

Wikipedia: History of the World in 1900



The world of 1900 was an incredibly complicated and tumultuous period in world history where countries, technologies, societies, ideologies, and values changed. The world of today, where technological advancement, mass culture, nationalism, and advanced warfare, are so evident, these themes can all be linked to the world in 1900. Many more parallels can be drawn between modern day and the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There is much dispute over whether this period was leading to the catastrophe of World War I or if it was caused by a build-up of unfortunate events. I will remain neutral, for there too much evidence to suggest that both opinions are correct. Rather, this essay will cover important themes that helped make this period so remarkable.

## **Historiography**

Scholars from around the world agree that the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was marked by tremendous change. Historian Martin Gilbert describes this period by saying, “no year passed in the Twentieth Century in which death, conflict, turmoil, and destruction were not in evidence in many parts of the world. Yet at the same time, no year passed without the efforts being made, and initiatives taken, to push ahead along a path of cooperation and mutual benefit.”<sup>1</sup> At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, imperial wars were being fought in Asia and Africa while sciences such as Social Darwinism were used to justify colonial and imperial expansion and was an excuse for rulers to subjugate inferior races.<sup>23</sup> Radical ideologies such as Anarchism propelled people to seek other effective methods of change, namely through terrorist acts, during the 1890s leading up to 1900.<sup>4</sup> Yet, even as the world appeared so tumultuous and negative, change also brought positivity and innovation.

The most notable changes at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century mainly impacted society. Firstly, ‘proto-industrialization’ provided working women with an outlet and it became common for middle-class women to receive secondary education.<sup>5</sup> The rise of general education for women and for the public contributed to the “major intellectual development of the years from 1875 to 1914.”<sup>6</sup> While women were exercising their freedoms, inventors were revolutionizing

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Gilbert. *A History of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: Avon Books, 1997), 34. Martin Gilbert’s work gives a great overview of the world in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and it was a useful source to acquire basic knowledge about such an amazing period.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 7

<sup>3</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 253. Eric Hobsbawm brilliantly illustrates the world before the great war by covering many important themes at the time. From the economy to nationalism, the New Woman and revolution, from peace to war, Hobsbawm writes about a complicated world that copes with so much change. I would recommend someone to read this with an understanding of historical events during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 100

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 204

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 263

technology. Eric Hobsbawm calls the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the “age when the telephone and the wireless telegraph, the phonograph and the cinema, the automobile and the airplane, became part of the scenery of modern life.”<sup>7</sup> This credit must be given to inventors like Guglielmo Marconi, Reginald Fessenden, and Thomas Edison, to name a few. The importance of nationalism was no more evident than with the waving American flag at the Chicago World’s Colombian Exposition in 1893, but it was also an international movement.<sup>8</sup> While rising imperial powers like Japan were developing their nationalist movements, smaller countries were attracted to nationalism because they rejected modernity, capitalism, and industrialization.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, there was a contrast that separated the countries who were for and who were against progressiveness.

This paper by no means covers all the important details of this period. One could go on forever discussing education, globalization, race, epidemics, women, labor, etc. However, this essay seeks to demonstrate how certain themes affected multiple countries or the entire world when they emerged.

### **Nationalism**

Nationalism is an important aspect of the world in 1900 because it was a movement that spread across the world. One can look to Algeria resistance towards French imperialism, or the idea of “brandishing the national flag against foreigners,” emphasized by France and Italy.<sup>10</sup> The list and methods of expressing nationalism go on, but fundamentally, the rise nationalism was to

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 52

<sup>8</sup> Robert W. Rydell and Rob Kroes. *Buffalo Bill in Bologna: the Americanization of the World, 1869-1922* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 55. Rydell and Kroes illustrate how the United States took the world by storm and built up a revered reputation across the world. This book focuses on mass culture and American culture and how it impacted the world between 1869 and 1922.

<sup>9</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire*, 155

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 142 and 286

recognize nationhood and identity. Two interesting cases that focus on nationalism have to do with Britain.

By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Indian nationalism was on the rise out of frustration with the mismanagement of the British Raj. Hundreds of millions of Indians, “an influential bourgeoisie... and an important cadre of educational officials, were increasingly resentful of economic exploitation, political impotence and social inferiority.”<sup>11</sup> Interestingly though, Indians “themselves were active participants” in the Raj, who believed British rule was necessary and beneficial.<sup>12</sup> In response to this, the Indian National Congress, founded in 1885, acted as the voice for Indians concerned with the governance of the Raj and advocated for a loosening of tensions in return for the ability to have non-violent protests.<sup>13</sup> This would be extremely effective, especially under the guidance of leaders like Mahatma Gandhi. After traveling to South Africa, he helped unite Indians through “passive or non-violent mass resistance.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 287

<sup>12</sup> Charles Emerson, *1913: In Search of the World Before the Great War* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2014), 227. Emerson focuses his work on the year before the great war. He approaches this period by focusing on a world without war. He interprets the world by observing the condition of cities which would, in some way, play a role in World War I. What he reveals is that the world in 1913 was an industrialized and thriving one with endless possibilities.

