

What Were the Underlying Causes of World War I?

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A Document Based Question (DBQ)
World History

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Introduction

At the turn of the 20th century Europe had reason to gloat. Though it was the smallest continent in the world, the countries within it controlled vast empires that circled the globe. The standard of living for the average person in most European countries, even for the lowest paid workers, outpaced other areas of the world. European technology had led to colonization and unmatched economic strength. Even its culture of art and music were the envy of the rest of the world. In 1900 Europeans believed the world was their oyster.

But this feeling was not to last. By the end of 1918, after four long years of continental war, the foundation of European confidence had been shaken to its very core. Ten million soldiers had died on the battle fields and in the military hospitals; another twenty million soldiers had been wounded. Empires that had lasted for centuries lay in tatters. Cities, villages and countryside were either in ashes or empty of young men. Military technology, that god of European power, lay fallen and twisted on the field of battle. European economies were broken, especially in Germany. Artists and composers were questioning long-held values. Europe had entered the Great War riding on a song. Now, in November of 1918, no one was singing. What had gone wrong?

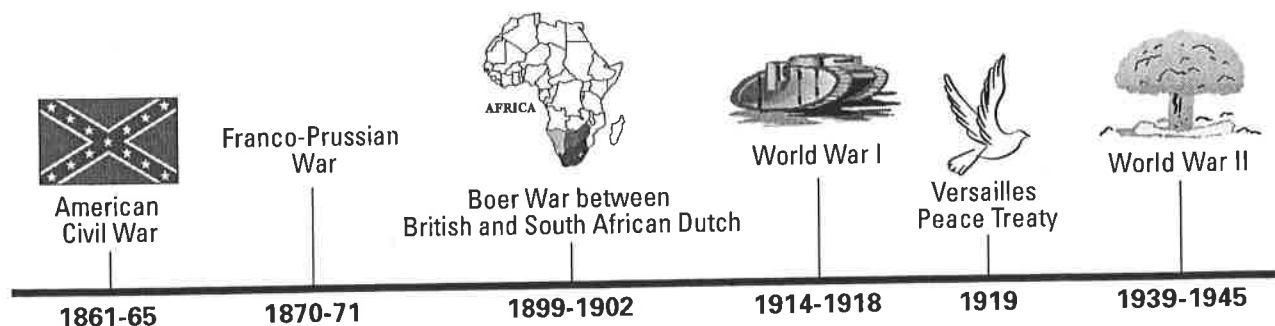
Creating a Balance of Power

Since the Napoleonic Wars in the early 1800s, European leaders believed that by creating

a balance of power they could prevent large-scale war. The idea was that if the major powers of Europe — countries like England, France and Russia — were balanced in strength, no one country could dominate the rest. This idea was threatened when Italy and Germany unified in the 1860s and 1870s to create new large nations in central Europe that had never existed before. Still, a major war was avoided.

This did not mean that Europe was entirely at peace. Otto von Bismarck, the Chancellor of Prussia who led the unification of the German states, actually conducted three wars to gain allies and unify all the German states. But he was careful to limit the participants in each war and to conclude each within a matter of weeks. When the third war (The Franco-Prussian War) ended in 1871, the European continent would not have another military conflict involving major European powers until the outbreak of World War I in 1914.

Bismarck had a special stake in peace because Germany was sandwiched between Russia and France. The last thing Bismarck wanted was to fight a war on two fronts. His solution was to make an alliance with at least one of these nations. This proved to be difficult to do. When negotiations failed, he developed an alliance with Austria-Hungary and Italy, which became known as the **Triple Alliance**. In response, France and Russia signed an agreement of military cooperation. Later, Great Britain joined France and Russia to create an alliance known as the **Triple Entente**.



Tension Between Nations

On the surface, these alliances could be seen as a way to maintain the balance of power and thereby preserve peace. But suspicions ran high. Political and military leaders spent countless hours developing plans in case a war might break out. Germany was particularly jealous of the British strength in naval power. German leaders in the late 1800s and early 1900s decided to challenge the British for naval prominence. Other European nations, lacking a large navy, felt the need to devote more resources to their military to keep up. Russia emphasized the recruitment and training of soldiers, developing the largest standing army in Europe.

The interest in military strength was matched by an interest in economic strength. This spurred the push for colonies where Africa was especially vulnerable. To Europe's credit she avoided a big war for more than forty years. But storm clouds remained on the horizon.

Tension Within Nations

The tension between countries was matched by tension within countries. The rise of Socialism and trade unions in the late 1800s and early 1900s promoted greater class consciousness. Working class people pushed for better wages, working conditions and rights. Some countries, like Great Britain, extended voting to greater percentages of the population. Other nations, like Russia, tried to keep the cork on the democratic bottle; little did they know that building pressure from unhappy workers would one day force the cork to pop. At the extreme political edge, anarchists pushed for no government at all; they assassinated leaders to encourage revolt.

