

Slide 1

## **Causes of the Great War**

**Imperialism**

## Slide 2

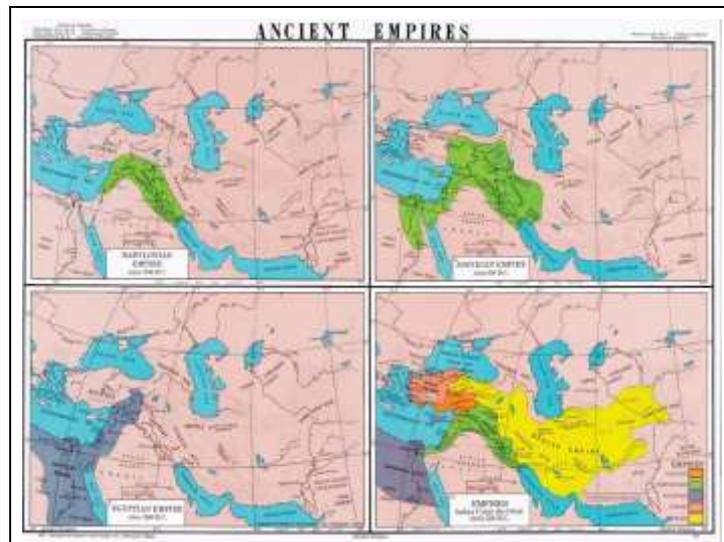
### **Imperialism as a Cause of the Great War**

In this topic we will consider the shared characteristics of 'empires' throughout history since time immemorial and briefly review the pre-war empires of each of the key protagonists involved in the lead up to the outbreak of the Great War in 1914.

The aim will be to give an understanding as to how and why the issue of 'Imperialism' constituted the second of the four toxic factors that caused the world's first global conflict.

The Ottoman Sultanate in 1914 CE represented the longest enduring empire involved in the Great War, and provides an excellent case study that illustrates how empires rise and inevitably decline.

## Slide 3



### Notes

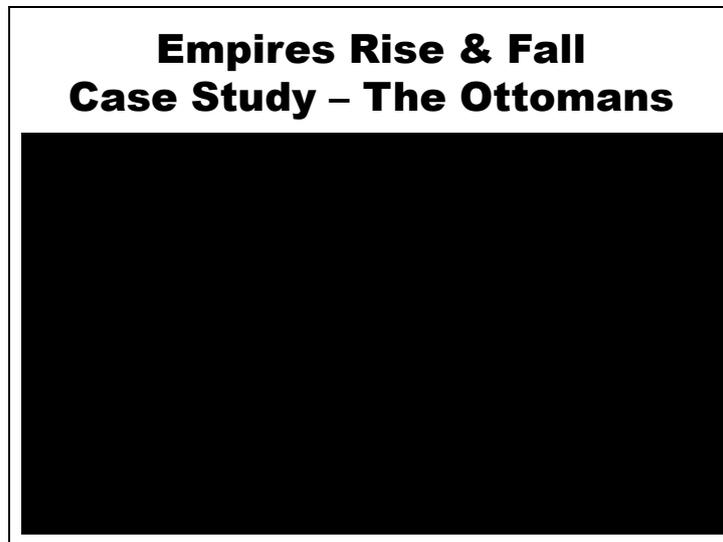
The notion of 'Empire' seems to have been a characteristic of the history of humankind from ancient times on, whereby stronger 'states' / 'tribes' of various eras employed their military forces to conquer and subjugate other tribes/ peoples within their surrounding geographic regions.

Thus one can read about many early empires including those of Babylon, Sumer, Egypt, Assyria, Greece and Rome to name just a few.

One common feature and purpose for building an 'empire' appears to be that the dominant nation in each case controlled the activities of the subjugated region in order to significantly enhance the economic / lifestyle advantages that could be enjoyed by its own people.

A second shared feature of Empires in history is that they commenced with a dynamic and vibrant flourish, reach a zenith point of power, and then eventually entered a phase of decline until their role is overtaken by the next big kid on the block. Thus, history repeatedly shows that all the great empires of ancient and modern times eventually fell.

Slide 4



Youtube video showing the rise and decline of the Ottoman Empire (1 Min 30).

## Slide 5



### Notes

During the 17<sup>th</sup> century CE the Ottoman Empire was the biggest empire in the world, encompassing much of eastern Europe, the Middle East and much of northern Africa. However, in the decades prior to the Great War, Ottoman land holdings had shrunk rapidly as its economic and social structures failed to modernise, resulting in it being euphemistically referred to as *'the sick man of Europe'*

*Its decline however* affected the balance of power in eastern Europe and created what was termed the **'Eastern question'** –

The question of what would happen in eastern Europe in the vacuum that would be created by the withdrawal of the Ottomans became a key issue in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century? Who would get what?

