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# The World from the 1890s to the First World War

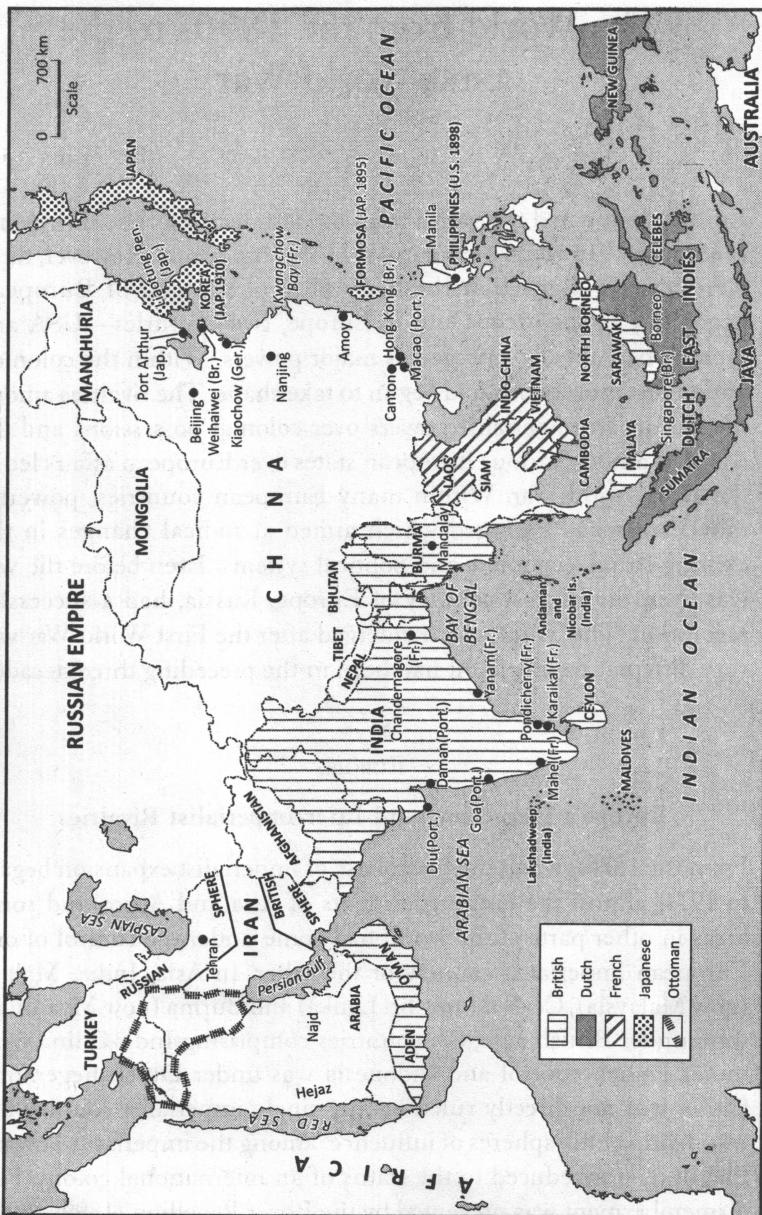
Europe dominated the world from the last decade of the nineteenth century to 1914 when the First World War broke out. However, there were already signs that the beginning of the end of European hegemony had started. Outside Europe, two countries—USA and Japan—had already emerged as major powers. Within the colonies, nationalist movements had begun to take shape. The rivalries among the European imperialist powers over colonial possessions and the conflicts among various European states over European affairs led to the First World War. Within many European countries, powerful movements had emerged which aimed at radical changes in the existing social, economic and political systems. Even before the war was over, the biggest country of Europe, Russia, had a successful revolution. The world which emerged after the First World War was very different from what it had been in the preceding three decades.