One of the greatest sources of conflict was around the issue of ethnicity and nationalism. Italian and German unification had prompted other ethnic groups to break free and create their own little nations. The area with the greatest movement for this type of change was an area known as the **Balkans** in southeastern Europe.

Since the 1400s most of the Balkans were controlled by the Ottoman Empire. Based in its capital at Constantinople, the Ottomans gradually lost their power. Some small areas revolted. Two large powers, Austria-Hungary and Russia,



stood by to collect the pieces. With the internal groups in the Balkan region pushing for their own nationhood and the two European powers trying to gain advantage as the Ottomans slipped from power, the area was a powder keg. All it lacked was a spark to set it off.

The Spark

Otto von Bismarck had predicted in the late 1800s that "some damned foolish thing in the Balkans" would ignite the next big war. In 1912 and 1913 two wars did break out in the Balkans, but the large European powers stayed away. In 1914 Europe was not to be so lucky. In June, the Archduke Francis Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, visited Sarajevo, a provincial city in the empire, to inspect some of the military stationed in the province. Seven assassins had been sent to Sarajevo by the Serbian nationalist group, the Black Hand, to kill the Archduke.

On the morning of June 28, a bomb was thrown at Ferdinand's car, but the Archduke escaped injury. After he attended a reception at lunch time, the Archduke's car was instructed to

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take an unannounced route, but the driver of the car got confused and drove down a main road where Gavrilo Princip, one of the Serbian assassins, happened to be walking. Princip was unmarried, unemployed and afflicted with tuberculosis; he expected to die in a year or two. As the car stopped to turn around, Gavrilo Princip shot and killed the Archduke and his wife.

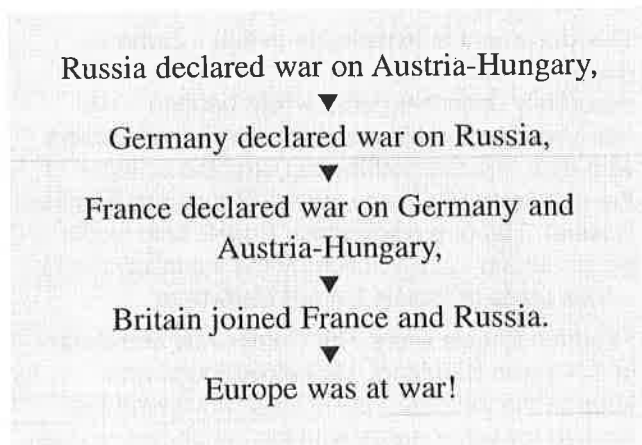
Chain Reaction

The Black Hand assassins hoped to use the killing to trigger a rebellion that would lead to a larger Serbian nation. But they triggered a lot more than that. The Austrian government was furious at the assassination. They blamed the Serbian government for not suppressing groups like the Black Hand. In fact, the Serbian government had learned of the assassination plot before June 28 and tried to stop the assassins from going into Austrian territory. But the order to stop the men at the border crossing was received too late to prevent them.

Would Austria retaliate? Realizing they needed the support of their ally Germany, the Austrian ambassador in Germany met with the Kaiser of Germany on July 5. The ambassador got what he hoped for — a promise of full support. This ‘Blank Cheque’ in hand, and brimming with confidence, Austria stood poised to act. The dominos fell:

- On July 23 Austrian leaders issued a ten-point ultimatum. It demanded apologies from Serbian leaders and insisted Austrian officials be allowed to investigate the assassination plot inside Serbia.
- On July 24 an angry Serbia sought help from Russia, and received a promise of support if Austria were to attack.
- On July 25 Serbia accepted most of the points of the ultimatum, but not all of them. In response, Austrian officials demanded that all parts of the ultimatum be met and mobilized their troops on the Serbian border.

- On July 28 with no further response from the Serbian leaders, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. In the next several days,



Four long years and ten million lives later, Europe looked for answers. What should be blamed? Who should be punished? What had caused this catastrophe?

About Causes and the Question

A useful way to think about causes in history is to distinguish between **immediate** and **underlying causes**. Take, for example, the causes of the American Civil War. Historians generally agree that the immediate cause of the Civil War was the decision by South Carolina soldiers to start firing on federal troops at Fort Sumter. However, historians do not believe that Fort Sumter explains why the Civil War was fought. For that one has to look for deeper, underlying causes like slavery, or the South's right to secede from the Union.

This DBQ is concerned with identifying deeper causes. Examine the seventeen documents that follow and answer the analytical question before us: *What were the underlying causes of World War I?*

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Document A

Source: Friedrich Engels, German socialist, 1887, in James Joll, *The Origins of the First World War*, New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1992, p. 153.

