



MacArthur Memorial Education Programs

Investigating Historical Controversy

Controversy can make people uncomfortable. For a historian though, controversy can be very helpful in understanding the past.

Today, many current events generate a lot of debate and can seem controversial. Events in the past often seem less controversial, because we are further removed from them. In reality though, many historical events were controversial to those who lived through them. They were debated and debated and not everyone was happy with the outcome in the end.

Individuals, countries, or other groups are historical actors. They bring their own unique perspective and interests to every issue they face. Part of being a historian is recognizing these perspectives and understanding the motivations of all parties involved in a controversial event.

1. What historical event is being examined and when did the event occur?
2. In one paragraph, provide a brief synopsis of the event in question.
3. Why might this event be considered controversial?
4. Who were the main individuals (or countries or other groups) involved in the event? Include facts about each that you feel are important to the situation.
5. Outline the arguments/perspectives of the major individuals involved in the event. Why do you think they took the positions they did on this issue?

6. What were the consequences of the decisions made by each side?

7. What else was happening in the world at the same time as this event? How might this have influenced the perspectives of both sides?

8. Describe public opinion at the time of this event. What side did the public take and why? What evidence do you have to support this finding?

9. What perspective do people today have about this event? What evidence do you have to support this finding?

10. What is the legacy of this event? Do the arguments/decisions made continue to influence current events?

11. As a modern observer of this event, which side would you take?
If you lived during the event, what side would you have chosen?
Compare and contrast your modern and “historic” perception of the event. Did you change sides? Why or why not?