## EUROPE

### **Europe's Hegemony and Inter-Imperialist Rivalries**

From the 1870s, when the new phase of imperialist expansion began, to 1914, almost the entire continents of Asia and Africa and some areas in other parts of the world had come under the control of one European imperialist country or the other. In Asia, India, Malaya (now Malaysia), Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and Burma (now Myanmar) were under British rule; the countries comprising Indo-China were under French control and Indonesia was under Dutch hegemony. China was not directly ruled by any single imperialist country but was divided into 'spheres of influence' among the imperialist powers. She thus, was reduced to the status of an international colony. Her dismemberment was prevented by the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1900).

## COLONIAL POSSESSIONS IN ASIA IN 1914



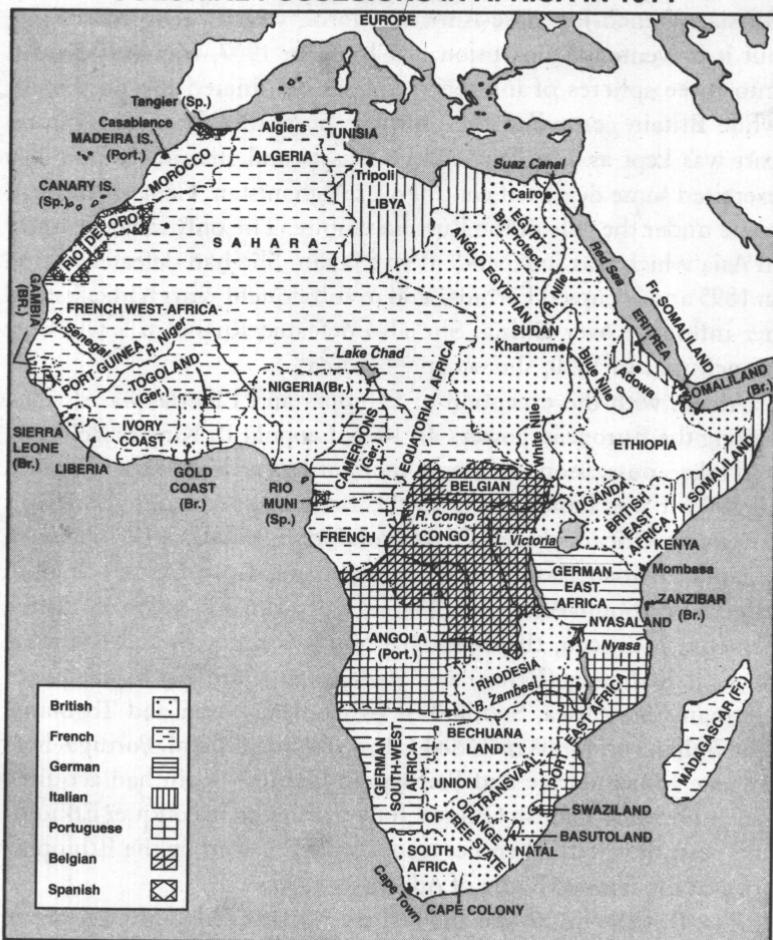
Though the rebellion was suppressed by a joint Anglo-German-Russian-French-Japanese-American force, which occupied Beijing, but it prevented the partition of China. In 1907, Iran was divided into three spheres of influence. Russia dominated the northwest, while Britain controlled the southern portion of Iran. The central part was kept as a buffer between Russia and Britain. Britain also exercised some degree of control over Afghanistan. Central Asia had come under the rule of the Russian empire. The only major country in Asia which was independent was Japan. She had defeated China in 1895 and occupied Formosa and in subsequent years had extended her influence over China. She also defeated Russia in a war over Manchuria. In 1910, she occupied Korea.

Africa, with the exception of Ethiopia and Liberia, was divided among the European powers. In 1876, Leopold II, King of Belgium, had taken possession of Congo, more or less as his private property. In 1908 it was handed over to the Belgian government. Britain's empire in Africa included Egypt and Sudan, Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), Uganda, British East Africa, Sierra Leone, Gold Coast (Ghana), Nigeria and South Africa. The French had taken possession of Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, the Sahara, French Congo, French Guinea, Senegal, Dahomey (Benin) and Madagascar. Germany had acquired German East Africa, South-West Africa, Cameroon and Togoland. The Italian conquests included Libya and Somaliland. Portugal held Angola, Mozambique and Portuguese Guinea. Spain had acquired Rio de Oro and Spanish Guinea. Italy's ambition to conquer Ethiopia had been thwarted when her troops were defeated by the Ethiopian army at the famous Battle of Adowa in 1896.

