



■ **Factors responsible for the First World War:**

- The First World War was the culmination of Nationalism, Militarism and Imperialism, while the mutual distrust made a contribution to it. Although the war started on the issue of Sarajevo massacre, but for this incident a number of factors like economic, political, social and intellectual were accountable.

Political factors:-

- The treaty of Frankfurt and the alliance system developed by Bismarck is supposed to be a major factor behind the First World War. As we come to know, up to the beginning of 20th century, there was the creation of two big military alliances such as the Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria & Italy) and the Triple Entente (Britain, France & Russia) in Europe. But, here we have to be cautious about the fact that after all, they were the defensive alliances. So, WWI was started after the Sarajevo massacre, not due to following the clauses of the treaty but to go beyond that. We can't take these alliances accountable for the war directly. But simultaneously, we can't undermine the role of the alliances behind the war. In fact, due to the presence

of the two military alliances, any conflict between the two nations used to result in an all-European question.

- Furthermore, the presence of military alliances led to military rivalry and the manufacturing of weapons. This measure created mutual distrust among European powers. Apart from that, it polluted public opinion as well. Above all, in course of the military preparation, the power of policymaking slipped out from the hand of civil authority to the military authority. It was a big danger for the future.



Economic factors :-

- A big economic factor before WWI was the Industrial Revolution. Industrial Revolution created multi-polar centres in Europe. So, after the Industrial Revolution, the imperialistic rivalry started along with the search for a market. Although imperialistic rivalry did not result in the First World War directly, it was having an indirect effect on the power equation. According to some critics, in one sense the industrial revolution worked as a safety valve as well.
- In fact, in course of Imperialistic expansion, the European powers were badly involved in the vast region of Asia and Africa, so Europe remained to be safe from the war. But, it is also true that the Imperialistic rivalry in Asia and Africa affected the power equation among European countries, so it created the situation for future war.

Social factors:-

- Behind WWI, even Social Imperialism was accountable. In other words, many European nations introduced aggressive foreign policy, while having them guided by their domestic policy. In fact, in many countries, the socialist and communist parties were making progress. So, in order to divert the attention of the people from domestic issues to foreign issues, aggressive foreign policy was introduced. This phenomenon also resulted in war and tensions.

Ideological factors:-

- Right from the time of Hegel, the state continued to be projected as a divine phenomenon. Hegel declared that the state is the march of God on earth. So, people developed great prestige for the nation. Likewise, a scientist of 19th century, Charles Darwin, propounded his famous theory "Origin of Species". In his

theory, he tried to prove that due to the conflict strong becomes stronger. This perception gave birth to Social Darwinism, which idealised war and conflict. In fact, the war was taken as a progressive phenomenon, such a perception changed the mentality of European people. So, when WWI started the European people enthusiastically welcomed the war.

Diplomatic factors:-

- One of the factors behind the war was the breakdown of the diplomatic process in Europe. There were two military alliances, but simultaneously, the diplomatic channel was not open. Due to the dearth of the diplomatic channel, a single incident at Sarajevo could result in a world war. If the diplomatic channel had been active through some diplomatic initiative the problems might have been solved. But unfortunately, this was not the case.

■ Could WWI be averted, or was it inevitable?

- Before coming to any conclusion, we have to observe the issues deeply. In fact, the assassination of a king and a prince was not such a big incident in itself that should have been resulted in a war. Even before this incident, the king of Italy and that of Portugal were assassinated in 1900 and 1909 respectively. But these incidents could not result in the war. So, the actual reason for the war was different and once we observe the deep cause then we come to the point that it was almost inevitable.
- Behind WWI, the basic interest of the European powers' was involved. For Italy, WWI was the extension of the unification of Italy. Through it, she would fulfill the unfinished agenda of unification. For Germany, it was a means for gaining the market. For Russia, the question was to maintain its credibility and to secure its

interest in the Balkan region. Likewise, for Austrian Empire, it was a last-ditch attempt for preventing its collapse. For Britain, WWI was a better means for maintaining the balance of power in Europe. Lastly, for France, there was a question for the restoration of her old power and prestige, which she had maintained before the battle of Sedan.

- In light of the basic interest of European powers mentioned above, we come to the conclusion that WWI was almost inevitable.
- **For WWI, was it simply Germany that was responsible?**
- Right from the time of the First World War there was a long controversy about Germany's responsibility behind that. Above all, the allied powers consciously made propaganda in this regard so that Germany could be awarded maximum punishment in Paris Peace Conference. Also, in the 'Treaty of Versailles', 'war guilt' clause was consciously imposed over Germany in the article 231 of the treaty. But on observation we find that although Germany could not be made free from the responsibility of the war but simultaneously even the allied powers made their own contribution in the war.
- Germany definitely created tensions in Balkan region by giving unconditional support to Austria on the issue of Serbia. But even Russia vitiated the situation further through giving support to Serbia on this issue. Even France showed irresponsible behaviour by giving support to Russia on this issue, in spite of the fact that she was not bound to support Russia on this specific matter. Now all hopes were on Britain, but as some critic has quipped that 'if other powers brought the world war through commission, Britain did it through omission'. In other words Britain

didn't make any serious attempt to resolve this issue at right time.

■ **The participants and the extent of the war:**

- **Central Powers** – Germany and Austria were the members of Central Power. Italy, despite being a member of the Triple Alliance, remained outside of this group because she believed that Austria was engaged in offensive war rather than a defensive conflict. Then Italy joined the group of Allied powers, whereas the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria joined the group of Central Powers.

