

Who were the great powers of Europe before the war?

The five most powerful countries in Europe in the years building up to the First World War were Britain, Germany, France, Russia and Austria-Hungary. To understand the origins of the First World War, you need to examine these countries in detail, and consider each country's ruler, the issues each country faced, the relationships between them, and their positions as military, industrial and imperial nations.

Objectives

- ▶ Examine key features of the most powerful European nations before the First World War.
- ▶ Assess the strengths and weaknesses of the key European nations.

Britain – the largest empire

In the years before the First World War, the British people had many reasons to be proud. Most British people were better fed, better clothed, healthier and more educated than many in other countries. Britain had been the first country in the world to have an industrial revolution, in the late 1700s and 1800s. As a result, Britain became an industrial power and, by 1900, was the world's richest country. Shops in towns and cities contained a wide range of goods, either made in British factories or brought in from parts of the British **Empire** – the largest the world had ever seen.

Ruling Britain

It was during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837–1901) that Britain had become one of the richest and most powerful nations on Earth.

- Through Victoria's marriage to Albert, a German duke, and the marriages of her children, the British royal family was directly connected to the rulers of Russia, Germany, Spain, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Greece and Romania.
- Before the end of Victoria's reign, some people had started to call Queen Victoria the 'Grandmother of Europe'.
- By the time of George V's reign (1910–36) the role of the monarch was largely symbolic. The King had very little political power. The British Parliament, like today, made all the laws, and members of Parliament were voted into power by the people of Britain who were eligible to vote.

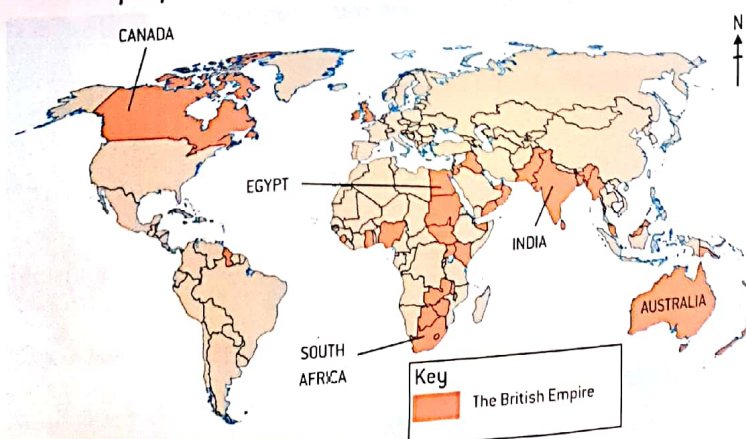
SOURCE A A souvenir postcard from the time of George V's coronation in 1910



The British Empire

By 1914, Britain ruled over 400 million people living in 56 different places all over the world. This amounted to approximately one quarter of the world's population and one quarter of the earth's total land area. The size of the British Empire was one of the reasons why an island as small as Britain was viewed as such a powerful nation.

▼ **B** The British Empire before the First World War; some historians argue that the British made positive changes in many of the lands they conquered, whilst others argue that there were many negative impacts on the colonies and the people within them













Key Words

imperial empire

Britain's issues

Despite having wealth and power, Britain was a divided nation. In the late nineteenth century, the politician Benjamin Disraeli (who went on to become Prime Minister) had claimed that the lives led by the rich and poor were so different that Britain was like two nations – a poor one and a rich one. About 3 per cent were very rich, 25 per cent were relatively wealthy (middle-class bankers, doctors, and so on) and the rest, the working class, were poor. The richer people enjoyed a life of luxury. They owned land, homes and many didn't have to work at all because they made so much money out of investments and rents. On the other side, the majority of poor people earned only enough money to get by, and often nowhere near enough to feed their families. There was no state sick pay, pensions or unemployment benefit. The injured and sick paid for their own medical care – if they could afford it.

