Imperialism as a cause of World War I

Imperialism is a system where a powerful nation rules and exploits one or more colonies (collectively known as an empire). In most cases the imperialist nation establishes control over new territory by coercion – for example, through infiltration and annexation, political pressure, war and military conquest. Once conquered, this territory is claimed as a colony of the imperialist nation, which is sometimes benignly referred to as the ‘mother country’. Colonial government was operated by the imperial power, or by a subordinate puppet regime. A military presence was stationed in the colony, to control native inhabitants, to deal with uprisings and deter imperial rivals. The main advantages of imperialism, however, were economic. Colonies existed to profit and enrich the imperial power. In most cases this involved the supply of precious metals or other resources, such as timber, rubber, rice or other foodstuffs. Colonies were also an invaluable source of cheap labour, agricultural land and trading ports.

Britain was the world’s dominant imperial power at the turn of the 20th century. The British Empire was famously spread out across 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 effort and bloodshed. Britain’s acquisition of South Africa, for example, was only secured after costly skirmishes against native tribes like the Zulus, then two wars against South African Boers (white farmer-settlers of Dutch extraction). British imperialism was driven chiefly by trade, the importation of raw materials and the commercial sale of manufactured goods. British imperial power was reinforced by her powerful navy, the world’s largest, and a fleet of mercantile (commercial) vessels.

Britain’s closest neighbour, France, was another major imperial power. French imperial holdings included Indochina (Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia), some Pacific islands and several colonies in west and north-west Africa. Spain once ruled the Philippines and large parts of South America, though her imperial power was rapidly dwindling. Germany’s empire included parts of China, New Guinea, Samoa and other Pacific islands, and several colonies in central and south-west Africa. 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:

**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 the Cameroons 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

The second half of the 1800s produced another ‘rush for empire’, fuelled by nationalism, increasing demand for land and raw materials and dwindling opportunities for colonisation. Two relative newcomers to empire-building were particularly keen on acquiring overseas colonies: the newly formed nations of Germany and Italy. The man who helped construct the German state, Otto von Bismarck, showed little interest in gathering colonies – but Bismarck’s view was not shared by other Germans. Formed in Berlin in 1882, the Colonial League whipped up support for German imperial expansion. The kaiser and his government formulated their own imperial designs, most of which 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 expansion into Africa 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”; Germany’s imperialist presence in central Africa was an obstacle to this vision.
The scramble for empire in Africa also gave rise to 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 traveled 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.

1. Imperialism is when a powerful nation-state seizes territories outside its own borders, transforming and governing them as colonies.
2. Several European nations had empires in the late 19th century, though the British Empire was by far the largest of these.
3. This period saw a race to acquire the last territories open for colonisation. Much of this occurred in Africa, where Britain, France and Germany all competed for new colonial possessions.
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 deterioration 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.
Nationalism as a cause of World War I

Nationalism was a significant cause of World War I. In the years prior to war, many Europeans nurtured a firm belief in the cultural, economic and military supremacy of their nation. This arrogance and overconfidence was fuelled by the jingoistic press. The pages of newspapers were often packed with nationalist rhetoric, inflammatory stories about rival nations and other forms of sabre rattling. Nationalism was also reflected in other aspects of popular culture, including literature, music and theatre. Royals, politicians and diplomats did little to deflate nationalism – and some actively contributed to it with their own provocative remarks and rhetoric. Nationalism assured citizens of the moral rectitude of their nation, suggesting that it was fair, righteous and without blame. In contrast it demonised rival nations, caricaturing them as aggressive, scheming, deceitful, backward or uncivilised. It convinced many Europeans that their nation was threatened by the expansionist plotting of its rivals. It assured them that in the event of a war, their nation would emerge victorious. In concert with its brothers, imperialism and militarism, nationalism created a mass delusion that a European war was both winnable and necessary.

Europe’s failure to recognise the perils of war is to some extent explainable. 1800s was a century of comparative peace for the continent. In England, France and Germany, the public had become accustomed to a regular diet of brief and victorious colonial wars, fought against undeveloped and under-equipped opponents in far away places. With the exception of France, beaten by the Prussians in 1871, none of Europe’s Great Powers had tasted significant military defeat for more than half a century. On this indifference to war, the arms race and the development of new military technology built a growing delusion of invincibility. Britons believed that their naval power, backed by the economic might of the empire, would protect their island and give them the upper hand in any war. The Germans placed great faith in Prussian military prestige and efficiency, in their policy of armament and their growing fleet of battleships and U-boats (submarines). The German high command had supreme confidence in its Schlieffen Plan, a pre-emptive military strategy for winning a two-front war against both France and Russia. In Russia itself, tsar believed his throne and empire were protected by God – and by Russia’s massive army of 1.5 million men, the largest peacetime land force in Europe. The French placed their faith in a wall of concrete fortresses and defences, running the length of their eastern border and capable of withstanding any German attack.

