

ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

History Optional World Wars

Paper 2 · Unit 22

Origins, conduct and settlements of both wars, and the failure of the League: 50 marks across four questions in four years, present in every paper.

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UPSC SYLLABUS

World Wars: 1st and 2nd World Wars as total wars, societal implications; World War I, causes and consequences; World War II, causes and consequences.

Origins of the First World War

Causation questions dominate here. Give the long-term structural pressures, then the alliance system, then the crisis, and say which layer you find decisive.

- **Alliance system** divided Europe into the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy from 1882 and the Triple Entente of France, Russia and Britain completed in 1907, converting any local quarrel into a general one.
- **Bismarck's** post-1871 diplomacy had isolated France deliberately, and its abandonment under **Wilhelm II**, particularly the lapse of the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia in 1890, allowed the Franco-Russian alliance that Bismarck had spent twenty years preventing.
- **Naval race** between Britain and Germany after Tirpitz's laws of 1898 and 1900, and especially after the **Dreadnought of 1906** made every earlier battleship obsolete, poisoned Anglo-German relations irreparably.
- **Imperial rivalry** produced the Moroccan crises of 1905 and 1911, in which Germany challenged French primacy and succeeded only in tightening the Entente.
- **Balkan instability** followed Ottoman retreat, with Austria's annexation of Bosnia in 1908 and the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 leaving Serbia enlarged, ambitious and backed by Russia.
- **Nationalism** operated in two directions, as great-power chauvinism amplified by a mass press and as the subject-nationality pressure dissolving Austria-Hungary from within.
- **Military planning** removed flexibility, since the **Schlieffen Plan** required Germany to attack France through Belgium the moment Russia mobilised, so a Balkan crisis produced an invasion of the west.
- **Sarajevo on 28 June 1914**, the assassination of Franz Ferdinand by Gavrilo Princip of the Black Hand, triggered the Austrian ultimatum, the Russian mobilisation and the sequence that followed within five weeks.
- Historiography to name: **Fritz Fischer** argued from German archives that Germany deliberately sought war for expansionist aims, while **A. J. P. Taylor** emphasised railway timetables and mobilisation schedules, and **Christopher Clark's** sleepwalkers thesis distributes responsibility across all the powers.

Total war and its societal implications

Named first in the syllabus, and the concept that distinguishes these two wars from every earlier European conflict.

- **Total war** means the mobilisation of the whole society and economy for war, the erosion of the distinction between combatant and civilian, and the subordination of normal politics to military need.
- **Conscription** reached unprecedented scale, with about seventy million mobilised in the first war, and Britain abandoned voluntary recruitment for conscription in 1916.
- **Economic direction** replaced the market, with ministries of munitions, rationing, price control, requisition and state direction of labour in every major belligerent.

- **Women's employment** expanded enormously in munitions, transport, agriculture and clerical work, and it contributed directly to the franchise extensions of 1918 in Britain and 1920 in the United States.
- **Propaganda and censorship** became state functions on a new scale, with Britain's Ministry of Information and Germany's equivalent producing the first systematic manipulation of mass opinion.
- **Casualties** were industrial in scale, with roughly nine to ten million military dead in the first war and around sixty million total deaths in the second, the majority of the latter civilian.
- **Civilian targeting** escalated across the two wars, from the naval blockade and Zeppelin raids of the first to the strategic bombing of Guernica, Coventry, Hamburg, Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the second.
- **Colonial contribution** deserves a paragraph in any Indian answer, since about 1.3 million Indians served in the first war and 2.5 million in the second, the largest volunteer army in history.
- **Political consequences** at home included the collapse of four empires after 1918, the extension of the franchise, the growth of organised labour and, after 1945, the welfare state.

KEY TERMS

Total war — War requiring mobilisation of the entire society and economy, in which the civilian and combatant distinction erodes.

Consequences of the First World War

The 2025 paper asked about impacts on ways of thinking as well as political consequences, so cover the intellectual dimension properly.

- **Four empires fell**, the German, Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman and Russian, and the successor states of central and eastern Europe were created out of their territory.
- **Treaty of Versailles of 1919** imposed on Germany the **war guilt clause Article 231**, reparations eventually fixed at 132 billion gold marks, territorial losses including Alsace-Lorraine and the Polish corridor, demilitarisation of the Rhineland and an army capped at 100,000.
- **Keynes** in *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* of 1919 argued the reparations were unpayable and would destabilise Europe, and his prediction shaped a generation of opinion.
- Companion treaties of **Saint-Germain, Trianon, Neuilly and Sevres** dismembered Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, and Trianon's reduction of Hungary by two thirds created a revisionist grievance lasting to the present.
- **Self-determination** was applied selectively, creating Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia while leaving large minorities inside each and denying the principle entirely outside Europe.
- That denial mattered enormously in Asia and Africa, and **Wilson's rhetoric** raised expectations in Cairo, Delhi and Beijing that Versailles then disappointed, which produced the 1919 Egyptian revolution and the May Fourth Movement in China.
- **Intellectual consequences** were profound, and the 2025 question turns on them: pre-war confidence in progress, reason and European civilisation was destroyed.
- That disillusion is visible in the war poets **Owen and Sassoon**, in **Remarque's** *All Quiet on the Western Front*, in Dada and Surrealism, in **Spengler's** *Decline of the West*, and in Freud's turn towards a death instinct.

