

# TEACHER, WHAT'S A HUN?

## AN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE ON TEACHING WORLD WAR I

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As the 100th anniversary of World War I approaches, news stories, television features, and museum displays will be cobbled together with a variety of materials and memorials from around the world to remind viewers of its horrors. Given all that background noise, how can teachers find a fresh approach to teaching a 100-year-old topic, a long-ago war that tends to be forgotten compared to a more recent global conflict, World War II?

Secondary students are drawn to studying World War II because the people, events, and locations all seem so extraordinary. What's more, a number of books on World War II have recently been published, including *The Boy in The Striped Pajamas*, by John Boyne, *Bomb: The Race to Build—and Steal—the World's Most Dangerous Weapon*, by Steven Sheinkin, and *The Book Thief*, by Marcus Zusak. But most students arrive in the classroom with little knowledge of or interest in the complex issues surrounding World War I.

A great place to start is to have a variety of books on World War I available for students in English and Social Studies classrooms, including narrative non-fiction titles such as *Truce: The Day the Soldiers Stopped Fighting*, by Jim Murphy, *The War to End All Wars: World War I*, by Russell Freedman, and *Dogs of*

*War*, by Sheila Keenan. For students more interested in historical fiction, try *The Foreshadowing*, by Marcus Sedgwick, Kirby Larson's *Hattie Big Sky*, *My Brother's Shadow*, by Monika Schröder, *War Horse*, by Michael Morpurgo, and of course the classic *All Quiet on the Western Front*, by Erich Maria Remarque. There are also a few recent books designed to entice reluctant readers, such as *Archie's War Scrapbook*, by Marcia Williams, and *Where Poppies Grow: A World War I Companion*, by Linda Granfield.

Instead of having the whole class read the same book, teachers might ask students to select one based on their interest and reading level. Instructors should read each book on the list prior to recommending, to check for age-appropriate content and readability, and assure they can speak confidently about all the options. Small book groups of three to four students may allow students to access the texts at their reading level.

No matter which books they select, students will need historical background information to support their reading. Note that any information provided in the classroom should be straightforward and direct; limited text, accompanied by appealing visuals, often proves to be the most compelling format. Focus on the causes of

war, countries and alliances, major players and battles, and key vocabulary. (By the way, “hun” was an offensive or slang term used to refer to German soldiers in World War I propaganda.)

In creating a slideshow, teachers should try to limit it to eight to ten slides and aim for a presentation lasting no more than 25 minutes. If the teacher designs a student version with questions as well as an instructor’s version that supplies correct answers, students can literally “fill in the blanks” as they watch. Including photos and video clips within the slideshow can also help students better grasp the content. Textbook reading and note-taking, while valuable when it comes to background research, should be kept to a minimum. A barrage of too many details and dry facts will turn off most students.

Background information on the war should also include various perspectives. For example, how did American isolationism play into the way the U.S. became involved in the conflict? Another angle that could be explored is how American industry made millions of dollars from selling weapons and materials to the nations at war. In exploring topics such as these, students are compelled to look beyond the alliances and historical figures and analyze the causes and effects, motives, and political underpinnings of the conflict.

In teaching about any historical event, it is important to introduce students to a variety of sources, so they can formulate their own conclusions. One perspective on warfare that intrigues many students is the role of women. But while most students have heard of Rosie the Riveter, many are unaware of the important contributions American women made to the Allied victory in World War I. They should also be reminded that the women who served in the military during this conflict still could not vote in U.S. elections.

In the end, all teachers face the bottom line: assessment. Before beginning instruction, they must

consider how their students are going to be assessed in order to know what to highlight and what to eliminate in the teaching process. For example, if a teacher is going to use Document Based Questions (DBQs) as the assessment method, lessons should be designed to help students build their historical thinking skills by sourcing a variety of documents, categorizing information, and writing coherent arguments. If a teacher plans to use more of an inquiry-based approach, he or she should give students a list of possible topics to research. With topics in hand, students will be ready for lessons on researching and documenting sources. Project types might include documentary videos, websites, performances, exhibits, or interactive lectures (which a teacher could use the following year), or even a student-created simulation, to help the rest of the class explore a particular topic.

Teaching World War I is similar to teaching other topics in social studies and history. Remember that our students learn just as much from what we teach as they do from how we teach it. Giving them the power to choose their own books, select their own topics, and pursue their own methods for demonstrating their learning helps students gain critical knowledge as well as twenty-first century skills.

Editor’s Note: You can find two of Matthew Elms’ lessons on World War I, focusing on propaganda and women in the military during the war, at <http://www.nhd.org/WWI.htm>.



German soldiers perform on musical instruments for local children. (Image courtesy of the National World War I Museum)