Eight to ten million soldiers will swallow each other up and in so doing eat all Europe more bare than any swarm of locusts. The devastation of the Thirty Years War compressed into the space of three or four years and extending over the whole continent; famine, sickness, want, brutalizing the army and the mass of population; irrevocable confusion of our artificial structure of trade, industry and credit, ending in general bankruptcy; collapse of the old states and their traditional states craft, so that crowns will roll by dozens in the gutter and no one will be found to pick them up; it is absolutely impossible to predict where it will all end and who will emerge from the struggle as victor. Only one result is absolutely certain: general exhaustion and the establishment of the conditions for the final victory of the working class.

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Document B

Source: Emile Zola, French writer, 1891, in James Joll, *The Origins of the First World War*, New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1992, p. 153.

Would not the end of war be the end of humanity? War is life itself. Nothing exists in nature, is born, grows or multiplies except by combat. We must eat and be eaten so that the world may live. It is only warlike nations which have prospered; a nation dies as soon as it disarms. War is the school of discipline, sacrifice and courage.

Document C

Source: A French citizen, 1912, in James Joll, *The Origins of the First World War*, New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1992.

How many times in the last two years have we heard people repeat “Better war than this perpetual waiting!” In this wish there is no bitterness, but a secret hope.

~~Source:~~ Bertrand Russell, British Philosopher, in James Joll, *The Origins of the First World War*, New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1992.

I spent the evening (of August 3, 1914) walking round the streets, especially in the neighbourhood of Trafalgar Square, noticing cheering crowds, and making myself sensitive to the emotions of passersby. During this and the following days I discovered to my amazement that average men and women were delighted at the prospect of war.

Source: Kaiser Wilhelm II, to departing troops the first week of August, 1914, in Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Guns of August*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1994.

You will be home before the leaves have fallen from the trees.

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Document D

 Notes

Source: Map created from various sources.

European Alliances, 1914

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Document E

Source: Excerpt from the Franco-Russian Military Convention (treaty), 1893, in James Joll, *The Origins of the First World War*, New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1992.

France and Russia, being animated by an equal desire to preserve peace, and having no other object than to meet the necessities of a defensive war ... have agreed upon the following provisions:

1. If France is attacked by Germany, or by Italy supported by Germany, Russia shall employ all her available forces to attack Germany. If Russia is attacked by Germany, or by Austria supported by Germany, France shall employ all her available forces to fight Germany.
2. In case the forces of the Triple Alliance, or of one of the Powers composing it, should mobilize, France and Russia, at the first news of the event and without the necessity of any previous concert, shall mobilize immediately and simultaneously the whole of their forces and shall move them as close as possible to their frontiers.
3. The available forces to be employed against Germany shall be, on the part of France, 1,300,000 men, on the part of Russia, 700,000 or 800,000 men. These forces shall engage to the full, with all speed, in order that Germany may have to fight at the same time on the East and on the West.