The British empire was the biggest in the world, both in terms of the number of people over whom it ruled and the area under her control. Britain, at this time, had a population of about 45 million, but the population of her colonial possessions extending over an area of 23 million square kilometres was about 400 million. France with a population of about 39 million ruled over an empire of over 10 million square kilometres inhabited by over 50 million people.

Europe dominated the world not only politically but also economically. Three countries of Europe—Britain, Germany and France—controlled about 45 per cent of the world trade and about 60 per cent of the world market for manufactured goods.

## COLONIAL POSSESSIONS IN AFRICA IN 1914



The process of the imperialist conquest of Asia and Africa was accompanied by intense rivalries and conflicts among the European imperialist powers. The competing claims over colonies often created conditions of war. However, most of these conflicts were resolved in the conference rooms of Europe and wars were generally avoided. The European powers generally settled their disputed claims over territory on the basis of quid pro quo or 'something for something', by giving away something in exchange for something else. For example, in 1904, after a long period of conflicting claims, which

had brought them almost to the point of war, Britain and France entered into a secret agreement whereby Britain was given a 'free hand' in Egypt, while France was given uninterrupted right of domination over Morocco. When Germany came to know about it, she demanded that France relinquish her claim to Morocco. A series of international crises followed, bringing Europe to the brink of war. The Moroccan issue was finally settled in 1911 when France agreed to give a portion of French Congo to Germany and Germany relinquished her claim over Morocco. Both in creating these crises and in resolving them, the people of French Congo or Morocco, whose territories were being bargained, had no say.

In spite of the "Gentlemen's Agreements" which resolved most disputes over colonies, there was growing militarisation of the European states. Every country feared and suspected the others and tried to increase its military and naval strength. Most European countries introduced conscription, that is, making military training compulsory for everyone. Europe was being gradually converted into armed camps. Each country, of course, claimed that the increase in her armed strength was for purely defence purpose, while disputed that of others as an instigation for war. Britain opposed Germany for building a strong navy, saying that it was a luxury for her as she had a strong army. On the other hand, Kaiser William II, the German Emperor, declared, "The German Fleet is not built against any one and not against England, but according to our need.... I want to make myself safe, against France and Russia and England too. And I am all for the white man against the black." Britain was determined to maintain her naval superiority, which she had enjoyed for about three centuries. The feverish manner in which the armed strength of various European states was increasing and the preparations for war were made, led to the steady growth of a feeling that war was inevitable. Further, war came to be considered a part of the natural order of things and was even extolled as a virtue. Preparations for war were accompanied by an extensive propaganda for war. Some philosophers and politicians even started viewing war as one of the "divine elements of the universe" and "a condition for progress".

When we speak of the economic and military might of Europe, it should be remembered that this was not true of all countries of Europe. When war broke out in 1914, there were about twenty-five states in Europe, big and small. The most industrialised of these were Britain,

Germany and France while most of the rest—Spain and Portugal in the Iberian Peninsula, the Balkan states such as Albania, Serbia and Bulgaria, Greece and countries of Eastern Europe—were still primarily pre-industrial economies, even though some of them had acquired colonial possessions. Russia, the most populous country in Europe and with a big empire was primarily an agricultural country, where industrialisation had just begun, and that too, mainly through investments by other countries. Nor were there any notion of the principle of nationality. The Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, and Finland were part of the Russian empire. Poland as a state did not exist—one part of it was under Russian occupation, another part was ruled by the Austro-Hungarian empire and the third part lay in Germany. Czechoslovakia was a part of the Austro-Hungarian empire as were many areas of the Slav people (comprising parts of what was till recently Yugoslavia). Ireland had been a British colony for centuries. The political system in these countries also varied. Some were republics, though not all republics were democratic; some were constitutional monarchies, the powers of the monarch varying from country to country; and the rest were autocracies.

