

**Objectives:**

- ❖ to recap the many possible causes of the First World War
- ❖ to analyse different interpretations of this event
- ❖ to consider why historians have had different opinions on the question.

Read through the following interpretations (versions/opinions) of why the First World War began in 1914:

<p><b>Interpretation A</b></p> <p>The First World War was caused by German expansionism and aggression. Germany was determined to assert its strength as an industrialised power. The Kaiser was intensely jealous of British naval strength and wanted to prove his own power by winning a war. This would make him more popular as an individual and make Germany more powerful as a nation. The assassination of Archduke Ferdinand proved the perfect excuse.</p>	<p><b>Interpretation B</b></p> <p>The First World War was the result of a number of factors. Britain and Germany had both industrialised rapidly bringing them into competition with one another for markets to sell their goods. This led them to build empires which could be used for trade. To protect these they needed naval strength. Their navies seemed threatening to one another so they made alliances with other countries for security. The assassination of Archduke Ferdinand was nothing more than a spark in a powder keg.</p>
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**Tasks:**

1. Highlight the five key words in each interpretation which you think are the most important.

2. Complete the following phrases in no more than one sentence:

**Interpretation one argues that WWI started because**

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**Interpretation two argues that WWI started because**

.....  
.....

3. Which interpretation do you most agree with?

.....

4. Why do you think historians can have such different views of the past?

.....  
.....

**Interpretation one: the contemporary British view**

'It is a satisfaction for Britain in these terrible times that no share of the responsibility for these events rests on her. There were six countries which entered the war at the beginning. Britain was last, and not the first.

Britain made every effort to avoid it; begged that there should be no conflict.

It is not quite the story of the wolf and the lamb. I will tell you why – because Germany expected to find a lamb and found a lion.'

Lloyd George speech, June 1917

**Context in which the speech was made**

- Lloyd George was the British Prime Minister during the First World War.
- It was his job to make decisions about the British war strategy.
- He also needed to keep morale up at home.
- In June 1917 trench warfare was in full effect, needing hundreds of thousands of British soldiers to lay down their lives.
- Lloyd George would have been very keen to remind the British public that they had the moral upper-hand and were fighting a just war against a terrible enemy.

**Interpretation two: the orthodox view (1918-1920)**

The Treaty of Versailles in 1919 said:

'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 ... have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies'

**Context in which the treaty was made**

- Immediately after the war the victorious nations agreed that Germany was the cause of the war. This was agreed at the Treaty of Versailles.
- France was keen to blame and punish Germany because much of the fighting had been in France.
- France was determined to reclaim the money they had spent fighting the war (a figure set at £6,600 million).
- French government records were searched to find documents which 'proved' German war guilt.

**Interpretation three: the revisionist view (1920s and 1930s)**

American historian Sydney Bradshaw Fay said that no single country was to blame for the outbreak of war, but that bigger forces such as alliances were responsible:

'The greatest single cause of the war was the system of secret alliances which developed. It divided Europe into two hostile groups who were increasingly suspicious of one another and who steadily built up greater and greater armies and navies.'

*The Origins of the First World War*, Sidney Bradshaw Fay (1928)

**Context in which the interpretation was made**

- During the 1920s and 1930s the anger over WWI had cooled.
- The German Foreign Office published all the German official foreign policy documents from before the war in an attempt to prove that Germany was not guilty of starting the war.
- Revisionist historians started to reconsider (revise) their interpretations in light of the new evidence.
- They decided Germany was not to blame after all, and looked at factors like alliances and empire building.

**Interpretation four: The Marxist view**

In his book, *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916), future socialist leader of Russia Vladimir Lenin argued that the war was caused by economic factors. He was greatly influenced by Marxism. Businessmen in wealthy countries, he claimed, wanted to be able to trade abroad and therefore encouraged their governments to pursue wars. As he saw it, the workers in all countries were the biggest losers in any war.

Later on, particularly in the 1960s, historians influenced by socialist ideas supported the view that the war was caused by economic competition. They wrote histories of the war from this perspective.

**Context in which the interpretation was made**

- This view was inspired by the writings of Karl Marx in the mid nineteenth century.
- Marx claimed that all history is a struggle between different classes of people for power.
- Marx said that in capitalist countries the factory owners (industrialists) were the most powerful group.
- They exploited (used) workers to get wealthy themselves.
- They needed to control other parts of the world to be able to sell their goods to bigger markets.

**Interpretation five: the anti-revisionist view (1950s and 1960s)**

At this time, a number of historians began to look again at the issue of German responsibility for the war. Some revived the idea that Germany was responsible:

'The German bid for continental supremacy was certainly decisive in bringing on the European War ...' (A.J.P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe*, 1954)

German historian Fritz Fischer argued that the German leaders had a 'will to war'. Like the Nazis after them, they wanted to expand and rule other countries.

**Context in which the interpretation was made**

- The Second World War (1939-1945) changed historians' views of the First World War.
- Faced by the rise of Adolf Hitler, historians tended to return to the idea that Germany caused the First World War.

