

Which Country Was to Blame for World War I?

Overview

In this activity, students role play members of a commission who read experts' differing assessments on blame for World War I and decide which country, if any, was responsible for the war.

Handouts for each student:

- Reading: **A Fire Waiting to Be Lit: The Origins of World War I**
- **Which Country Was to Blame for World War I? (Student Instructions)**
- **The Experts Disagree: Which Country Was to Blame for World War I?**
- **Graphic Organizer for The Experts Disagree**

Procedure:

1. Explain the following:
In the Versailles Treaty marking the end of the war, blame was placed on Germany and its allies for causing the war. Almost immediately, historians and others thought this judgment was wrong and a debate has continued to this day over which country, if any, was responsible for starting the war.
2. Tell students that they are going to role play members of an international commission assigned to place the blame for starting the war.
3. Divide the class into small groups. Distribute the handouts to students.
4. Review the **Student Instructions** handout with students, including the introductory part and each of the four tasks they are to do, answering any questions they may have.
5. When students are ready, call on a group to report its findings and hold a class discussion. Repeat this process for each group.

Common Core College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards

Speaking and Listening

Comprehension and Collaboration:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.1

Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.2

Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.4

Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.6

Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.

Reading

Key Ideas and Details:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1

Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.2

Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.7

Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.9

Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

Common Core State Standards

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.1

Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades [9-10 or 11-12] topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.1.a

Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.1.b

Work with peers to promote civil, democratic discussions and decision-making, set clear goals and deadlines, and establish individual roles as needed.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.1.c

Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.1.d

Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.4

Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.7

Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9

Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.9

Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Which Country Was to Blame for World War I?

The Treaty of Versailles, signed following World War I, contained Article 231, commonly known as the “war guilt clause,” which placed all the blame for starting the war on Germany and its allies. It reads as follows:

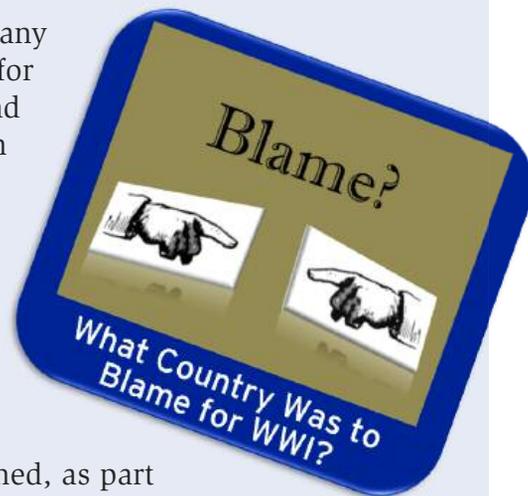
The Allied and Associated Governments affirm and Germany accepts the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associated Governments and their nationals have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies.

In the years since, historians have argued over which country was to blame, and they have come up with many different answers: Germany, Austria-Hungary, Serbia, Russia, France, no country, all the countries, the alliance system, and on and on.

Imagine that your group is an international commission assigned, as part of the commemoration of the First World War’s 100th anniversary, to answer once and for all this question: **What country (or countries), if any, was to blame for the war?**

In your group, do the following:

1. Read together **The Experts Disagree: Which Country Was to Blame for World War I?**, reading one expert at a time.
2. When you finish reading each expert, discuss these questions and fill in the **Graphic Organizer**:
 - A. Who (or what) does the expert blame for starting the war?
 - B. Why does the expert believe this?
 - C. What evidence from the reading **A Fire Waiting to Be Lit** supports the expert’s position?
3. After reading all the experts and filling in the Graphic Organizer, discuss this question: Which expert made the most compelling case? The least? Why?
4. Discuss and decide on your answer to this question: **What country (or countries), if any, was to blame for the war?**
5. Prepare a presentation to the class on your conclusion, giving reasons and citing evidence from **A Fire Waiting to Be Lit** and **The Experts Disagree**. Your presentation should also include why you dismissed other conclusions, again giving reasons and citing evidence.