- **Allied Powers** – Initially, it included Britain, France and Russia, then in 1915 Italy also joined this group on the basis of the secret Treaty of London and she was promised some territories in the Adriatic region. Similarly, the Allied powers made a secret deal with Japan in 1917 and she was assured the territory of Shantung in China. Likewise, China was also promised that the German occupied region of Shantung would be returned. So, China also joined this group. In April 1917, the United States also joined the Allied group. Rumania was already a member of it. But in 1917, Russia withdrew from the war, since there was an socialist revolution taking place in the country and it was going under a turmoil with internal revolution. Therefore, a total 22 countries participated in this war under the Allied powers.

■ **Why did the United States get involved in this war?**

1. The United States was determined to protect its markets in Britain and France.
2. Immediate cause- Germany's submarine attack on British passenger and merchant ship, which also had a large number of American citizens led the US Congress to declare war on Germany. Apart from that, British naval intelligence intercepted the

Zimmerman telegram, which urged Mexico to join the war effort on the side of Germany. British forwarded the intercepted telegram to the United States.

■ **Why is the First World War considered a Total war?**

1. Along with the soldiers, a large number of civilians also participated in this war.
2. The geographical extent of this war was very wide. It was fought not only in Europe, but also in other continents. It was fought on a massive scale, and involved millions of people.
3. The duration of this war was also relatively long. It was also a war of resources. The more resources the country had, the more it could survive in this war.
4. In this war, along with military bases, industries and other economic centers were also destroyed which resulted into huge economic destruction.
5. Whole population of the belligerent nation was involved in this war. A large number of men were sent to the war front, while women continued to work in offices, hospitals, educational institutions, etc. So much so that even children were also put into production.
6. During this war, along with conventional weapons, new types of destructive weapons were developed, e.g. chemical weapons and biological weapons.

■ **Impact of WWI :**

- The First World War certainly had a destructive impact, but at some points it had positive impact also. World War-I was coined as 'Total war'. Along with the soldiers, a large civilian population also participated in this. So naturally it affected European life on a deep level.
1. In the middle of the First World War, some old dynasties of Europe came to an end, such as Habsburg dynasty, Romanov dynasty and Hohenzollern dynasty. As a

result, democratic ideas got a boost.

2. But on the other hand the development of fascist ideology was also a product of the First World War. Aggrieved German and Italian nationalism arose in the form of Nazism and Fascism respectively and challenged the European system.
3. World War-I had encouraged war driven trade but after the war, the economy suffered with deep shock. Then in the late 1920s, a kind of imbalance occurred in the European economy which manifested in the form of Great Depression.
4. Economic reconstruction started in Europe after the First World War. With this, many types of economic and social problems occurred. In order to cope with these problems, the power of European governments increased and human freedom was curtailed.
5. WWI created social dislocation and adversely affected family life. The male members went on the border and female members were involved in the production in factories. Some of the critics believed that WWI proved a liberator for women because it was after WWI along with the working class even women got the franchise. But, when we observe minutely we find that whether WWI produced a positive impact on women's franchise that is not clear but it is clear that it brought a deep impact on families. For example, women had to perform in three spheres simultaneously. Firstly, they had to look after their kids, secondly they had to work in factories and lastly, as during this period there was the problem of rising price due to the scarcity in the market, so the women had to manage the commodities of daily necessities after doing hard bargaining in the market.
6. Culturally, WWI gave a serious jolt to the idea of freedom, humanism, and the idea

of progress; and in their place, it encouraged a sense of skepticism. Before WWI, it was emphasised by European scholars that European culture had reached up to the highest stage of civilization. But the WWI rejected such perception and rather tried to prove that human beings are still savaged or uncivilized and they could use weapons for mass destruction even against their fellow human beings.

7. Apart from that, it was realized that science, in place of assuring human comforts, ensured destructive machinery. So, once science and reasoning were questioned, there developed skeptical ideas. This sort of mental thoughts and ideas were reflected in contemporary art and literature.

Question: How far is it correct to say that the First World War was essentially fought to re-establish balance of power?

Answer: The First World War was a product of complicated circumstances. It was the result of the contradictions arising in the economic-political sphere of the 19th century. Factors such as the collapse of balance of power certainly played an important role in creating this contradictory situation, but some other factors were also associated with it.

The balance of power in Europe rested to a large extent on the division of German territory. Therefore the unification of Germany almost destroyed the balance of power in Europe. One of the main reasons for Britain's return to continental politics and

forming an alliance against Germany was the effort to preserve the balance of power. In the words of British Prime Minister Disraeli, the reunification of Germany produced a greater effect than the French Revolution.

But with this some other issues surfaced. One of the main issues was the issue of the Balkan region. The Pan-Slavic movement in the Balkan region caused great tension between Austria and Serbia. Russia's support was with Serbia. Thus, as soon as Germany's support was extended to Serbia's enemy nation Austria, the issue of the Balkans became a pan-European issue. Apart from this, an issue of tension between France and Germany had been going on since the Treaty of Frankfurt since four decades ago. The defeat of Germany was necessary for France to once again be reinstated in the European politics. So France was trying to overcome its demographic and resource constraints by joining a larger European alliance. Thus the atmosphere of war prevailed in the early decades of the twentieth century, when the Sarajevo massacre played a role of an unknown catalyst.

The above facts show that the issue of balance of power was an important issue behind the First World War, but it was not the only issue. Even before this, the issue of protection of the balance of power had come up in Europe, such as during the time of Louis XIV and Napoleon, and after the Crimea War. But if it became a cause of world war in the beginning of the twentieth century, it means there were many other causes also.



Food for Thought

1. Why has the 19th century been characterized as long 19th century and twentieth century as short twentieth century?
2. Is it correct to say that the First World War was the product of deformities which originated in socio-economic and political structure of 19th century Europe?
3. Do you accept the view that the First World War has continued in West Asia and Arabian region since the last 100 years?
4. Was the First World War fought for maintaining balance of power in Europe?

