

Emma Root

World History in the Year 1900 Wikipedia Entry

The year 1900, or to put it in terms of an historic era, 1880 to 1914, has gone by a variety of names: The Age of Imperialism, *La Belle Epoque*, the Gilded Age, the end of the Victorian Era, and so on. It is a time filled with contradictions, possibilities and immense changes in technology and thought. Often studied in terms of what happens next, World War I, the late 19th and early 20th century is an interesting period in its own right. Circa 1900 is a changing global world, as it is the height of imperialism, has changes in technology affecting the global world, and there are changes in national identities.

Historiography

Many historians have studied the 1880s to 1914. Often, this time period is studied in the context of World War I. For example, *The Age of Empire* by Eric Hobsbawm, written in the year 1987, has a pessimistic feel to it, because he argues that 1875 – 1914 marks a time during the destruction of the liberal bourgeoisie, and he ends with discussing the causes of the war.¹

However, some historians written against this idea of studying the time period for World War I.

Charles Emmerson writes a book entitled *1913* that is divided up by cities throughout the world and discusses the changes during 1913. He presents information not fixated on the war,

explaining 1913 is a year of possibilities.² In the past ten years many books take this global

approach. Although touching on places in many corners of the world, in *1913* the center is still

Great Britain, which had the largest empire at the time, as his first and last chapters are set in

London. *Imperial Connections* by Thomas R. Metcalf challenges the idea of Britain as the center, writing a book that looks at of the center of power in the Indian Ocean as being India.³ *Buffalo*

Bill in Bologna by Robert W. Rydell and Rob Kroes also look at global connections, but they

write about it through the transmission of mass culture.⁴ Another book, *The World History of*

Rubber by Stephan L. Harp, also takes a world view, but Harp organizes the book topically by

ideas such as race and gender, connecting Sumatra to Akron.⁵ Another interesting thing the book

studies, as several other authors have also studied, is look at a commodity in order to study the

¹ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire: 1875 – 1914*, (New York: Random House, 1987)

² Charles Emmerson, *1913: In Search of the World Before the Great War*, (New York: PublicAffairs, 2014)

³ Thomas R. Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860 – 1920*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007).

⁴ Robert W. Rydell and Rob Kroes, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna: The Americanization of the World, 1869 – 1922*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁵ Stephan L. Harp, *A World History of Rubber: Empire, Industry, and the Everyday*, (West Sussex: John Wily & Sons, 2016).

world, in Harp's case rubber. These recent studies show that it can be very useful to see the early 20th century world as a globalized and interconnected.

Imperialism

On the surface level, the world in the early 20th century is connected because it is dominated by European powers through imperialism. Colonialism and world exploration occurred since the 15th century, but the turn of the century was the height of European world domination.⁶ This occurred in part because of scientific racism, as Europeans thought that the white race was naturally better because of genetics.⁷ Because technology was improved, the Europeans were able to systematically mark off territories on a map they would colonize in an event called the “Scramble for Africa” during the Berlin Conference of 1885.⁸ One of the most famous and gruesome examples of European Colonialism is the Belgian Congo, highlighted in King Leopold’s Ghost by Adam Hothschild.⁹ Europe was not just carving out Africa, as European powers also were taking parts of Asia. In southeast Asia, some older powers like the Dutch were solidifying their reach in their colonies like the Dutch East Indies.¹⁰ However, some older colonial powers lost their colonies in wars. For example, Spain gave up the Philippines when America bought it after Spain lost the Spanish American War (1899 – 1902).¹¹ This marked the shifting colonial powers during this time, away from Europe. Another example of this is the Russo- Japanese War (1904-1905), where two powers attempted to widen their empire, Russia

⁶ Jan Romein, *The Watershed of Two Eras: Europe in 1900*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1982), 1.

⁷ Jonathan Marks, "Racism: Scientific." In *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism*, edited by Patrick L. Mason, 2nd ed. Gale, 2013, http://0-search.credoreference.com.dewey2.library.denison.edu/content/entry/galerace/racism_scientific/0?institutionId=4607.

⁸ “Scramble for Africa,” In *Greenwood Encyclopedia of International Relations*, by Cathal J. Nolan, ABC-CLIO, 2002. http://0-search.credoreference.com.dewey2.library.denison.edu/content/entry/abcintrel/scramble_for_africa/0?institutionId=4607.

⁹ Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost: A Story of Freed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, (New York: First Mariner Books, 1998).

¹⁰ M.C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia, since c. 1200*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

¹¹ Morton Keller, "Spanish American War." In *The Reader's Companion to American History*, edited by Eric Foner, and John Arthur Garraty. Houghton Mifflin, 2014, http://0-search.credoreference.com.dewey2.library.denison.edu/content/entry/rcah/spanish_american_war/0?institutionId=4607.

and Japan.¹² Japan won the war, shaking the European-dominated world and the ideas of the Age of Imperialism. The Age of Imperialism occurred during immense changes and shifts in world powers, from Europe to places like the United States and Japan.

¹² Paul W. Doerr, "The Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905)." In *World History Encyclopedia*, by Alfred J. Andrea, ABC-CLIO, 2011, http://0-search.credoreference.com.dewey2.library.denison.edu/content/entry/abccliow/the_russo_japanese_war_1904_1905/0?institutionId=4607.

