

John Petersen

Professor Gregory Shaya

The History of the World in 1900

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Themes in the World in 1900

Introduction

The early nineteenth centuries were, for the most part, a time of great intellectual advances both in the realms of science and political philosophy. Despite this progress, however, not all advances were used for the betterment of humanity. The world in the early nineteenth centuries was a time in which Europe was in the center of the world culturally, scientifically, and militarily, and although the majority of advances marked a progress beneficial to humanity, the European powers, in an effort to maintain their standing on the world stage also used their enormous power to hold the rest of the world down. The world in 1900 was certainly following a Eurocentric trend, but there were some areas of the world that did manage to break free from the European mold

that most nations found

themselves in prior

to World War I.



Geopolitics

Over the course of the long nineteenth century, Europe had managed to firmly place itself in the center of the world, both figuratively and literally, with the prime meridian having been established in 1851. More than two thirds of the 1.6 billion people on earth at this time were under European rule, and of the European powers, Britain was the strongest, having the largest empire in history. When Bismarck was establishing Germany's place in Europe in the late 1800s, he identified the five major powers as being Britain, France, Prussia, Russia, and Austria-Hungary, and for the most part, these powers have lived up to their potential as great powers as the years drew closer to the 1900s (with the exception of Austria-Hungary that was clearly in decline. Otto von Bismarck was even quoted saying, "One day the great European War will come out of some damned foolish thing in the Balkans," which captures the dysfunctionality of the region quite well.)

Britain and France both boasted vast amounts of overseas colonies. Britain claimed eastern Africa, Canada, Australia, and the jewel in the crown of the British Empire, British India. France, meanwhile, claimed western Africa and French Indochina. Germany initially aimed to stay out of colonization, but after Wilhelm II fired Bismarck, he thought that Germany should claim its position in the world by investing in colonies overseas, and before World War I, Germany had managed to carve out some regions in Africa and the Pacific Ocean for itself. Russia continued pursuing its national security goals by expanding further east. Russia's eastern expansion had been one of the nation's foreign policies well before the idea of colonization came about, and Russian "colonization" was different from the rest of Europe's in the sense that conquered land was added to the mass of a contiguous Russia. It was, however,

still expansion into the lands of those who were not ethnically Russian, and the expansion was by no means peaceful.

The biggest difference between Russian expansion and European expansion was not where they expanded, however, but why. Russian expansion has always been motivated by a need for a buffer region to protect the Russian interior. Russia lacks protective barriers like mountains and ocean and because of this, Russia's sovereignty has always been under existential threat. Russian expansion at this time was also prompted by a need for a warm water port. Although Russia has one of the largest coastlines in the world, most of Russia's coast is useless because it is located along the frozen Arctic Ocean. The few ports that Russia does have are located in enclosed seas that can easily be cut off by an enemy of Russia's. The Baltic Sea, for example can be cut off by Denmark, and the Black Sea could be easily by cut off from the Mediterranean at the Ottoman owned strait of Bosphorus. The quest of a warm water port is what motivated aggressive Russian expansion toward Port Arthur, and the resulting escalation between Russian and Japan over this territory ultimately resulted in the Russo-Japanese War.¹

The Russo-Japanese War was a major war in history, not necessarily because of its concrete consequences, but because of the political implication at the time. From the Russo-Japanese War, Japan emerged as the only Asian nation to ever defeat a western nation in a war,² and this, along with Japan's image after the Meiji restoration, prompted the rest of the world to see Japan as the Britain of Asia. Japan's victory contradicted the beliefs of many social darwinists at the time, and the success of Japan even served as a model to other Asian nations on how to modernize while retaining an Asian identity.³ In Sun Yat-Sen's *San Min Chu I* (The

¹ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. *The Russo-Japanese War*. (2018).
<https://www.britannica.com/event/Russo-Japanese-War>

² The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica.

