

# Before the Deluge

## *Europe, 1900–1914*

### Chronology

1899–1902	Boer War
1901	Death of Queen Victoria
1904–1905	Russo-Japanese War
1905	Revolution in Russia
	Tsar Nicholas II issues the October Manifesto
1906	Algeciras Conference
	Great Britain launches HMS <i>Dreadnought</i>
1908	Austria-Hungary annexes Bosnia and Herzegovina
1914	Assassination of Franz Ferdinand

AT 6:30 P.M. ON JANUARY 22, 1901, Queen Victoria died at Cowes on the Isle of Wight. Although her son Edward, the Prince of Wales, was present, she died in the arms of her favorite grandson, Wilhelm II. The German Kaiser had rushed from Berlin to be at her side.

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Deeply moved that the Kaiser conducted himself with such stately dignity at the Queen's funeral, the new king, his "Uncle Bertie," made him a British field marshal.

Victoria (1819–1901) was more than the queen of an empire upon which the sun never set. Many throughout the world viewed her as the beloved sovereign, at least symbolically, of the civilized world. Even those peoples who were not regarded as "civilized" by Europeans revered her. Four hundred million people spread over 12 million square miles of land were her subjects. Leaders from around the world paid homage to her memory. Even in the United States, flags flew at half-mast and newspaper editorials eulogized the late queen and the age to which she gave her name.

There was something very reassuring about Queen Victoria's funeral. Royalty and government leaders from all over Europe, including her grandson the Kaiser and his cousin Nicholas II, Tsar of Russia, gathered to say farewell. To have been present, or even to view the film footage of the funeral, was to be caught up in the solemn splendor of such a gathering of the world's political leadership. The observer might be pardoned for equating the pomp with power and concluding that the future was safe and secure. But such a feeling would have been only an illusion. The fabric of European civilization was already tearing at the seams and coming unraveled.

## Europe and the World

Europeans before the Great War divided the world into "civilized" and "uncivilized peoples," much as we today speak of "developed" and "developing" nations. To be considered among the civilized nations meant being "Westernized," which in turn meant accepting the world view and lifestyle of Europeans. "Westernized" peoples included more than the residents of Europe itself but also those of such nations as the United States and Canada in North America and Australia and New Zealand in the South Pacific Ocean. The words "Western," "European," and "civilized" were often used interchangeably.

Despite the smug arrogance of the imperialists, to a certain degree, Europe's sense of moral superiority was justified. Europe's

moral values, fundamentally religious in origin, were taken over and secularized by the eighteenth-century intellectuals. Emerging from the Enlightenment as inalienable human rights, these values were summarized by John Locke and Thomas Jefferson as the individual's right to life, liberty, and property (or happiness), the foundation of classical liberalism. In practice, during the nineteenth century, the enjoyment of these purportedly inalienable rights was often qualified by considerations of property and gender.

Westernization offered more than a few benefits. Europeans were better housed, better fed, and better clothed than people anywhere else in the world. They lived longer and their infant mortality rate was lower than in the non-Western world. Nearly 100 percent of the population of northwestern Europe was literate, whereas in much of the non-Westernized world, the literacy rate was barely above 0. Europeans no longer lived in fear of unseen forces. Scientific knowledge had given them mastery over nature, showering upon them a cornucopia of material blessings. They also governed themselves, while virtually the entire non-Western world was subject to the more advanced Europeans.

By 1900, the "relics of barbarism," such as slavery, infanticide, blood sports, and torture, were expunged from the European nations. Even women, who were still denied the vote and full equality with men in employment and education, possessed the same human rights as every other human being. And where human rights clashed with cultural or religious practice, human rights were deemed superior. European women were not subjected to such barbarous practices as genital mutilation or *suttee*, the burning of a Hindu widow on her husband's funeral pyre. Nor were they condemned to a lifetime of illiteracy and unquestioned submission to the arbitrary will of father or husband. This message of universal and inalienable human rights went, if not always practiced, wherever the might of European imperialism was felt.

There were, of course, other civilizations in the world whose ancestry reached further back than Europe's. China, India, Japan, and the Middle East all possessed the characteristics associated with being civilized, for example, literacy, cities, monumental architecture, a socioeconomic class structure, and systematic

philosophical and religious thought. By the mid-1800s, however, all of the great non-European civilizations were but shadows of their past glory and vulnerable to an industrialized West in need of markets and resources to fuel its rapid development. Of the ancient non-European civilizations, only Japan survived the threat of the new imperialism from the West, and it did so only by rapid Westernization.

The humanitarian impulse was often used as a justification for imperialism. Although for some it was a sincere motivation, for many others, it served as an excuse for European domination and exploitation of the non-Western world. Christian missionaries brought Christianity to non-European nations, and they and other humanitarians built hospitals, orphanages, and schools for both boys and girls. Such people often saw the native peoples as child-like and backward, souls in need of “uplifting” from the darkness in which they seemed to exist and an introduction to the benefits of civilization, whether or not they wished such. This aspect of imperialism was romanticized by such ardent imperialists as the English writer Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936), many of whose works are set in India and relate the interactions of British colonials and subject Indians.

Kipling preached the “glories” of imperialism in his widely popular fiction and poetry. The best known of Kipling’s proimperialist poems is *The White Man’s Burden* (1899, pp. 290–291), composed to commemorate the United States’ victory in the Spanish–American War (1898) and America’s annexation of the Philippine Islands. In it, Kipling urged the United States to join Britain in the pursuit of empire and the spread of Western civilization:

Take up the White man’s burden –  
Send forth the best ye breed –  
Go bind your sons to exile  
To serve your captives’ need;  
To wait in heavy harness  
On fluttered folk and wild –  
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,  
Half devil and half child.

However much one wishes to extoll the benefits of European imperialism enjoyed by subject peoples, there was a dark side, as imperialism's primary and most influential motivations always boiled down to economic exploitation and national prestige.

