

Historians debate the origins of World War One on Twitter

Teacher note: The following exercise should be used after students have thoroughly studied the Origins of World War One and are in a position to understand the references to the various countries and its historiography (at the very least, the Fischer thesis should be familiar to them as this is referred to explicitly by Schama). My own materials can be found here:

- Causes of WW1, IGCSE / GCSE Level - <http://goo.gl/XaSqq5>
- Origins of WW1 Compared to WW2, IB / A-Level - <http://goo.gl/TBZsYw>

• On 2nd January, the UK Education Secretary Michael Gove wrote an article suggesting that UK schools should be stressing that World War One was a 'just war' needed to combat aggression by a German elite bent on domination. Mr Gove turns his fire on 'Left-wing academics all too happy to feed those myths by attacking Britain's role in the conflict': <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2532923/Michael-Gove-blasts-Blackadder-myths-First-World-War-spread-television-sit-coms-left-wing-academics.html>

• He singled out Richard Evans, regius professor of history at Cambridge University (pictured), who has said those who enlisted in 1914 were wrong to think they were fighting to defend freedom: 'Richard Evans may hold a professorship, but these arguments...are more reflective of the attitude of an undergraduate cynic playing to the...rather than a sober academic contributing to a proper historical debate.' Professor Evans replied in characteristically robust fashion:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/cambridge-history-professor-hits-back-at-michael-goves-ignorant-attack-9037502.html>



• The previous week, Mr. Gove had a discussion with the respected historians Tom **Holland** and Simon **Schama** about his plans for the history curriculum (and had appeared to stress the importance of students reaching their own judgements), so on that basis I sent out a tweet which started off a discussion between **Schama**, **Holland** and also by Professor Gary **Sheffield**, who appeared on BBC Radio 4 with Richard **Evans** the same day.

Questions and Tasks

1. Does **Schama** appear to blame one country more than any others for the outbreak of World War One? Explain your answer.
2. Does **Sheffield** appear to blame one country more than any others for the outbreak of World War One? Explain your answer.
3. In his BBC Radio 4 interview, **Gove** appeared to support the idea that students should be free to reach their own interpretations. In his Daily Mail article the following week, he appears to state the opposite.
 - (a) How does **Holland** explain this discrepancy?
 - (b) Which of the two sources do you think is more reliable as evidence of Gove's views? Explain your answer.
4. Find out what the following historians suggest were the main causes of World War One:
 - Richard **Evans** • Fritz **Fischer** • Christopher **Clark**

Debate and Discussion Points


1. Do you agree with Michael Gove that World War One was a 'just war' for the British?
2. Should the soldiers who fought in World War One be held up as heroes to be emulated or victims to be pitied?
3. What is 'patriotism'? Does a study of World War One make you more or less 'patriotic'?
4. Should history teachers be more prepared to share their own personal interpretation of World War One (and other topics) rather than presenting students with different viewpoints and requiring them to make up their own minds?
5. What are the strengths and weaknesses of Twitter for conducting a debate of this type?

MR. TEE **Russel Tarr** @russeltarr 4h

I wonder what other academics like @holland_tom and @simon_schama make of Gove on WW1 / @RichardEvans36 today? dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2...

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Daily Mail Online



Michael Gove blasts 'Blackadder myths' about the First World War...

The Education Secretary (pictured) criticises historians and TV programmes that denigrate patriotism and courage by depicting the war as a 'misbegotten shambles'.

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 **Simon Schama** @simon_schama 2h

@russeltarr @holland_tom @RichardEvans36 am more of a Chrisclarkian than a Sheffieldite. Russian mobilization not German the key moment.

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MR. TEE **Russel Tarr** @russeltarr 2h

 @simon_schama @holland_tom @RichardEvans36 @ProfGSheffield

My students always have a lively discussion about the Kaiser in particular.

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MR. TEE **Russel Tarr** @russeltarr 1h

 @simon_schama @holland_tom @RichardEvans36 @ProfGSheffield

...the Tsar, perhaps unsurprisingly, fails to generate much division of opinion.