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Document F

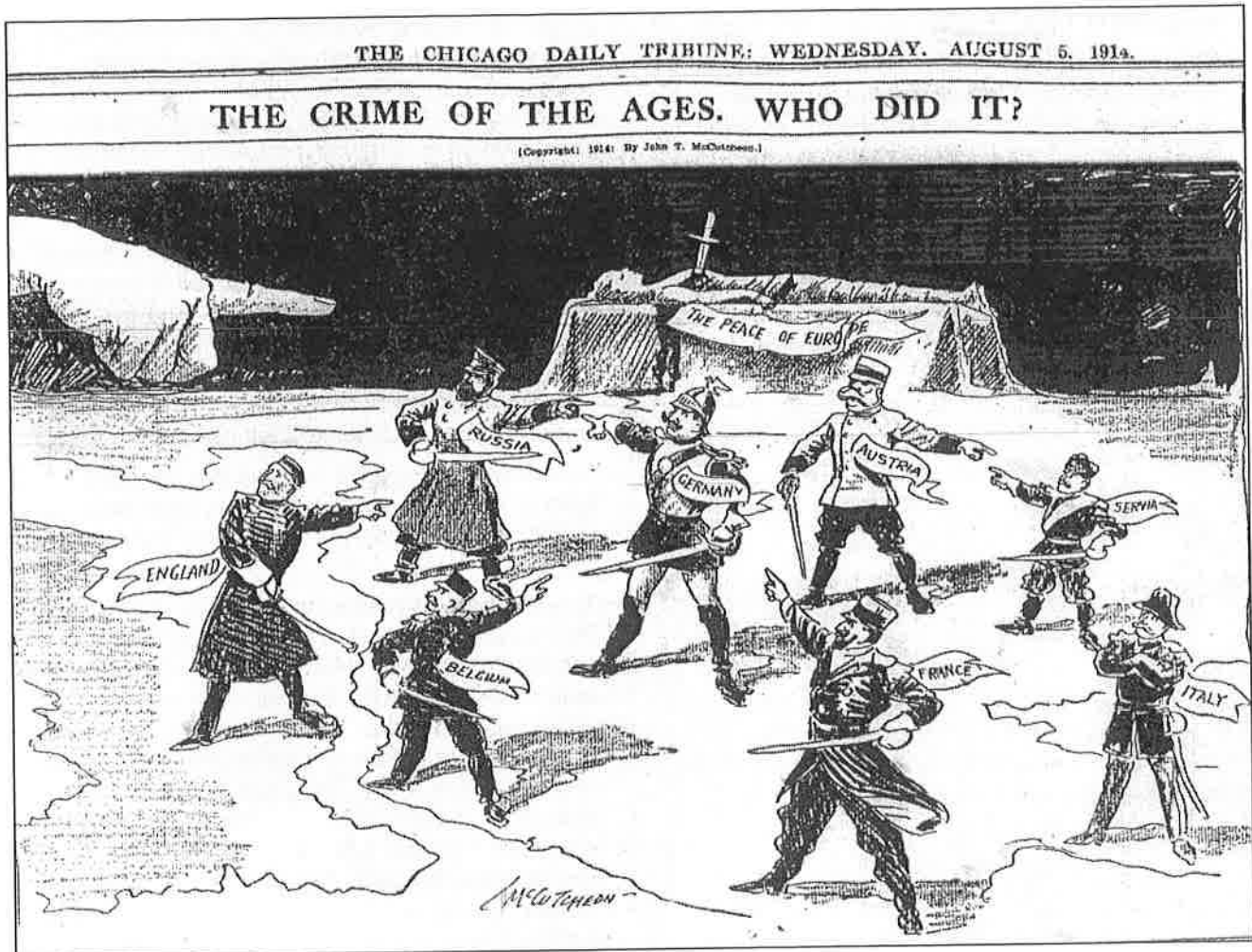
Source: James Joll, *The Origins of the First World War*, New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1992.

More than any other of the international alignments before 1914, the Franco-Russian alliance was held together by financial as well as political and strategic ties. Even if the conclusion of the alliance in 1893 was originally the result of strategic and political pressures on both sides, its negotiation coincided with the launching of the first big series of Russian loans on the French money market. The first loans to the Russian government in 1888, 1889 and 1890 were followed by French investment in other sectors of the Russian economy – municipal loans, railways, mines and industrial enterprises of all kinds – so that by 1914 about a quarter of all French foreign investments were in Russia.

Document G

Source: John T. McCutcheon, cartoonist, *Chicago Tribune*, August 5, 1914.

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Document H

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Source: Russian National Anthem, 1833-1917. Composed by Prince A. V. Lvov, winner of a contest, with lyrics by Vasily Zhukovsky (English translation).

God Save The Tsar!

God save the noble Tsar!
Long may he live, in power,
In happiness,
In peace to reign!
Dread of his enemies,
Faith's sure defender,
God save the Tsar!
(repeat previous three lines)

Source: Poem written by James Thomson, a Scottish poet, and put to music in 1740 by Thomas Arne. Unofficial national anthem of Great Britain (excerpted lyrics).

Rule Britannia

When Britain first at Heaven's command
Arose from out the azure main;
This was the charter of the land,
And guardian angels sang this strain;

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

The nations not so blest as thee,
Shall in their turns to tyrants fall;
While thou shalt flourish great and free,
The dread and envy of them all.

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



Document I

Source: Newspaper run by Colonel Dragutin Dimitrevic, head of Serbian military intelligence and founder of the secret society, "Union or Death" (called "The Black Hand" by its opponents), 1912. in James Joll, *The Origins of the First World War*, New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1992.

The war between Serbia and Austria ... is inevitable. If Serbia wants to live in honor, she can only do this by war. This war is determined by our obligation to our traditions and the world of culture. This war derives from the duty of our race which will not permit itself to be assimilated. This war must bring about the eternal freedom of Serbia, of the South Slavs, of the Balkan peoples. Our whole race must stand together to halt the onslaught of these aliens from the north.

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Document J

Source: Norman Rich, *The Age of Nationalism and Reform, 1850 - 1890*, Norton and Company, 1977.