This decline of the Ottoman's drew the Great Powers of Europe into the Balkan sphere, and thereby created new rivalries and increased international tensions.

Described by satirists as the *'Sick Man of Europe'*, the Ottoman sultanate was in rapid political, military and economic decline by the second half of the 1800s.

The Ottomans were defeated in several wars including the Crimean War (1853-56), Russo-Turkish War (1877-78) and First Balkans War (1912-13).

These defeats, along with rising nationalism and revolutions in Ottoman-controlled regions, resulted in gradual but significant losses of territory.

## Slide 6



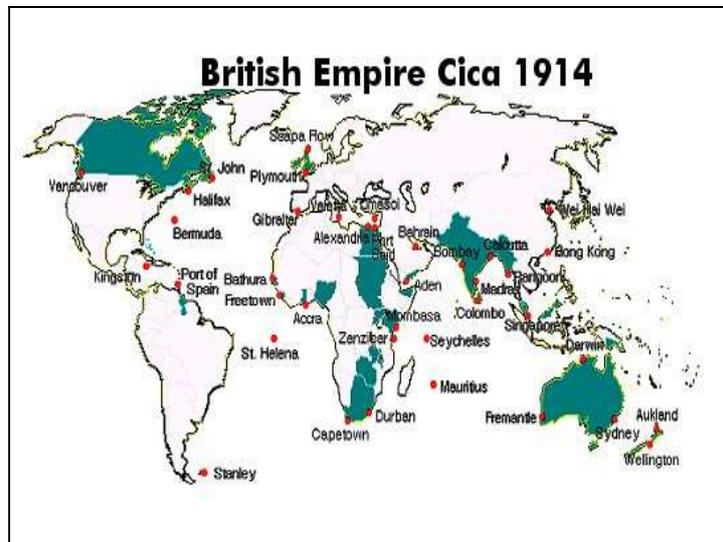
### Notes

Historians generally accept that the era of **'European Imperialism'** began in the **'Early Modern Period'** commencing in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century CE.

It began with Spanish and Portuguese conquests in South America, and continued up until the **'Industrial Revolution'** of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century when more advanced nations of the period (particularly Britain & France) began to establish their Empires.

In the period between 1800 and 1914 many western European nations (Britain, France, Belgium, Germany and Italy) conquered and subjugated a number of what today would be classified as **'sovereign'** third world countries and their peoples, with the objective of establishing a sufficient number of colonies to create an *'empire'*.

## Slide 7



### Notes

Historians consider that one of the four core factors leading to World War One resulted from '*European imperialism*'.

In most cases the imperialist nation obtained control of a new territory by military conquest, following which they then claimed that land area to be their colony, while subsequently they would often be referred to as the '*mother country*'.

A key feature of British imperialism was that control of their Colonies consisted of a local puppet government, controlled by the imperial power.

In the cases of both Australia and New Zealand in 1914, the British Imperial figurehead of each country was a London appointed (British) Governor General and while the last vestiges of that system remain to this day, the notion is being challenged by the Australian Republican Movement.

## Slide 8



### Notes

In most cases the imperialist nation obtained control of a new territory by military conquest, following which they then claimed that land area to be their colony, while subsequently they would often be referred to as the **'mother country'**.

Colonies were / are governed and administered by either the imperial nation, a puppet government or local collaborators. A military presence was often stationed in the colony, to maintain order, to suppress dissent and uprisings, and to deter imperial rivals.

Colonies may have military or geopolitical advantages but their main purpose is economic. Colonies were exploited to profit and enrich the imperial 'mother' country. In most cases this involved the supply of foodstuffs such as wheat, dairy, wool, precious metals such as silver and gold and other resources, including timber, rubber, rice and other foodstuffs. Colonies also provided an invaluable source of cheap labour, strategic trading ports and provided agricultural land for wayward sons of the empire (the squatacracy in Australia).

## Slide 9



### Notes

Inevitably a military presence was stationed in each colony, to control its native inhabitants by dealing with local uprisings (for example the **Eureka Stockade**) and as importantly to display a presence sufficient to deter imperial rivals such as the French, Russians and Japanese.

However the main purpose of imperialism was economic. Colonies were exploited to profit and enrich the imperial 'mother' country. In most cases this involved the supply of foodstuffs such as wheat, dairy, wool, precious metals such as silver and gold and other resources, including timber, rubber, rice and other foodstuffs.