³ Rogaski, Ruth. *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-port China*. CA:

Three Principles of the People), he cited Japan's success as proof that all races are equal in terms of ability, and he asserts that China could, like Japan, someday regain its position on the world stage.⁴ It is because of Japan's rise, that Charles Emerson to regard the nation as a "twilight power", a nation that had not quite yet achieved the strength of Britain or France, but was very clearly progressing in that direction.⁵

Another nation that could have been considered a twilight power was The United States of America. America was far behind the European powers in terms of colonization, and was looked down upon by the European powers, but American success was never necessarily worse than the European powers'. A more accurate word to describe American success would be "different". American mathematics, for example was lagging far behind the European powers, but in terms of experimental physics, Americans were known for some groundbreaking work.⁶ Culturally, Americans were viewed as moving directly "from barbarism to decadence", but in reality, American cultural icons like Buffalo Bill were very well received in Europe, especially Germany.⁷ America's economy was growing fast at this time as well, and in time, it would prove to drastically outpace the European powers.

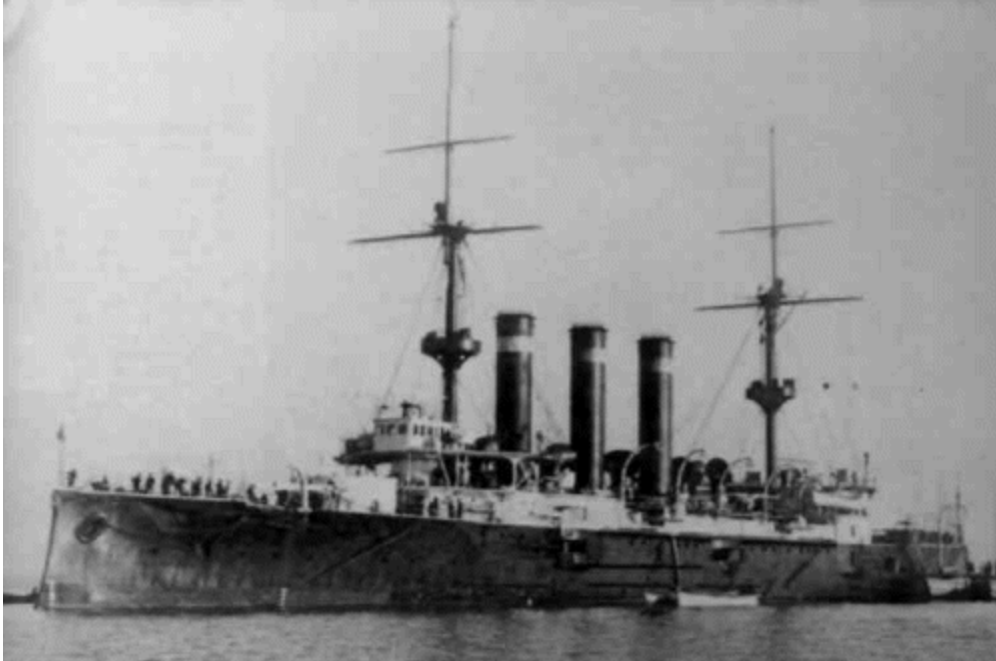
University of California Press, (2004), (107.)

⁴ Sun Yat Sen, *San Min Chu-i (Three Principles of the People)* (1925), (6.)

⁵ Emerson, Charles. 1913. (2014), (411.)

⁶ Servos, John W. "Mathematics and the Physical Sciences in America, 1880-1930." *Isis* 77, no. 4 (1986): 611-29. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/233164>, (613.)

⁷ Robert Rydell and Rob Kroes, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna: The Americanization of the World, 1869-1922* (2005).



Technological Advancements

It is difficult to understate the abundance and significance of technological and scientific advancements during this time. Thomas Edison created the technology necessary for film and the Lumiere brothers in France were the first to popularize the art form. Cars were first created in the late 1800s and Henry Ford made them both easily accessible and well received.⁸ Medicine was also a groundbreaking advancement, as during this time, germ theory finally overtook the miasma theory as being the most widely accepted.⁹ Germs were of course easier to contain with another invention, the rubber glove, made of rubber which, now through the process of vulcanization was made more durable.¹⁰

⁸ Emerson, (182-193.)

⁹ Rogaski, (26.)

¹⁰ Stephen Harp, *A World History of Rubber: Empire, Industry, and the Everyday* (2017), (13.)