From *The Century of Total War* (1954) by Raymond Aron (1905–1983), a French scholar:

The division of the principal nations of Europe into two camps did not necessarily make for war. It only made it inevitable that any conflict involving two great powers would bring general war. From the moment when there was formed in the center of Europe a German empire, industrially foremost in Europe, with a population exceeding that of France by more than fifty per cent, and allied to the Dual Monarchy, a war on the small scale of that of 1870 had become impossible. Neither Russia nor Great Britain would have tolerated a new German victory which would have made of the Reich no longer merely the dominant European state, but a claimant to empire over the Continent.

The two camps were not condemned to mortal combat by any mysterious fatality. The relations between the coalitions had simply deteriorated until clear-sighted observers foresaw the inescapable outcome of armed peace. Who was to blame? The issue has been passionately argued. One side denounced the intolerable manners of Teutonic diplomacy, . . . the spectacular visit to Tangier, the dispatch of a gunboat to Agadir, the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina; on the other side it was pointed out that in the course of the half century during which she had been the foremost power on the Continent, Germany had added less to her overseas possessions and profited less by arms or negotiation than weakened France. Germany had made herself intolerable by her brutality, by her arrogance, and by the ambitions of which she was suspected. But under the rules of diplomacy she was not wrong in demanding compensation when France established her protectorate over Morocco. She could not fail to notice that the international conferences were not turning out to her advantage.

From ‘Catastrophe 1914: Europe Goes to War’ (2013) by Max Hastings, author of *Catastrophe 1914: Europe Goes to War*, interviewed on *Global Ethics Forum*:

Austria decided in the first days of July to invade and then break up Serbia. Because everybody knew that Russia regarded



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this Slavic nation as under the czar’s protection, Vienna dispatched an envoy to Berlin to assure German backing if the Russians interfered. On the 6th of July, Kaiser Wilhelm and his chancellor gave the Austrians what historians call the blank check — an unqualified promise of German diplomatic and, if necessary, military support for crushing Serbia.

This was incredibly reckless. Some modern historians have produced elaborate arguments to deflect blame from Germany for what followed. But it seems to me impossible to escape this undisputed fact: the Kaiser’s government endorsed Austria’s decision to unleash a Balkan war. This predated everything the Entente Allies did.

From ‘“Britain should have stayed out of the First World War” says Niall Ferguson’ (2014) by Niall Ferguson (1964–), professor of history at Harvard University, interviewed in *BBC History Magazine*:

[T]he Germans miscalculated in thinking that they could wage a war on two fronts, knocking out France in order to focus on Russia, without bringing Britain into the war. The German decision to back the Austrians in their confrontation with the Serbs was therefore based on a series of major strategic errors.

But before we revisit the blame game, it is important to bear in mind that the Austrians were the wronged party in 1914. The heir to their throne had been assassinated and the terrorists had been sponsored by the intelligence service of Serbia. If you change the names and dates and ask yourself how we would react today if, let’s say, the American vice president, Joe Biden, was assassinated by a terrorist organisation clearly supported by the Iranian government, you see that the German position in 1914 was not entirely unreasonable.

Really the Austrians were the ones in the right and those who lined up on the side of Serbia were essentially backing the sponsors of terrorism.

From *Origins of the World War* (1930) by Sidney Bradshaw Fay (1876–1967), professor of history, Harvard University:

For many of the Powers, . . . a European War might seem to hold out the possibility of achieving various desired advantages: for Serbia, the achievement of national unity for all Serbs; for Austria, . . . the checking of nationalistic tendencies which threatened her very existence; for Russia, the accomplishment of



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her historic mission of controlling Constantinople . . . ; for Germany, new economic advantages and the restoration of the European balance . . . ; for France, the recovery of Alsace-Lorraine . . . ; and for England, the destruction of the German naval danger All these advantages, and many others, were feverishly striven and intrigued for, on all sides, the moment the War actually broke out, but this is no good proof that any of the statesmen mentioned deliberately aimed to bring about a war to secure these advantages. One cannot judge the motives which actuated men before the War, by what they did in an absolutely new situation which arose as soon as they were overtaken by a conflagration they had sought to avert. . . .

