of 1917 and the Russian Revolution
4. End of war, Treaty of Versailles and consequences

Having covered this chapter, there is often a close link to the chapter of “The Weimar Republic”, ending in the collapse of the first German parliamentary democracy and the rise of National Socialism.

Principally, textbooks respond to the so-called “controversy of Fischer”. In 1961, historian Fritz Fischer introduced in his work “Germany's Aims in the First World War” [Griff nach der Weltmacht. Die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschlands 1914/1918, Düsseldorf] a thesis, stating that imperial Germany had not “plunged” into World War One and there was no “outbreak” of World War One. Important parts of the social, political and military society had rather lead the German Reich deliberately into World War One, allegedly paying attention to not being the attacker. The thesis has been seriously criticized by German historians, because it would have had confirmed belatedly the so-called German “guilt of war”, stated in article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles. However, in Germany, all social forces from left to right wing had been refusing to accept the accusations made in the Treaty of Versailles since 1919. Today, historians are of the opinion that there is no definite guilt of the World War one’s start and above all that Germany cannot be hold responsible exclusively for this outbreak, although they definitely acknowledge “plans of war” of certain parts of the German society and government.

Today, most of the textbooks consciously avoid formulations like “sliding into war” or “outbreak of the war”, using rather the more neutral terminology of “path to World War one”. Regarding the past and present significance of this question, it is important to clarify the implication of the choice of terminology (“plunge” vs. “outbreak” vs. “start”, etc.) and to encourage pupils to develop a rather own and critical opinion.

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