Stories and stereotypes

Underpinning these practical measures was an near spiritual belief in the strength and righteousness of each nation. By the late 1800s some European powers were almost drunk with patriotism and nationalism, though not without some cause. Britain, for instance, had enjoyed two centuries of imperial, commercial and naval dominance, her empire spanning one quarter of the globe. The lyrics of a popular patriotic song, Rule, Britannia!, trumpeted that “Britons never never will be slaves”. London had spent much of the 19th century advancing her imperial and commercial interests and avoiding wars – however the unification of Germany, the speed of German armament and the bellicosity of Kaiser Wilhelm II gave many Britons cause for concern. Britain’s ‘penny press’ (serialised novels and short stories) fuelled foreign rivalries with incredible fictions about foreign intrigue, espionage, future war and invasion. The Battle of Dorking (1871), to cite one example, was a wild tale about a successful invasion of England by German forces. By 1910 a Londoner could buy dozens of tawdry examples of ‘invasion literature’, each gamely warning of German, Russian or French aggression or under-handedness, perpetrated against England or her interests. This invasion literature was often marked by racial
stereotyping or innuendo: the German was painted as cold, cruel and calculating, the Russian an uncultured barbarian, the Frenchman a leisure-seeking layabout, the Chinese a race of murderous savages. Penny novelists, cartoonists and satirists mocked the rulers of these countries. Two of the most popular targets were the German kaiser and the Russian tsar, both ridiculed for their arrogance, excessive ambition or megalomania.

German attitudes were just as intense, though they sprang from different origins. The German nation was comparatively young, formed by the unification of 26 German-speaking states or territories in 1871. German nationalism was the political glue that bound together these disparate states: Prussia, Bavaria, Saxony, Hesse, Baden, Brunswick and others. The leaders of post-1871 Germany relied on nationalism to consolidate and strengthen the new nation. German culture – from the poetry of Goethe to the music of Richard Wagner – was promoted and celebrated. German nationalism also went hand in glove with German militarism: the state of the nation was both defined and reflected by the strength of its military forces. The new kaiser, Wilhelm II, was the personification of this new Germany. Both the kaiser and his nation were young, nationalistic, obsessed with military power and imperial expansion; proud of Germany’s achievements but nervous about its future; envious of other powers and desperate for national success. In the kaiser’s mind, the main obstacle to German expansion was Britain. Wilhelm envied Britain’s vast empire and enormous naval power but considered them greedy and hypocritical: the British retained the world’s largest empire but maneuvered against German colonial acquisitions in Africa, Asia and elsewhere. Britain became a popular target in the pre-war German press, particularly during the Boer War of 1899-1902, Britain’s heavy-handed war against white farmer-settlers in South Africa. Berlin went as far as secretly supplying the anti-British Boers with weapons and munitions.

The quest for independence

As the Great Powers thumped their chests and trumpeted their own superiority, another dangerous form of nationalism was on the rise in southern Europe. This nationalism was not about supremacy or military power – but the right to independence, self determination and self government. With the world divided into empires and spheres of influence, different regions, races and religions sought freedom from their imperial masters. In Russia, more than 80 ethnic groups were forced to speak the Russian language, worship the Russian tsar and practice the Russian Orthodox religion. For much of the 19th century China had been ‘carved up’ and economically exploited by European powers; resentful Chinese formed secret and exiled nationalist groups to rid their country of foreign influence. Nationalist groups contributed to the weakening of the Ottoman Empire in eastern Europe, striving to throw off Muslim rule. The growth of Slavic nationalist groups in the Balkans threatened the stability of the fragile Austro-Hungarian Empire. Aggravated by Vienna’s annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, young Serbs joined radical nationalist groups like the ‘Black Hand’ (Crna Ruka). These groups hoped to drive Austria-Hungary from the Balkans and establish a ‘Greater Serbia’, a unified state for all Slavic people. It was this pan-Slavic nationalism that inspired the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in June 1914, an event that lit the touch paper of World War I.