Essential statistics: Britain in 1914

| | | |
|----------------------------|---|---|
| Population of Britain |  | 41 million |
| Size of army |  | 710,000 |
| Battleships |  | 122 |
| Submarines |  | 64 |
| Air force |  | 110 fighter and bomber planes, 6 airships |
| Number of colonies |  | 56 |
| Population of colonies |  | 400 million |
| Size of the colonies |  | 27 million square kilometres |
| Coal production per year |  | 300 million tonnes |
| Steel production each year |  | 11 million tonnes |

There were also signs that Britain's status as a world economic leader was under threat. The USA, for example, was making more goods than Britain and Germany. Britain still had the largest shipbuilding industry in the world, but was outperformed by Germany in the production of coal, iron and chemicals. Other nations, such as Canada, were also making lots of their own goods – and buying less from Britain.

▼ **SOURCE C** A picture about British involvement in Africa published in an American magazine in 1902; it had the title, 'From the Cape to Cairo'; 'Britannia' is shown carrying a large white flag with British soldiers and colonists behind her



Work

- 1 Explain why Queen Victoria was given the nickname 'Grandmother of Europe'.
- 2 Outline why Britain was a 'divided nation' in the early 1900s.
- 3 Create a mind-map that shows the position and status of Britain in the years before the First World War. In the centre, write 'Britain before the First World War' and include branches called:
 - British society
 - Ruling Britain
 - The British Empire
 - Britain's problems
 - Military power
 - Economic power.

Practice Question

Look at **Source C**. It supports the British Empire. How do you know? Explain your answer using **Source C** and your contextual knowledge.

4 marks

Study Tip

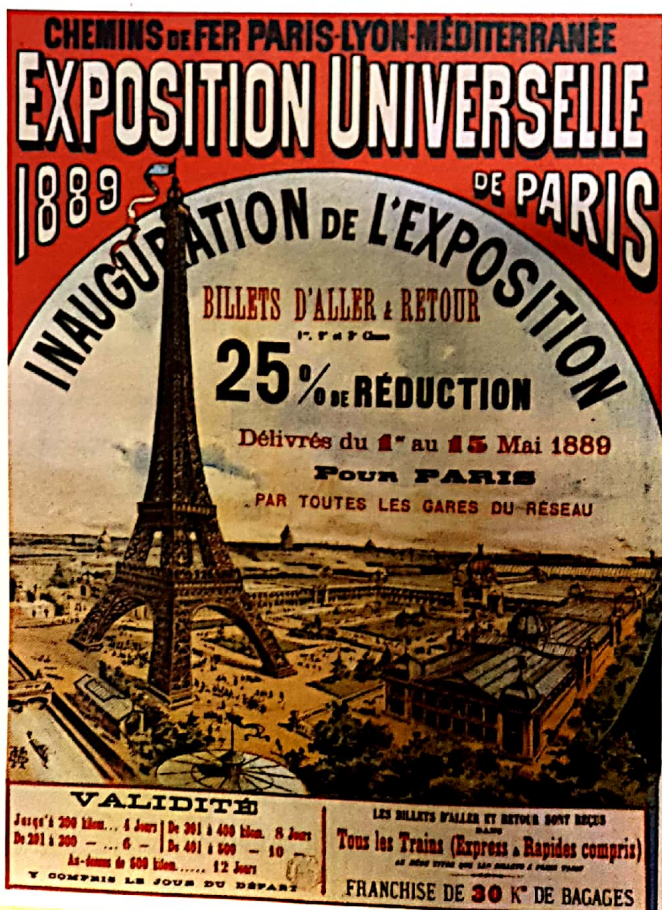
Study the image carefully. How does it show the British Empire in a positive way? What does the artist want you to think about Britain?

France – a rival empire

In the early 1800s, under Napoleon, France was one of the strongest and most feared military powers in Europe. Many French people had been very proud of this history, but by the late 1800s much of this national pride had been lost. In 1870 the French were beaten by German forces in the Franco-Prussian War. After this defeat, Germany took two areas of land from France – the rich coal, steel and glass production regions of Alsace and Lorraine. These areas were not just valuable pieces of land, but their loss was a bitter blow to French pride. From this point on, many French people wanted revenge against the Germans.

By the early 1900s, farming was still one of France's main industries and around 40 per cent of the population were farmers. Although there were also many factories producing goods that were traded all over the world, France could not match the industrial output of Germany and Britain.

