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# Why Did They Fight the Great War? A Multi-Level Class Analysis of the Causes of the First World War\*

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THE CAUSES OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR are in some senses mysterious. In the popular mind World War I has been substantially eclipsed by the seemingly greater clarity of World War II, where the leaders of the belligerent nations can so readily be assigned black and white hats that many of the chief participants in the conflict have been turned into clichés. The popular amnesia regarding World War I is all the more regrettable as the consequences which came from World War I were just as profound, if not even more so, than the consequences of World War II.<sup>1</sup>

What were the causes of World War I? This question has become one of the classic historical debates of which there seem to be endless permutations. In the past ninety years historians, journalists and politicians have offered many more or less rational explanations for the war. Although at least some of the usual “causes” assigned to the war offer relatively straightforward threads of argument, the harmony created when these causes are assembled and prioritized is particularly complex. Given this scenario, the analysis of the causes of World War I by students is an

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excellent opportunity to hone such cognitive skills as comprehension, interpretation, analysis, explanation, refutation, and synthesis. As such, I have over the years developed a semester-long project allowing students in certain modern history classes to analyze the causes of World War I through a number of activities. This project provides students an in-depth examination of a critical event in history while developing their cognitive abilities—which after all is the goal of many history courses. Instructors might wish to consider utilizing this project for upper-level courses focused on 20<sup>th</sup> Century Europe; Europe from 1870 to 1914; World War I; and similar themes.

This project was constructed according to the guidelines laid down in Benjamin Bloom's "Taxonomy of Educational Objectives." Bloom's Taxonomy was designed to stimulate the use of "higher mental processes that would enable students to apply their knowledge creatively."<sup>2</sup> Since its publication in 1956, Bloom's Taxonomy has become "a basic reference for all educators worldwide." One educator has described it as "the all time 'best seller'" in the field of educational literature.<sup>3</sup> The Taxonomy has particularly influenced the development of course planning, instructional delivery, and student evaluation.<sup>4</sup> Bloom believed that cognitive ability could be broken down into six levels, from simplest and most concrete to most complex and abstract. First, the student acquires knowledge through successfully recalling basic facts, terms, concepts, and phenomena.<sup>5</sup> Next, the student demonstrates a comprehension of these facts and concepts through organizing them, comparing them, prioritizing them, and highlighting the key ideas which characterize them.<sup>6</sup> Application of new knowledge comprises step three. Here, the learner solves new problems through the application of knowledge which has already been assimilated.<sup>7</sup> Level four focuses on the more complex process of analysis. The student must identify motives, causes, biases, and assumptions; distinguish dominant from subordinate ideas or themes; create generalizations and substantiate them with evidence; and draw inferences and conclusions from their analysis.<sup>8</sup> Synthesis, level five, allows for the creative discovery of new knowledge built upon the foundation now created. The student devises improvements, alternatives, and adaptations to accomplish a new task.<sup>9</sup> Finally, evaluation rounds out the list as the highest cognitive level, step six. The various solutions offered are evaluated and judged for quality, functionality, and other relevant values.<sup>10</sup>

I have endeavored to assemble a series of cognitive tasks related to determining the causes of World War I which make use of Bloom's guidelines. I begin with the assumption that the students come to the course with no background knowledge about the war or its causes. My

goal at this stage is to present the student with basic knowledge about the war and its causes, in accord with Bloom's first level of cognitive understanding. First off, they are provided with a short primer of the key events leading up to the war, and a short summary of the course of the war and its consequences. I present a mini-lecture in class emphasizing these points. In particular I discuss the mind-numbing chaos and senseless death which permeated the conflict, as well as the muddled aftermath of the war.<sup>11</sup> The students are taught that the failure to fulfill the messianic hopes which marked the end of the war were the result of the allies simultaneously pursuing diametrically opposed goals (such as fulfilling President Woodrow Wilson's 14 points while punishing Germany by reducing its territory). Courses which can devote more time to the war, or can accommodate a longer reading list, might assign the highly engaging book by David Fromkin, *Europe's Last Summer: Who Started the Great War in 1914?* for a current, detailed account of the causes of the war from Fromkin's perspective. John Keegan's *An Illustrated History of the First World War* is considered by some as the standard primer on the war itself. Margaret MacMillan's *Paris 1919* can be assigned for a well-crafted, insightful narrative on the diplomatic aftermath of the war. The carnage of the war and the lost opportunities that the defeat of the Central Powers and the idealism of Wilson presented to the world will excite students' interest in understanding the causes of the war.