1. Nationalism was an intense form of patriotism. Those with nationalist tendencies celebrated their own country and placed its interests above those of other nations.
2. Pre-war nationalism was fuelled by wars, imperial conquests and rivalry, political rhetoric, newspapers and popular culture, such as novelists.
3. Anti-German literature in Britain focused on a future war with Germany and even a future German invasion.
4. German nationalism was predicated on the belief that Britain sought to deprive Germany of her ‘place in the sun’.
Militarism as a cause of World War I

The German army officer Alfred Vagts described militarism as the “domination of the military man over the civilian, an undue preponderance of military demands, an emphasis on military considerations”. In the decades prior to 1914 militarism was a defining force in several European nations. Governments and aristocracies were strongly influenced, if not dominated, by their military personnel and considerations. Generals and admirals often acted as de facto government ministers, advising political leaders, influencing domestic policy and demanding increases in defence spending. Militarism fathered a dangerous child, the arms race, that pushed European nations to equip, expand and modernise their military forces. Militarism also shaped public opinion, with the press hailing military leaders as heroes or national leaders. Militarism alone did not start World War I – that first required a political crisis – but it inflamed nationalism and fed a culture of expectation about military strength. Even worse, militarism created an environment where war was considered the best or only response to political and diplomatic problems.

Militarism, nationalism and imperialism were intrinsically connected. In the 19th and early 20th centuries military forces were considered a manifestation of national and imperial strength. A powerful state needed a powerful military to protect its interests and support its policies. Strong armies and navies were needed to defend the homeland, to protect imperial and trade interests abroad and to deter threats and rivals. War was to be avoided where possible – but it could also be used to advance a nation’s political or economic interests (as the famous Prussian theorist Carl von Clausewitz wrote in 1832, war was “a continuation of policy by other means”). In the 19th century European mind, politics and military power became inseparable, in much the same way that politics and economic management have become inseparable in the modern world. Governments and leaders who failed to maintain armies and navies capable of enforcing the national will were considered weak or incompetent.

“The belief in war as a test of national power and a proof of national superiority added a scientific base to the cult of patriotism… In Britain, a real effort was made to teach boys that success in war depended upon the patriotism and military spirit of the nation, and that preparation for war would strengthen ‘manly virtue’ and ‘patriotic ardour’.”

Zara Steiner, historian

Prussia is rightly considered the wellspring of militarism in Europe. Germany’s government and armed forces were both based on the Prussian model and many of its politicians and generals were Junkers (land-owning Prussian nobles). Prior to the 1871 unification, Prussia was the most powerful Germanic state, both in political and military terms. The Prussian army was reformed and modernised in the 1850s by Field Marshal von Moltke the Elder. Under von Moltke’s leadership the Prussian army implemented new strategies, improved training for its officers, introduced advanced weaponry and adopted more efficient means of command and communication. A crushing military defeat of France in 1871 revealed the Prussian army as the most dangerous and effective military force in Europe. This victory also secured German unification, allowing Prussian militarism and German nationalism to become closely intertwined. Prussian commanders, personnel and methodology became the nucleus of the new German imperial army. The German kaiser was its supreme commander; he relied on a military council and chief of general staff, made up of Junker aristocrats and career officers. When it came to military matters, the Reichstag (Germany’s elected civilian parliament) had no more than an advisory role.
Elsewhere in Europe militarism took on a different flavour, yet it was an important political and cultural force. British militarism, though more subdued than its German counterpart, was considered essential for maintaining the nation’s imperial and trade interests. The Royal Navy, by far the world’s largest naval force, protected shipping, trade routes and colonial ports. British land forces kept order and imposed imperial policies in India, Africa, Asia and the Pacific. British attitudes to the military underwent a stark transformation. During the 18th century Britons had considered armies and navies a necessary evil, their ranks filled with the dregs of the lower classes, most of their officers failed aristocrats and ne’er-do-wells. But in 19th century Britain soldiering was increasingly depicted as a noble vocation, a selfless act of service to one’s country. As in Germany, British soldiers were glorified and romanticised, both in the press and popular culture. Whether serving in Crimea or the distant colonies, British officers were hailed as gentlemen and sterling leaders, while enlisted men were well drilled, resolute and ready to make the ultimate sacrifice ‘for King and Country’. The concept of soldiers as heroes was epitomised by Tennyson’s 1854 poem *The Charge of the Light Brigade* and reflected in cheap ‘derring-do’ novels about wars, both real and imagined.