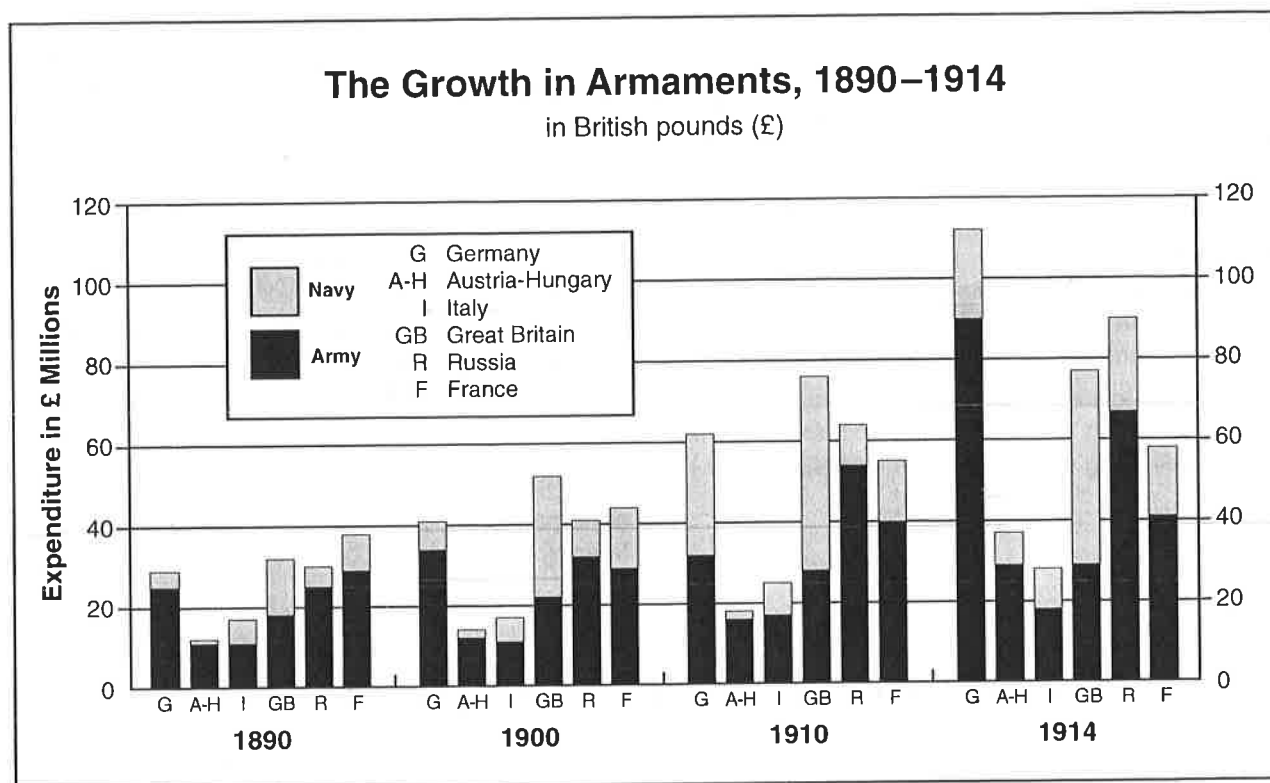
There was nothing inevitable about the triumph of the new nation-states.... Nor is there anything inevitable about nationalism itself. People are not born with feelings of national self-consciousness....

To overcome resistance ... national governments ... resorted to deliberate and intensive programs of indoctrination through state-controlled systems of education, compulsory military service, manipulation of the press, and all the other powers at the disposal of the modern state....

The extraordinary feeling that some people seem to derive from the belief that they are members of a superior nation or race is undoubtedly one of the great appeals of modern nationalism. Another is the ... belief that this superior nation was chosen by God or fate.... This messianic quality of nationalism was eloquently expressed by the great Italian nationalist Giuseppe Mazzini (1805-1872). "Nationality," he said, "is the role assigned by God to each people ... so that the divine purpose may be realized in this world."

Document K

Source: Adapted from *The London Times History of the World*, new edition edited by Richard Overy, 1999.



Note: By 1914 the Entente Powers could field 2.23 million men, Germany and Austria-Hungary 1.2 million.



Document L

Source: From James Joll, *The Origins of the First World War*, New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1992.

*Prince Bernhard von Bulow, German Chancellor, speech to the Reichstag
December 11, 1899*

...we realize that without power, without a strong army and a strong navy, there can be no welfare for us. The means of fighting the battle for existence in this world without strong armaments on land and water, for a nation soon to count sixty millions, living in the centre of Europe and at the same time stretching out its economic feelers in all directions, have not yet been found. In the coming century the German nation will be either the hammer or the anvil.

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Document M

Source: From Annika Mombauer, *The Origins of the First World War: Controversies and Consensus*, New York: Pearson Education Limited, 2002.

*Diary of Admiral von Muller, German Chief of the Imperial Naval Cabinet, account
of a secret meeting among Kaiser Wilhelm II and his military and naval advisors
December, 1912*

Kaiser Wilhelm II: "Austria must deal energetically with the foreign Slavs (the Serbs), otherwise she will lose control of the Slavs in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. If Russia supports the Serbs, which she evidently does ... then war would be unavoidable for us too. We could hope, however, to have Bulgaria and Rumania and also Albania, and perhaps also Turkey on our side.... If these powers join Austria then we shall be free to fight the war with full fury against France. The fleet must naturally prepare itself for the war against England...."