- **Economic dislocation** included inflation, war debt to the United States, and the shift of financial primacy from London to New York, which set the conditions for 1929.

The League of Nations and its failure

Asked in 2026 on why it failed to maintain peace and security between 1919 and 1946. The answer needs structural weaknesses and specific failures in balance.

- Established by the Covenant within the Treaty of Versailles, the League began work in 1920 at Geneva with an Assembly, a Council, a Secretariat and the Permanent Court of International Justice.
- **Absence of the United States** was the founding wound, since the Senate refused ratification, and the organisation designed around Wilson's vision operated without his country.
- Membership was never universal, with Germany admitted only in 1926 and leaving in 1933, the Soviet Union admitted in 1934 and expelled in 1939, and Japan and Italy departing in the 1930s.
- **Unanimity rule** in the Council meant any interested party could block action, which made collective security procedurally almost impossible.
- **No armed force** of its own left the League dependent on members to act, and economic sanctions were its only real instrument.
- Early successes are worth acknowledging for balance, including the Aaland Islands settlement of 1921, the Greek-Bulgarian dispute of 1925, the mandate supervision and the technical work on health, labour and refugees.
- **Manchuria in 1931** was the decisive failure, since the Lytton Commission condemned Japanese aggression, the Assembly adopted the report, and Japan simply left the League in 1933 with no further consequence.
- **Abyssinia in 1935** destroyed the League's credibility completely, since sanctions on Italy excluded oil and the Suez Canal stayed open, and the **Hoare-Laval Pact** revealed that Britain and France were negotiating a partition behind the League's back.
- **Rearmament and remilitarisation** followed without response, with the Rhineland in 1936, Anschluss and Munich in 1938, and by 1939 the League was irrelevant.
- The verdict to argue: the League failed because its members preferred national interest to collective security, and the institutional defects mattered chiefly because they gave those members an excuse.

Origins of the Second World War

Weigh the Versailles legacy, the Depression, ideology and appeasement, and name the historiographical dispute, since it is one of the sharpest in the discipline.

- **Versailles grievance** supplied the political material, with war guilt, reparations, territorial loss and the Diktat label uniting German opinion across parties.
- **Great Depression** from 1929 destroyed the Weimar Republic's legitimacy, produced six million German unemployed by 1932, and made extremist parties electorally viable across Europe.
- **Nazi ideology** provided the aims, since **Lebensraum** in the east, racial hierarchy and the repudiation of Versailles were stated in *Mein Kampf* and pursued consistently.
- **Failure of collective security** through the League emboldened each successive aggression, and Manchuria, Abyssinia and the Rhineland formed a sequence of unpunished violations.

- **Appeasement**, culminating in the **Munich Agreement of September 1938** that transferred the Sudetenland, is defended by its practitioners on grounds of military unreadiness, public war-weariness and the belief that Versailles had been unjust.
- Its critics answer that Munich handed Germany the Czech armaments industry and defensible frontier while gaining a year that Germany used better than Britain did.
- **Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 1939**, with its secret protocol dividing Poland and the Baltic, removed Hitler's last strategic obstacle and made the invasion of 1 September possible.
- **A. J. P. Taylor's** *Origins of the Second World War* of 1961 argued that Hitler was an ordinary opportunist statesman without a timetable, and the storm it provoked defines the historiography of this question.
- The mainstream reply, from **Hugh Trevor-Roper** and others, is that Taylor underweighted ideology and the consistency of Hitler's stated aims, and a good answer states the dispute before taking a side.

The Second World War as a global conflict

Asked in 2024 on whether it was truly global. That question is answered by theatres, participants and consequences, and the answer is a qualified yes.