The rapid industrialization in the West increased the demand for raw materials, some of which, like petroleum and rubber, were necessary for the modernization of existing industries and the creation of new ones. As the standard of living slowly increased for the working classes, the demand for items from distant parts of the world such as coffee and tea increased. As mass production and distribution of products grew, so too did the need for reliable supplies of raw materials and new and expanding markets for finished goods. The seemingly insatiable need for new markets was in part due to the unequal distribution of wealth in the industrialized nations of the West. The concentration of wealth in fewer hands, combined with the inability of the working classes to purchase ever-increasing quantities of the goods they produced, pushed the investment of excess capital abroad.

The need to protect the profits of existing industries and protect those of emerging ones led the governments of turn-of-the-century industrialized nations to abandon free trade in favor of neomercantilism. The result was the creation of colonial empires that served as large, worldwide trading communities. Tariffs on imported goods, combined with restrictions on competition within the colonial empires, served to protect the luxurious lifestyle of the upper classes while providing limited improvements in the lifestyle of the working classes of the imperial powers. With the exception of the British Empire, however, the economic model fell short, as the cost of colonies often surpassed any economic benefit they provided for the mother country. More important, therefore, was what colonies meant in terms of national prestige and national rivalry among the great powers, themselves.

By the 1840s, steam-propelled ships equipped with the new screw propellers were revolutionizing both merchant and naval vessels. So-called tramp steamers were carrying goods from port to port around the world, often not returning to their home ports for a year or more. At first, the steam-powered ships were overshadowed by

the fast-sailing and graceful clipper ships. But the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the very year that the most famous clipper ship, *Cutty Sark*, was launched, doomed the sailing vessels. As the colonial empires expanded, sea power became increasingly important. The growth of large navies, especially the naval race between Great Britain and Germany after 1898, was a major cause of the outbreak of the Great War in 1914.

One individual who clearly understood the interrelationship between seaborne commerce, large naval forces, and imperial expansion was US Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840–1914). Mahan presented his analysis of the importance of sea power in a series of lectures published in 1890 as *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783*. After reading Mahan's magnum opus, Kaiser Wilhelm invited Mahan to lunch aboard his yacht, the *Hohenzollern*, and then ordered that copies of the book be placed aboard every ship in the German navy. The Japanese adopted *The Influence of Sea Power on History* as a textbook in their military and naval academies.

In defending America's annexation of Hawaii (1898), Mahan argued that sea power was the key element in determining a nation's position in the world and its prosperity. Big navies, seaborne commerce, economic prosperity at home, and foreign colonies were all bound up together. Behind it all lay the influence of Social Darwinism. In this application of what was at the time a popular school of thought in the West, the greatness of a nation or a people was determined by struggle, ultimately struggle won or lost on the battlefield. The argument went that, naturally, the "fittest" people would triumph in any such conflict, to the betterment of both parties. To bring the supposition to its ironic—and ultimately tragic—conclusion, if peace were to prevail, then progress would stop, and Western civilization would stagnate.

Even though the colonial peoples were mere pawns in the high-stakes power struggle between the great powers, a significant majority of the citizens of the great powers were caught up in the romantic image of colonialism as preached by Kipling and others. Tales of explorers opening up the interior of Africa, still labeled the "Dark Continent" on many maps, or encounters

with the mysterious ancient civilizations of Asia fed the popular imagination. One well-known example of how popular support for imperialism was encouraged, or even manufactured, was the highly publicized search to find the Scottish missionary and explorer David Livingstone (1813–1873), who was reported missing somewhere in Africa. Sir Henry Morton Stanley (1841–1904), himself an explorer, convinced the editors of the *New York Herald* and London's *Daily Telegraph* to sponsor his search for Livingstone. The editors hoped to increase the daily circulation of their newspapers; Stanley sought both fame and fortune. Both were successful.

Europeans, as well as Europeans living abroad in North America and elsewhere, took pride in the fact that at the beginning of the twentieth century, the West's faith in progress and optimism was about to triumph over ignorance and darkness and usher in a new era of universal peace and prosperity. The humble peasant or laborer took pride in knowing that their country's flag was around the world, on the high seas and in the far corners of the globe. Their pride was nowhere more clearly voiced than the chorus of the popular hymn "Rule, Britannia" (<http://www.hymns.me.uk/rule-britannia-lyrics.htm>):

Rule, Britannia! Britannia, rule the waves!  
Britons never, never, never shall be slaves.

But there was a not so romantic reality to the new imperialism, the best-known example of which was the Belgian King Leopold II's private rubber plantation in Central Africa, commonly referred to as the Congo Free State.

Leopold II (1835–1909) was a firm believer in the notion that a nation's greatness was tied to its possession of a colonial empire. When neither the Belgium government nor the Belgium people showed interest in Leopold's vision, he created a private holding company in 1876. With the help of Henry Morton Stanley, Leopold laid claim to 905,000 square miles of central Africa with an estimated population of 30 million. This chunk of territory was recognized internationally as Leopold's personal property. There were no legal restrictions on how

he chose to exploit the Congo or its people. The methods employed by Leopold's agents, including forced labor and brutal mutilation, decimated the population and eventually aroused the conscience of many.

Among those who called attention to the methods employed to meet the demands for rubber were Joseph Conrad (1857–1924) and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930). Conrad published *Heart of Darkness* in 1902, a novel based on his personal experiences as a steamboat captain on the Congo River. He recorded in fiction the cruelty that characterized daily life in the Congo Free State. Doyle, best known as the creator of Sherlock Holmes, provided descriptions and photographs of the atrocities in *The Crime of the Congo* published in 1909. It was not until November 1908 that the government of Belgium ended Leopold's personal rule and made the Congo Free State a colony. The estimated death toll resulting from Leopold's rule between 1876 and 1908 is variously given as between 8 and 30 million. The Congo may well have been an extreme example of the new imperialism, but there were other such examples in colonies that were state controlled from the beginning.

