

# First World War

## Imperialist parallels then and now

### Part II Alliances and the Arms Race

*Governments decide and act on their foreign policies,  
not countries and their peoples.*

*A Democrat insert*

We are being bombarded with books, papers, radio and TV programmes, and events to mark the First World War. The bulk of this material concentrates on the war and carnage in the trenches. Our objective is to put a different point of view.

*There is no intention to look in every nook and cranny in this period of 'New Imperialism' but to highlight the major events leading up to the outbreak of the WWI.*

### Alliances

In the period prior to the First World War Britain was known as the 'workshop of the world' and had a vast empire and market. Germany had a growing manufacturing industry in competition with British manufacturing but only had a few colonies with a limited market and needed to expand. Russia with an empire, and as a monarchy, had aspirations to industrialise and expand into Asia but ran up against imperial Japan.

The objective of imperialism was to have colonies which were viewed as necessary for an industrial nation. Colonisation was in order to supply raw materials needed in industry and to furnish markets for manufactured goods, enable investment of capital and to make profits.

Following the 'scramble for Africa' alliances took place between imperialist powers, who manoeuvred and horse-traded to catch each other out in a game of secret chess, treaties and tenuous alliances to gain the upper-hand. This was over-laid and complicated by several monarchs who promenaded in each other's uniforms and pockets based on family relationships which emanated from Queen Victoria. They included her son King Edward VII, Kaiser Wilhelm II, Tsar Nicholas II of Russia and several other monarchies.

The Triple Alliance was formed in 1882 by Germany, Austria and Italy. Although Italy renewed the commitment in 1891, 1902 and 1912 but made further and secret agreements with France in 1900 and 1902.

A Franco-Russian military alliance of 1894 directly rebuffed the supremacy of Germany's empire in the continent. Capital from France was invested in Russian railways and manufacturing which enabled the military forces to be equipped.

The Boxer rebellion between 1898 and 1900 was a revolt in Northern China against foreign imperialism and put down by the Eight-nation Alliance in out-of-character co-operation amongst imperialists who simply invaded China. (see picture) [L to R Britain, US, Australia, British India, Germany, France, Austria-Hungary, Italy, Japan.] A French political cartoon indicates their ambitions were to divide China between them.

In the Far East, Russian and Japanese imperialism went to war over Manchuria and Korea. The Japanese navy destroyed the Russian fleet in Port Arthur and another Russian fleet at sea. This removed one threat to the periphery of the British Empire. An Anglo-Japanese Alliance was signed in 1902.







Following disagreement over who should control Egypt and Morocco, the Entente Cordiale between the UK and France was signed in 1904. This Entente was extended by the former 1892 Franco-Russian alliance into the Triple Entente.

'The Great Game' of conflict, which included the Crimean War, was between the British and other empires and Russian empire from 1813-1907. An Anglo-Russian Entente was signed in 1907. This agreed borders and control over territories between British India and Russia including Persia (Iran), Afghanistan and Tibet.

Preceding this Entente there were two Anglo-Afghan wars. In the first war 4,500 British troops were wiped out in a retreat back to India. The UK wanted Afghanistan as a buffer state to keep Russia out of India labelled the 'Jewel in the British Crown'. In the second Afghan war 40,000 British troops were sent into Afghanistan in 1878 to control and occupy the country. Memorials to soldiers killed in Afghanistan can be found in many churches in Britain.

Both the Entente and Triple Alliance were the basic alliances in place in 1914 when hostilities boiled up between the European and other imperialist powers at the start of the First World War.



### Arms race

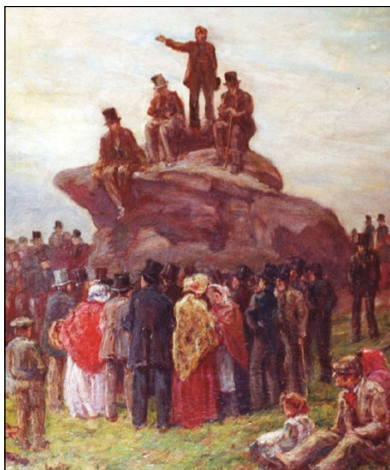
In this 'New Imperialism' period an arms race took place which was a test of manufacturing, required development of a railway system capable of transporting heavy goods, troops and the all important horses, and taxation to pay for the armed forces, especially the navy. All this required support of the general public. Simultaneously, as imperialism rampaged and competed across the world, capitalism based on nation states was consolidated along with the so called 'right to conquest' by the imperial powers. In this period capitalism was prepared to put up with democracy within nation-states, leaned on and used the sovereign powers of national governments.