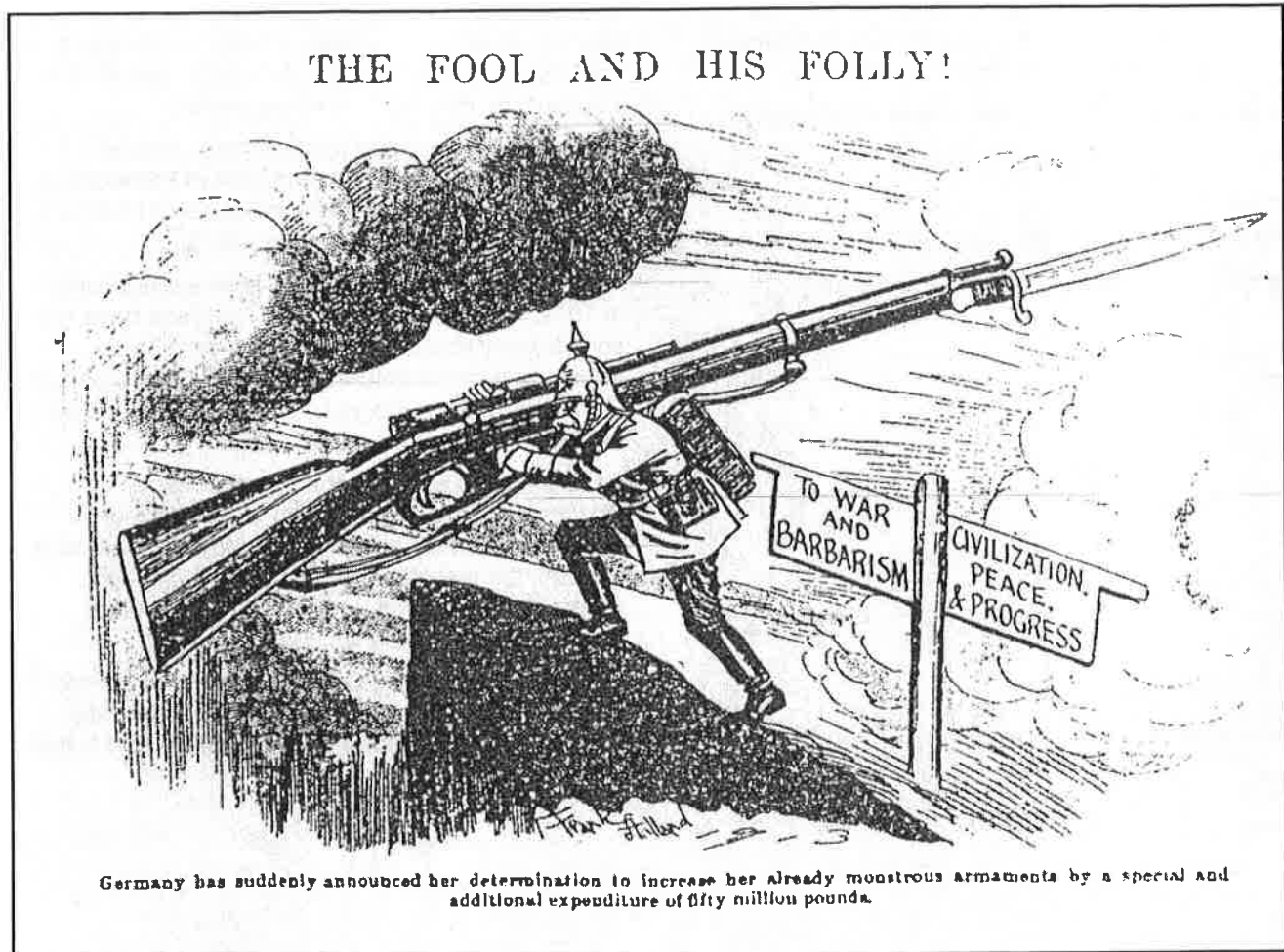
General von Moltke: "I believe a war is unavoidable and the sooner the better. But we ought to do more through the press to prepare the popularity of a war against Russia...."

His Majesty supported this and told the State Secretary (Admiral von Tirpitz) to use his press contacts, too, to work in this direction. Tirpitz made the observation that the navy would prefer to postpone the great fight for one and a half years. Moltke says the navy would not be ready even then and the army would get into an increasingly unfavourable position, for the enemies were arming more strongly than we, as we were very short of money.

Document N

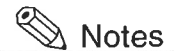
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Source: *Reynold's Newspaper*, London, March 9, 1913.