Germany was a latecomer to the contest for colonies. Chancellor Otto von Bismarck (1815–1898) at first opposed ventures outside Europe but in 1884 yielded to popular clamor. The first German colony was Angra Pequena, later named German South-West Africa. Other possessions followed in Africa and the Pacific. Resistance to German rule was dealt with swiftly and decisively. When the Herero, a native pastoral people, revolted in 1904, the German forces suppressed the revolt and while doing so reduced the Herero population from an estimated 80,000 to an estimated 15,000. Similarly, in German South-East Africa, the Maji uprising of 1905–1907 was put down at the cost of between 80,000 and 100,000 African lives.

The “rules of the game,” for the new imperialism, were agreed to at the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, hosted by Bismarck. Representatives of 14 nations, including the United States and Turkey, attended the conference. One of the primary reasons for the conference was to assure all parties convened free access to the Congo Free State by recognizing Leopold's private ownership of the territory. But there was more. The so-called Principle of Effectivity was agreed to for further exploitation of Africa. In order



to claim an area as a colony, the interested power had to make treaties with the local leaders, establish a police force, administer the area, and, perhaps most important, provide for the economic “development” of the area.

By 1895, Africa was carved up among the European powers. Only two states remained independent in 1900. On the west coast, Liberia, sponsored by the United States as a refuge for freed slaves who wished to immigrate to Africa, remained independent. In the northeast of the continent, known as the Horn of Africa, the ancient kingdom of Ethiopia (Abyssinia) remained the only independent, native-ruled nation on the African continent.

Asia suffered a similar fate. The kingdom of Siam (modern Thailand) maintained its independence by a clever diplomacy that argued the need for a buffer between British and French imperial expansion in southern Asia. In order to avoid being a victim of imperialism, Japan underwent a reform referred to as the Meiji Restoration that resulted in the modernization, or Westernization, of Japan. By the mid-1890s, Japan was itself an imperial power, one with expanding influence in Korea and Manchuria, as well as an emerging competitor with the United States for control of the Pacific Ocean.

No matter what standard one adopted, the world before the outbreak of the Great War in 1914 was Westernized. The traditional great powers of Europe, joined by the United States, were the masters of the world. But the changing power alignment and force of nationalism in Europe, exacerbated by colonial competition, were about to shatter the illusion of *La Belle Époque*.

## The Great Powers

On the surface, at least, the European great powers in 1900 were the same powers regarded as such in 1815. They were the traditional five, Great Britain, France, Russia, Austria-Hungary (the Habsburg Monarchy), and Germany (formerly Prussia). Italy was considered by many in 1900 to be a great power, but as the events of the Great War were to demonstrate, this was more a clever ruse on Italy's part than an accurate assessment of its resources. And for that matter,

there were, technically, only three great powers, since both Russia and Austria-Hungary lagged behind in those areas vital to maintaining great-power status into the twentieth century. Both had resisted the modernist ideas that came out of the Enlightenment, especially liberalism. There were some signs of industrialization and urbanization in the Austrian portion of the Habsburg lands and in Russia around St. Petersburg and Moscow, in Russian Poland, and the Donbas in the south. Still, both remained predominantly agrarian states of a few fabulously wealthy landlords and a multitude of poverty-stricken peasants.

### Austria-Hungary

The Dual Monarchy, as Austria-Hungary was often called, maintained a cumbersome form of government with separate parliaments for Austria and Hungary. Common to both halves of the empire were ministries for war, finance, and foreign affairs. Uniting the vast multinational realm was the emperor, Franz Joseph (1830–1916), who had come to the throne in 1848 and who would stubbornly resist death until November 21, 1916. Like Queen Victoria, Franz Joseph was the much beloved symbol of a great historic tradition. The House of Habsburg was the oldest and most prestigious dynasty in Europe. But unlike Queen Victoria, Franz Joseph was committed to, and lived in, a world that no longer really existed.

Austria-Hungary did not possess an overseas empire. It was a multicultural land empire held together by soldiers, bureaucrats, parades, and a living symbol of past glory. It was being torn apart by nationalism. Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Serbs, Croats, and Ruthenians were only the more numerous of the minorities who inhabited the Habsburg lands. There were over 51 million inhabitants in 1911, who spoke at least 10 different languages. Among them were Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Muslims.

Following defeat in the Austro-Prussian War (1866), Franz Joseph avoided dissolution of the empire by appeasing the Magyars (Hungarians). The result was the Dual Monarchy. By 1900, the Czechs were pressing for a further reorganization. Habsburg foreign

policy was aimed at three goals: maintain and expand the empire at the expense of Turkey; prevent the spread of Russian influence in the Balkans; and combat the growth of nationalism among the South Slavs, especially the Serbian desire to create a Great Serbia.

One solution to the problem of trying to appease so many minority populations was a triple monarchy with the organization of an autonomous Yugoslav (South Slav) state from portions of Austria and Hungary. Another was a federal state composed of a number of largely autonomous units. The greatest obstacle to any of the various solutions proposed was Magyar intransigence. Magyar elites dominated Hungarian politics and opposed any reorganization of the empire. Many contemporary observers felt that only the aging emperor himself held the empire together.

## Russia

Russia had much in common with Austria-Hungary. It, too, was a land-based empire after the sale of Alaska to the United States in 1868 for \$7.6 million, slightly less than 2 cents per acre. Russia's status as a great power in 1900 rested upon its immense size—it stretched across the whole of Eurasia from the eastern border of Germany to the Pacific Ocean—and the fact that it had defeated the great Napoleon in 1812. Like Austria-Hungary, Russia was an old-fashioned agrarian state. The Romanovs, who ruled Russia since 1613, devoted their energies to the maintenance of autocratic rule. The current Tsar, Nicholas II (1868–1918), upon ascending the throne in 1894 promised: “I shall preserve the principle of autocracy as firmly and undeviatingly as did my father” (Sulzberger 1977). The ideas of the Enlightenment, especially any thought of liberal political reform, were dismissed by Nicholas II as simplistic nonsense. Handsome and devoted to his family but weak-willed and easily dominated by those around him, his one goal in life was to leave to his son and heir an unchanged Russia. He was not well suited to rule Russia in the troubled years before the Great War.