Colonies also provided an invaluable source of cheap labour, strategic trading ports and provided agricultural land for wayward sons of the empire (the squattocracy in Australia).

## Slide 10



### Notes

In the century before the Great War, 'Imperialism' was a widely accepted notion in Western Europe that gave those nations the right to invade, occupy, subdue and control (using ruthless force if necessary) under-developed (and less militarily advanced) countries all around the globe, including in India, Africa, the Middle East, China and the Pacific.

Therefore to better understand the root causes of the Great War, it is important to have some appreciation of the role that '**Imperialism**' and '**Empires**' played in the lead up to that world conflagration.

Prior to World War I the world's largest, richest and most dominant imperial power was Great Britain. The British Empire famously occupied one quarter of the globe - "***the sun never sets on Britain***" was a famous slogan of the mid-19th century.

British colonial possessions in the late 1800s included Canada, India, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Burma, Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, several Pacific and Caribbean Islands, South Africa, Rhodesia, Egypt and other parts of Africa.

Many of these colonies were acquired with little difficulty; others however took more time, effort and bloodshed.

For example, Britain conquered South Africa with its rich resources of diamonds and gold, after winning costly wars against the Zulus (native tribes) and the Boers (white farmer-settlers of Dutch extraction).

British imperialism was focused on maintaining and expanding trade, the importation of raw materials from her colonies and the sale of British manufactured goods to the peoples in her colonies.

## Slide 11



### Notes

Britain's imperial power prior to the Great War was reinforced by possessing the world's largest fleet of mercantile (commercial) vessels accompanied by the world's largest and most powerful navy whose purpose was to keep the sea lanes open.

With the anticipated fall of the Ottoman Empire, Britain's objective was to keep her trade routes open and to also prevent the Russian acquisition of warm weather ports on the Black Sea, which could potentially interfere with her dominance.

## Slide 12



### Notes

Another significant imperial power in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was France, Britain's closest neighbour.

French imperial holdings included Indochina (Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia), some Pacific islands (New Caledonia) and several colonies in west and north-west Africa.

Up until Germany arrived on the scene as an empire building power, France was considered to be Great Britain's main colonial rival.

## Slide 13



### Notes

The German Empire in 1914 included Shandong (a province of China), Papua New Guinea, Samoa and other Pacific islands (New Britain), and several colonies in central and south-west Africa, including modern day Tanzania, Namibia and the Cameroon.

In terms of empire building Germany only began the colony acquisition process after her unification in 1871, and hence by the time she had built a significant navy, most of the best colonial lands had already been taken by the older European nations.



Notes

Austria-Hungary possessed no colonies outside Europe but was an empire nonetheless, ruling over many different regions, ethnic and language groups in eastern Europe.

Among its regions were Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia, Galicia, Transylvania, the Tyrol and, after 1908, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

With the anticipated fall of the Ottoman Empire, Austria Hungary was particularly keen to increase its influence in the Balkan states, mainly populated by Slavic peoples.

## Slide 15

### The Pre-War Russian Empire



#### Notes

Russia ruled as an imperial power over Finland, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and several central Asian regions such as Kazakhstan.

Its disastrous war against Japan in 1904-5 was an attempt to extend Russia's imperial reach further into Korea and northern China.

With the anticipated fall of the ottoman Empire, Russia's objective was to represent the interests of the Slavic peoples in the Balkan states and to acquire strategic warm weather ports on the Black Sea.

## Slide 16



### Notes

Despite American condemnation of European imperialism, the United States also engaged in a degree of empire building, particularly towards the end of the 1800s.

Like Germany, the United States was a relative newcomer to imperialism but by 1914 had gained control of the Alaska, the Hawaiian Islands, Philippines, Guam, American Samoa & Puerto Rico.

