

Causes of World War I

The outbreak of the First World War in popular history magazines

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Basic Information

World War I is a central event in contemporary history. It can be regarded as the start of the short 20th century (1914-1989) involving horrific wars and a reshaping of Europe. The causes of the war, which lasted between 1914 and 1918, are often explained with how political tensions, alliances and imperialist aspirations made a minor dispute turn into a major war. On the one hand, we have Germany and Austria – Hungary, the so-called central powers, and on the other hand, we have France, Russia and the United Kingdom: the triple entente. The triple entente also included Serbia and later Japan, Italy, Romania and the United States. Sweden was declared neutral and, for this reason was not directly involved in the war. Still, Sweden was affected in many ways. Rationing and economic problems with international trade affected daily life. With dismay the contemporary Swedes could read about the war in the trenches, which strengthened the peace movements in Sweden.

World War I in the Swedish curriculum

One of the core contents in the Swedish history syllabus for upper secondary schooling highlights the value of knowledge concerning “industrialisation and democratisation during the 19th and 20th centuries, as well as key global processes of change and events, such as migration, peace-making, resource distribution and increased prosperity, international cooperation, human rights, gender equality, colonialism, dictatorships, genocide and conflicts”. A key event in these historical processes is World War I.

Learning objectives

The complexity of the causes of World War I can be addressed in a number of ways. Here we have designed questions to make students consider multiple perspectives on the causes of the outbreak of World War I. The assignments are also designed to stimulate critical thinking. Since history is both a humanistic and social science subject it deals with the individual's conditions and changes in society over time. Both structures and individuals need to be analyzed. We want to highlight people's opportunities and choices in the past, but also how contemporary society and ideas can explain events. Texts,

images and questions are selected and designed to stimulate critical thinking in general and especially with regard to popular history.

First World War in textbooks

In Swedish textbooks the First World War is primarily depicted as a matter of power balances, which are disrupted and this turned into a conflict; a total war of previously inconceivable magnitude, following a European era of relative peace and prosperity, not least due to industrialization. Trying to explain the causes of the First World War is a complex act. Politics in Europe were heavily affected by competition regarding power, economy and social status. The scramble for Africa was one matter of conflict and competition, and industrialization was another. Europe as a whole was going through an era of social transformation, in which social groups of a new bourgeois era challenged traditional groups of power. The nationalism of the 19th century also affected the developments, not least in the Balkans with a number of conflicts.