

## PART II



*The Global Spread, Functioning, and Breakdown of  
Industrial Capitalism, 1815–1945*



## CHAPTER 6

# 1815–1914: From Imperialism to World War I



### BRITAIN RESTS ON ITS OARS

Once begun, technological change is endless and always accelerating. Ultimately it reaches into all areas of our existence—economic, cultural, military, and political. With industrial capitalism, the rate of change is even more rapid. Capitalism’s very nature is to produce continuing struggles between one company and another, one industry and another, one nation and others—all of those seeking to become stronger than the others. (See Bowden, *Economic History of Europe Since 1750* for the whole story.)

For companies, industries, and nations, capitalism makes it necessary to find ways to best the others—in every way, everywhere, no matter what. In the struggle anything goes; there are no holds barred.

Add to that the always improving education and science of the modern world, and it became inevitable that Britain’s early superiority in productive efficiency would be temporary. (This evanescence was assured, even discounting the earlier-noted educational superiority of Germany or the incomparable resource strengths of the USA.)

So Britain was going to be in trouble even if it hadn’t “rested on its oars”—especially when we take into account the nationalism accompanying the spread of capitalism, and the relationships between economic and military strength. Then it is easy to understand why Britain, one way or another, would one day lose its lead.

One more item should be added to the stew. As both the richest and the first industrial country, Britain also became the world’s biggest *lender* to the newly industrializing countries. Its lending enabled the borrowing countries to use the latest technologies as they expanded new productive capacities. And because they were borrowing the capital for expansion, they didn’t have to reduce the rest of their production.

Thus, in becoming the world’s giant lender, Britain was at the same time

assisting the strengthening and spread of its competitors—especially, as noted earlier, its most powerful rivals, Germany and the USA.

So it was that by the beginning of the twentieth century, the USA had passed Britain and all others in industrial strength.

*Note* The USA became the biggest lender in the twentieth century. But by the 1990s, we had become history's biggest *borrower*. At its peak, Britain was *owed* 4 *billion* pounds sterling from other countries (when the British pound was worth \$5). In sharp contrast, as the 20th century *ended*, the USA was *in debt* by several *trillion* dollars (owing about \$1 trillion each just to Japan and China). The reasons for that, and the looming troubles arising from our massive foreign debt will be discussed at length in *Part III*.

Back to Britain and the end of the 19th century and its spreading *industrialism*. Then add to that the other members of The Big Four, *nationalism* and *capitalism*, bloody brothers from their beginnings, but brothers that could not help but fight each other. (See Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism...*)

The tense interactions of The Big Four took a sharp turn for the worse from the 1860s on. As noted, after the 1860, both nationalism and industrialism were strengthening in a growing number of both old and new nations, both in and outside of Europe: Britain, of course; but also Belgium and Holland, France and Italy, and the USA.

Britain was the most successful. Of those on the Continent, Germany was the most aggressive and the least successful. The USA came out best of all, both because and despite its anti-colonialism, plus its distance from Europe (also true for Japan—at least for a while—as it began to put *its* empire together in the Far East.) All of that will be discussed below.

### IMPERIALISM: MAKING COLONIALISM LOOK TAME

Taken together, these nations unleashed the 19th century version of colonialism. It was called *imperialism*. (W. A. Williams, 1980)

Imperialism made colonialism look tame, no matter how cruel and damaging colonialism had been. Why? Because colonialism had been a horse race between a few nonindustrial, just-budding capitalist nations of the early modern period. Imperialism was more like the racing car frenzy of the Indianapolis 500—but with all the drivers armed with deadly weapons and eager to use them. Why that big difference?

First, the technologies of the *colonial* era were *pre-industrial*, and the appetites for *industrial* resources were weak. By the late 19th century, they were raging.

Next during colonialism, the technological advances in both weaponry and transportation were puny compared with those of the *two* industrial revolutions of the 19th century—the first led by Britain and producing machinery, the second (led by Germany and based on chemistry and physics), producing electricity and—much more.