### Conflicts within Europe

The conflicts among European countries were not confined to the question of colonies. There were tensions and antagonisms between them over European affairs. Of the twenty-five European states, five may be said to have been powerful. These were Britain, Germany, France, Austria-Hungary and Russia. Of these, Britain was the richest and the most powerful. Britain had a parliamentary form of government, though monarchy had been retained. Even after the various Reform Acts passed during the nineteenth century, the House of Commons of the British parliament, which comprised elected members (the other being the House of Lords which comprised hereditary members), was not truly democratic. All men still did not have the right to vote and women had no voting rights at all. One of the major problems that Britain faced was the demand for Home Rule by the Irish. A powerful movement for independence had been growing in Ireland, though many people in northern Ireland, mostly settlers from England and Scotland, were opposed to it.

Germany was emerging as the strongest power, both in terms of her economic capabilities and armed might, and was Britain's main rival. She too had a parliamentary form of government though the position of the German emperor was much stronger than that of the British monarch. The territory of Germany included a part of Poland and Alsace-Lorraine which she had taken from France after a war in 1870-71. France, the third most industrialised state of Europe, had been a republic since 1871. She looked forward to the day when she would avenge her humiliating defeat at the hands of Germany and recover Alsace-Lorraine by a war of *revanche* (revenge). The dominant power in Central Europe was the Habsburg Empire, or the dual monarchy of Austria-Hungary. Emperor Francis Joseph was simultaneously the emperor of Austria and king of Hungary. Politically, Austria-Hungary was the most troubled state in Europe, extending over a large area of Europe. Her territories, besides Austria and Hungary, included areas inhabited by many nationalities, like the Czechs of Bohemia and Moravia, Slovaks, Poles, Romanians, Serbs and Croats, and Italians. In all these territories, there was a resurgence of nationalism, creating deep discontent and divisions. The nationalism of the Slav people in Austria-Hungary was also fanned by Russia and Serbia and created strong antagonism between these two countries and Austria-Hungary.

Russia was the biggest country in Europe and she had established a vast empire which included the Baltic states, Finland and parts of Poland in Europe, and Northern and Central Asia. Economically Russia was a backward agricultural country with an outdated political system—there were some industries concentrated in a few big cities. She was under the autocratic rule of the Czars, as the Russian emperors were called, and until 1905 she did not have even the semblance of a parliament. After the revolution of 1905, a parliament, called the Duma, was created with very limited power. Discontent was rife in the Russian empire among the non-Russian nationalities, because of the oppressive social, economic and political system. Another country of Europe which pretended to be powerful was Italy. She had vast colonial ambitions, but, except for her northern parts, she was industrially backward.

Some of the tensions in Europe were connected with the dismemberment of the Ottoman empire. Till the early nineteenth

century the entire Balkan Peninsula was a part of the Ottoman empire. Throughout the nineteenth century Russia and the Ottoman empire fought each other. Russia's attempts to extend her control over the Ottoman territories in Europe were thwarted by other European countries, notably Britain, Germany and Austria-Hungary. By the early twentieth century, the Ottoman rule over the Balkans had all but ended. Serbia, Bulgaria and Albania had emerged as independent states. However, the dismemberment of the Ottoman empire did not solve the problem of nationalities in Europe. Serbia had emerged as a champion of the Slav people, many of whom inhabited the Austro-Hungarian empire. She depended on Russia's support in her ambition to create Greater Serbia which would include the Ottoman provinces of Bosnia-Herzegovina, that were under Austria-Hungary, and the southern areas of Austria-Hungary which were inhabited by the Slav people—the Croats, Slovenes and Serbs. She encouraged discontent in these areas and organised conspiracies against Austria-Hungary. This region became the source of increasing tensions in Europe and finally provided the incident which brought about the First World War.