Consumer goods were not the only advancements present, however. Aether was recently discredited during this time period which completely revolutionized the scientific community.¹¹ American scientists managed to discover the speed of light and the charge of electrons (which had previously been known as positive.)¹² There were also breakthroughs in the realm of mathematics that were so outside the realm of common sense that even some mathematicians refused to accept these new findings.¹³

Although most of the technological advancements during this time were groundbreaking, there were a growing number of pseudoscientific trends plaguing society at this time, and one of those was social darwinism. Social darwinists typically believed that the strongest members of society are those with the best genes, and they believed that anyone's success is proof of their genetic superiority.¹⁴ Because of Europe's domination of the world, social darwinists used this fact as proof that the white race was superior to all other races. This theory gained more and more traction in Europe, and even led to eugenics becoming a highly regarded policy, that is, the idea that selectively sterilizing certain members of society could improve the gene pool, and thereby improve everyone's life. Unfortunately the truly beneficial European technological advances were only used as further "proof" that Europeans were superior to the rest of the world, with things like the differences in medical practices being used to assert superiority over the Chinese.¹⁵

¹¹ Hobsbawm, Eric. *The Age of Empire 1875-1914*. (1987), (247-248.)

¹² Servos, (613.)

¹³ Servos, (620.)

¹⁴ Hobsbawm, (254-256.)

¹⁵ Rogaski, (144.)



Ideological and Philosophical Advancements

There were also great philosophical and political strides made during this time. Because the nineteenth century saw a great amount of urbanization, the issues raised by Marx in the Communist Manifesto were being very seriously considered by scholars. Everyone from political scientists and union organizers to sociologists (a new field of study that has its creation attributed to Max Weber) were using Marxist theory in their analysis of the world.¹⁶ Never before had there been this level of urbanization, and as a result there was a great amount of, what

¹⁶ Hobsbawm, (273-275.)

Marx would call, “worker exploitation”. Because of the new reality that one machine could do the work of hundreds of men, new problems also arose. It was now possible in this society to starve even when there was an over-abundance of food,¹⁷ and for philosophers like Sun Yat-Sen and W. E. B. Dubois, this meant that the government should step in and provide for those who could not feed themselves.¹⁸ This time period marked a shift in the negative rights that were championed during the American Revolution toward positive rights that would include giving everyone equal education.

New political ideology at this time was not just limited to Marxism, however. This period also saw a steep rise in nationalism. This nationalism was actively supported by companies which wanted to use it as a counter-weight to Marxism since Marxism advocated for the lower classes of different nations to realize their similarities and rise up against oppressors. Nationalism was very popular in Italy at this time, as the population was longing to reclaim the greatness that Italy once held by conquering Ethiopia.¹⁹ Nationalism would continue to rise in Europe, and the allegiance that people held to their nations would go onto yield devastating consequences.



¹⁷ Sun

¹⁸ W. I

¹⁹ Em



W.E.B. DuBois

Exceptions to Common Trends

It is worth noting that not the entire world was the same. There are of course general trends in every time period, but it is important to remember that there are always and always have been exceptions to these trends. The world in 1900 was a world of the colonizers and the colonized, yet Siam managed to deter the British and French from invading. The world in 1900 was a place where democracies were taking on the role that monarchs once held. Nonetheless, Russians and the Siamese still looked to the Tsar and King as paternal figures.²⁰ The Japanese in the early nineteen hundreds are typically regarded as fiercely nationalistic, but the Japanese who lived in cities and went to college were notable exceptions to this trend. Even in America, a nation that is certainly western, the common trend of revolutionary mathematics was almost nonexistent due to the college system at the time. The only graduate school in America was

²⁰ Chakrabongse, Chula, Of Thailand. *Lords of Life The Paternal Monarchy of Bangkok*. London: Alvin Redman Limited, (1960), (245.)
Emerson, (111-112.)

Johns Hopkins and undergraduate programs typically only required one year of basic calculus for physics majors.²¹ The world in 1900 was certainly a time of intellectual revolution, globalization, and colonization, but, like all times, it was also a time of complexity.

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Bangkok. London:

²¹ Servos, (611, 616.)



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