The next phase of this project embodies Bloom's stage 2. I have the students consider how the events and "facts" which led to World War I have been organized and discussed by historians since the war. These approaches inevitably cover the "big" causes of World War I which have now become the cornerstones of most pedagogy on the subject: the alliance system, nationalism, imperialism, and militarism.<sup>12</sup> Other important elements which should be touched upon include the Social Darwinist concept of national struggle; the Anglo-German arms race; the impact of public opinion in democracies, constitutional monarchies, and quasi-constitutional monarchies; the desire to maintain great power status; the rise of nationalism (particularly as it affected ethnic minorities); the transition of Austria from a dynastic state to a nation-state; the increasing costs and technological sophistication of the weaponry of war; tensions between military spending and spending on domestic programs; the politics surrounding export trade; and the commonly presumed correlation between national cultural/scientific greatness and geopolitical power. Students should be asked to consider how these factors existed in virtually all countries, but should compare and contrast the degree of importance for individual countries.

Depending on the degree of preparation and teachers' expectations of

the students' ability to work independently, these topics could either be covered through appropriate reading, or through in-class lecture. If the professor chooses to have the students read this material, brief summaries of key points can be obtained through Wikipedia or a similar website ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Causes\\_of\\_world\\_war\\_I](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Causes_of_world_war_I); <http://www.firstworldwar.com/origins/causes.htm>). If a more intensive investigation of current scholarly thought on the causation of the war is desired, a selection of monograph readings on the subject might be assigned (see the bibliography and course outline below).

Alternatively, perhaps more appropriate for an advanced-level course, the historiographical framework of the debate could be explicitly studied. This approach allows the student to consider how the historical and cultural context of historians can influence their interpretation of an historical event. It also provides the opportunity for students to argue the merits of the various arguments historians have formulated to try to determine the causes of the war, and (perhaps) the culpability of various nations for allowing the war to break out. Annika Mombauer's *The Origins of the First World War: Controversies and Consensus* (London; New York: Longman, 2002) is probably the best historiographical text for this assignment.

The students should learn that most historians from allied countries immediately after the war laid the blame for the entire debacle squarely at the feet of the German government. Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles famously captures this propagandistic conclusion, and served merely to add fuel to the fire of post-war German resentment. After a decade or so, the failure of the post-war settlements became obvious. Many of the former belligerents, led by Germany, published vast quantities of documents to provide evidence for their contentions that their nations could not be reasonably blamed for causing the war. By the 1930s, the passage of time allowed for more tranquil reflection on the war. This resulted in more penetrating analyses, which began to stress the affect of transnational factors in causing the war: secret alliances, rigid military planning, Darwinian justifications of the struggle between nations, and so on. Some revisionist historians singled out the poor diplomatic skills of the leaders of the period; others turned to Marxist critiques, blaming the competitive dynamic of capitalists or (as a rather more roundabout economic cause) the struggle for colonies. The desire to construct a lasting peace with Germany also influenced historians to de-emphasize the German contribution to the causes of the war.

However, the naked aggression exercised by Adolf Hitler from the mid-1930s onwards tended to swing the historiographical pendulum back toward blaming Germany for the First World War (as well, of course, for

the Second). For some time, German historians by and large had resisted this trend, emphasizing the culpability of all the major participants. This changed dramatically in the 1960s when the German historian Fritz Fischer published a series of works (beginning with his 1961 *Griff nach der Weltmacht (Grasp for World Power)* which alleged that the German leadership sought to quell internal dissent and the forces of democratization by embracing a program of external expansionism. Fischer even emphasized that the “will to war” evinced by German leaders bore a resemblance to the Nazi motives for aggression several decades later. Fischer’s ideas were a veritable bombshell in the field of World War I scholarship—so much so that his work is sometimes referred to as the “Fischer Revolution.” Naturally, Fischer was fiercely attacked by conservative German historians who weren’t about to see their nation maligned by a native scholar.

