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The unveiling of the Whitehall Cenotaph, 1920

Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin at Yalta, February 1945

Advice on tackling Essays

• You must spend a few minutes carefully looking at the paper and weighing up the choice of questions, before you make up your mind on which two questions to answer.

• Look very closely at the wording of the questions, making sure that you understand their implications and what you need to address in your answer.

• Pay particular attention to ‘command’ words such as: ‘to what extent’, ‘analyse’, ‘compare and contrast’. In the case of ‘To what extent was the First World War a total war?’ you must weigh up the ways in which it was and the ways in which it was not total, reaching a conclusion about whether it was entirely, largely, partly, or not at all, total. ‘Compare and contrast the causes of the First and Second World Wars’ would require you to examine the similarities and the differences between their causes. ‘Analyse’ means examine or scrutinise, so ‘analyse the results of the Second World War’ would require you to examine the key effects of the war politically (both in domestic and international terms), economically, socially and technologically, evaluating which were most important.

• Always plan your answer, spending at least 2 or 3 minutes doing this for each essay, if not longer (but no more than 5 to 6).

• Give equal time to each essay you write. Do not be tempted to spend much longer on one at the expense of the other.

• Answer the question. Keep your approach analytical, do not drift in to a description of events. Focus tightly on the question; do not deviate.

• Perhaps the best way of ensuring that each paragraph is linked to the title, is to check that your first sentence (the ‘key’ sentence) is making a statement that directly answers the question.

• For each point that you make, provide an explanation of what light that point sheds on the question/why it is significant and also present evidence or a precise example to support it. So the drill should be ‘Statement, Explanation, Example’.

• Always write in complete sentences and be as clear as you can in your use of English. The clearer your English, the more effectively you will communicate your points to the examiner.

• Always write a proper introduction. This must identify the key issues raised by the question. You should also outline your thesis, the line of argument that your answer will take.

• Make sure that you leave time for a proper conclusion. The main purpose of this is to restate your key arguments.

• Do not feel that you have to pack your answer with references to differing schools of historical interpretation and named historians. You will get credit for such historiographical references, where used appropriately but do not insert them just for the sake of displaying your knowledge if they do not contribute to answering the question.

• Whatever information you insert in to your answer, whether in the form of a fact, a statistic or a quotation, do make sure that you explain its significance and how it answers the question. If you do that, your essay should remain focused.
The Causes of the First World War

The historical debate

Perhaps no other question in history has aroused such fierce historical debate as the issue of who or what caused the First World War. Many historians have essentially accepted the verdict of Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles (1919) that Germany and its allies were responsible for the outbreak of the war.

The Allied and associated governments declare, and Germany accepts the responsibility for, all the loss and damage suffered by the Allied and associated governments as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies.

The Fischer Thesis

The most influential historian in this respect is Fritz Fischer who published two highly controversial works in the 1960s. Fischer’s thesis was that Germany had pursued an aggressive foreign policy since the 1890s aimed at expanding Germany’s borders and that, from the time of the War Council meeting of December 1912, Wilhelm II’s government wanted to go to war as soon as possible. Fischer argues that the German government’s expansionist aims of the pre-First World War period were very similar to those of the Nazis, that there was a basic continuity in German foreign policy between 1871 and 1939.

Fischer saw the aggression of Wilhelm II’s Germany as primarily motivated by the government’s desire to strengthen its support among the German population, at a time when the power of the Kaiser and the German elites was being challenged by the growing strength of the Socialists who, by 1912, were the largest party in the Reichstag. Historians who focus on domestic factors in shaping Germany’s foreign policy see the Zabern Affair (1913) as highly significant. The Reichstag passed a vote of no confidence in Bethmann-Hollweg’s government (by 293 to 54 votes) following the army’s mistreatment of civilians in Zabern in Alsace. The government defended the army’s behaviour. Historians of the Fischer school see the Zabern Affair as highlighting the ongoing constitutional tensions in Germany which arguably made the prospect of a short, victorious war more attractive to the Kaiser and his advisers in 1914.

Fischer’s thesis became the orthodox interpretation, replacing the view that had prevailed since the 1930s that no one country was responsible for the First World War and that, according to the former British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, no country wanted war in 1914. Lloyd George saw the war as an accidental war, arguing that ‘the nations in 1914 slithered over the brink into the boiling cauldron of war.’ Fischer’s view that Germany deliberately engineered a war in 1914, in order to fulfill the aims of Weltpolitik (to make Germany a great imperial power), has received support from many historians, notably Immanuel Geiss and Ulrich Wehler. Geiss sees Germany as the aggressor in the July Crisis, putting pressure on Austria-Hungary to resolve by military action the threat posed by Serbia. According to Geiss, Bethmann Hollweg’s government was prepared to provoke a general European war in order to fulfill the aims of Weltpolitik.

Fischer’s critics

Fischer has many critics such as Gerhard Ritter; Ritter argues that Germany acted defensively in July 1914 and was seeking a diplomatic victory over the Triple Entente, rather than a military one. Other German historians, notably Egmont Zechlin, argue that Germany in 1914 was seeking a preventative war, with no plans for acquiring land from its neighbours. They challenge Fischer’s claim that Bethmann Hollweg’s September Programme (1914), in which the German government outlined possible war aims in terms of acquiring territory in central Europe, reflects the German government’s motives in going to war in 1914. Zechlin suggests that the German government in the years immediately before the First World War was increasingly gloomy about the growing power of its enemies (the Triple Entente of France, Russia and Britain) and went to war in desperation in 1914 as an attempt to break out of its ‘encirclement’ by the Triple Entente as the balance of power tipped increasingly in the favour of Germany’s enemies. There is no doubt that the German government was more and more worried about the fragility of its chief ally, Austria-Hungary, which appeared menaced by the restless nationalism of its Slav subjects.