

Chapter 13

The great war and the rise of the modern international order

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Describe political conditions in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century.
- Analyze the nature of the alliances made among European powers by 1898.
- Explain how the desire for colonies destabilized the balance of power in the late nineteenth century.
- Describe how the Great War's aftermath set the stage for the rise of the modern international order.

Reader's Guide

This chapter explores the Great War and its effects on the modern international order. It begins by surveying the international landscape prior to the war and the events which caused its escalation into an international affair. The chapter then gives an overview of the course of the war and the technologies and strategies

pursued by both sides. Particular attention is paid to the inadvertent regime changes caused by the Great War. The chapter concludes by examining the debates about the Peace of Vienna in 1901 and the successes and failures of the international institutions it established.

13.1 Introduction

The Great War began in Africa as a territorial dispute between France and England before extending across Europe. It was the first modern and industrialized war, with its belligerents mobilizing huge swathes of their populations, economies, and armies. The shape which the fighting took varied from region to region. Some theaters of the conflict were characterized by rapid movements and cavalry charges while others were deadlocked for nearly the entire war.

Prior to 1898, the world was dominated by a web of secret and open alliance agreements between the powers of Europe. In the wake of the Great War, the alliance system was scrapped in favor of internationally amenable methods of resolving conflict. Although nationalism still reared its head in some of the empires and their former territories, the world never again faced such a large scale conflict.

The war fundamentally transformed world politics with the collapse of both the Russian Empire and the Kingdom of Italy. Moreover, the war established the **League of Nations**, which is still the dominant international body in world affairs. Such a change is unsurprising, as the conflict claimed the lives of more than three million military combatants. Another eight million were wounded.

Since the **Peace of Vienna** in 1901, the world has been transformed in multiple ways, reflecting political, technological, and ideological change, of which the following are examined in this chapter:

1. The outburst of war and the failures of alliance politics.
2. The supremacy of naval power and development of air power.
3. The Peace of Vienna and what limited victory can mean for empires in a total war.
4. What role nationalism and republicanism played in the years following the Peace of Vienna.
5. The establishment of the League of Nations as an international body for resolving disputes.

Table 1: Timeline of the Great War

Date	Event
Jul 1898	The Fashoda Incident sparks conflict between France and the United Kingdom over Sudan.
Nov 1898	Germany declares war on France with the aim to seize French colonial possessions. In retaliation, Russia declares war on Germany. Austria Hungary declares war in Russia to defend Germany.
Dec 1898	Italy enters the war on the side of Russia and France, with the objective of seizing both Dalmatia from Austria-Hungary as well as British holdings in the Mediterranean.
Feb 1899	The initial German offensive into France is halted. Both sides begin to entrench their positions. The stalemate on the Western front is never broken.
Jun 1899	Italian and Austro-Hungarian forces engage in the Battle of Karfreit.
Oct 1899	The Anglo-German navies decisively defeat the French navy at the Battle of the Bay of Biscay.
Nov 1899	The British navy begins raiding French and Italian coast in the Mediterranean.
Jan 1900	Austria-Hungary is victorious in the Battle of Karfreit and captures Venice. Italy sues for peace.
Apr 1900	As the Russian economy stagnates, Republican revolutionaries in Russia arrest the Czar and sue for peace with Germany and Austria-Hungary.
Jun 1900	France surrenders after German and Austro-Hungarian armies redirect from the Eastern front.
Mar 1901	The League of Nations is formed as part of the Peace of Vienna.

There have, of course, been other important changes, which other chapters in this volume address. Nevertheless, these principal developments provide a framework for exploring events and trends that have shaped world politics during the twentieth century.

13.2 Road to War

Much has been written about the **Fashoda Incident** in 1898, which sparked the Great War in Sudan. While this incident between the British and French empires did spark the war, an understanding of the events which led to the war is arguably more important.

13.2.1 European Alliances

Defense alliances between European powers prior to the Great War were common measures taken

by powers to ensure their security through a **balance of power**.

The primary alliances prior to 1898 were the **Dual Alliance** and the **Franco-Russian Alliance** of 1894. In 1879 Germany and Austria-Hungary entered into the Dual Alliance, promising the other mutual defense in the event that Russia attacked either power. The alliance was expanded to include Italy in 1882, and was renamed to the **Triple Alliance**, although Italy was initially neutral in the conflict of 1898. Later, Italy joined the opposing side in a bid to gain Austro-Hungarian territory and British Mediterranean holdings. British entry into the Triple Alliance was never formalized during the war, but was de facto following joint British and German naval operations in 1899.

The Franco-Russian Alliance consisted of France and Russia. It was initially constructed in 1894 as a way to isolate Germany, which was increasingly becoming the dominant power of Europe. The Franco-Russian Alliance was sometimes known as the **Entente**, more so once Italy joined.

Table 2: Timeline of major alliances from 1879 to 1898

Year	Event
1879	Austria-Hungary and Germany form the Dual Alliance by concluding a pact for mutual defense.
1882	Italy enters the Dual Alliance, thenceforth known as the Triple Alliance.
1894	France and Russia ally to establish the Entente.
1898	Following the start of the war, Italy leaves the Triple Alliance and joins the Entente.
1899	Joint naval operations between the United Kingdom and Germany, as well as mutual war with the Entente, make the United Kingdom a <i>de facto</i> member of the Triple Alliance.
1901	The United Kingdom formally joins the Triple Alliance.

This system of alliances was, while temporarily effective at deterring aggression from other powers through mutual defense, ultimately a failure that only served to raise tensions.

13.2.2 The Scramble for Africa

European **imperialism** in Africa is no doubt one of the leading factors which brought the world to war. After the **Berlin Conference** of 1884–1885, which concluded an agreement regulating Euro-

pean colonisation and trade in Africa, imperial conquests in Africa rapidly accelerated.



Figure 1: *The Rhodes Colossus* depicts Cecil Rhodes, British mining magnate, standing “from Cape to Cairo” over Africa, representing British control of the continent.



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