The arms race

Military victories, whether in colonial wars or major conflicts like the Crimean War (1853-56) or the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71), only increased the prestige of the military and intensified nationalism. In contrast, a military defeat (such as Russia’s defeat by Japan in 1905) or even a costly victory (like Britain in the Boer War, 1899-1902) might expose problems and heighten calls for military reform or increased spending. Virtually every major European nation engaged in some form of military renewal in the late 1800s and early 1900s. In Germany, military expansion and modernisation was heartily endorsed by the newly crowned kaiser, Wilhelm II, who wanted to retain his country’s “place in the sun”. In Britain the arms race was driven not by the monarchy but by public interest and the press. In 1884 the prominent newspaperman W. T. Stead published a series of articles suggesting that Britain was unprepared for war, particularly in its naval defences. Pressure groups like the British Navy League (formed 1894) agitated for more ships and personnel. By the early 1900s the Navy League and the press were calling on the government to commission more Dreadnoughts (battleships), one popular slogan being “We want eight and we won’t wait!”

As a consequence of this pressure and other factors, European military expenditure between 1900 and 1914 sky-rocketed. In 1870 the combined military spending of the six great powers (Britain, France, Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia and Italy) totalled 94 million pounds. By 1914 it had quadrupled to 398 million pounds. German defence spending during this period increased by a massive 73 per cent, dwarfing the increases in France (10 per cent) and Britain (13 per cent). Russian defence spending also grew by more than one third. Russia’s embarrassing defeat by the Japanese (1905) prompted the tsar to order a massive rearmament program. By the 1910s around 45 per cent of Russian government spending was allocated to the armed forces, in comparison to just five per cent on education. Every major European power, Britain excluded, introduced or increased conscription to expand their armies. Germany added 170,000 full-time soldiers to its army in 1913-14, while dramatically increasing its navy. In 1898 the German government ordered the construction of 17 new vessels. Berlin also led the way in the construction of military submarines; by 1914 the German navy had 29 operational U-boats. This rapid growth in German naval power triggered a press frenzy and some alarm in Britain. London responded to German naval expansion by commissioning 29 new ships for the Royal Navy.

The following table lists estimated defence and military spending in seven major nations between 1908 and 1913 (figures shown in United States dollars):
This period saw significant changes to the quality of military weapons and equipment, as well as their quantity. Having studied the lessons of the Crimean War and other 19th century conflicts, military industrialists developed hundreds of improvements and rushed them to patent. Perhaps the most significant improvements were made to the calibre, range, accuracy and portability of heavy artillery. During the American Civil War (1861-65) heavy artillery could fire up to 2,500 metres at best; by the early 1900s this range had almost tripled. The development of explosive shells was also significant, giving a single artillery round greater killing power wherever it landed. These advances allowed artillery shelling and bombardments to become standard practice along the Western Front during World War I. First developed in 1881, machine guns also became smaller, lighter, more accurate, more reliable and much faster, some capable of firing up to 600 rounds per minute. Small arms also improved significantly. The effective range of a rifle in the 1860s was around 400 metres; in contrast the British issue Lee-Enfield .303 could hit a target more than 2,000 metres away. Barbed wire, an invention of the 1860s, was also embraced by military strategists as an anti-personnel device. While historians often disagree on the reasons for the arms race, there is no doubt that the development of new weaponry changed the face of modern warfare. Sir Edward Grey, reflecting on his service as British foreign secretary in July 1914, said it thus:

“A great European war under modern conditions would be a catastrophe for which previous wars afforded no precedent. In old days, nations could collect only portions of their men and resources at a time and dribble them out by degrees. Under modern conditions, whole nations could be mobilized at once and their whole life blood and resources poured out in a torrent. Instead of a few hundreds of thousands of men meeting each other in war, millions would now meet – and modern weapons would multiply manifold the power of destruction. The financial strain and the expenditure of wealth would be incredible.”

1. Militarism is the incorporation of military personnel and ideas into civilian government – and the belief that military power is essential for national strength.
2. Militarism was strongest in Germany, where the kaiser relied heavily on his military commanders and the civilian legislature (Reichstag) exerted little or no control over the military.
3. Militarists were also driven by experiences and failures in previous wars, such as the Crimean War, Boer War and Russo-Japanese War.
4. Influenced by nationalism and advice from military commanders, European governments ramped up military spending, purchasing new weaponry and increasing the size of armies and navies.