

Essay and Discussion Questions

Contemporary History World at War Higher Education Questions

Help students understand how events between 1900 and 1945 continue to shape today's world through these essay and discussion questions.

Question 1

How do countries decide to go to war? Why is maintaining a balance of power in the global system so important? Assess how successful militarization is in deterring conflict and maintaining peace.

- What was the key factor behind the decades of peace Europe saw in the late 1800s and early 1900s?
- How did Britain and Germany throw off the balance of power in Europe prior to World War I?
- To what extent does nationalism lead to positive or negative outcomes for individual countries and the international community?

Question 2

How did nationalism contribute to conflict in World War I? To what extent was World War I the result of an imbalance of power in Europe? What lessons did the aftermath of World War I teach about the dangers of isolationism?

- What lessons does the failure of the Treaty of Versailles have for future diplomatic agreements?
- To what extent did World War I impact the world order between 1915 and 1938?
- To what extent did World War I alter women's roles in society?

Question 3

To what extent were the world wars the result of an imbalance of power in Europe? Compare the causes leading to both global conflicts.

- How did fascist regimes use existing institutions to gain power?
- How did nationalism help cause World War II?
- Why did appeasement in the late 1930s backfire? How did the policy of appeasement contribute to a shifting balance of power in Europe?

Question 4

In what ways did the Industrial Revolution spur an interest in communism? Describe Karl Marx's worldview. In what ways did the Soviet Union not live up to Karl Marx's vision of communism?

- How did Marx view the relationship between workers and management (or labor and capital)?
- What is appealing about Marx's vision of communism?
- How have other countries implemented communism?
- What does the history of the Soviet Union suggest about the limitations of communism in practice?

Question 5

What does it mean to be a global power? What does it mean to be a hegemonic power? Identify a specific year or event that you think marks the debut of the United States as a global power. Defend your choice with evidence. Be sure to consider U.S. engagement around the world, not just in Europe.

- During the United States' history, what factors have pushed the country toward global engagement? What factors have pushed it toward isolationism?
- Which countries hold significant global power today? Explain your choice by outlining criteria for global power.
- Based on your knowledge of history, predict whether the future of U.S. foreign policy will be defined by engagement or isolationism?