By the end of the century, steamships and railroads were common, and, therefore, essential. In the same years, and closely connected, was the beginning of modern warfare, its weaponry, and its connected resource needs—for defense or offense.

A side note about the “progress” of warfare. The U.S. Civil War was the first modern war in terms of its weaponry, the numbers of soldiers involved, and what happened to them. So it was also the first war whose deaths were measured in the hundreds of thousands: in this war 600,000 soldiers died. The number of deaths rose to *10 million* in World War I, adding, for the first time significant *civilian* casualties. Then, in World War II, more than *60 million* were killed, *and most of them* were civilians.

Before there were nations, as noted earlier, there had long been strong rivalries and wars between the Europeans. (As noted earlier, in the 17th century there were only 4 years *without* war.)

All that was intensified and became normal, as nationalism, imperialism, capitalism, and industrialism became common. And the stakes were very much higher.

As The Big Four spread their wings, flexed their muscles, and interacted to become stronger, there was an intensification of the competition for control over resource-rich distant areas, with, always, a military side to it. To forge ahead in that race meant wealth and power—and survival. The alternative was to be taken over by one of the “fittest.”

So imperialism meant an endless dogfight between nations *within* Europe for control over desired territories *outside* of Europe. Where? Just about everywhere. I begin with Africa and the Congo.

### **AFRICA: RICH WITH RESOURCES TO PLUNDER**

In a different kind of world, Africa’s rich resources would have placed it among the most fortunate of continents. But in the real world, Africa and its people were doomed to endure one set of disasters after another. From the early slave trade to the endless civil wars of today, Africa has suffered one disaster or another, with the Congo all too representative.

### *The Richest Region: The Congo*

The Congo is the richest of all the regions in Africa. It had abundant sources of ivory, cobalt, copper, rubber, diamonds, gold, zinc, manganese. All of those, plus its rivers, coasts, its forests and its attraction for “slavers”—all of that made Africa easy to invade and an irresistible attraction to outsiders, from early times to today.

The Congo’s long history of tragedies began when it was a major source for the slave trade, Then, in the late 1870s, to that horror was added its takeover by King Leopold of Belgium.

Leopold was unique in the imperialist race. The Congo became *his*, in the late 1870s. Only after several decades was the Belgian business world able to bring their government to “buy” the Congo from the King. It remained Belgium’s until 1960. (See below).

Leopold was an early Hitler; a very modern monster. As he took over more than a *million* square miles of the Congo, he did so in the name of *his* “International African Association.” Created for himself alone, its *nice name* allowed him to get away with portraying his colony as a charitable, Red Cross sort of venture.

Once he had firmly established himself (and his local “police”), he piled riches upon riches, It was done at the cost of the lives of at least 10 *million* Congolese. (See Adam Hochschild’s *King Leopold’s Ghost* and Joseph Conrad’s searing novel, *The Heart of Darkness*.)

After World War II, many dozens of what had been colonies achieved their political independence. Among them, after a strong and popular protest there, was the Congo, The popular leader of those protests was Patrice Lumumba. He soon became the Congo’s first Prime Minister.

Lumumba was well informed concerning the external control of Congo’s economy by American, British, and Belgian corporations. He publicly argued that the Congo and all other *freed* African countries would continue to have their *economies* controlled by foreigners companies. Therefore, for Africa to be freed from its colonial past; the whole *continent of Africa* must cease to be an economic colony of Europe. For the USA Patrice Lumumba was a problem and very much in the way:

His speeches set off immediate alarm signals in Western capitals and he became a leader whose days were numbered. Less than two months after becoming Prime Minister, a U.S. National Security subcommittee on covert operations authorized his assassination....President Eisenhower said he would have ‘preferred’ to have

Lumumba taken care of some other way, but...he wanted the problem dealt with. It was.