Fischer’s critics generally rejected the notion that the political forces which led Germany to war were somehow fundamentally different from those operating on the other belligerents. In the 1970s and 1980s, a number of historians (such as Modris Eksteins) devised a rather subtle argument that European culture in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was permeated by a fascination with violence in intellectual discourse, in domestic politics, and in international relations. The war, some argued, was caused by the violent ferment in European culture and intellectual thought. Nevertheless, Fischer’s accusations have held up quite well over time, at least to the point that most historians can agree that the German political class became convinced by 1914 that a major war against Russia was inevitable, and it only benefited Germany to see it through sooner rather than later.

However, from the late 1980s until 2001 a number of important scholars assigned significant blame for the war to nations other than Germany. Samuel Williamson considers Austrian expansionism in the Balkans as a hitherto underrated cause of the war. Niall Ferguson, in *Pity of War*, makes the rather unexpected case that the poor diplomatic performance of British statesmen must be considered as an instigating factor of the war.

Not surprisingly, scholars after September 11, 2001 have emphasized the important role Serbian terrorists played in deliberately provoking the war. David Fromkin’s *Europe’s Last Summer* is an excellent example of this new direction in scholarship.

The long, diverse, and well-thought out historiographical pedigree of arguments concerning the causes of World War I suggests that students should have no difficulty in formulating their own explanations for the origins of the war. Their review of these changing interpretations completes the second phase of the project.

The third stage of this project is certainly the most critical in terms of the student's own analytical interpretation of the causes of the war. This activity would correspond to Bloom's third stage of learning, the analytical stage. Here, each student will be assigned to "represent" one of the countries involved in the war. These would include Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia, Serbia, Britain, and (optionally) Belgium. The process of assignment might be based on the student's own election (to achieve appropriate balance, students might have to select a first and second choice), or at the instigation of the professor (perhaps students would be assigned randomly). Presumably there would be more than one student assigned to represent each country.

Next, the students are given a set of primary source documents which "justify" the actions of the country in question in the years prior to the outbreak of war. For example, documents which would be given to the "British representatives" would probably include 1) Bernhard von Bülow's "Hammer and Anvil" speech before the Reichstag, December 11, 1899; 2) the "British Foreign Policy by A.B.C., etc." memorandum published in the *National Review*, November, 1901; 3) the article which spawned the *Daily Telegraph* Affair, October, 28, 1908; 4) Lloyd George's Mansion House Speech, July, 21, 1911; 5) excerpts from Friedrich von Bernhardi's *Germany and the Next War*; 6) the telegram from the German Imperial Chancellor, von Bethmann-Hollweg, to the German Ambassador at Vienna, Tschirschky, July 6, 1914; 7) Prince Lichownowsky's Reply to Sir Edward Grey, July 1914; 8) the German request for free passage through Belgium, August 2, 1914; 9) Sir Edward Grey's speech before the House of Commons, August, 3, 1914; 10) Sir E. Goschen's report to Sir Edward Grey on his final interview with Chancellor von Bethmann-Hollweg, August 4, 1914; and 11) the British declaration of war, August 4, 1914.

Assembling packets of documents for other nations is not difficult because numerous pre-edited primary sources are freely available from the internet for use in this exercise. For my collection, I have assembled documents from Richard Hacken and Jane Plotke, "The World War I Document Archive," Brigham Young University Library, <http://www.lib.byu.edu/~rdh/wwi/>; H-German, "G-Text Primary Source Archives, Kaiserreich, 1871-1918," <http://www.h-net.org/~german/gtext/kaiserreich/index.html>; Paul Halsall, editor, "Internet Modern History Sourcebook: World War I," <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/modsbook38.html#The%20Path%20to%20War>; and Vincent Ferraro, Mt. Holyoke College, "Documents of World War I," <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/ww1.htm>. Alternatively, the instructor could use Louis L. Snyder, *Historic Documents of World War I* (Princeton,

N.J.: D. Van Nostrand Co., Inc., 1958). Luigi Albertini's *The Origins of the War of 1914* (translated and edited by Isabella M. Massey. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980) is an extremely detailed account of the origins of the war with excerpts of the most important documents. A selection of document excerpts could also be extracted from Albertini's work.

