

GROUP ASSIGNMENT 6: Analyzing Interpretations

When historians study primary sources, they often develop different interpretations of the meaning of those sources. Their interpretations may be shaped by the mood of the times or the place in which they live. Thus, a historian's environment influences his or her **frame of reference**, the way one views an event or development.

Historians have debated the causes of World War I since 1914. The following excerpts give the views of two historians. The first one was written by Emil Ludwig in 1929. The second was written by Raymond Aron in 1954. Read and then analyze their interpretations.

Procedure:

- 1). As a group read the biographical information on historians Emil Ludwig and Raymond Aron.

Emil Ludwig (1881-1948) was born into a Jewish family in Breslau, Germany. He didn't identify as a Jew until the rise of Adolf Hitler in the 1920s, i.e. he identified largely as part of a response to the dangers posed to liberty by the growth of anti-Semitism in Western Europe. He studied law but eventually chose to pursue writing as a career. Ludwig became a Swiss citizen in 1932 and then later immigrated to the United States to avoid the growing spectre of Nazi power in Europe. During the 1920s, he achieved international fame for his popular biographies which combined historical fact and fiction with psychological analysis.

Raymond Aron (1905-1983) was born in Paris, France, to a secular Jewish family. He received an excellent post-secondary education in France earning a doctorate in the philosophy of history in 1930. He regarded himself as a rational humanist, e.g. he was an outspoken advocate of human rights, toleration, science and freedom. Aron fought the invading German armies during World War II. When France was defeated in 1940, he moved to London where he edited a French newspaper. He returned to France following the defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945. His writings reveal an absolute aversion to all totalitarian political systems.

- 2). As a group read Aron's and Ludwig's opinions on the cause of the First World War.

From Emi Ludwig's book *July 14*

The war-guilt belongs to all Europe...Germany's exclusive guilt or Germany's innocence are fairy-tales for children on both sides of the Rhine...This book is a study of the stupidity of the men who in 1914 were all powerful...Economic crises, questions of competition, and colonies had, indeed, complicated the European situation; yet war had been averted time and again, and three capable statesmen could once more have achieved what the great majority desired...The picture of July 1914 shows a continent in which the nations trusted and obeyed their leaders, while those leaders in their turn were responsible to no central authority. The absence of any control over the individual governments had brought about European anarchy...Hurry, carelessness, surprise, and, above all, mutual fear...finally brought about a war which a sound League of Nations could have prevented.

From Raymond Aaron's book *The Century of Total War*

Before the assassination of the Archduke Francis Ferdinand, Europe was living in a state of preparedness, but no one expected an outbreak from one day to the next. Following the assassination...chancelleries [governments] and populations alike felt the dread of approaching faster...The rise of Germany, whose hegemony [supremacy] France dreaded and whose navy menaced England, had created an opposition that claimed to be defensive but was denounced by German propaganda as an attempt at encirclement. The two camps alarmed each other, and each

tried to soothe its own fears by piling up defensive armaments. The atmosphere grew heavy with multiplied incidents, which spread the conviction of approaching disaster.

3). Then as a group just discuss—do not write anything—the following questions.

i. Identify the interpretations. a). What does Ludwig suggest was the main cause of World War I? b). What does Aron suggest was the main cause of the war?

ii. Decide how a historian's frame of reference affects his or her interpretation. To do this, you need to know about the mood of the times in which the historian lived. In the 1920s, many European historians rejected the view of the Allies that Germany alone was responsible for the war. They hoped to learn a lesson from the war that would prevent another world conflict. In the 1950s, the world seemed to be divided into two parts: the "free world," led by the United States, and the "communist world," led by the Soviet Union. Both sides built up large arsenals of weapons. Use this background information (and the biographical information above (see step 1)) to answer the following questions:

a). How does Ludwig think World War I might have been avoided? b). How does this view show the influence of the 1920s on Ludwig's interpretation? c). How might the tensions in the 1950s have affected Aron's interpretation?

iii. Evaluate the reliability of each source. a). Do you think individual government leaders could have prevented the outbreak of war? Why or why not? b). In your opinion, how important was the division of Europe into two armed camps in causing World War I? c). What other factors do you think contributed to the outbreak of World War I?

4). Then individually compose an answer (minimum 100 words in length) to the following question. Ensure you appeal to both relevant logic, events, personalities and evidence in the composition of your answer. Submit your answer using *Google* docs sharing read/write permissions with your instructor (rdelainey@lcbi.sk.ca).

iv. Use the sources to generate a deeper understanding. In the form of a paragraph, synthesize (combine) and place into your own words Ludwig and Aaron's interpretations on the causes of World War I. Then from your paragraph identify and highlight the *single* greatest cause of the Great War by **bolding it**, i.e. you'll be bolding a single sentence.