The Royal Navy had a network of coaling stations around the world to provide a guard for shipping lanes and communications with the British Empire, where, in the words of Chartist leader Ernest Jones, '...the sun never set and the blood never dried'. British naval policy evolved in the 1890's was to make the Royal Navy twice as large as the next two nations put together. The UK built battleships including massive 'dreadnoughts'. This was to take account of the perceived threats to the British Empire from not just Germany but France and Russia as well.

As an example of British government thinking taking place in 1897, between the Boer Wars, a discussion took place between the assistant under-secretary at the British Foreign Office, Sir Francis Bertie, and acting German ambassador in London, Baron Hermann von Eckardstein. The Baron mentioned Germany had interests in southern Africa. In response the Foreign Office official said if the Germans lay so much as a finger on the Transvaal the British government would not stop at any step, 'even the ultimate' which implied war, 'to repel any German interven-

Chartist leader, Ernest Jones addressing a meeting at Black Stone



tion'. The ambassador was told 'should it come to a war with Germany...the entire English nation would be behind it and a blockade of Hamburg and Bremen and the annihilation of German commerce on the high seas would be child's play for the English fleet'.

The conflict over Crimea brought a new phase in warfare which included the use of telegraphs and railways, which, to function efficiently, developed this early use of telecommunications. Submarine cables were laid across the world with a Pacific telegraph laid in 1902. With this cable, a system was in place dominated by British companies as part of a strategy with a military element known as the 'All Red Line'. There were several routes possible with the 'All Red Line' in which 49 cuts would have to be made to isolate the UK. These British companies monopolised the specialist cable laying and repair equipment as well as the all important insulation material percha gutta. In contrast Germany had a far smaller empire with a less significant cable system which could easily be cut.

In parallel an 'Imperial Wireless Chain' was not fully developed but could be a 'valuable reserve' system as it was thought any enemy could listen into or interrupt messages.

In the growing arms race Germany perceived Britain as the main threat. The military thinking in Germany centred on a long term plan drawn up by Admiral von Tirpitz which included some dreadnoughts and cruisers to defend Germany close to the European mainland and the ability to attack commercial shipping. The race included thicker and stronger hulls, larger calibre guns with longer ranges. Tirpitz indicated the main area of conflict would be between Heligoland, an island in the North Sea, and the river Thames estuary.