Once the representatives of the several nations receive their documents they will find the process of interpreting and analyzing them, and reassembling them into a coherent narrative, quite complex. Therefore, several weeks should be allocated to this phase (perhaps three weeks). In addition, class time should be set aside each week for students representing each country to assemble in groups to discuss the documents with each other, sharing their interpretations, suggesting possible routes of analysis, and prioritizing the importance of the arguments made in the documents. During this segment of the class session (I allot twenty minutes a week to this exercise), I circulate among the groups, offering suggestions and providing explanations when needed. One of the more interesting dynamics I have observed at this stage of the project is that some students eventually come to reject their initial assumptions about which country (or causes) initiated the war, and might ask to be reassigned to represent a different country. On other occasions, a discussion group has split into two or more subgroups, because though the participants all agreed on the "innocence" of their country, they developed sharply differing views of which other countries (or causes) were responsible for the war. Such reconsideration of assumptions when new evidence is considered and analyzed is, of course, critical for the nurturing of our students as critical thinkers and good historians.

After the period assigned to study the documents, the students are required to write an argumentative essay detailing the reasons for their country's "innocence" with regard to starting the war. Although the arguments were developed in a group context, this writing assignment is emphatically an individual task. The arguments presented must be carefully and thoroughly supported with appropriate references to, short quotations from, or paraphrases of the documents provided. This is the professor's first opportunity to formally evaluate the student's performance in this project. I was impressed with the ability of my students to construct reasonable arguments defending their positions. Those defending Germany, for example, could argue quite persuasively that the Franco-Russian alliance clearly intended to menace Germany by land. In the decade before the war, the increasingly amicable relationship between Great Britain, France, and Russia threatened also to potentially strangle Germany by a naval blockade. Meanwhile, the Great Powers (satiated in



their colonial aspirations, trade relationships, and cultural influence in the western world) seemed to begrudge Germany an equal place in these arrangements. Not surprisingly, however, those students whose task it was to “defend” their country principally by blaming Germany (and Austria-Hungary) tended to have an easier time of it.

Students next have the opportunity to hear and react to the leading arguments presented by all sides in a simulated conference to resolve the conflict. In the weeks which led up to World War I, the Serbian government proposed to Austria-Hungary that a “Great Powers Conference” be assembled to resolve the impending crisis caused by the Austro-Hungarian Ultimatum to Serbia (see the Serbian response to the Austro-Hungarian Ultimatum, July, 25, 1914). Although such a conference was never held, this project assumes that such a conference does take place, on August 4, 1914. This phase of the project corresponds to Bloom’s cognitive steps 5 (Synthesis) and 6 (Evaluation). I would suggest one of two methods to structure the conference. The professor might select the “principal representative” of each country, based on the professor’s assessment of the qualities of the argumentative papers which were previously written. Alternatively, the students in each group could elect their own principal representative. In either scenario, the remaining students in each group would act as “advisors” to their principal representative. Students should be given a reasonable amount of class time after each group is restructured to discuss their argumentative strategy, assign roles to the advisors, and otherwise prepare themselves for the conference. In my own experience I have found that, if the conference can be structured as closely as possible to what might actually have taken place in early August, 1914, the extra verisimilitude and sheer excitement of historical reenactment is well worth the effort. Perhaps a conference room built before that date can be utilized, to provide the students with an environment similar to that which would have existed in 1914. The conference tables can be arranged in a large circle; name and country plates can be prepared; the students can be encouraged to wear formal clothes. At least two hours should be set aside for the conference. The principal representative of each country should be allowed ten to fifteen minutes to present their case. Then a general discussion should ensue. It must be impressed upon the students that their primary mission is, while seeking to resolve the crisis, to uphold their own country’s international standing. They are competing with other nations in an effort to emerge from the conference as the strongest party. Given the risks that a general war would entail, it might well be that avoidance of a large war is preferable. However, simply “surrendering” to the demands of their adversaries would be politically fatal. They should assume that an abject

surrender would result in the overthrow of their government, and hence the total failure of their mission. In essence, I believe that we can assume that this was approximately the reality faced by the antagonists in the summer of 1914.