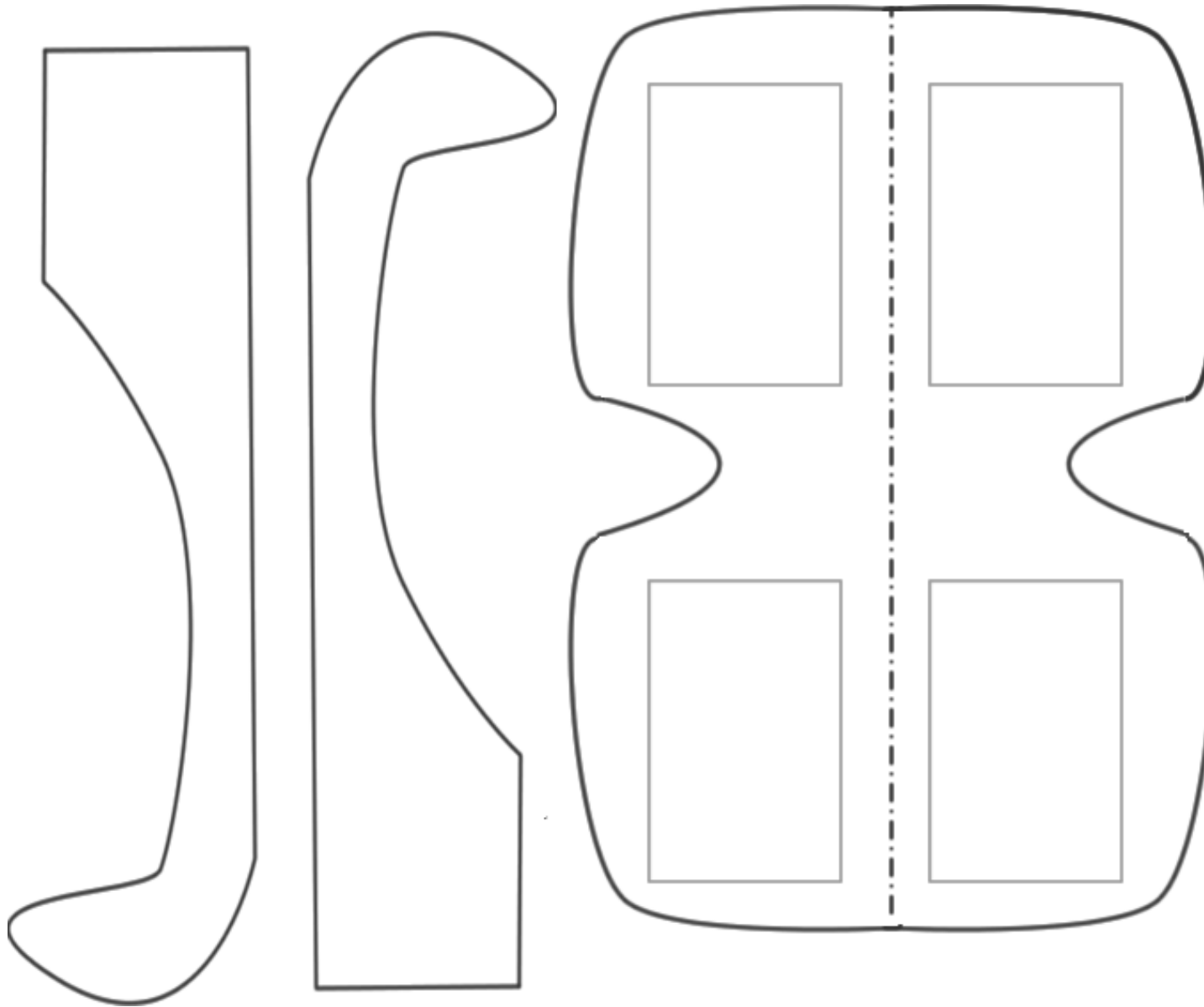
**Interpretation six: the modern view**

'None of the rulers really knew what they were fighting about in August 1914 ... the crisis gathered pace and the calculations of statesmen were overwhelmed by the rapid succession of events, the tide of emotion in the various capitals, and the demands of military planning.'

*The Origins of the First World War* by British historian L.C.F. Turner, 1983

**Context in which the interpretation was made**

- Most recently, historians have tended to say that there were many causes of World War One, all connected to each other.
- Many years from the event modern historians are less concerned with who was to blame and more concerned with pinning down the relationships between individuals, long term, short term, and trigger factors – just as you probably debated in class.



## Why can't historians agree on who caused the First World War?

Interpretation	When?	Who/what was to blame?	Reasons for this view (context, views of the time/writer)
<b>1. Contemporary</b>			
<b>2. Orthodox</b>			
<b>3. Revisionist</b>			
<b>4. Marxist</b>			
<b>5. Anti-Revisionist</b>			
<b>6. Modern</b>			

### Teaching notes

This activity was originally planned for a mixed ability Y9 class who had just finished studying the origins of WWI from a causation perspective. The intention was to give them an overview of the historiography of the origins of the war using a crafty 'hook'.

### Craft potential

Coloured glasses can be used in this lesson as an aid to understanding the idea that historians' perspectives on the past are coloured by their own views and context. The template on p.5 can be used to make some! Print the outlines on coloured card, fold over the main 'frames' and insert coloured transparent sweet wrappers. Attach the 'arms' and stick everything together. The finished article could be deployed in various ways – students could each make a pair at the beginning of the lesson and be asked how they might relate to History. Alternatively, a different coloured pair of the glasses could be left at each of the carousel stations (see below). Students might then be asked, at the end of the activity, whether they can identify the significance of the glasses and how they can help us to explain an answer to the main enquiry question.

### Activities

1. Workings individually, or in pairs, ask students to read through the contrasting interpretations on p.1 and complete the short tasks beneath. Feedback ideas as a class.
2. Divide the class into six groups (mixed ability groupings work well). Arrange the desks into six 'islands' and place one of the coloured interpretations cards from pp. 2-4 on each. Ask the groups to rotate around the desks to visit each interpretation. They should work together in their group to record the key points of each interpretation on their table (p.6).
3. The activity could be concluded with a class discussion on the nature of history. Students might be asked to vote on which of the following statements they most agree with (with the intention on sparking some debate!):

'History is ...

- written by the winners'
- written for the time in which it is produced'
- like looking back through tinted glasses'
- the version of past events that people have decided to agree upon'.  
(Napoleon Bonaparte)