Nevertheless, a European War broke out. Why? Because in each country political and military leaders did certain things which led to mobilizations and declarations of war, or failed to do certain things which might have prevented them. In this sense, all the European countries, in a greater or less degree, were responsible.

From ‘It’s Time to Stop Blaming Germany’ (2014) by Matthew Yglesias, executive editor of Vox, writing in Slate:

Serbia and its Russian superpower sponsor were genuinely trying to destroy the Habsburg empire. Franz Ferdinand’s assassins really did have ties to the Serbian state.

He was assassinated in part because he was known to be a moderate who favored further decentralization of imperial authority and concessions to the interests of South Slavs, and Serbian nationalists thought his rise to power would undermine their effort to incorporate Bosnia, Croatia, and Slovenia into Serbia. The authorities in Vienna and Berlin had a legitimate interest in pushing back against the attempted dismemberment of the Habsburg state. And then things got nasty in no small part thanks to French politicians having persuaded themselves that a Balkan crisis would be the best possible shot at teaming up with Russia to wage a war against Germany and take back Alsace and Lorraine. Nobody is blameless in the whole affair, but it’s much more complicated than “Germans be starting wars.” The Entente powers were essentially sticking up for a state sponsor of terrorism.



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From ‘10 interpretations of who started WW1’ (2014) by Heather Jones, associate professor in international history, London School of Economics, on BBC News:



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Relatively common before 1914, assassinations of royal figures did not normally result in war. But Austria-Hungary’s military hawks — principal culprits for the conflict — saw the Sarajevo assassination of the Austro-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife by a Bosnian Serb as an excuse to conquer and destroy Serbia, an unstable neighbour which sought to expand beyond its borders into Austro-Hungarian territories. Serbia, exhausted by the two Balkan wars of 1912–13 in which it had played a major role, did not want war in 1914.

Broader European war ensued because German political and military figures egged on Austria-Hungary, Germany’s ally, to attack Serbia. This alarmed Russia, Serbia’s supporter, which put its armies on a war footing before all options for peace had been fully exhausted.

This frightened Germany into pre-emptively declaring war on Russia and on Russia’s ally France and launching a brutal invasion, partly via Belgium, thereby bringing in Britain, a defender of Belgian neutrality and supporter of France.

From *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848–1918* (1954) by A.J.P. Taylor (1906–1990), British historian:

No one in 1914 took the dangers of war seriously Though all . . . abhorred its bloodshed, none expected a social catastrophe. . . . [Statesmen] were inclined to think that war would stave off their social and political problems. . . .

The Balkan wars had taught a deceptive lesson. Everyone supposed that decisive battles would be fought at once, and a dictated peace would follow. The Germans expected to take Paris; the French expected to break through in Lorraine. The Russian “steam-roller” would reach Berlin; more important, from the Russian point of view, their armies would cross the Carpathians and take Budapest [Hungary]. Even the Austrians expected to “crush” Serbia. The British expected to destroy the German fleet in an immediate naval engagement and then to establish a close blockade of the German coast; apart from that, they had no military plans, except to applaud the victories of their allies and perhaps to profit from them.

None of these things happened.

GRAPHIC ORGANIZER FOR THE EXPERTS DISAGREE: WHICH COUNTRY WAS TO BLAME FOR WORLD WAR I?

Expert	The Blame Lies With ... / Why?	Supporting Evidence From 'A Fire Waiting to Be Lit'
Raymond Aron		
Max Hastings		
Niall Ferguson		
Sidney Bradshaw Fay		
Matthew Yglesias		
Heather Jones		
A.J.P. Taylor		

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