<sup>13</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire*, 288

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 288



Nationalist movements in North America also signaled a disconnection from imperial control even as imperial powers celebrated their own national identity. In 1913, Britain was priding itself with nationalism because it was the largest empire in history. The pageant of empire, held in Canada, was a “commemoration of the British empire” that “stretch[ed] from Canada to Australia, from India to South Africa.”<sup>15</sup> Britain saw Melbourne and Winnipeg as images of imperial success and wealth.<sup>16</sup> Contrarily, Australians and Canadians alike “developed a relationship to [their] land, a sense of national destiny wrapped up in imperial destiny, a sense of having cut loose from Britain as well as recreating it.”<sup>17</sup> In conjunction with the nationalist movements in India, which questioned the idea of being “Indian”, Australians and Canadians were also considering their identities apart from Britain. Therefore, it was evident that, while

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<sup>15</sup> Charles Emerson, *1913: In Search of the World Before the Great War*, 230

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 234 and 244

<sup>17</sup> Charles Emerson, *1913: In Search of the World Before the Great War*, 233

these two countries developed under the British Empire, there were undertones that indicated a separation from the Britannic identity.

### **Technology**



Technology during the world in 1900 was marked by improvements that provided people with greater access to communication, transportation, and creative expression. But the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century also provided developing countries access to technologies created decades before this era.

Railroads, introduced to Argentina and India during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, allowed people and resources to travel around their country at a booming rate. By the early 1880s, “almost 2 billion people a year travelled on them” worldwide.<sup>18</sup> A map of Argentina during this era would display “a network of railway lines running into tens of thousands of miles, stretching out from the capital city to reach large inland estates... where so much of Argentina’s wealth was generated.”<sup>19</sup> What developing countries realized was that railroads equaled productivity, fast transportation, and power. On the other hand, colonial powers used railroads as a political and

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<sup>18</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire*, 27

<sup>19</sup> Charles Emerson, *1913: In Search of the World Before the Great War*, 253

strategic tool.<sup>20</sup> The British invested for railways to be built in India and constructed “a giant railway network across the country” that ultimately increased Britain’s exports of goods and provided them with control over the Indian ocean that provided trade routes between Europe and Asia.<sup>21</sup>



Two other inventions that brought people closer together were radio and the telegraph. Developed by Italian inventor Guglielmo Marconi in 1898, radio would revolutionize communication by allowing the human voice and music to reach audiences across the world.<sup>22</sup> This new technology was also very accessible to the public, and it became popular for people to build their own radios for their entertainment.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, telegraph cables followed the “intricate web” of railroads that spread across countries.<sup>24</sup> Adam Hochschild emphasizes how technology, especially the telegraph, allowed “African explorers... [to become] the first

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 286

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 286

<sup>22</sup> Robert W. Rydell and Rob Kroes. *Buffalo Bill in Bologna: the Americanization of the World, 1869-1922*, 94

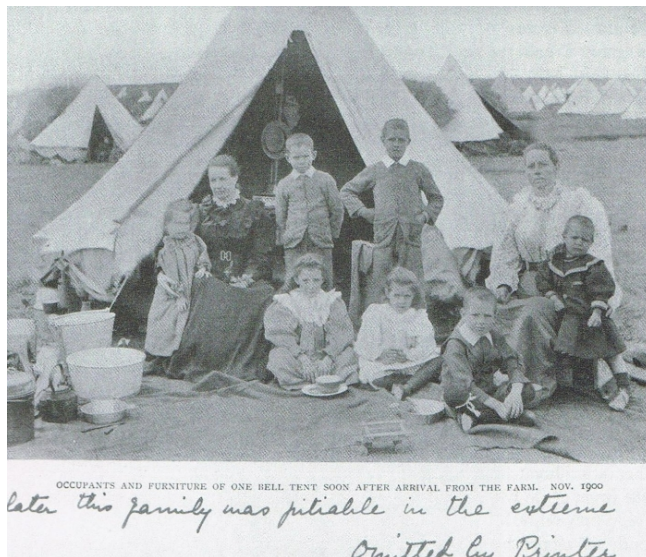
<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 95

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 16

international celebrity figures.”<sup>25</sup> Just as the railroad had sped up time, the radio and telegraph would greatly influence international connections.