Naturally, this conference provides another opportunity for the instructor to evaluate the students. In this case, their oral argumentative skills can be assessed. It might also be worthwhile to consider their ability to work well within a group, to support others, to formulate counter-arguments, to persuade others of the logic of their arguments, and to resolve complex difficulties. The instructor may wish to assign a grade to an entire group based primarily on the performance of their principal representative, or it may be possible to adequately evaluate each student's performance. Otherwise, the instructor might ask each group to evaluate the performance of the other groups, and derive a grade from these assessments.

The project would conclude with a full-class "debriefing," a discussion between the students and the professor concerning what can be learned from this project about the causes of World War I in particular and about historical processes in general. Once again, this final stage of the project can be equated with Bloom's step 6 (evaluation). The professor should beforehand formulate questions to ask the students: Can any one country be assigned "guilt" for World War I? Were transnational historical processes more at fault than the actions of particular statesmen or individual actors? Is the construction of an historical narrative an artificial exercise, or can a narrative capture the essential "truths" of historical events? Are the apparent "mistakes" of individual actors more understandable when placed in the context of a rapidly evolving international crisis whose outcome can hardly be guessed? During the conference phase of the assignment, did the need to remain faithful to diplomatic priorities influence the students' interpretation of events? Do they believe that similar constraints operated on the actual actors in the crisis? Do they now appreciate the forces that might have shaped their "enemies'" behavior? What are the advantages of historical simulation, as represented in this simulation of a Great Powers Conference? How might simulations fail to capture historical reality?

Of course, this project is only part of the student's overall grade for the course. I generally make the activities related to the project count for about half of the student's overall course grade. The paper written as part of this project counts for thirty percent of the student's overall grade; participation in the "Great Powers Conference" counts for ten percent; and participation in the group discussion sessions and the final evaluation session counts for ten percent. Exams, quizzes and other class discussion

activities unrelated to the WWI project count for the remaining fifty percent of the course grade.

No classroom activity can be consistently flawless. There are certainly points at which challenges occur in this project. Some students might have difficulty grasping the long chain of events that led to the war as well as the complex variety of causes. A fully convincing attempt at prioritizing the causes of the war could well necessitate an in-depth level of study beyond the expectations of this course. The ability of students to articulate their arguments in written form, and substantiate their claims with appropriate evidence, draws upon a vast body of learning and practice which the professor cannot provide in a one semester history course. Likewise, the oral defense of their arguments is a skill that can only be developed to a limited extent in this project. Shy students might be at a particular disadvantage in this activity, as well as during the group discussion and the final debriefing stages. Those students who are naturally imaginative, creative, and enjoy acting will probably flourish most in "Great Power Conference" simulation.

In the end, however, I have found that the interpretative, analytical, writing, and oral skills my students develop from this project entirely justify the time spent throughout the semester in carrying it out. The First World War is intrinsically interesting because it was so tragic. Fifteen million young adults died (by some estimates), often of the same age as our students. World War I was surely one of the most significant transformative events in twentieth-century history. It is therefore worth detailed consideration. Furthermore, the war was caused by complex historical processes and the activities and decisions of multiple actors. However, the relative importance of these processes, activities and decisions, and the assumptions, ethics, and goals which underlay them is not entirely clear. Historians (including our students) are therefore presented with an exemplary opportunity to use their cognitive skills in formulating cogent arguments to answer the question: who (or what country) is to blame for causing World War I? In the end, this is no idle exercise. The diplomats of 1919, essentially representing the victors, were the first to answer the question and their conclusions had a profound impact on the world for decades thereafter.