The century began badly in Russia with an economic recession, strikes, peasant disorders, and acts of terrorism. The government's difficulties increased after Russia became involved in war with Japan

in 1904. Repeatedly defeated in battle by the Japanese, the Russian government faced a rising tide of discontent at home among workers, peasants, intellectuals, and members of minority nationality groups. The Revolution of 1905 was triggered by “Bloody Sunday” in January of that year. It involved a peaceful procession to the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg, organized by a Russian Orthodox priest, to present a petition by workers to the Tsar. As the peaceful crowd marched to the Winter Palace respectfully singing “God Save the Tsar,” they were fired on by troops and dispersed with a great loss of life. The event touched off waves of strikes and disturbances that led eventually to the Tsar’s issuing the October Manifesto (1905).

The October Manifesto, the document establishing the *Duma* or parliament, was seen by many as the beginning of a new era in Russian history. The revolutionary forces split. Most moderates and liberals were hopeful that a true parliamentary system would evolve. A party of moderates, the Octobrists, was founded on that hope. The major group of liberals, the Kadets, was more skeptical of the government, but it, too, hoped for the best. Some of the socialists, however, especially the Marxist revolutionaries, wanted to continue the revolution.

Liberal and moderate hopes were soon dashed. As the government regained confidence in 1906, it worked to limit the powers of the Duma and to repress any remaining signs of the revolution. In June 1907, the electoral laws were changed to disfranchise many workers and those persons from non-Russian parts of the empire. The various revolutionary groups were either destroyed or forced underground.

Pyotr Stolypin (1862–1911), the minister of the interior between 1906 and 1911, carried through an important series of measures that allowed a peasant to claim his land from the village commune as a unified, independent holding. The idea behind the measure was that the peasants would be more conservative politically if they had property of their own. Furthermore, if they farmed as independent farmers free of the restrictions of the commune, or *mir*, they would be more productive.

Some historians, in assessing Russia in 1914, point to the changes that the Stolypin land reforms were making, the spontaneous revival

of the industrial economy, and the continued existence of institutions of parliamentary government, to justify an optimism about the solidity of the empire before the advent of its destruction with the Great War. Others, however, emphasize continuing problems in the countryside with low productivity and overpopulation, the precariousness and ineffectiveness of the Duma, the chasm between educated society and the government, and the hostility between urban workers and society to buttress their case that even had the war not come, the collapse of the empire was inevitable. They also point to the lack of political leadership in Russia after the assassination of Stolypin in 1911. As with Austria-Hungary, Russia's future did not appear bright.

### Germany

Germany after 1900 was the dominant power on the continent and Great Britain's leading rival in the world. On the eve of war, Germany produced nearly a third more pig iron and twice as much steel as Great Britain and only slightly less coal. Having industrialized much later than Great Britain, German industry was able to take advantage of new sources of power and new techniques. Hence, its electrical and chemical industries flourished. German industry produced far more than could be consumed within the Reich. After 1880, Germany rapidly increased its share of world trade. By the outbreak of war in 1914, the nation's merchant marine was the second largest in the world behind Great Britain's.

Germany's surge to world-power status was not due only to its industrial development. Germany led the world in scientific development. Although no longer simply the land of "poets and philosophers," it still held a commanding lead in intellectual and cultural affairs. Its educational system from elementary schools through graduate universities was the model for, and envy of, all other developed countries. The number of German university students in 1911 was nearly twice the number of students enrolled in universities in any other of the European great powers.

In other areas, too, Germany appeared to be the most progressive nation in the world. Under Otto von Bismarck's leadership as the

first chancellor (1871–1890) of the German Reich, Germany was the first nation to develop a system of social insurance. Designed to win the support of the working class, which it failed to do, the system provided for accident and sickness insurance, old-age pensions, and unemployment benefits. English workers would have to wait until 1906–1914, and American workers until Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal (1933–1939), to receive such benefits.

But Germany was far from being a liberal democratic country in the same mold of Great Britain and France. Political liberalism was defeated in Germany in the revolutions of 1848. After that, German liberals expended their energies on developing economic liberalism. The task of achieving national unity was carried out by conservatives with the enthusiastic support of the masses. Consequently, Germany emerged from the nineteenth century as one of the world’s great industrial powers but with a governmental system that one might best describe as a pseudoconstitutional absolutism. Outwardly, Germany appeared to be a liberal constitutional monarchy, but this was only an illusion based upon the fact that the *Reichstag*, or parliament, was elected on the basis of universal manhood suffrage of all citizens over the age of 25. In fact, the Reichstag possessed little real power other than to refuse to pass the federal budget. Past experience in the Prussian parliament (1862–1866), however, left liberals with the conviction that this one “real” power was best left untested in the Reichstag.

The German Reich was in fact a federal union of individual German states in which real power was divided between Prussia, the largest state, and the *Bundesrat*, or federal parliament. Sovereignty was vested by the constitution in the Bundesrat, which was presided over by the Reich chancellor who was appointed by, and accountable to, the Kaiser (the King of Prussia). The delegates were appointed by the individual state governments and voted en bloc as directed by their governments. All really significant measures required approval by Prussia. Any attempt to amend the constitution could be defeated by 14 votes in the Bundesrat—and Prussia had 17 votes.