▼ **SOURCED** Paris became centre stage in 1889 for the 'Exposition Universelle'; world fairs, such as this one, are large international exhibitions designed to display a nation's achievements; a new 324-metre tall steel arch – the Eiffel Tower – was built as an entrance to the exhibition



However, France rivalled any country in the world in science, technology and culture:

- Paris was the centre of the world fashion industry.
- Many of the world's most famous writers, painters and musicians lived and worked in France.
- French food was viewed by many as the finest in the world.
- Frenchman Louis Pasteur made remarkable breakthroughs in the causes and prevention of diseases; whilst working in France, Pierre and Marie Curie did pioneering work on radioactivity, paving the way for scientists in later years to work on cancer treatments.
- France led the world in the development of cinema, aeroplanes, motorcars and motorcycles.

▼ **SOURCE E** Adapted from an official report by W.B. Franklin to the members of the United States Congress after visiting the 1889 Exposition; Franklin was one of America's official representatives in Paris

The event was organized perfectly – the magnificent show of industrial and agricultural products, the fine art exhibits, which have never been equalled, the splendid works of engineering and agriculture, the intelligent historical exhibits and the colonial exhibits. In fact, everything connected with the event convinces me that the nation which could organize such a grand exhibition must be an equal of any other modern nation.

Ruling France

France did not have a ruling royal family like many of the other leading European powers. It was a republic – a nation ruled by an elected president with the help of elected politicians. Many of France's army generals also had lots of political power and not only held high-ranking positions in the Army, but held important jobs in the government too.

Many French politicians had a long-standing hatred for Germany and wanted revenge for the Franco-Prussian War. Some government policies brought in during the early 1900s were concerned with increasing the size of France's army and navy. These policies were a result of a long-standing fear of German attack.











The French Empire

The French Empire was the second largest behind the British Empire. At the outbreak of war in 1914, after years of expansion in the late 1800s, the French controlled around 11 million square kilometres of land and nearly 60 million people, mainly in West and North Africa and in South East Asia.

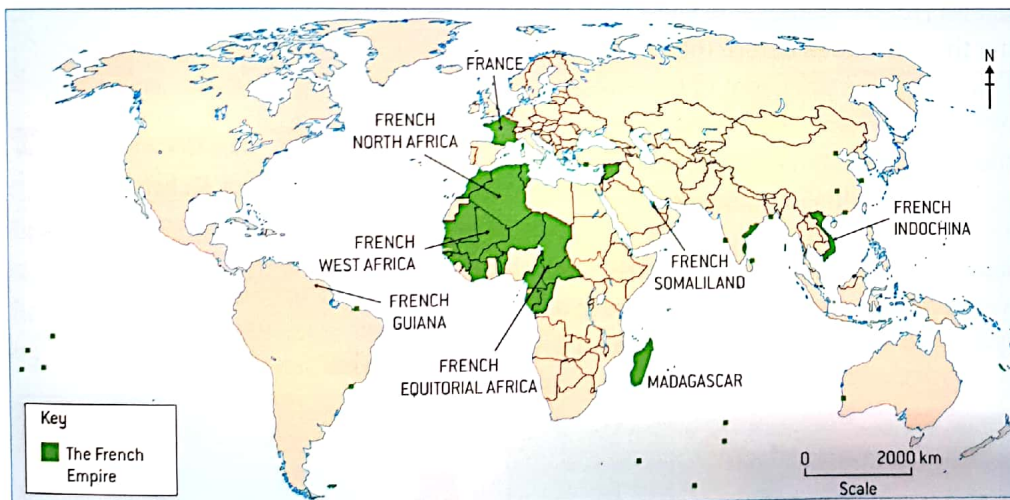
France's issues

France was one of the world's leading trading nations as a result of the size of its empire, but it was beginning to fall behind many other nations, including Britain and Germany, in the production of goods and materials such as iron, coal, steel, ships and food. Also, despite being twice the size of Britain and around the same size as Germany, France's population was less than both of those nations – and was shrinking every year.

Essential statistics: France in 1914

| | | |
|----------------------------|--|-------------------------------|
| Population of France |  | 41 million |
| Size of army |  | 1,250,000 |
| Battleships |  | 46 |
| Submarines |  | 73 |
| Air force |  | 132 fighter and bomber planes |
| Number of colonies |  | 29 |
| Population of colonies |  | 58 million |
| Size of the colonies |  | 11 million square kilometres |
| Coal production per year |  | 40 million tonnes |
| Steel production each year |  | 5 million tonnes |

▼ F The French Empire at the outbreak of the First World War



Extension



France's president from 1913–20 was named Raymond Poincaré. Find out about Poincaré's background. What region of France was he from? Suggest why he may have had strong anti-German feelings. Do you think this influenced his dealings with other European countries?