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Document O

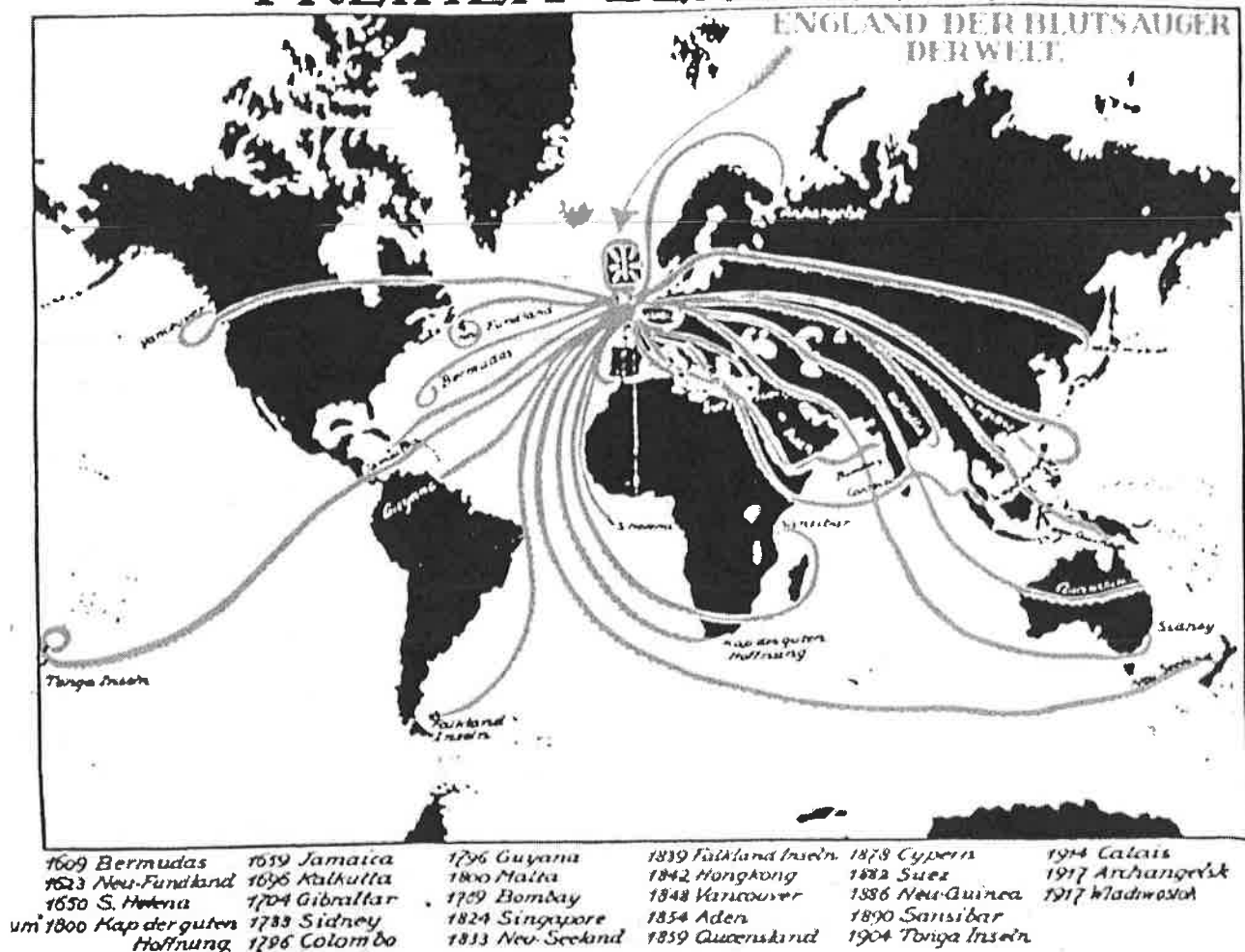


Source: German propaganda cartoon, 1917, GE104A, Poster Collection, Hoover Institution Archives.

The British Octopus

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FREIHEIT DER MEERE.