The period from 1890 until Germany’s defeat in 1918 is referred to as the “Wilhelmian era,” for it was the Kaiser who determined the course of events in Germany. In foreign policy, Wilhelm II



The German crown prince Wilhelm stands over a tiger he shot in a big game hunting trip to Ceylon, c. 1912, a fitting symbol of European dominance in the world before the Great War. © ullsteinbild/TopFoto

(1859–1941) charted a “new course” meant to achieve for Germany a commanding role in world affairs or, as he put it, a “place in the sun.” Wilhelm II’s new world policy, or *Weltpolitik*, brought Germany into conflict with France and Great Britain, especially the latter.

The “new course” meant colonies, and colonies meant a great navy capable of a commanding presence throughout the world. For Germany, the greatest military power in Europe, to build a fleet capable of challenging British naval supremacy was a direct challenge to Great Britain. It was to prove a dangerous, and ultimately disastrous, course. As in Austria-Hungary and Russia, in Germany, the emperor possessed real power. Whatever the constitutional trappings, Wilhelm II ruled Germany. What made the situation dangerous for world peace was the fact that, unlike Austria-Hungary



and Russia, Germany possessed the economic power and national unity to make the Kaiser's wildest dreams possible. Without responsible leadership, the German Reich was a real threat to the peace of Europe.

In the minds of many, responsible leadership was precisely what Germany lacked in the years before 1914. Special interest groups achieved positions of influence in Germany. The Bülow tariff of 1902, a protective tariff, was brought about by the cooperation of industrialists from the Rhineland and Junkers, landed nobility from East Prussia. The combination of rye and steel was powerful in Germany. Similarly, the Navy League, an organization composed of merchants, businessmen, and the military, supported and encouraged the Kaiser's commitment to naval construction. Finally, the general staff of the army increasingly usurped the government's prerogatives in voicing opinions or making commitments.



Nine of Europe's sovereigns gathered for a group picture while attending the funeral of Britain's King Edward VII. Standing fourth from left is Kaiser Wilhelm II. Seated in the middle is Britain's George V. Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2013



In the 1912 elections, both the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Catholic Center Party made strong showings. If they had banded together with the Progressive Party, a majority on the left and left-center might have been created to press for a revision of the political system. Such a coalition was unthinkable, however, and Germany continued into 1914 without leadership except for that provided by nationalists and militarists.

## France

France, too, was an industrialized nation, although on the eve of the Great War, it lagged far behind Germany, Great Britain, and the United States. Unlike its competitors, France was a nation of small businessmen, small farmers, and small manufacturers, a nation of *petit bourgeoisie* rather than giant industrialists. More than half of the French still made their living from agriculture.

Of the great powers, France was the most democratic. Like Great Britain, it had a parliamentary system, but in France, members of the upper house, or Senate, were elected. Also, unlike in Great Britain with its two large political parties, in France, politics found expression in numerous small parties. The proliferation of parties meant that every government was a coalition, often only briefly in office. Between 1890 and 1914, a period of only 24 years, France had 43 different governments and 26 different premiers. At the turn of the century, French politics and French society were plagued by a sharp polarization between Left and Right. In part, this was historic. Those on the Left saw themselves as the heirs of an anticlerical, democratic revolutionary tradition reaching back to 1789. Those on the Right were conservatives, who, from their base within the church and army, called for more order while blaming France's decline in power on too much democracy. In short, it can be said that the Third Republic, a republic born of France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871, was divided between those who favored a republican form of government and those who desired a restoration of monarchy but were unable to determine the “rightful” monarch.

The divisions within French society intensified as a result of the Dreyfus Affair between 1894 and 1906. In 1894, Captain Alfred

Dreyfus (1859–1935) was accused of selling military secrets to the Germans. Tried and convicted, Dreyfus was sentenced to life imprisonment in the infamous penal colony on Devil's Island. Believing Dreyfus was falsely charged, a group of noted politicians and intellectuals waged a public campaign for his release. Until his final exoneration in 1906, France was bitterly divided by an often violent controversy that involved anti-Semitic, anticlerical, and antirepublican issues.

Between 1906 and 1911, a period in which the Radicals (a left-center party devoted to the preservation of the French Republic and the advancement of the interests of the "little man" in French society) were dominant, two developments unfurled. One was the emergence of a radical right movement centered on the opinions espoused in the newspaper *Action Française* and the writings of Charles Maurras (1868–1952) and Leon Daudet (1867–1942). *Action Française* favored a return to strong government at home and a highly nationalistic and aggressive policy abroad. Its views were shared by many who were not royalists but still found the Third Republic lacking. At the same time that a sizable opposition arose on the right, labor militancy increased on the left. Strikes among vineyard workers took place in 1907 and again in 1911. A major strike by postal workers in 1909 was followed by a strike of railroad workers in 1910. The railroad workers returned to work unconditionally when the premier, Aristide Briand (1862–1932), a former socialist, threatened to mobilize the workers. The criticisms and demands of neither the left nor the right had been met; they had only been sidestepped. France in 1914 possessed a workable system of government provided not too many demands were placed on it.

## Great Britain

In contrast to the other European great powers, Great Britain at the turn of the century appeared to be the shining example of Western civilization in its golden age. It possessed the world's largest empire and the world's largest navy to protect it. Although its rate of economic growth was slipping behind that of Germany and the

United States, especially in the key industries of steel, iron, and coal, Great Britain nevertheless lay at the center of world trade, with vast, highly profitable foreign investments. London remained the financial capital of the world.

In contrast to the appearance of political and social fragmentation in France, Great Britain possessed a stable, two-party parliamentary system. The trend in Great Britain through the nineteenth century had been in the direction of steady, if at times slow, social and political reform. Beginning with the Great Reform Bill of 1832 and including the Reform Bill of 1867 and the Franchise Bill of 1884, the Parliament had gradually extended the suffrage until virtually every adult male could vote. By 1900, it appeared that Great Britain, of all of the European great powers, would make a smooth transition to democracy.

