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Q12

How far is it correct to say that the First World War was fought essentially for the preservation of balance of power?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · GS I · 15 marks · History of the World

History of the world will include events from the 18th century such as industrial revolution, world wars, redrawing of national boundaries, colonization, decolonization, political philosophies like communism, capitalism, socialism etc. - their forms and effect on the society.

Core demand of the question

- State the balance-of-power reading of the First World War
- Examine how far that reading is correct against other causes

Revision summary

The balance-of-power view sees 1914 as a response to German hegemony and a rigid alliance system.

Britain's Belgian case fits an old habit of stopping one power from dominating the Channel coast.

Imperial rivalry, Balkan nationalism, and railway mobilisation are causes that this view underplays.

Fischer and others stress German war aims, not only equilibrium.

1919 did not restore a stable balance. It created new grievances.

The word "essentially" is too strong. Balance of power was a major logic. It was not the only one.

Introduction

One common reading of the **First World War** is that the European powers fought in 1914 to keep a **balance of power** after the rise of Germany. Europe had become a system of alliances that claimed to keep peace by deterring rivals. That reading is partly true. It is not the whole explanation. Imperial rivalry, nationalism, military timetables, and the Balkan crisis also made a general war more likely. The word "essentially" in the question needs to be tested against those other causes.

Body

The balance-of-power case

Since 1871 a **German Empire** had sat in the middle of Europe with industry, a general staff, and, under **Wilhelm II**, a **Weltpolitik** fleet that frightened Britain. Bismarck's old isolation of France gave way to a **Triple Alliance** of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy against a **Triple Entente** of France, Russia, and Britain. Britain's **entente** was not a blank cheque. Naval rivalry and the **Schlieffen** plan for a two-front war made every crisis a test of who would be isolated. When Austria moved on Serbia after **Sarajevo**, Russia backed a Slav cause.

Germany backed Vienna. France stood by Russia. Britain entered over **Belgian neutrality**. That was the old British habit of not letting a single power own the Channel coast. In that story, 1914 is balance of power pursued by war.

- **German rise:** Industry and navy looked like a bid for hegemony.
- **Alliance blocs:** Two camps turned a Balkan war into a continental one.
- **British tradition:** Britain sought to prevent a hostile dominant power in Western Europe.

What the formula leaves out

Imperialism made the blocs global. Morocco, the Baghdad railway, Africa, and the Ottoman lands were extra-European stakes. **Nationalism** in the Balkans and among subject peoples of Austria-Hungary was not only a diplomatic move. It was a demand for states of their own. **Arms races** and railway mobilisation plans meant that once a cabinet chose war, the trains ran. **Fischer's** reading of German war aims, and the later **Versailles** war-guilt clause, stress aggression, not only equilibrium. Socialist and liberal opinion at the time named capitalist rivalry. Colonial soldiers died for a European conflict they had not designed.

Italy's switch and the Ottoman and Japanese entries show a war that rewrote the balance rather than preserving a known one. The peace of 1919 created new imbalances. It left a punished Germany, a dissatisfied Italy, and a revolutionary Russia.

- **Empire:** Extra-European stakes were not a sideshow.
- **Nation:** Serbia, Poland, Czech, and South Slav questions were not mere weights on a scale.
- **Contingency:** Blank cheques, misread telegrams, and elite honour codes also mattered.

How far "essentially"

It is correct that cabinets spoke the language of encirclement, prestige, and equilibrium. Britain's entry fits an old balance reflex. It is incorrect to say the war was essentially only that. Balance of power was the usual method of great-power diplomacy. Imperialism and nationalism ran through that method. Without the German-British naval race the system still might have held. Without Sarajevo and mobilisation timetables it might have held a few years more. The word "essentially" overstates a real strand.

A fair verdict is this. The war was fought among other things to stop a feared German hegemony. That was a balance-of-power aim. It was also fought to settle who would own colonial margins and whose nation would exist.

Flow diagram

German rise and navy -> Alliance blocs
Alliance blocs -> July 1914 escalation
Nationalism Balkans -> July 1914 escalation
Imperial rivalry -> July 1914 escalation
Mobilisation timetables -> July 1914 escalation

Conclusion

Balance of power explains the alliance map and Britain's Belgian argument. It does not cover empire, nation, and mobilisation plans. The First World War was a hegemonic war in Europe and an imperial war abroad. To say it was fought essentially for balance alone is too simple for 1914.

Facts & figures

Triple Alliance / Triple Entente

Pre-war groupings of Germany-Austria-Hungary-Italy versus France-Russia-Britain that turned a regional crisis into a general war.

Schlieffen Plan

German general-staff plan to strike France quickly through Belgium, which internationalised the war and brought Britain in.

Sarajevo, June 1914

The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand that set Austria's ultimatum to Serbia in motion.

Fischer debate

Fritz Fischer's thesis emphasised German responsibility and annexationist aims, challenging a pure 'slide into war' or balance-only story.

Belgian neutrality

Britain cited the 1839 guarantee of Belgian neutrality as the legal trigger for war with Germany.