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 **Simon Schama** @simon_schama 1h
@russeltarr thanks so much. for what its worth I do think Gary Sheffield persuasive about Haig and military innovations and non-donkeying
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 **Simon Schama** @simon_schama 2h
@russeltarr @holland_tom @RichardEvans36 and some of Fischer thesis still makes powerful sense. (the 1912 meeting)
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 **Simon Schama** @simon_schama 2h
@russeltarr @holland_tom @RichardEvans36 though German ultimatum to Belgium and the inexorable working through of Schlieffen also disaster
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 **Simon Schama** @simon_schama 1h
@russeltarr @holland_tom @RichardEvans36 @ProfGSheffield Kaiser a monster but not in summer of 1914; nervously supposed war could be local
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 **Simon Schama** @simon_schama 2h
@russeltarr @holland_tom @RichardEvans36 and some of Fischer thesis still makes powerful sense. (the 1912 meeting)
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 **Russel Tarr** @russeltarr 1h
@simon_schama @holland_tom @RichardEvans36 @ProfGSheffield Re. Fischer, my IB students enjoy historiography WW1 v WW2 [activehistory.co.uk/Miscellaneous/...](http://activehistory.co.uk/Miscellaneous/)
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 **Simon Schama** @simon_schama 1h
@russeltarr @holland_tom @RichardEvans36 @ProfGSheffield try and get them to read Sleepwalkers; its a thing of beauty as well as wisdom
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 **Tom Holland** @holland_tom 1h
@simon_schama @russeltarr @RichardEvans36 @ProfGSheffield The opening alone is like something out of a Jacobean tragedy...
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-  **Simon Schama** @simon_schama 1h
@russeltarr @holland_tom @RichardEvans36
@ProfGSheffield Clark argues the replacement of dove
Kokovtsov by hawk Sazonov was fatal re Serbia
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-  **Gary Sheffield** @ProfGSheffield 1h
@simon_schama @russeltarr @holland_tom
@RichardEvans36 Like many others, I have severe
reservations about this book. I dont buy C's thesis.
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-  **Simon Schama** @simon_schama 1h
@ProfGSheffield @russeltarr @holland_tom
@RichardEvans36 Not even on Russia's mob & implications
for Serbian resistance to ultimatum?
Details Reply Retweet Favorite More
-  **Simon Schama** @simon_schama 59m
@ProfGSheffield @russeltarr @holland_tom
@RichardEvans36 and I do agree with Tom Laqueur that
C's title is misleading..
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-  **Simon Schama** @simon_schama 58m
@ProfGSheffield @russeltarr @holland_tom
@RichardEvans36 How much of Fischer do you think
stands? All of it?
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-  **Gary Sheffield** @ProfGSheffield 55m
@simon_schama @russeltarr @holland_tom
@RichardEvans36 Some of it. My reading is GE prepared 2
risk general war in 1914 to achieve gains.
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-  **Gary Sheffield** @ProfGSheffield 57m
@simon_schama AH backed by GE had decided on war no
matter what RU reaction was. RU mob defensive move fire
warning shot - didn't work.
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-  **Gary Sheffield** @ProfGSheffield 54m
@simon_schama @russeltarr @holland_tom
@RichardEvans36 AH spoiling 4 fight regardless of consq.
GE backed AH in full knowledge of likely end
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 **Gary Sheffield** @ProfGSheffield 53m
@simon_schama Intl conference as proposed by BR (6 times!) wd have punished Serbia. But neither GE or AH interested: wanted war.
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*GE – Germany; AH – Austro-Hungary, RU – Russia, BR - Britain

 **Simon Schama** @simon_schama 1h
@ProfGSheffield @russeltarr @holland_tom @RichardEvans36 Am very much a lay amateur in all this listening to the scholars including you!
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 **Russel Tarr** @russeltarr 1h
@simon_schama @ProfGSheffield @holland_tom @RichardEvans36 The debate's the thing. Hence my alarm at Gove's idea we sell one interpretation
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 **Tom Holland** @holland_tom 1h
@russeltarr @simon_schama @ProfGSheffield @RichardEvans36 But a Tory politician writing in the Mail is bound to play to the gallery!
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 **Tom Holland** @holland_tom 1h
@russeltarr @simon_schama @ProfGSheffield @RichardEvans36 On Start The Week, Gove was very clear there should be debate, not consensus.
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 **Tom Holland** @holland_tom 1h
@russeltarr @simon_schama @RichardEvans36 I think that politicians show a lot more nuance on Radio 4 than they do when writing for the Mail.
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 **Tom Holland** @holland_tom 1h
@simon_schama @russeltarr @RichardEvans36 A year in which @ProfGSheffield vs Chris Clarke on WW1 makes for rolling news is great 4 history
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