Work

- France, like Britain, had a huge overseas empire.
 - What are the advantages of having a large empire?
 - Can you think of any disadvantages?
- What impact did the Franco-Prussian War have on the French attitude to Germany?
- Read **Source E**. In your own words, sum up what the visitor says about:
 - The 1889 Exposition
 - The French nation.
- In what ways was France a leader in science, technology and culture by the early 1900s?

Russia – the world's largest nation

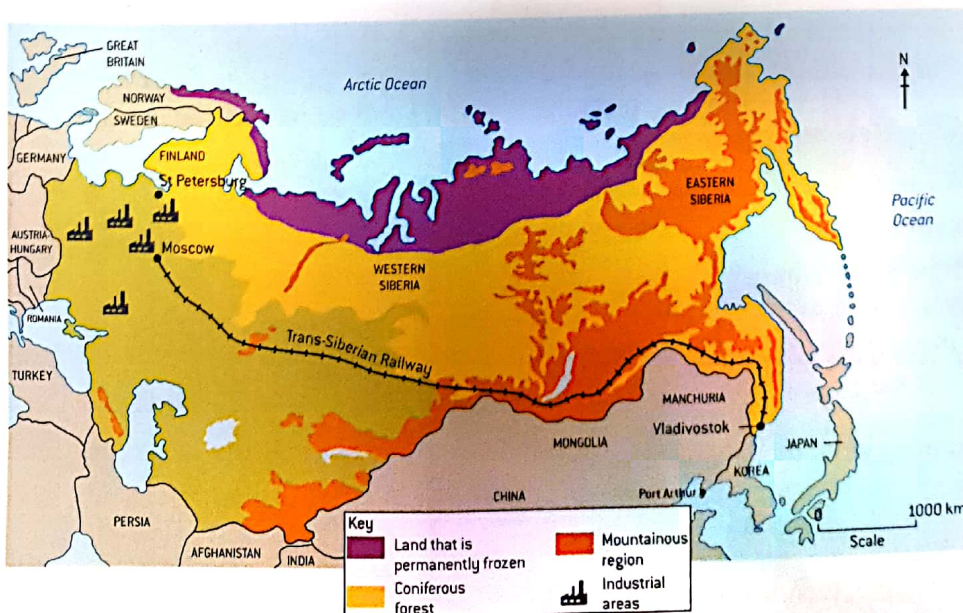
Russia is by far the largest country in the world. Russia has vast amounts of valuable natural resources (such as oil, coal and gold) but in the years before the First World War much of this lay undiscovered or unworked. Vast areas of land cannot be used for farming because it is too cold. Although the country has a long coastline, much of it is frozen for long periods of time every year.

In the early 1900s:

- Russia had a huge population of nearly 160 million people, most of whom lived in the western (European) part of the country
- the population was very ethnically mixed, with over 200 different ethnic groups, speaking many different languages
- most Russians were members of the Russian Orthodox Church (one of the three main Christian groups, the others being Roman Catholic and Protestant), but there were also 5 million Jews and around 23 million Muslims. Sometimes violence erupted between the different ethnic groups and many wanted to gain their independence.

Russia was a nation of both great wealth (for the ruling, elite class) and extreme poverty (for the rest). In the three decades before the First World War, oil and coal production trebled, but around 85 per cent of the Russian people continued to live in the countryside and earn their living from farming. The rich owned the best land and the vast majority of Russians were illiterate peasants under the control of wealthy landowners.