It was the Liberal Party, which came to power in 1906 and remained in power until after the Great War, that actually presided over the transition from aristocratic conservatism to popular democracy and the first signs of the emergence of a welfare state. In 1909, David Lloyd George (1863–1945), chancellor of the exchequer and leader of the radicals within the Liberal Party, presented a budget that proposed a revision of the tax system so as to place the burden for financing the new social legislation upon the wealthiest classes. It was a radical new departure, one that foreshadowed the future British welfare state. The proposed budget led, not unexpectedly, to a showdown between the two houses of Parliament. The outcome severely curtailed the power of the House of Lords to veto legislation passed by the House of Commons, making the House of Commons unequivocally the center of political affairs in Britain.

The Liberals remained in power between 1906 and 1914, partly through agreements with the Labour Party and the Irish delegation to the Parliament. By 1914, these agreements were fast becoming liabilities. The Labour Party was increasingly dissatisfied with its alliance with the Liberals, despite the gains made. Even more important, the working-class militancy grew enormously from 1911 to 1914. A series of strikes in 1911 and 1912 reflected the influence of the idea that change would come only through direct action. In the

spring of 1914, a “triple industrial alliance” of transport workers, railwaymen, and miners was formed. Beyond the control of the moderate union officials or the Labour Party, it was watched nervously in the summer of 1914.

That same spring, the question of home rule for Ireland, promised to the Irish delegation in return for their support, came before the House for the third time and passed. Ireland was to receive home rule with no separate provision for Northern Ireland (Ulster). Volunteer armies in Northern and Southern Ireland were already in existence. Many in the British army had indicated that they would not act to enforce home rule. Civil war seemed a possibility. A militant suffragist movement completed the forces, making for what has been described as “domestic anarchy” in 1914. That summer, Britain faced its worst crisis in decades.

### The United States of America

In the period before the Great War, the United States of America was emerging as a major power in world affairs. Its population stood at 76 million in 1900. An additional 13 million immigrants, including 1 million Jews, were added prior to 1914, mostly from Central and Southern Europe. The immigrants provided an energetic and willing labor force for the burgeoning northeastern industrial complex that was rapidly becoming the most productive in the world. Between 1900 and 1914, manufacturing replaced agriculture as the nation’s chief source of wealth. The great captains of American industry and finance, like J. Pierpont Morgan (1837–1913), Andrew Carnegie (1835–1919), and John D. Rockefeller (1839–1937), were every bit as worthy of note as any of Europe’s “robber barons.” Blessed with abundant natural resources, a democratic yet business-friendly environment, and a vision of America’s destiny, the United States was becoming the world’s greatest industrial power.

America’s rising status was not due solely to its industrial growth. The same spirit of nationalism that drove Europe’s great powers was propelling the United States to establish its place in the sun. The belief in “Manifest Destiny” that drove America’s expansion across

the continent from the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans was thrusting the United States onto the world stage during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Albert J. Beveridge (1862–1927), the expansionist senator from Indiana, proclaimed:

Fate has written our policy for us. . . . The trade of the world must and shall be ours. . . . We will cover the ocean with our merchant marine. We will build a navy to the measure of our greatness. . . .  
(Tuchman 1966, p. 154)

In 1890, America's navy was little more than a collection of "wash-tubs," as one congressman put it. But that soon changed.

Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919), the flamboyant Progressive politician, became one of Mahan's fans and disciples, prompting "TR," or "Teddy," as he was affectionately known, to write a book of his own the subject, *The Naval War of 1812* (1882). When he became president in 1901, following the assassination of President William McKinley (1843–1901), TR took every opportunity to make America's presence felt in world affairs. In 1905, Roosevelt offered to mediate between Russia and Japan and hosted the peace conference at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, that ended the Russo-Japanese War. In the following year, Roosevelt was instrumental in persuading his admirer, the Kaiser, to agree to an international conference at Algeciras, to relieve tensions over the Moroccan crisis. In 1907, he sent the new American navy on a cruise around the world, just to show the flag. It was standard TR theatrics, a bit of bluster perhaps, but with a serious purpose.

A booming industrial plant and a great navy were two signs of great-power status or at least the aspiration to such status. Another sign was the acquisition of a colonial empire. Here, too, the United States was taking action that earned it membership in the ranks of the world's imperialist powers at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The Hawaiian Islands were formally annexed to the United States in July 1898. One month later, the Spanish–American War ended, with the United States gaining portions of the old Spanish Empire in the Caribbean and the Pacific. Puerto Rico, Guam, and the

Philippines became American possessions, while the island of Cuba became, in essence, an American protectorate. In 1899, America's demand that China be opened to commercial exploitation by all (the so-called Open Door Policy) was accepted by other Westernized nations with interests in China. Within the Western Hemisphere, the United States asserted a kind of informal sovereignty. With the Roosevelt Corollary (1904) to the Monroe Doctrine, the United States asserted the right to intervene at will in the matters of any Latin American state. When Columbia refused an offer of \$10 million for America's right to build a canal through Panama, the United States encouraged the Panamanians to revolt, gaining independence from Columbia. Like Cuba, Panama then became a virtual protectorate of the United States, to whom it "leased" the Canal Zone.

The United States was emerging as a great power before the Great War but was not yet a member of the club. In 1917, it would enter the war to decide its outcome in favor of the Allies but afterwards would retreat into isolation. Not until the second Great War, World War II, would America reenter world affairs. During the Cold War that followed World War II, the United States would be the dominant power in the West. By the end of the century, it would emerge as the dominant power in the world, with no apparent challenger on the horizon.

## Japan

The United States forced the opening of Japan to trade with the West in 1854. At first, it appeared that Japan would suffer the same fate as China, but in 1868, a small group of Samurai and noblemen instituted a reform movement known as the Meiji Restoration (1868–1912). The new leadership undertook a program of rapid Westernization, restructuring Japan using what were considered the best of the West as models in each area.