## Notes

1. For more on this argument, see Margaret MacMillan, *Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World*. New York: Random House, 2002.
2. Benjamin S. Bloom, "Reflections on the Development and Use of the Taxonomy," in Lorin W. Anderson and Lauren A. Sosniak, eds. *Bloom's Taxonomy: A Forty-Year Retrospective*, Pt. II, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 1.
3. T. Neville Postlethwaite, "Validity vs. Utility: Personal Experiences with the Taxonomy," in Lorin W. Anderson and Lauren A. Sosniak, eds. *Bloom's Taxonomy: A Forty-Year Retrospective*, Pt. II, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 179.
4. Lorin W. Anderson, "Research on Teaching and Teacher Education," in Lorin W. Anderson and Lauren A. Sosniak, eds. *Bloom's Taxonomy: A Forty-Year Retrospective*, Pt. II, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 130.
5. Benjamin S. Bloom et al., *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, The Classification of Educational Goals*, Handbook I: *Cognitive Domain*. New York: Longman Publishing Group, 1956, p. 62.
6. Benjamin S. Bloom et al., *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, The Classification of Educational Goals*, Handbook I: *Cognitive Domain*. New York: Longman Publishing Group, 1956, pp. 89-90.
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9. Benjamin S. Bloom et al., *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, The Classification of Educational Goals*, Handbook I: *Cognitive Domain*. New York: Longman Publishing Group, 1956, p. 162.
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11. An instructor wishing to refresh his or her knowledge of the War might find particularly valuable the lectures of Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius on *World War I: The "Great War,"* available in transcript form from The Teaching Company, Course No. 8210.
12. Richard F. Hamilton and Holger H. Herwig, "World Wars: Definition and Causes," in Richard F. Hamilton and Holger H. Herwig, eds. *The Origins of World War I* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 11.

## Resources

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## Appendix I: Course Outline

### Phase 1: Narrative Overview of World War I

#### Weeks 1-3

Students are given a basic factual background of the causes, events, and consequences of World War I. Particular emphasis is placed on the causes of the war.

#### *Read general works on WWI and its causes:*

- David Fromkin, *Europe's Last Summer: Who Started the Great War in 1914?* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004.
- John Keegan, *An Illustrated History of the First World War* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, distributed by Random House, 2001.
- Margaret Olwen Macmillan, *Paris 1919: Six Months that Changed the World* New York: Random House, 2001.

**Week 3:** Quiz on the assigned readings.

### Phase 2: Historiography of the Causes of World War I

#### Weeks 4-6

Historiographical study of the causes of the War: Students consider how the trends, events, moods, and other causative forces which led to World War I have been organized and discussed by historians.

**Historiographical readings:**

Annika Mombauer, *The Origins of the First World War: Controversies and Consensus*. London; New York: Longman, 2002.

**Week 6:** Quiz on the assigned readings.

### **Phase 3: Diplomatic Response to the Causes of the War**

**Weeks 7-9**

Each student will be assigned to “represent” one of the countries involved in the war, and explain the causes of the war from that viewpoint. Students are given relevant primary source documents for analysis. Students also meet in groups to discuss documents.

**Document Collection derived from:**

Richard Hacken and Jane Plotke, “The World War I Document Archive,” *Brigham Young University Library*, <<http://www.lib.byu.edu/~rdh/wwi/>>; H-German, “G-Text Primary Source Archives, Kaiserreich, 1871-1918,” <<http://www.h-net.org/~german/gtext/kaiserreich/index.html>>; Paul Halsall, editor, “Internet Modern History Sourcebook: World War I,” <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/modsbook38.html#The%20Path%20to%20War>>; and Vincent Ferraro, Mt. Holyoke College, “Documents of World War I,” <<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/ww1.htm>>.

### **Phase 4: Debate on the Causes of World War I**

**Week 10**

Students turn in a written assignment on causes of World War I. Students are organized into the appropriate diplomatic group representing their country. Preparations are made for the “Great Powers” Conference.

**Week 11**

“Hague Conference of the Great Powers” takes place. Students debate the causes of the impending war according to their country’s perspective.

### **Phase 5: Post-Conference Debriefing**

**Week 12****Class Debriefing**

Class discussion regarding the causes of World War I, the process of writing history, and historical re-enactments.