Technological and Global Changes

Many historians have written about the early 20th century and what it means to be “Modern.” Circa 1900 is often cited as “Modern” because of the changes that occurred.¹³ For example, “Modern art,” marked a change in the art world with its switch from participating in a long art tradition, to showing a particular artist’s expression of themselves.¹⁴ This modernity, however, only belongs to a certain class of European culture. Charles Emmerson



Pablo Picasso, Les Femmes d'Alger (O Version O), 1907.

argued that the time around 1900 was “modern” in part because of its globalization. He said in his book, *1913*, “1913, and the years before it, [was] a period of unprecedented globalization, rich in encounters, interconnections, and ideas.”¹⁵ His idea of globalization reflects the connections during this time period created due to travel, empires, and technology. Hobsbawm echoes this idea, saying that the 1880s compared to the 1780s was different because it was truly global.¹⁶ World fairs were important during this time, as empires and countries would show off their riches and cultures.¹⁷ This time period marks the height of exoticism and looking at other cultures as others, which in the context of colonialism and scientific racism is highly problematic. It is important to look beyond the European implications of modernity because although Europe certainly dominated this time period in terms of power and empire, the rest of the world still existed in their own right.

¹³ H.H. Arnason and Elizabeth C. Mansfield, *History of Modern Art*, (Upper Saddle River: Pearson, 2013), 3.

¹⁴ H.H. Arnason and Elizabeth C. Mansfield, 3.

¹⁵ Emmerson, xiii.

¹⁶ Hobsbawm, 13.

¹⁷ Rydell and Kroes, 11.

These global changes could not have existed without the technological changes that occurred during this era. One way is how photography helped to illuminate global atrocities. In the Belgian Congo, the Congolese were forced into labor on rubber plantations.¹⁸ Estimates say ten million Congolese died for the Belgian cause of having an empire. According to Hochschild,



Scene from the Congo

this was the, “first major international atrocity scandal in the age of the telegraph and the camera”¹⁹ An interesting element of this case is the global humanitarian response, brought about in part because of the new ways the public could witness atrocities.

Photography has a certain shock factor that paintings often do not have because photography seems to be telling the truth of what happened. This is once again the case in the Russo-Japanese War, which is seen as a Modern War because the pictures of the trenches and the dead bodies.²⁰ Technology connected the world in ways it did not previously, creating a new global and modern world.

¹⁸ Hochschild, 159.

¹⁹ Hochschild, 4.

²⁰ Doerr.

National Identity

During this Age of Imperialism, empires had an interesting relationship with the countries we know today. For example, Indonesia, which became independent in the 1940s, is an archipelago of over 17,000 islands, many with unique languages and cultures. Their national identity came to be around the turn of the century because the Dutch East Indies created the border and thus created the national identity.²¹ Nations also started to thinking of themselves as a specific national identity within a larger empire during this time. In Canada and Australia, their identities when from British Citizens to being Canadian and Australian.²² A similar thing happened in India, where they got a sense of national identity.²³ The British gathered for the 'Pageant of Empire' which showed off aspects of different nations in the British Empire like Canada, Ireland, and India.²⁴



Festival of Empire Postcard, 1911



King Chulalongkorn

This phenomena was not unique to European empires. An example is Siam (Modern-day Thailand), who was not colonized by Europeans, but a strong central government was created in order to keep it a free state. Their King Chulalongkorn reformed Siam through creating departments of eduction and banning gambling, which helped them

²¹ Ricklefs.

²² Emmerson, 230.

²³ Metcalf.

²⁴ Emmerson, 231.

maintain independence.²⁵ Strong centralized government also helped create a sense of national identity as the more rural areas became further under his rule.²⁶ Leaders and centralized government helped unite countries during this time, and Siam is an interesting case because it was united outside of European Empire.

Beyond politics, a sense of national identity can also be created through culture. One example is American mass culture, which took off during this time period.²⁷ In America, like all countries, the population is very diverse, and thus what could be an identity for one person may not be an identity for others. Rydell and Kroes discuss mass culture in terms of “industrially produced standardized cultural forms produced for cheap sale to ‘mass’ audiences.”²⁸ This means mass culture has less to do with individual identities and more about the kinds of culture that is consumed by the masses. This helped create American identity, because now other countries had their own idea of what America was, which in turn created a sense of national identity. The key importance of national identity in this time period is that it is unlike ever before: people are starting to think of themselves as American, or Indonesian, or Australian, or Indian. This is very important in the creation of the world as we know it today, because although many nations are not under the control of the Europeans like in the turn of the century, many retain the same borders because of the national identity created during this time.

²⁵ B.J. Terweil, *Thailand's Political History: From the Fall of Ayutthaya in 1767 to Recent Times*, (Bangkok: River Books, 2005), 204.

²⁶ David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1982), 215.

²⁷ Rydell and Kroes.

²⁸ Rydell and Kroes, 3-4.

Imperialism, changing global interactions, and changing national identity all relate to how the world in 1900 was a global world. Whether or not a world war was inevitable from these global connections is not important, because regardless these changes in global identity affected how people saw the world then, forever changing how we see the world today.

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