Compulsory education was introduced as was military conscription. At first, France served as the model for restructuring the educational system. Later, Germany replaced France as the inspiration. Germany served also as the model for the new army and Britain for the new imperial navy. A constitution providing for a parliamentary system

was introduced in 1889. Once again, Germany provided the model, perhaps because the German Constitution allowed for the outward appearance of a true constitutional system while in fact leaving real power in the hands of a few. One notable difference was the fact that whereas the German Kaiser could rule as well as reign, the Japanese emperor was never much more than the symbol of sovereignty.

Japan followed the Western example in another area. The combination of government-sponsored economic reforms, including industrialization, allowed Japan to become an imperialist power. Japan was the victor in both the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905). The latter in particular gained international respect for the Japanese army and navy. As early as 1902, Japan entered into an alliance with Great Britain, the first non-Western nation to be recognized as an equal. Korea became a Japanese protectorate in 1905 and was annexed in 1910. Clearly, imperial Japan was a rival of the United States in the Pacific by the beginning of the Great War in 1914.

## **The Class Structure**

### **The Upper Class**

The class structure of Europe before the Great War was still a pyramid, with a handful of very wealthy at the apex and a great multitude of poor at the base. The ruling aristocracy at the turn of the century was a union of the old landed wealth and the new industrial wealth. Titled, land-owning families with pedigrees that stretched back for centuries formed marriage alliances of convenience with the wealthy new plutocrats of commerce and industry. This new elite shared a common pattern of education and consumption and similar economic and political views. Generally, the greater the industrialization of a nation, the more closely tied was the upper middle class to the government. Peers of the realm and the giants of industry and commerce (the “robber barons”) often had the same values, the same political interests, and the same condescending attitude toward the propertyless classes at the base of the pyramid.

## The Working Class

Most of those at the base of the pyramid were better-off in 1900 than at the beginning of the century. At least this was true for those living in the industrialized nations of Great Britain, France, Belgium, Germany, and the United States. For them, the quality of life was improving. Not only had real wages risen, but purchasing power had almost doubled in the decade before 1914. Even so, poverty was a reality for most Europeans, even for those in the most prosperous nations.

Out of a population of 44.5 million in Great Britain before the war, 15.5 million earned less than £50 a year, this at a time when the “poverty line” was estimated as £55 a year for a family of five (Tuchman 1966). One study of London households in 1899 revealed that almost one-third of the inhabitants of the world’s richest city lived in poverty. Poverty was even more pervasive in the less industrialized areas of Eastern and Southern Europe. Life expectancy in the Balkans and in Spain remained at less than 35 in 1900 (Carr 1979).

Politically, the laboring classes were attracted to ideologies that, in contrast to liberalism, emphasized equality of reward over equality of opportunity. The two most attractive political ideologies were anarchism and Social Democracy (i.e., Marxism). Anarchism sought the violent overthrow of all existing order and the establishment of a stateless, voluntary order in its place. Anarchism was most appealing to the urban and rural unemployed in the more backward regions of Eastern and Southern Europe.

More important than anarchism was the appeal of Social Democracy for the working class in the more industrialized nations of Northern and Western Europe. Grounded in Marxism, Social Democracy was undergoing a transformation by 1900. Known as “revisionism” in Germany, the emphasis was shifting away from revolution to evolution. Also, like the Fabian socialists that influenced the Labour Party in Great Britain, the revisionist Social Democrats in Germany looked more and more to a future welfare state as their goal, rather than the classless utopia of Marx’s dreams. The desire for “gas and water” socialism was replacing the ideology of class struggle.



The German Social Democratic Party (SPD) was the strongest in Europe. Publicly, it defended Marxist orthodoxy on the need for revolutionary overthrow of bourgeois society and the state. At the same time, many within the party worked for limited improvements through legislative action. This was undoubtedly the goal of the German trade union movement. Although acceptance of the industrial system was never made explicit by the SPD or the trade unions, there were numerous indications that it was tacitly accepted by large numbers within both groups.

The SPD and the German working class have been characterized as existing in a state of “negative integration” with German society in the early part of the twentieth century. Mutual hostility and suspicion prevailed; integration was only partial in that the SPD and the working class did not (and often were not allowed to) participate fully and positively in all aspects of German life. Yet the SPD was set firmly in the framework of German society and German workers participated in national life in many ways. Examples might include the veneration of the Kaiser or working-class fascination with the growth of Germany as a world power.

In general, the working class in Europe reacted to changing circumstances less according to national characteristics than according to the stage of industrialization reached in a particular area. Where experience was lacking, hostility and friction were vented in radical and often violent protest. Where experience with industrial life reached back over two or three generations, a durable if not always satisfying relationship between working class and industrial order emerged. For workers in Britain, France, Belgium, and Germany, the industrial system was becoming increasingly acceptable, even if expectations always seemed to race ahead of fulfillment.

Socialism never gained a significant following in the United States. Part of the reason was the multicultural nature of the working class. In some areas, for example, the South, racism helped to divide the working class. Of all the attempts at organizing a socialist party in America, the Socialist Labor Party was perhaps the most successful, especially under the charismatic leadership of Eugene V. Debs (1855–1926). Debs ran for president as a socialist candidate in 1900,

1904, 1912, and 1920. His share of the popular vote varied from 0.6 percent in 1900 to 3.5 percent in 1920. He conducted his 1920 campaign while a prisoner in the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary.

Another reason for socialism's failure to attract a large following in America was the Progressive Movement of the 1890s through the 1920s. Many historians interpret the period as one of struggles: that between the agricultural West and South and the urban and industrialized East, as well as one between small farmers and urban laborers against Big Business such as railroads and trusts in steel, oil, and other industries. Much of the era's political struggles were waged over the issue of silver versus gold. The debt-ridden farmers hoped that coining silver and gold, a bimetallism of "16 to 1," would lead to an increase in the money supply, thus lowering interest rates and enabling the farmers to pay back their loans and sell their agricultural products more profitably. "Free silver" and "16 to 1" were popular campaign slogans used by those who favored bimetallism.