▼ **G** *Russia at the turn of the twentieth century; most people lived in the south-western corner of the country where land was easier to farm, and it wasn't covered in forest or mountains; the Trans-Siberian Railway was built between 1891 and 1916; it remains the longest railway in the world*

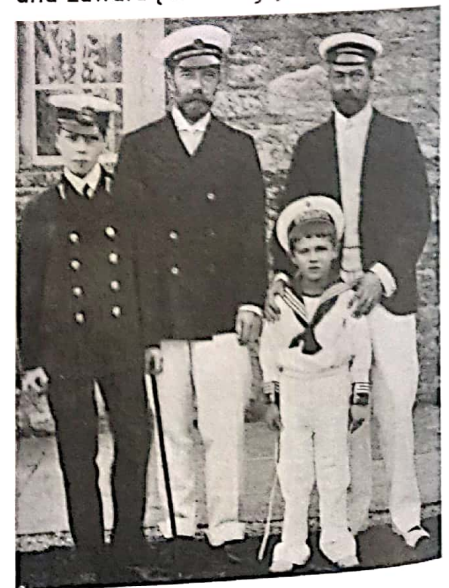


Ruling Russia











Since the sixteenth century, Russia had been ruled by an emperor (known as a **tsar**). In 1894 Tsar Nicholas II took power. Nicholas and his wife Alexandra were distant cousins of both Kaiser Wilhelm II, the German Emperor, and King George V of Great Britain.

Nicholas had absolute control of Russia and believed that God had chosen him to be ruler. However, he was not a good judge of character. He often appointed family members and friends to important positions, even though most of them were not qualified to do the job, or were corrupt. Other key jobs usually went to men who had achieved high-ranking positions in the armed forces.

▼ **SOURCE H** *Tsar Nicholas II (the man on the left) with his cousin, King George V of Britain (then Prince of Wales); they are pictured with their sons and heirs, Alexei (on the right) and Edward (on the left)*



Essential statistics: Russia in 1914

| | | |
|----------------------------|---|--|
| Population of Russia |  | 159 million |
| Size of army |  | 1,200,000 |
| Battleships |  | 26 |
| Submarines |  | 29 |
| Air force |  | 360 fighter and bomber planes, 16 airships |
| Number of colonies |  | 0 |
| Population of colonies |  | 0 |
| Size of the colonies |  | 0 |
| Coal production per year |  | 36 million tonnes |
| Steel production each year |  | 4 million tonnes |

The Russian Empire

Russia didn't have any overseas **colonies**. However, the Tsar was keen to acquire areas next to Russia, such as Manchuria (in China), Persia (modern-day Iran) and the Balkans, an area in south-eastern Europe that was ruled by Turkey in the early 1900s. These areas are to the south of Russia, and the oceans and seas near to them do not freeze during the winter months.

Russia's issues

There was extreme poverty, and living conditions in the countryside were often harsh. A poor harvest could mean the deaths from starvation of thousands of people. Living and working conditions were not much better in the towns, and working hours were generally much longer than in other European countries. There was little concern for the workers' health and safety, and **trade unions** were illegal in Russia, so industrial workers found it difficult to improve their conditions. Strikes were also banned, and if they ever did take place, they were ended brutally when the Russian Army was called in.

Key Words

trade union

tsar

colony

From 1904–5, Russia fought and lost a war with Japan (the Russo-Japanese War). Following this loss, there were riots in Russia's capital city, St Petersburg, and the Tsar was persuaded to accept a reduction in his power. He formed a new Russian parliament called the Duma, but the Tsar often rejected any new laws that the Duma proposed. As a result, the country remained very unstable; strikes became more and more frequent and the Tsar responded with an increasing use of force.

▼ **INTERPRETATION I** Adapted from Strategic Observations of the Russo-Japanese War by Andrew Torelli, 2004; Torelli is an American defence analyst and former US Air Force officer

Port Arthur [in Manchuria] was a symbol of national solidarity. Its fall to the Japanese resulted in a huge psychological blow which led to widespread protests and strikes in Tsarist Russia, 'Bloody Sunday', and ultimately the Tsar's reputation and standing within the Russian empire.

Work

- a What areas of the world did Russia hope to take over?

b Why do you think Russia was interested in these areas?
- a Russia was a huge nation with a large population and lots of natural resources. What are the advantages of this if Russia was to go to war?

b Suggest reasons why Russia's size, its large population and geographical position might not help Russia in a time of war.
- Some historians have described Russia as a 'weak giant' in the years before the First World War. Do you think this is a suitable description? Give reasons for your answer.
- Read **Interpretation I**. What does it tell you about the impact of Russia's defeat in 1905 by the Japanese? Explain your answer.