

World War I

IMPERIALISM AS A CAUSE OF WORLD WAR I

Imperialism and imperial rivalry provided both a cause and context for World War I. Imperialism is a system where a powerful nation controls and exploits one or more colonies. In most cases the imperial nation, euphemistically referred to as the 'mother country', establishes control over its colonies by coercion – for example, through infiltration and annexation, political pressure, war and military conquest. Once conquered, this territory is claimed as a colony. Colonies are governed and administered by either the imperial nation, a puppet government or local collaborators. A military presence is often stationed in the colony, to maintain order, to suppress dissent and uprisings, and to deter imperial rivals. Colonies may have military or geopolitical advantages but their main purpose is economic: they exist chiefly to profit and enrich the imperial power. In most cases, this involves the supply of precious metals or other resources, such as timber, rubber, rice or other foodstuffs. Colonies can also be invaluable sources of cheap labour, agricultural land and trading ports.



A satirical representation of Spanish imperialism in central and South America

Prior to World War I the world's largest, richest and most dominant imperial power was Great Britain. The British Empire famously occupied one-quarter of the globe ("the sun never sets on Britain" was a famous slogan of the mid 19th century). British colonial possessions in the late 1800s included Canada, India, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Burma, Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, several Pacific and Caribbean Islands, South Africa, Rhodesia, Egypt and other parts of Africa. Many of these colonies were acquired with little difficulty; others took more time, effort and bloodshed. Britain's acquisition of South Africa, for example, came after costly wars against the Zulus (native tribes) and Boers (white farmer-settlers of Dutch extraction). British imperialism was focused on maintaining and expanding trade, the importation of raw materials and the sale of manufactured goods. Britain's imperial power was reinforced by her powerful navy, the world's largest, and a fleet of mercantile (commercial) vessels.

Another significant imperial power was France, Britain's closest neighbour. French imperial holdings included Indochina (Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia), some Pacific islands and several colonies in west and north-west Africa. The German Empire included Shandong (a province of China), New Guinea, Samoa and other Pacific islands, and several colonies in central and south-west Africa. The Spanish Empire had once included the Philippines and large parts of South America, though by the early 20th century Spain's imperial power was dwindling. Empires closer to home included Russia, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman sultanate. Russia ruled over Finland, Poland and several central Asian regions as an imperial power; its disastrous war against Japan in 1904-5 was an attempt to extend Russia's imperial reach further into Korea and northern China. Despite condemnation of European imperialism in America, the United States also engaged in a degree of empire building, particularly towards the end of the 1800s. Here is a list of the more significant imperial powers of the early 1900s:



A depiction of British imperialism in Africa, from 'Cairo to the Cape'

Global empires in 1914

The British Empire took in India, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Hong Kong, parts of North Africa, islands in the Pacific and Caribbean and concessions in China.

Russia ruled modern-day Poland, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Ukraine, Georgia and several regions in central Asia, such as Kazakhstan. Russia also had colonial interests in East Asia, including a concession in China.

France maintained colonies in modern-day Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, areas of West Africa and India, small possessions in South America, and islands in the Pacific and Caribbean.

Germany had seized control of modern-day Tanzania, Namibia and Cameroon in Africa, German New Guinea, some Pacific islands and an important concession in Shandong (China).

Austria-Hungary possessed no colonies outside Europe but was an empire nonetheless, ruling over several different regions, ethnic and language groups. Among its regions were Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia, Galicia, Transylvania, the Tyrol and, after 1908, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Spain once possessed a large empire that included Cuba, the Philippines and large areas of South America – but by 1914 the Spanish were left with

only tiny colonial territories in the Americas and north-west Africa.

The United States was a relative newcomer to imperialism but by 1914 had gained control of the Philippines, Guam, American Samoa, Puerto Rico and several islands in the Pacific. Though later absorbed into the United States, both Alaska and the Hawaiian Islands might be considered colonial acquisitions.

The Ottoman Empire was once the largest empire in the world, taking in eastern Europe, the Middle East and much of northern Africa. Ottoman territory had shrunk significantly but by 1914 the sultanate retained the heart of its old empire: modern-day Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Armenia and Macedonia.

Portugal in 1914 was the imperial ruler of modern-day Angola and Mozambique in Africa, Goa (India) and East Timor (Indonesia).

Belgium was one of the smallest nations in Europe but still possessed a significant African colony (Belgian Congo), as well as a small concession in China.