In January 1961 Lumumba was arrested, beaten, secretly shot and killed....[Soon after,] A U.S. CIA agent ended up driving around with Lumumba's body in his car trunk trying to find a place to dispose of it. (Hochschild)

Lumumba's place was taken by Joseph Mobutu, a former police officer for the Belgians, and on the payroll of the CIA.

Mobutu ruled from 1961 until his death about 30 years later. In those years he accumulated a fortune of more than \$30 *billion*, had sumptuous homes along the French Riviera, and (like Leopold) was responsible for the deaths of 10 *million* Congolese. In the many years between becoming the Congo's dictator and his death, Mobutu had been welcomed at the White House by more than one president, beginning with J. F. Kennedy.

Unfortunately, and except for its personal rule by one such as Leopold, the Congo's tragic and disgraceful history is not unique. In their post-colonial-imperial histories after World War II, virtually all of the ex-colonial societies—whether in Africa, North and South America, or the Middle East—shared one development, one that on the surface sounds OK, but from which they continue to suffer. It is this. As the invaded societies were “freed,” they were convinced or coerced by their one-time conquerors into becoming *nations*.

But nations are supposed to be unified. In the colonizing and imperializing processes, the conquerors had forcibly demolished the age-old *tribal* geographic demarcations of the native peoples—for example, in North America those of the Iroquois, in Central America those of the Maya, or the lands of the Inca in South America, among hundreds of others. (See Wright, *Stolen Continents*.) Quite apart from any other consideration, those earlier forms of organization had been created by the peoples who lived there themselves, not imposed upon them by outsiders. Big difference.

When the former colonies became *independent nations*, they had to contend with both numerous and complicated recombinations of the original groupings and the artificial boundaries created and left behind by the departed imperialists.

Throughout Africa, as elsewhere (including South Asia and the Middle East), there have been, are, and will continue to be deadly struggles between groups, with sickening casualties (always including children), the great majority of whom are innocent bystanders.

Sadly, tragically—whether for Africa or elsewhere—there seems to be no resolution or solution in sight. Especially so, given the persistence and spread of another injustice: racism. As we in the *imperialist* countries read the tragic news from the once *imperialized* countries, the all-too-common racist tendency is for us to shrug and blame the victims for being “uncivilized.” Or worse.

### *Every Square Inch of Land Colonized*

By the end of the nineteenth century in Africa there was not an inch of land *not* controlled by one or another European power—from South Africa all the way north, to east and west. Nor were there free and uncontested lands in the rest of the world. The endless *contests* and related matters had set the stage for the outbreak of World War I in 1914; “the scramble for Africa” (as it came to be called) was only one part.

Naturally, as the imperialist (nineteenth) century ended, the conflicting efforts *outside* of Europe also gave rise to ever more heated conflicts between the major nations *inside* Europe. Germany was at the center of much of that conflict, most especially, as will soon be discussed, in connection with the Middle East, which is the *far west*—of Asia. Now we turn to that huge region, with special attention to Germany’s efforts there.

## ASIA: MORE THAN CHINA AND JAPAN

Say *Asia* and almost all will think *China* or *Japan*. And that’s accurate—both are surely in Asia—but so is much more that is often seen as part of Europe (Turkey, for example). The *Asia* to be dealt within this section is everything west and south of Japan and China (including India) but going no farther south than Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Cambodia) and no farther west than Central Asia and Turkey (which for present purposes will be seen as part of the *Middle East*).

### *China: When The Innovations Cease*

First there’s China. The Chinese were themselves long-standing imperialists. Indeed, until recently, China referred to itself as *Imperial China*. Before the modern era, Imperial China was great and powerful. But as the modern world emerged, China did not become part of it. Like Britain, China rested on its oars. And it paid a high price for doing so.

Although China was an innovator in cultural (and in some technological) areas, the innovations had ceased well before the nineteenth century began.