Freiheit Der Meere = Freedom of the Seas

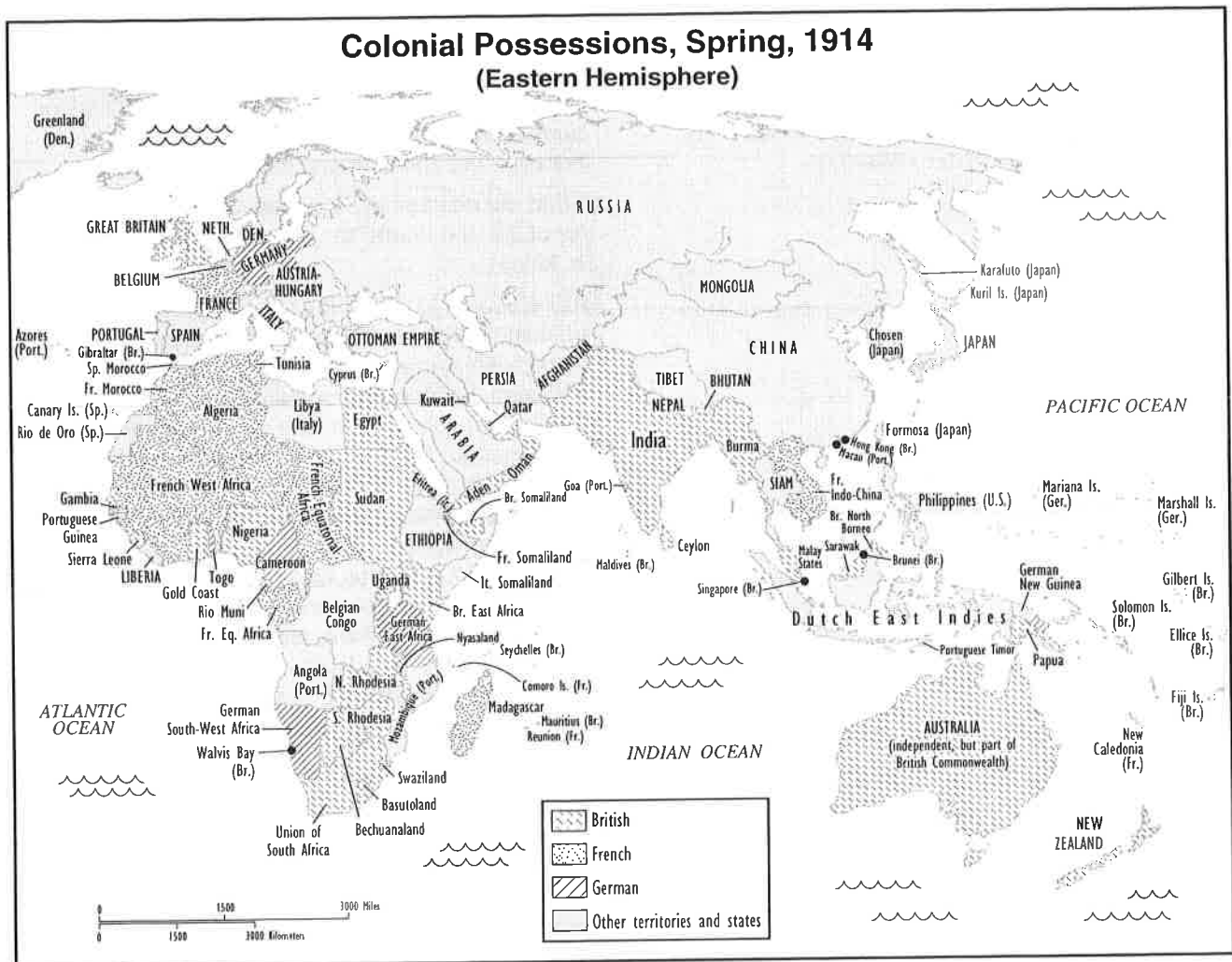
England Der Blutsauger der Welt = England is the Bloodsucker of the World

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Source: Map created from various sources.



Source: Colin Nicolson, *The First World War, Europe 1914-1918*, Essex, England: Pearson Education Limited, 2001.

Size of Colonial Empires in 1913		
	Area (sq. km.)	Population of Colonies
Britain	33,000,000	400,000,000
France	11,500,000	56,000,000
Germany	2,950,000	12,000,000
Belgium	2,400,000	15,500,000
Portugal	2,100,000	7,000,000
Holland	2,000,000	38,000,000
Italy	1,500,000	1,600,000
USA	324,000	10,000,000
Japan	300,000	17,000,000
Spain	250,000	700,000
Austria-Hungary	0	0
Russia	0	0



Document Q

Source: Norman Rich, *The Age of Nationalism and Reform, 1850 - 1890*, Norton and Company, 1977.

A steadily increasing ... concern about national security gave rise to theories that a country's survival as a great power depended on the extent of its territorial possessions and on the strategic advantages and economic resources such territories could provide. Colonies were deemed essential as sources of raw material for the manufacture of modern weapons, and as naval bases to protect trade routes and strategic supply lines. Moreover, the need to acquire such territories was growing more pressing with each passing day. Because the total amount of land in the world was limited, a state had to acquire as much territory as possible as quickly as possible while there was still territory left to take....

Colonization, said the eminent French political economist Paul Leroy Beaulieu (1843-1916), had become for France "a matter of life and death: either France will become a great African power or in a century or two she will be no more than a secondary European power...."

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