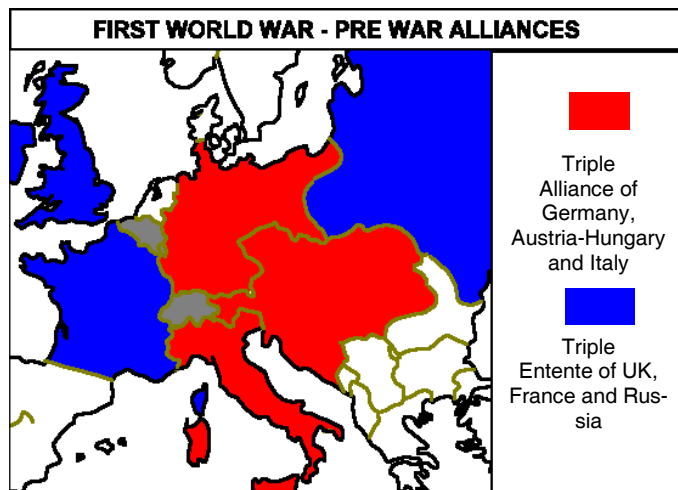
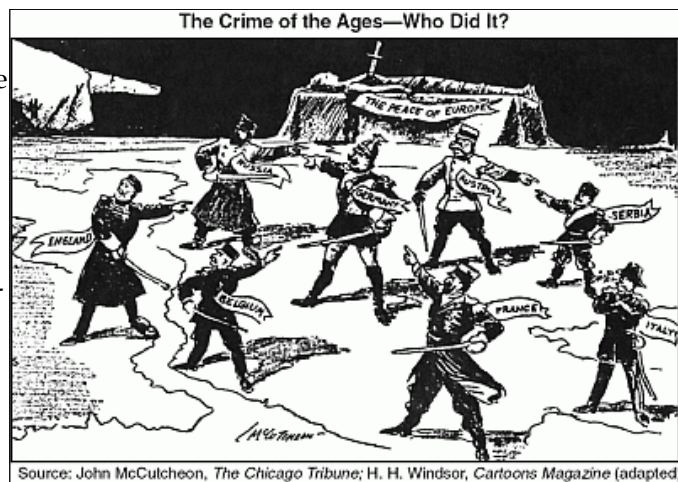
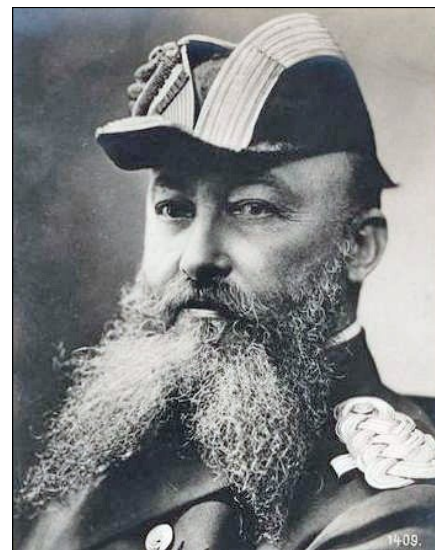
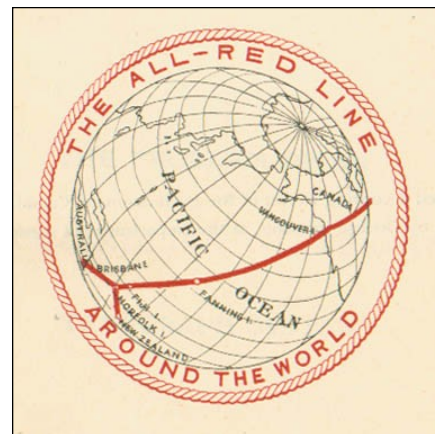
Germany in contrast developed an offensive expansionist policy which included the aims outlined by the chief of the General Staff Alfred von Schlieffen and set out in a 1905 memorandum. This included a large westward advance requiring a huge increase in the army and money to pay for this. The objective was to defeat France and Britain and then turn eastwards to deal with Russia. Without doubt this was nurturing the roots of Mittleuropa taken up in the Third Reich and the EU today where Germany would dominate over one economic unit consisting of Austro-Hungary, France, the Baltic states, Benelux countries, Italy and Poland.

Besides all the confrontations across the world, British imperialism was in the position of defending the largest empire ever and preventing other empires expanding. The Liberal government in 1906 won a general election on the slogan: 'Peace, Retrenchment and Reform'. Although expenditure on the army was cut back following the Boer Wars, money spent on the navy soared compared to that of Germany.