- **Theatres** spanned Europe, North Africa, the Atlantic, the Soviet Union, China, Southeast Asia and the Pacific, with fighting on three continents and every ocean.
- **Chronology is itself contested**, since the war began in Europe in 1939 but in Asia arguably with the Japanese invasion of China in 1937 or of Manchuria in 1931, and saying so answers the global question directly.
- **Eastern Front** was the largest theatre by far, with **Stalingrad** from 1942 to 1943 and Kursk in 1943 the turning points, and Soviet deaths of roughly twenty seven million exceeding all other belligerents combined.
- **Pacific war** from Pearl Harbor in December 1941 through Midway in 1942 to the atomic bombings of August 1945 was fought across an ocean and involved the mobilisation of Asian colonial populations.
- **Colonial participation** was extensive, with Indian, African, Caribbean and Southeast Asian troops and labour deployed far from home, and the Indian Army the largest volunteer force ever raised.
- **Economic mobilisation** was genuinely worldwide, drawing rubber from Malaya, oil from Iran and Venezuela, food from Argentina and Australia, and manufactures from the United States under Lend-Lease.
- **Ideological character** distinguished it from the first war, since it was fought against fascism and, in Asia, against Japanese imperialism, which gave the Allied cause a moral framing the earlier war lacked.
- **The Holocaust** and the systematic murder of six million Jews alongside Roma, disabled people, Soviet prisoners and others is the war's defining crime and produced the Genocide Convention of 1948.
- Qualification worth making: participation was global but decision-making was not, since colonial peoples fought without being consulted, which is precisely the grievance that fuelled post-war decolonisation.

Consequences and the post-war order

Close by linking to the units on the world after 1945 and on liberation from colonial rule, since examiners reward the connection.

- **Two superpowers** emerged as Europe declined, and the wartime alliance dissolved into the Cold War within three years of victory.
- **United Nations**, established in 1945 with a Security Council of five permanent members holding vetoes, was deliberately designed to avoid the League's structural weaknesses while preserving great-power primacy.
- **Decolonisation** accelerated because the metropolitan powers were exhausted, because colonial troops had seen European defeat at Japanese hands, and because the Atlantic Charter had proclaimed self-determination.
- **Economic institutions** created at **Bretton Woods in 1944**, the IMF and the World Bank, and later the GATT, established an American-led international economic order.
- **Nuremberg and Tokyo trials** created the precedent of individual criminal responsibility for crimes against humanity, and the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** followed in 1948.
- **Division of Europe** was settled at Yalta and Potsdam in 1945, and the resulting partition of Germany and of the continent lasted until 1989.
- **Nuclear weapons** transformed the character of great-power conflict, making direct war between the superpowers unthinkable and channelling rivalry into proxy conflicts.
- **Welfare states** were built across western Europe on the argument that populations mobilised for total war were owed social provision, and Britain's Beveridge Report of 1942 is the model text.
- For India specifically, the war produced the 1943 Bengal famine, the INA, the Quit India movement and a treasury position in which Britain owed India substantial sterling balances, and all four shaped the timing of independence.

Last-mile revision

- Alliances 1882 and 1907; Reinsurance Treaty lapses 1890; Dreadnought 1906; Moroccan crises 1905 and 1911; Bosnia 1908; Sarajevo 28 June 1914.
- Fischer for German responsibility, Taylor for timetables, Clark for sleepwalkers.
- Versailles 1919: Article 231, 132 billion gold marks, army capped at 100,000; Saint-Germain, Trianon, Neuilly, Sevres; Keynes 1919.
- League from 1920: no United States, unanimity rule, no army; Manchuria 1931 and Lytton, Abyssinia 1935 and Hoare-Laval, Rhineland 1936.
- WWII origins: Depression, Lebensraum in Mein Kampf, appeasement and Munich 1938, Nazi-Soviet Pact August 1939; Taylor 1961 and the Trevor-Roper reply.
- Global: Asia from 1931 or 1937, Stalingrad 1942-43, Soviet dead about 27 million, Pearl Harbor December 1941, atomic bombs August 1945.
- After: UN 1945 with the veto, Bretton Woods 1944, Nuremberg and Tokyo, UDHR 1948, Yalta and Potsdam, Beveridge 1942.

Common errors to avoid

- Giving Sarajevo as the cause rather than the trigger. The alliance system, naval race, Balkan instability and mobilisation plans are the causes.
- Saying the League failed because of its structure alone. Members preferred national interest and the structural defects gave them cover.
- Dating the Second World War's start uniformly to 1939. In Asia it began in 1931 or 1937, which is the substance of the global question.
- Treating appeasement as simple cowardice. Military unreadiness, public opinion and genuine doubts about Versailles were real considerations.
- Omitting the intellectual consequences of 1918. The 2025 question asked specifically about ways of thinking.
- Forgetting colonial participation. India alone sent 1.3 million in the first war and 2.5 million in the second.

Mains Practice

The Second World War was a truly global conflict. Discuss.

20 marks · 250 words · 2024

'The League of Nations failed to achieve its objectives of maintaining international peace and security.' Analyse the major factors during 1919-1946.

10 marks · 150 words · 2026

“The First World War did not produce just political consequences, it also had a deep impact on ways of thinking.”

10 marks · 150 words · 2025

The Treaty of Versailles contained in itself the seeds of the Second World War. Examine.

10 marks · 150 words · 2023