

Did Germany cause the war?

SOURCE 21

The Allied governments affirm, and Germany accepts, the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied governments and their peoples have been subjected as a result of the war.

The war guilt clause from the Treaty of Versailles, 1919.

After the war, the victorious Allies forced the defeated Germany to sign the 'war guilt' clause (Source 21). Germany had to accept that it was responsible both for starting the war and for all the damage caused by it. However, as the state 'on trial', Germany refused to accept the sole blame. Historians have argued about this issue ever since. Some have continued to blame Germany. Others have reached different verdicts.

FOCUS TASK

Was Germany to blame for the war?

What do you think? Was Germany to blame?

Your task is to look over the evidence and hold your own retrial, looking back from today. You will study evidence and hear from witnesses. You must then reach one of four verdicts:

Verdict 1: Germany was rightly blamed for starting the war.

Verdict 2: Germany was mainly responsible for starting the war, but the other powers should accept some of the blame.

Verdict 3: All of the major powers helped to start the war. They should share the blame.

Verdict 4: No one was to blame. The powers were swept along towards an inevitable war. It could not be stopped.

This is how to run the trial. You can work on your own, or in groups.

1 Draw up a table like the one below:

| Witness | Which verdict does the witness support? | What evidence does the witness give to support the viewpoint? | Can I trust the witness? |
|---------|---|---|--------------------------|
| | | | |

2 Read all the witnesses' statements on page 13. Complete columns 1 and 2.

3 In column 3, note what evidence the witness gives to support his/her viewpoint.

4 In column 4, note what might make the witness reliable or unreliable.

Think about:

- the date and origin of each source
- whether the witness was involved in the events of the time
- the value and reliability of each witness.

5 Look through the other information in this chapter to see if there are other witnesses you should consider.

6 Choose your verdict from verdicts 1–4.

7 Once you have chosen a verdict, you should sum up the evidence for it in a short explanation.

Remember to explain why you have chosen your verdict, but also explain why you have rejected the others.

8 Use your table and explanation for a class debate.

The witnesses

WITNESS 1

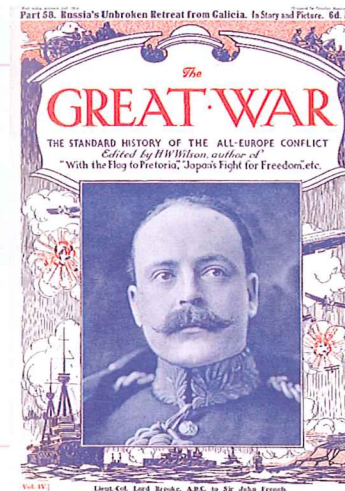
German militarism, which is the crime of the last fifty years, had been working for this for twenty-five years. It is the logical result of their doctrine. It had to come.

Walter Hines Page, US Ambassador in London, 1914. The USA was an ally of Britain and France during the war, and fought in it against Germany from 1917 to 1918.

WITNESS 4

The Schlieffen Plan must rank as one of the supreme idiocies of modern times . . . It restricted the actions of the German government disastrously. In July 1914 they had just two choices; either to abandon the only plan they had to win the next war, or to go to war immediately.

Historian DE Marshall in *The Great War: Myth and Reality*, 1988.



WITNESS 8

German: I wonder what history will make of all of this?

Clemenceau: History will not say that Belgium invaded Germany!

From a conversation between French Prime Minister Clemenceau and a German representative at the peace conference after the war. Clemenceau was a hard-line anti-German.

WITNESS 2

Bethmann stood in the centre of the room . . . There was a look of anguish in his eyes . . . For an instant neither of us spoke. At last I said to him: 'Well, tell me, at least, how it all happened.' He raised his arms to heaven and answered, 'Oh – if only I knew!'

Prince von Bülow, speaking in 1918, remembers calling on the German Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg in August 1914.

WITNESS 5

The World War was directly started by certain officials of the Russian General Staff. But their conduct was caused by the criminal activity of an Austrian Foreign Minister, and this in turn was aided by criminal negligence at Berlin . . .

But they would have been quite unable to start any war, had they not been equally with millions of common people . . . willing agents of forces moving the world towards war . . .

From the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1926.

WITNESS 7

The greatest war of modern times, and perhaps in the whole history of the human race, was begun by Germany using the crime of a schoolboy as an excuse . . . Austria had regarded the growing power of Serbia with concern for many years . . . The situation in Europe seemed to encourage the German peoples in this adventure. England, it was thought, could do nothing . . . with the threats of civil war in Ireland. Russia was in the midst of the reorganisation of her army . . . As for France, Germany believed herself quite competent to deal with her; and sought an opportunity of doing so.

From *The Great War – The Standard History of the All-Europe Conflict*, 1914 (Vol IV). This was a patriotic weekly journal written and published in Britain, describing the war 'as it happened'.

WITNESS 9

. . . the Kaiser authorised me to inform our gracious majesty that we might, in this case as in all others, rely upon Germany's full support . . . it was the Kaiser's opinion that this action must not be delayed . . . Russia was in no way prepared for war and would think twice before it appealed to arms . . . If we had really recognised the necessity of warlike action against Serbia, the Kaiser would regret if we did not make use of the present moment which is all in our favour.

Count Szogyeny, the Austrian ambassador in Berlin, reporting a famous conversation with the Kaiser, July 1914. Historians are divided as to whether the Kaiser was making a planned policy statement or was simply giving reassurance on the spur of the moment.

WITNESS 3

None of the rulers of the Great Powers 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 LCF Turner, 1983.

WITNESS 6

We are being forced to admit that we alone are to blame for the war: such an admission on my lips would be a lie. We are not seeking to absolve [pardon] Germany from all responsibility for this World War, and for the way in which it was fought. However, we do strongly deny that Germany, whose people felt they were fighting a war of defence, should be forced to accept sole responsibility.

Count Brockdorff-Rantzau, head of the German delegates at Versailles, 1919.