## **Warfare**

When considering the buildup to World War I, it is critical to observe the wars that preceded it a decade before. The Second Boer War and the Russo-Japanese war are perfect examples because they displayed changes from traditional forms of warfare at the time.



From 1899 to 1902, Britain used psychological warfare in a traditional, yet modern war against the Boers in South Africa. It was a war in which, cavalry, railroads, trench, guerilla, and psychological warfare would all be used.<sup>26</sup> What was more surprising was the extent of suffering

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<sup>25</sup> Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1998), 27. Hochschild brings to light the atrocities committed by greedy colonial powers. Millions of Africans lost their lives under the ruthless power of King Leopold II. What makes Hochschild's interpretation so effective is the balance between the desire for new commodities like rubber and the means to acquire it. If you are interested in learning about the exploitation of Africa by Europeans, then this book is a must-read.

<sup>26</sup> Kenneth O. Morgan, "The Boer War and the Media," *Twentieth Century British History*, no.1 (2002), 1. Academic articles are also apart of my list of sources. Morgan discusses the Boer War through the perspective of the media. What I discovered was that the Boer War was heavily publicized and photographed. The war was unique because there were both traditional and modern aspects to it. Also, this was a war fought between a White colonial power and its White colony. If you are interested in learning about the media's impact on the Boer War, I would recommend this article.



inflicted on the Boer people. To demoralize the Boer resistance, the British placed Boer families in concentration camps. Following these actions, the patriotic British news dismissed the high death rates of mothers and children in the camps and censored the news.<sup>27</sup> That was until reporters publicized these atrocities in anti-war papers and photographed the Boer families and British casualties.<sup>28</sup> Suddenly there was a shift in public support of the war. It was evident to the world that the British Empire was incapable of maintaining order and peace in their colonies.



The Russo-Japanese War revealed that a powerful navy could determine the victory of a small country over a powerful European power. In 1905, the news of a “Japanese victory in a naval encounter with Russia ricocheted around the world.”<sup>29</sup> No longer was manpower necessarily needed to win wars. Britain and Germany recognized that a powerful navy would be needed to maintain control over bodies of water that connected them with their colonies.<sup>30</sup> The United States also recognized that the Japanese victory over Russia could jeopardize their interests in Asia. But instead of waging war with Japan, Teddy Roosevelt constructed the immaculate Great White Fleet that circumnavigated the globe between 1907 and 1909. The

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 3

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 9 and 11

<sup>29</sup> Charles Emerson, *1913: In Search of the World Before the Great War*, 226

<sup>30</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire*, 320

purpose of such a feat was to establish harmonious relations between the United States and Japan amidst tensions with German naval expansion.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, the importance of naval power during the world in 1900 proved vital for engaging in conflicts, diplomacy, and intimidation.

### Mass Culture



Emerging in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, mass culture would help develop the image of the United States. Mass culture is the formation of ideas and beliefs that arise from a common knowledge and acceptance of a certain culture that spreads out to the world.<sup>32</sup> Nowhere is mass culture more evident than with the world's fairs in the United States that "promised material progress well into the future and laid down a blueprint for a racially exclusive technological utopia."<sup>33</sup> William Cody was a showman who brought the Wild West to Europe in a new way. His Wild West show

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<sup>31</sup> James R. Reckner. *Teddy Roosevelt's Great White Fleet* (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1988), 158. Reckner focuses his work on the result of growing international tensions and the victory of Japan over Russia. The U.S already declared possession of islands in the Pacific, but the threat of Japan forced Teddy Roosevelt to choose a drastic course of action. His response was a navy of sixteen battleships that circumnavigated the world. This book tells of that journey, mainly through the eyes of the media. If you are interested in American imperialism and the rise of naval power, I would recommend this work.

<sup>32</sup> Robert W. Rydell and Rob Kroes. *Buffalo Bill in Bologna: the Americanization of the World, 1869-1922*, 4

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 49

was extremely popular because he presented the living images of hunters, cowboys, and Native Americans which had fascinated Europeans.<sup>34</sup> Technologies already mentioned, like radio, provided nationwide audiences with different genres of music, radio personalities, and advertising.<sup>35</sup> Mass culture served as an “instrument for promoting American values.”<sup>36</sup> Therefore, one who wishes to understand mass culture, look to the impact the United States made, especially during the world in 1900.

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<sup>34</sup> Robert W. Rydell and Rob Kroes. *Buffalo Bill in Bologna: the Americanization of the World, 1869-1922*, 109

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 96

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 172

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