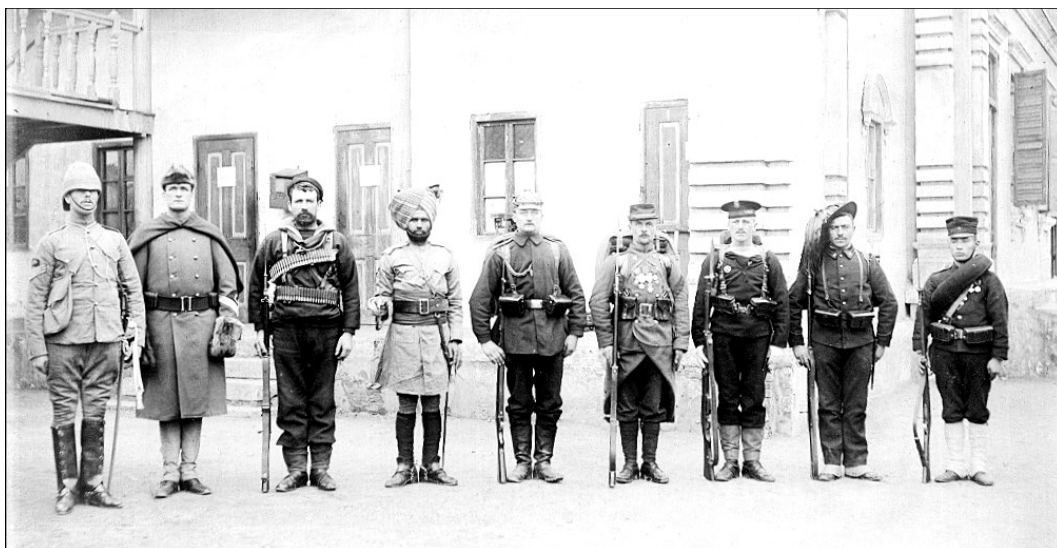
## Conclusion

Serbia was in an alliance with Russia simultaneously as Germany egged on Austria-Hungary to attack Serbia and was, as we all know, the confrontation too far.

All the imperialist powers were responsible in greater or lesser degree for building a system of alliances and a huge accumulation of armaments which generals and admirals were impatient to use. This and other factors contributed to the tension that came to a head in July 1914.







As part of carving up the world and grabbing land, an invasion of China was carried out by several imperialist countries co-operating.

Above L to R are soldiers in China from the UK, USA, Australia, British India, Germany, France, Austria Hungary, Italy and Japan

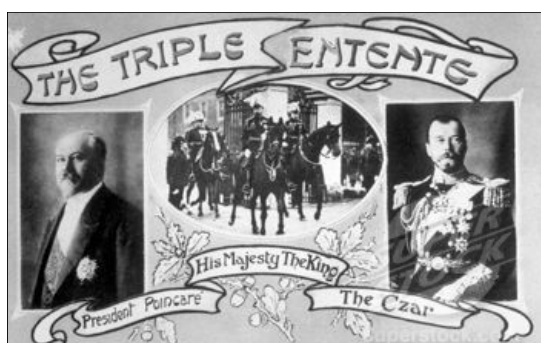
Sources referred to in this supplement included:

*The Sleepwalkers - How Europe Went to War in 1914*  
Christopher Clark

*Germany's Aims in the First World War*  
Fritz Fischer

*The Origins of the First World War* (pamphlet)  
Bernadotte E Schmitt

Wikipedia



The Kaiser's dream for German imperialism was to have a place in the sun like other imperial powers



Part II will discuss opposition to the war and split in the labour and trade union movement and amongst the suffragettes.

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## Timeline

- 1839-1842 First Anglo-Afghan War
- 1853-1856 Crimean War between Russia and an alliance of France, Britain, Ottoman Empire and Sardinia
- 1878-1880 Second Anglo-Afghan War
- 1880-1881 First Anglo-Boer War
- 1884-1885 Berlin Conference led to 'Scramble for Africa'
- 1892 Triple Alliance of Germany, Austro-Hungary and Italy
- 1894 Franco-Russian military alliance
- 1890's British naval policy to be twice as large as any other two imperialist powers
- 1898-1900 Boxer rebellion in China and invasion of China
- 1899-1902 Second Anglo-Boer War
- 1902 Anglo-Japanese Alliance
- 1902 Completion of the 'All Red Line' of submarine telegraph cables
- 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War in which Russian fleets are destroyed.
- 1905 Germany's Schlieffen 'war plan' which is the basis of the common economic and political unit of 'Middleuropa'
- 1906 In UK a Liberal Government is elected pm slogan of 'Peace, Retrenchment and Reform' But, expenditure on Royal Navy continued to be increased
- 1813-1907 At end of the 'Great Game' an Anglo-Russian Entente was signed in 1907 forming Triple Entente of Britain, France and Russia
- 1914 Commencement of First World War