



Student worksheet

Why do we learn what about World War 1?

How and what we are taught about World War 1 – a response from a UK school

In our school in the UK we all learn about World War 1 in ten history lessons in Year 9, when we are 13-14 years old. Students who choose to study English in Year 12 (age 16-17 years) study the poetry of World War 1 for a term and therefore learn about the War as context to understanding the poetry. Students who choose to study History in Year 12 learn about why Britain got involved in the War for two lessons. We also sometimes have school assemblies which have a theme of remembrance and include World War 1. This is always around 11th November. In 2014 the theme of our school Creative Arts Festival for all students was World War 1, but this was a one-off event because of the centenary.

The study of World War 1 is not compulsory in England (our part of the UK). Students in other schools may not study World War 1 at all. Or they may study World War 1 only if they choose to continue studying History from age 14-16 years. If students study World War 1 in Year 9 and below, their teachers will have chosen to put this study into the curriculum. Their teachers will choose which parts of the topic of World War 1 they study. Their teachers will decide how long is spent studying World War 1, although sometimes there is flexibility. For example, if a class is really engaged with their studies, the teacher can extend the time. If students study World War 1 from Year 10 and above, it will be as part of an exam course and they will study it for about 10 weeks, for 2-3 hours per week. The organisations which set the exams (not school, but not government either) will decide what is studied. However, it is our teachers who choose which parts of the exam courses we study. For example, we do not study World War 1 in depth in Year 10, instead we study Germany 1919-1945 in depth. This is our teachers' choice. We learn about some of the consequences of World War 1 as part of other topics. For example, in Year 8 we learn that World War 1 was a cause of the decline of the British Empire.

In Year 9 History we study the causes of World War 1. We learn about the trigger (the assassination), the July Crisis and the underlying tensions between the major European powers before 1914 (nationalism, imperialism, militarism). We also study how World War 1 transformed lives. We do this by taking 4 people as case studies: a young woman who became a nurse, a young man who volunteered to fight, a young man who refused to fight, and a young man who was a doctor and won medals. We use source material about these people to find out about experiences of the Western Front. We also use artists' work as evidence from World War 1 from Britain and Germany. In addition, we learn about some of the changes in world history as a result of World War 1. Because our Year 10 Germany 1918-1945 course requires us to study the Treaty of Versailles and the period between the World Wars, we do not study this in Year 9 as well. We are encouraged to read fiction and non-fiction about World War 1 for ourselves and to follow up areas that interest us online.

In Year 9 we do not learn from one textbook. We investigate using a range of source material, and research for context online and in textbooks. For example, we use source material to investigate the causes of World War 1. We then take part in a scripted drama which encourages us to think about how we can judge which were the most important causes of the War. After this we write an essay, in which we give our interpretation about why the war happened. We often disagree with each other, that



does not matter; we are marked upon the quality of our evidence based arguments. We use source material collections to find out about the impact of World War 1 on people's lives. The aim is that we should understand that the impact of the War on individuals was diverse. We present our findings and questions to each other. Some of us take part in an optional visit to Ypres and the Somme each year. In this field study we are taken around the battlefields and cemeteries by an expert guide, who challenges us to think about the experience of fighting on the Western Front 1914-18. Our study of the causes of the war is international. However, our study of the war itself is mainly focused upon the experience of British people in the War, although we also learn a little about the German and French experience of the Western Front.

'Why we learn about World War 1 in the way we do' - from a UK school

We decided that we wanted to know more about why we learn about World War 1 in the way we do. So, we decided to interview our teacher. We have summarised here some of the main things that she said.

It is not possible to teach everything that is important in history and so we have to make some tough decisions. Because children in the UK can stop learning history at the age of 13 or 14, we have very little time. Also, in the UK we do not only learn historical knowledge, we believe that it is only one part of historical thinking. We also learn how to research and criticise that knowledge. History is about debate. Students research from sources to construct evidence based opinions about historical topics. That takes time! In this school we think the First World War shapes the modern world and so you should learn something about it. At the same time, we think that the causes of the First World War make a great topic for helping you to learn more about complex historical causation and how to put together an analytical essay to answer a question. The whole war was so huge and included so many people, therefore we decided to take the case study approach of 4 characters so that you could see the impact on individual lives, while still learning something about the war itself. We do this using source material and to help you to see the diverse experiences of the war even within one country. We have more source material available for the Western Front in English. It's where most British men fought, and you can make connections with local war memorials and your own family history. When we visit the Western Front it is for the same reasons and because it is geographically the closest place to us and costs less to get to. To be honest, we do not have time to teach any more about the topic in Year 9. We could learn about World War 1 all year, but then you would not learn about other important topics, such as Votes for Women, the rise of living standards and the Holocaust. We do try to make you aware that there is a wider picture, for example, the experience of other European nations and the huge contribution made by the millions of troops of the British Empire who came from across the world to fight and often die in Europe; many of whose ancestors are now British citizens. We hope to spark your curiosity to want to learn more for yourself and in the future.

His interpretation is that Europe went to war in 1914 because the decision makers at the time did not appreciate the consequences of what they were doing. He argues that one should ask 'how' as well as 'why' when trying to understand the causes of war in 1914. "The question of how invites us to look closely at the sequences of interactions that produced certain outcomes. By contrast the question of why invites us to go in search of remote and categorical causes: imperialism, nationalism, armaments, alliances, high finance, ideas of national honour, the mechanics of mobilisation." He argues that looking at 'why' gives the impression that there was a build-up of causes until war was inevitable. This would suggest that forces such as nationalism, armaments, alliances, and finance were all out of control of the decision makers at the time. Clark argues instead that decision-makers made choices that in combination made war break out. He does not seek to blame a particular state or individual, but aims to identify the decisions that brought war about and to understand the reasoning or emotions behind them. He



starts with 'how' to explain 'why'. For example he says that "In the minds of many statesmen [pre-1914] the hope for a short war and the fear of a long one seem, as it were, to have cancelled each other out, holding at bay a fuller appreciation of the risks." That's why his title is 'Sleepwalkers'. "The (decision-makers) of 1914 were sleepwalkers, watchful but unseeing, haunted by dreams, yet blind to the reality of the horror they were about to bring into the world."