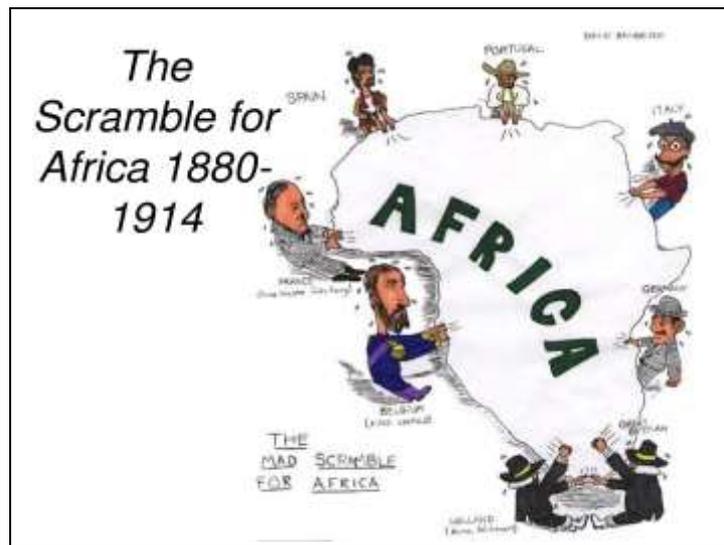


**Notes**

With most of the known and finite world already colonized, the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century produced a final 'rush for empire' on the only remaining continent that had still not been fully occupied.

This desperate push for new colonies was fuelled by rising nationalism, increasing demand for land and dwindling opportunities at home.

## Slide 18



### Notes

Two relative newcomers to empire-building were the newly unified nations of Germany and Italy.

The man who helped construct the German state in the 1870s, Otto von Bismarck, had showed little interest in gathering colonies – but Bismarck's view was not shared by other Germans. Organisations like the Colonial League (formed 1882 in Berlin) whipped up support for German imperial expansion.

The Kaiser and his advisors formulated their own imperial designs, most of them focused on Africa. In 1884 Germany acquired Togoland, the Cameroons and South West Africa (now Namibia).

Six years later a sizeable portion of East Africa was under German control; this territory was renamed Tanganyika (now Tanzania). This African colonisation was well received by the German population – however it caused angst in Britain and France.

Many in London dreamed of a British-owned railway running the length of Africa (“from Cairo to the Cape”) and German colonies in eastern Africa were an obstacle to this vision. The scramble for empire in Africa also sparked several diplomatic incidents that could have led to the outbreak of serious conflicts between European nations prior to 1914.

Two significant crises stemmed from events in Morocco in north-west Africa.

Though not a French colony, Morocco's location placed it within France's sphere of influence. As Paris sought to establish a protectorate in Morocco, the German Kaiser intervened, in 1905 he travelled to the Moroccan city of Tangier and delivered a speech supporting the idea of Moroccan independence.

This antagonised the French government and precipitated a series of angry diplomatic responses and feverish press reports.

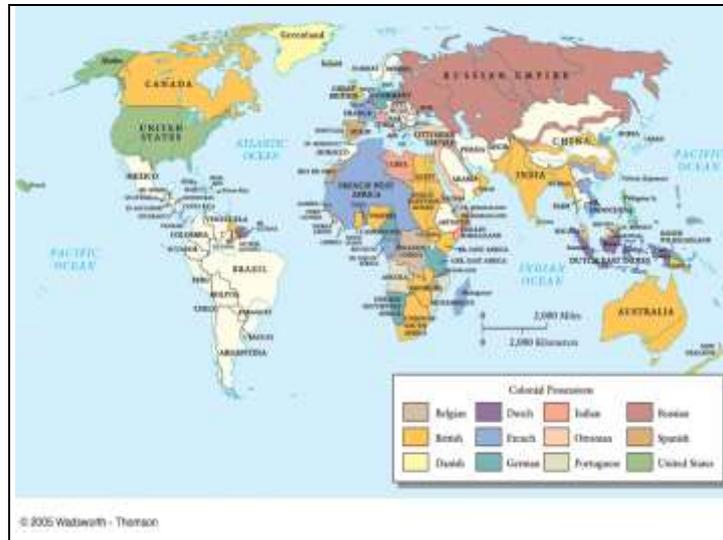
A second crisis erupted in 1911. As the French were attempting to suppress a rebellion in Morocco, the Germans landed an armed vessel, the *Panther*, at the Moroccan port of Agadir – a landing made without permission, prior warning or any obvious purpose.

This incident triggered an even stronger reaction and brought France and Germany to the brink of war.

These acts of German provocation were not designed to encroach into Morocco or expand the German empire, but rather to drive a wedge between France and Britain.

In fact it had the opposite effect, strengthening the Anglo-French alliance and intensifying criticism of German *Weltpolitik* and 'gunboat diplomacy' in both France and Britain.

## Slide 19



### Notes

What was clear in the lead up years to War in 1914 was that strong European nations with empires and colonies ( Britain, France and Russia) were prepared to wage war to protect their existing colonial possessions, and in a 'finite' world the scramble for new land acquisitions had eventually to inevitably lead to conflict between one or more of the conquistadors.

Slide 20

**A Depiction of British Imperialism  
in Africa – From Cairo to the Cape**

