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Revision

Peace and war: international relations c.1890–1941: AS Unit F962/02 (p. 18)

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You can use this material, alongside the OCR exam focus on p. 18 of this issue, to help you revise this topic. Here, an alternative example answer to the question has been provided, and some commentary assessing the answer has been interspersed throughout (in blue italic type).

Question

‘Assess the view that the arms race was the main reason for the outbreak of the First World War.’ (50 marks)

Example answer

The First World War broke out for many reasons. The reasons include the arms race, Russia’s aims in the Balkans, Germany’s policy and the alliances. The First World War broke out in 1914 after a lot of tensions between the different countries. The Schlieffen Plan led to Germany invading northern France and Belgium, which meant that Britain and France had to get involved, as this was in the alliance system. Russia was also involved. There had been many tensions before the war because of nationalism and countries supporting their allies.

Comments: The answer identifies several relevant factors. It does address the question of the reasons for the outbreak of the First World War (and mentions the arms race) but does not at this stage give an argument in terms of their importance. This isn’t vital but when present it does show that the candidate has planned their answer and shows the examiner that they understand the task. There is some contextual information here but it is not really necessary (especially in an exam situation where time is limited) and it would be much more useful to use the time to provide an argument about importance.

The first reason for the outbreak of the First World War is the arms race. The arms race was a race between different countries to build the biggest Army and Navy. Britain and Germany focused on their navies, building many ships in order to dominate the seas. It was also a race towards getting better weapons. Britain and Germany were the two most industrialised countries and so they wanted to show off and prove that they were the best. It was important because it meant that the countries were all wary of each other because they knew that the others had built up large stocks of weapons. This meant that they needed allies and it made tensions more likely to lead to a war. Some historians think that this made British and German relations much worse, which also contributed to war, and that

Franz Ferdinand could have been assassinated earlier without war happening because the arms race had not reached its peak.

Comments: All of this discussion is relevant but it is fairly superficial. It does provide explanations as to why the factor helped to cause the First World War but the evidence given is general. This will limit the candidate's achievement if repeated throughout. It also lacks an explanation of why this factor is more important than the next — there is no sense of prioritisation or evaluation here. It is possible that the candidate will do this later on, but it is much better if produced consistently throughout the essay.

The second factor is the desire of Russia and Austria to gain territory in the Balkans. Both countries wished to gain land there, and because Turkey was weak they knew that it was possible. There had been a lot of conflict in the area before, even wars over the area involving Russia. There had nearly been war in 1908. As a result there was a lot of tension between Austria and Serbia. Because Russia was a supporter of Serbia it didn't want to back down and this led to a crisis. It also led to the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914, and this triggered the war. It is a very important cause because of this, as when Franz Ferdinand was killed Austria made an ultimatum to Serbia, and because Austria rejected Serbia's response war was declared. Russia supported Serbia, so war broke out.

Comments: Again, this could form the basis for a useful discussion. It's certainly an important factor and the candidate gives a little more detail initially in their section on Turkey. The same problems exist, however, in that it's a very brief and surface-level discussion that needs much more detail. The candidate has still not linked the factors or made a judgement about the relative importance of the factor.

A third factor is the system of European alliances. This was really important because it meant that when one of the countries was threatened, the others in the alliance would have to step in. Austria, Italy and Germany were in the Triple Alliance (formed in 1882) and Britain, France and Russia were in the Triple Entente (1907). Because of the tensions between the different countries, such as the Balkan crises, the alliances were kept up and became even more important. Britain had also promised to protect Belgian neutrality, so when the Germans invaded Belgium it had to join the war. Germany mobilised in order to protect Austria. It is said that the alliances made war more likely on a European level because if one country declared war, the others in the alliance had to join in, which meant that the war spread.

Comments: This section demonstrates a little more knowledge regarding the alliances and Belgian neutrality but it doesn't really develop beyond a basic explanation. The candidate could explain how this cause had an effect on others, for example Russia and Austria's aims in the Balkans. This could form the basis for an argument. It is very lightly inferred here, but not developed.

Fourthly, there is German policy. Germany was a very militarised nation. Kaiser Wilhelm II was very interested in the military and wanted Germany to look strong as opposed to other countries. He was very xenophobic and encouraged right-wing groups who wanted expansion abroad. Wilhelm and his industrialist supporters were certainly very aggressive and in their war aims published a month after the war started they talked about breaking France and having a huge colonial expansion programme. Germany was envious and afraid of Britain's huge colonial empire which spread across the world.

Comments: There is a lot of generalised discussion here. The comment about colonialism is not really explained as a cause of war and may read as description.

So you can see that all of the causes I have talked about are very important. The arms race was important but so were the other factors. German policy was aggressive which made war more likely. Alliances meant that countries had to come to each other's defence. The Balkans were a political battleground between Russia and Austria, which meant that the alliances were more likely to be used. The arms race meant that tensions were more likely to become war. But none of the causes are more important than each other. They are equally important because they all were linked.

Comments: This reads as more of a list than a conclusion. No argument is provided and the causes are not linked in any way. This limits the mark that the candidate can achieve and would be an excellent place to start improving the essay. In a conclusion, the argument should be restated (having been developed and supported in the main part of the essay) and the main explanations given. This is a persuasive piece rather than a story.

Overall assessment

This essay has some good points. It uses relevant, if general, evidence. It provides some plausible explanations and there is some analysis present, if weak. It does discuss all the factors it sets out to, although it would perhaps benefit if it focused on only three factors and developed them in more depth. This candidate could improve significantly if they worked on their evaluation and judgement skills. They do also need to revise detailed evidence to support their evaluation and explanation but, in terms of skills, evaluation is the area that they need to work on the most.

Marks

- AO1a: level III, 14/24
- AO1b: level III, 16/26

Overall, the essay would achieve a total mark of 30/50.

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