

The Causes of the First World War

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Grade Level: Secondary

Province/Territory: all

Time Period: 1900 – 1930 Into the 20th Century

Time Allowance: 1 period (76 minutes)

Overview: On the eve of August 1914, the European countries had created a system of alliances and circumstances that would result in the first global war of the twentieth century. The complex nature of the conflict can often result in a confusing and/or dry history lesson. The students will be recreating the causes and events that led to the start of the First World War through a “gang” warfare simulation.

Purpose:

To familiarize students with the long and short term events that led to the start of the First World War in a way that would be understandable to the students

To provide students with an experiential simulation of the events, individuals, groups, concepts connected to the beginning of the First World War

Resources: handout – Descriptions of groups (see attached)

Materials: markers, art paper, group descriptor hand out

Activity:

1. Begin the lesson by discussing the concept of gangs (eg. Why do gangs exist? Who joins a gang? What makes one unique for another?...). The key to the success of this lesson is to not mention any “historical” connection until after the role play has been completed.
2. Divide the class into 9 groups (each group will become a unique gang). The “gangs” will be different sizes depending on the country being represented. The students are not aware that each gang represents a country.
3. Arrange the groups in the classroom to mirror the geographical location of Europe. Emphasize the territory boundaries of each group. The groups could display their flags so that the other groups grasp the various players.
4. Each group could choose a leader and devise a cheer, motto, flag, illustration of its name, etc...to show pride (nationalism).

5. Give each group its name and description (this can be done orally and/or by written description). The names and descriptions of each gang parallel a country involved in the 1914 conflict. The groups will familiarize themselves with their descriptions. (See accompanying hand out)
6. Have each group introduce itself to the rest of the class. The group will explain its power status, allies, adversaries, goals. Encourage “nationalism” during the introductions. (nationalism, militarism, imperialism, alliance systems, long term causes of war)
7. Prior to enacting the events that lead up to the gang warfare, emphasize the relationships between the gangs and have students visually connect to their allies.
8. Using the short term events leading up to the declaration of war in August 1914, direct/choreograph the various “gangs” into a complex “gang fight”. The level of student participation and movement can be as active as the teacher desires. The level of historical detail can be tailored to the grade and level of the students. Questions and prompts about what may happen next can be used to further involve the students.
9. To connect this to the history of the First World War, inform the students that they just enacted the causes that led to the war. For reinforcement, review the lesson and substitute the names of the countries, people, events involved in the conflict.

Evaluation:

Students can demonstrate their understanding of the causes of the First World War through pen and paper activities, class follow up discussions, or summative evaluation. The following question can be used as a prompt:

A student once told me that World War One started because “a guy called Archie Duke was hungry and shot an ostrich.” Explain the historical causes that led to the First World War. One cause could be the deciphering of this student’s slightly mixed up reasoning.

(Note: source of quotation Blackadder Goes Forth)

Suggested Names and Descriptions of Gangs

- The Germs:** a strong and powerful gang
Wants more territory (scouts are being sent out)
Rich
Stockpiling weapons
Cousins with the Always Hungry gang
Hate the Flamethrowers (had previous war – Germs won)
Competing with the Bulldogs for the most territory
Competing with Bulldogs to be #1 gang
- The Flamethrowers:** want to be a powerful gang
Rich
Hate the Germs (previous war – Germs took over some Flamethrower territory)
Stockpiling weapons
Friends with the Bears
- Always Hungry:** made up of many different groups because they have taken over so much land
Lots of fighting within the group
Wants more land (recently seized Bosses' territory)
Does not get along with Bears because of interest in same territory
Wants to crush Black Hand gang
Cousin to the Germs

Bears: lots of territory to look after
The leader is having problems ruling over members
Becoming more powerful but disorganized
Do not have very many weapons or latest weapons
Does not get along with Always Hungry gang because of interest in the same territory
Angry at Always Hungry for taking over Bosses' territory

Bulldogs: very powerful and rich
Continually expanding and seeking new territory
Stockpiling weapons
Competing with Germs for finding new territory
Competing with Germs to be #1
Protector of the Believers

The Believers: small gang
Keeps to themselves
Tries not to get involved in rivalries
Friends with the Bulldogs and Flamethrowers
Made an agreement with the Bulldogs for protection if needed

The Bosses: small gang
Wants more power
Taken over recently by Always Hungry gang
Not happy with takeover

Planning an revenge

Many Black Hand members live in Bosses' territory

The Black Hand:

very small but radical gang

Just received independence from Always Hungry control

Willing to use violence to achieve goals

Friends with the Bosses

Wants to help the Bosses because many Black Hand members live in Bosses' territory