The Democratic Party embraced the cause of the farmers and free silver in the presidential campaign of 1896, in which the Democratic Party ran the Nebraskan Populist William Jennings Bryan (1860–1925), the "Silver Knight of the West," as its presidential candidate. Bryan was one of the most gifted orators of his time, referred to as the "Boy Orator of the Platte." He often invoked biblical imagery in his speeches, not uncommon in that era. In what was perhaps his greatest moment, Bryan rallied the Democratic Party by identifying the free silver movement as a righteous cause. Concluding a speech before the 1896 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Bryan thrust his arms out to his sides invoking the dramatic image of Jesus Christ on the cross and proclaimed, "You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns; you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold." Bryan and free silver lost the election of 1896, and again in the 1900, and 1908 presidential elections as well. By 1914, the Progressive Movement was merging with the middle-class movement for reform. The focus shifted to the East and such prominent politicians as Robert La Follette (1855–1925), Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919), and Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924).

## The Middle Classes

In later decades, the middle classes were to view the era before 1914 largely as a golden age, *les bon vieux temps*, “the good old days” in Europe or the “Gilded Age” in American history. In retrospect, it seemed that there had never been a better time for the well-to-do than the two decades before the Great War. A prosperous middle-class family with an annual income of \$10,000 could employ a staff of 10 full-time servants for only one-quarter of that income. One measure of middle-class standing was the ability to employ one full-time maid.

Economic opportunities abounded, political influence was increasing, and even social prominence was on the rise. The changing economic structure offered few opportunities for individuals or families to own and control their own enterprises, but this was compensated for by an expansion of positions within management and the civil service. Wider educational opportunities also made it possible for many to enter the professions or the upper reaches of government bureaucracies. Possibilities, especially in Western Europe and America, of achieving a comfortable income and a commensurate status were good.

The middle class was not a unified group. The views of one group of businessmen often conflicted with those of professionals or other business groups. The middle class was, nonetheless, a formidable political power in states where parliamentary government was well established. Politics was increasingly the preserve of professionals, both elected and unelected, and the middle class supplied more and more of these people. At the same time, the middle class furnished the leadership of most major political parties in Europe and America. This was true even of some socialist parties, in which renegade members of the middle class formulated most of the policies and interpreted doctrine for the rank and file. Governments were increasingly sympathetic to middle-class views, as demonstrated by the trend toward protective tariffs and other legislation favorable to business.

The middle class was beginning to set the tone for all of society. The activities of the aristocracy and particularly the royal families of

Europe were still of great interest to many, but, increasingly, standards were set by a new elite drawn from both the middle class and the aristocracy. The upper class with its vast wealth became an important source of patronage for the arts and had a significant influence on fashion and style.

The lower middle class, like the middle class, was not a unified group. One component, the independent lower middle class of shopkeepers, merchants, and artisans, had long been a part of European and American society. It had emphasized familiar middle-class ideals of family, property, and respectability. A second, largely dependent, component was a product of recent structural changes in the economy. The expansion of distribution and sales together with the increased complexity of organization required vast numbers of clerks, salespeople, and technicians. Governments also began to require larger and larger numbers of clerical and technical personnel.

Both the independent and dependent elements of the lower middle class had in common a sense that in terms of status and behavior, they were distinct from the working class. As regards income, however, the lower middle class no longer earned a great deal more than the working class. Lower-middle-class people spent their money differently, however, either buying or saving mainly for items connected with social status, such as a piano; the working class tended to spend on immediate pleasures. The intense consciousness of status was reflected not only in the behavior but also in the politics of the lower middle class, which was usually conservative, antisocialist, and sometimes also anti-Semitic. In politics, the lower middle class favored parties such as the Radical Party in France or the Christian Social Party in Austria, parties that catered to the "little man" and stressed the importance of order, property, and attachment to the nation.

Like the middle class, the lower middle class enjoyed the good times of the era before 1914 including a new measure of prosperity, status, and political power. Living in close proximity to the lower classes, the lower middle class tended to take the good times less for granted than the middle class as well as remain more anxious about any developments that might threaten their position in society.

### Swan Song

The West's dominate position in the world was based upon a number of illusions, chief among them the belief that history can somehow be made to stand still. Imperialism is never more than a momentary advantage. It nourishes resentment and envy: resentment because the human spirit can never endure humiliation indefinitely and envy because human beings naturally desire to imitate what symbolizes a better life.

The long history of the rise of Western civilization peaked during the first decade and a half of the twentieth century. Many of the era felt they were living at the dawn of new age of world peace and progress. Others in Europe and abroad in the colonies sensed they were living on the verge of history-making change such as occurs from time to time in world history. Was it like the period of the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries, a waning of the old or the birth something new? Storm clouds were gathering in the sky above. In the spring and summer of 1914, the storm broke, and Europe and the world were plunged into the most destructive war since the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West:

The silver Swan, who living had no Note,  
when Death approached, unlocked her silent throat.  
Leaning her breast against the reedy shore,  
thus sang her first and last, and sang no more:  
"Farewell, all joys! O Death, come close mine eyes!"  
"More Geese than Swans now live, more Fools than Wise."

(Orlando Gibbons [1583–1625], *The Silver Swan*.)

[http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poems/  
silver-swan-who-living-had-no-note](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poems/silver-swan-who-living-had-no-note))

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Morton, Frederic. 2001. *Thunder at Twilight: Vienna, 1913/1914*. New York: De Capo Press. Life in Vienna on the eve of the Great War is portrayed in very readable and interesting fashion.

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