In 1908, Austria-Hungary formally annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina which, though formally a part of the Ottoman empire, had been under her control. Serbia wanted Russia to go to war with Austria-Hungary on this issue but Germany's threat of supporting Austria-Hungary in the event of a war restrained Russia. There was further intensification of bitterness in Serbia against Austria-Hungary as a result of the Balkan Wars (1912–13). Some of the Balkan states, including Serbia, had united, with Russian support, to conquer Macedonia from the Ottomans. However, after the Ottomans had been defeated, Austria-Hungary, with the support of Britain and Germany, succeeded in making Albania an independent state rather than a part of Serbia, which Serbia had earlier hoped.

### Formation of Alliances

During the period, treaties and secret agreements were signed, and threats of war issued and withdrawn, indicating alignments and realignments. There were no permanent friends or enemies amongst them and thus no country could rely on the support of another country.

This mistrust persisted till the very outbreak of the First World War and was an additional source of tension. Coupled with this there was the confusion of who was a friend or an enemy. For example, Russia had threatened to go to war on the question of Bosnia-Herzegovina. In fact, she had earlier reached a secret understanding with Austria-Hungary promising her not to interfere in her plans to annex Bosnia-Herzegovina in exchange for her support in Russia's ambition to have the straits leading to the Mediterranean opened to her. However, in spite of these uncertainties, two rival alliances had emerged by the first decade of the twentieth century. Already in 1882, the Triple Alliance comprising Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy had been formed. Although Germany and Austria-Hungary remained friends, by 1890 it was clear that Italy's loyalty to the alliance would be uncertain. Russia and France had signed secret agreements in 1894 which had brought them together against the Triple Alliance, particularly against Germany and Austria-Hungary. In 1904, Britain and France—who had long been enemies and had often reached the brink of war for their competing claims over colonies—entered into what is known as the *Entente Cordiale*, which was a sort of friendly agreement rather than a formal alliance. The secret clauses of this 'friendly agreement' included France giving up her claims on Egypt in return for freedom to do what she liked in Morocco. The next stage in the process was an agreement in 1907 between Britain and Russia—the two had a long history of hostility and war. The purpose of this agreement was to divide Iran. With this was formed the *Triple Entente* comprising Britain, France and Russia. It was an Entente (understanding) and not a formal alliance. The formation of alliances (or understanding), in spite of doubts about the loyalty of allies or friends, in case the war broke out, further built the atmosphere of war and added to the mistrust and fear of each against the other. The alliances also made it, in a way, inevitable that, when the war breaks out, it would not be a local war confined to one or two countries and that it would almost certainly assume wider proportions.

### Social Tensions

Besides the conflicts between states, there were serious tensions and problems within states. The problem of nationalities, which has been

mentioned, was not the only source of internal tension. The socio-economic changes that had come about as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism made Europe's hegemony over the world possible. However, the social system in almost all countries of Europe was marked by gross inequalities. In the countries where industrialisation had not taken place on any significant scale, the peasantry, which constituted the bulk of the population, continued to live in conditions of misery and oppression. For countries that were marked by industrialisation and had become mighty economic powers, the social setup was based on undisguised exploitation of the workers. In spite of the growth of industries which produced an increasing quantity of goods, vast masses of people lived in unhealthy conditions and led lives of semi-starvation, with the ever-present danger of being thrown out of employment. Their abject poverty became apparent on many occasions. In Britain, for example, during her war against the Boers (Dutch settlers) in South Africa between 1899–1902, the need for recruiting additional men to the army was urgently felt. A large number of people who flocked to the army recruiting centres were, however, rejected, for they were either diseased or considered too weak, to serve as soldiers. Efforts were made to mitigate some of the worst effects of capitalism, but the situation of the downtrodden had not significantly improved even up till the end of the nineteenth century. A British historian of twentieth century Europe has thus remarked:

The poor who thronged the overcrowded slums of the big towns and industrial districts were a lower order of humanity and treated as such, valued only as the necessary pool of labour, always in surplus, on which the social as well as the economic system depended.

### Socialist Movement

The period witnessed the rise of the trade union movement and the spread of the ideas and movements of socialism. Since the last quarter of the nineteenth century the socialist view that capitalism was a system based on exploitation was gaining increasing popularity among the workers of Europe. There was a spate of strikes in pre-First World War Europe. In almost every country of Europe, socialist