Holland had several small colonial possessions in South America (Dutch Guyana), Asia (Batavia, or modern-day Indonesia) and the Pacific.

Italy by 1914 had moved into northern Africa, annexing modern-day Libya, Somalia and Eritrea. It also held a small concession in China.

The scramble for Africa



Imperial rivalry: a British cartoon ridiculing Belgian rule in Africa

The second half of the 1800s produced a significant 'rush for empire'. This desperate push for new colonies was fuelled by rising nationalism, increasing demand for land and dwindling opportunities at home. Two relative newcomers to empire-building were the newly unified nations of Germany and Italy. The man who helped construct the German state in the 1870s, Otto von Bismarck, had shown little interest in gathering colonies – but Bismarck's view was not shared by other Germans. Organisations like the Colonial League (formed 1882 in Berlin) whipped up support for German imperial expansion. The Kaiser and his advisors formulated their own imperial designs, most of them focused on Africa. In 1884 Germany

acquired Togoland, the Cameroons and South West Africa (now Namibia). Six years later a sizeable swathe of East Africa was under German control; this territory was renamed Tanganyika (now Tanzania).

This African colonisation was well received by the German population – however, it caused problems in Britain and France. Many in London dreamed of a British-owned railway running the length of Africa (“from Cairo to the Cape”) and German colonies in eastern Africa were an obstacle to this vision.

The scramble for empire in Africa also sparked several diplomatic incidents. Two significant crises stemmed from events in Morocco in north-west Africa. Though not a French colony, Morocco’s location placed it within France’s sphere of influence. As Paris sought to establish a protectorate in Morocco, the German Kaiser intervened. In 1905 Wilhelm II travelled to the Moroccan city of Tangier, where he delivered a speech supporting the idea of Moroccan independence. This antagonised the French government and precipitated a series of angry diplomatic responses and feverish press reports. A second crisis erupted in 1911. As the French were attempting to suppress a rebellion in Morocco, the Germans landed an armed vessel, the *Panther*, at the Moroccan port of Agadir – a landing made without permission, prior warning or any obvious purpose. This incident triggered an even stronger reaction and brought France and Germany to the brink of war. These acts of German provocation were not designed to encroach into Morocco or expand its empire, rather to drive a wedge between France and Britain. In fact, it had the opposite effect, strengthening the Anglo-French alliance and intensifying criticism of German *Weltpolitik* and ‘gunboat diplomacy’ in both France and Britain.

Imperial instability was another contributor to European tensions. Critical problems in the Ottoman Empire also affected the balance of power in eastern Europe. Described by satirists as the ‘Sick Man of Europe’, the Ottoman sultanate was in rapid political, military and economic decline by the second half of the 1800s. The Ottomans were defeated in several wars including the Crimean War (1853-56), Russo-Turkish War (1877-78) and First Balkans War (1912-13). These defeats, along with rising nationalism and revolutions in Ottoman-controlled regions, resulted in gradual but significant losses of territory. With the Ottoman Empire shrinking and at risk of complete collapse, Europe’s other imperial powers clamoured to secure territory or influence in the region. Austria-Hungary hoped to expand into the Balkans; Russia moved to limit Austrian expansion while securing access to the Black Sea; Germany wanted to ensure the security and completion of its Berlin-to-Baghdad railway. Britain and France also had colonial and trade interests in the region. The ‘Eastern question’ – the issue of what would happen in eastern Europe as the Ottomans withdrew – was an important talking point of the late 19th century. These developments drew the Great Powers of Europe into the Balkan sphere, creating opportunities for rivalry and increased tensions.



KEY POINTS

1. Imperialism is a system where a powerful nation-state seizes or controls territories outside its own borders. These territories are claimed and governed as colonies.
2. Several European nations maintained empires in the decades before World War I. The British Empire was by far the largest, spanning around one-quarter of the globe at one point.
3. The pre-war period saw European powers scramble to acquire the new colonial possessions. Much of this occurred in Africa, where Britain, France and Germany all vied for land and control.
4. This 'scramble for empire' fuelled rivalry and led to several diplomatic incidents, such as two Moroccan crises that were largely precipitated by the German Kaiser.
5. The decline of another imperial power, the Ottoman Empire, attracted the attention of European powers, who sought territory, influence or access in the Balkans and eastern Europe.

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