China became prey to that century's innovators; first and foremost, Britain, the most powerful of all in the nineteenth century.

Britain's aims and means in China from the 1830s on are high on the history's long list of utterly obscene activities. In those years Britain deliberately and successfully sought to create, serve, and profit from its creation of a massive market for *opium*.

Why opium? Money, money, money, that's why. Early in the nineteenth century, Britain was already a leading trading nation; but for some decades, it had been running a deficit in its foreign trade balance. Hmmm...

For many decades, Britain had controlled India through its East India Company. In the 1830s, Britain's government took over direct control. In doing so, Britain also took over the India trade with China, and Britain saw to it that the trade would become centered on one product alone: opium. The gains from selling opium resolved its trade deficit by getting hard money from China. Here is the sorry story.

Opium, the cooked and filtered latex of the opium poppy, is a narcotic and sedative—with a combination of alkaloids, most notably morphine, that act on specific receptors in the brain. It is usually smoked. And it is addictive.

As the nineteenth century opened, several developments concerning opium, China, India, and Britain occurred at about the same time. As the century went on, the British sales of opium to China had become enormous. By the 1830s its sales amounted to 30,000 “trunksful.” It took a lot of Chinese silver to pay for all those trunks of opium. And that was the idea. Much greater sales—and wars—were on their way. As Bowden points out,

In 1834, China's ‘Imperial Commissioner’ forced surrender of the British opium in the port, burned it, and forbade further imports. All of that led to the several ‘Opium wars.’ Over time, those conflicts involved Britain, France, the USA and Russia—with Britain always the dominating power.

By 1876 Britain had won and China was forced to legalize opium imports. Soon after the annual average of opium imports had more than doubled, to 80,000 trunks. (See Bowden.)

Even after its trade deficit had become a huge surplus, Britain continued to twist and torture the Chinese. They were aided by other European nations and the USA, all of them profiting in one way or another from the combination of Chinese weakness and easy profits.

By the end of the century, all of that had been given the pleasant spin, being

called The Open Door Policy. Nothing wrong with open doors, right? Today the equivalent term is *free trade*.

Now the focus will shift to the Middle East, the western end of Asia, and its role in bringing on the first installment of the world wars of the twentieth century.

### *The Middle East: Germany Arrives Too Late*

To mention the Middle East today immediately brings *oil* to mind; oil...and then Iraq and Iran. And Israel-Palestine. That's the Middle East—unstable (or destabilized).

However, as noted in *Part I*, the invasions of that region by Europeans began with the Medieval Crusades—well before oil had become the most precious and profitable of all raw materials.

Then, and although the initial motives were mostly religious, they soon they were mixed in with the beckoning trading opportunities of the Middle East, a region including Egypt, Turkey, Persia (now called Iran) and Mesopotamia (now called Iraq)—where cities and civilization had long existed. It was those opportunities that in the thirteenth century prompted the Polo brothers of Venice (Nicolo, Maffeo, and, later, Marco) to venture all the way to China by way of the Black Sea and the Gobi Desert.

They were the first steps of the long string of troubles that have tormented Asia ever since. Just before World War I, Germany took a long step that led to much more trouble.

Seeking to speed up and support its industrialization, Germany set out to gain the badly needed resources it did not have. Its plan was to build a railroad into the region. It was its last and most provocative step in that direction. (Veblen, 1915)

The Middle East at the time was by no means up for grabs. Part of it was in Turkey's Ottoman Empire, which also stretched up to and into Europe. Turkey was weakening as the nineteenth century ended; one of the European powers' aims was to break its empire. World War I finally saw to that.

A great part of the Middle East was controlled by Britain: Egypt, Palestine, and, later, Persia and Mesopotamia. France and Austria also had their fingers in the pie. So, thought Germany, who's counting? (The answer: most of Europe.)

Nonetheless, as the nineteenth century ended and the twentieth began, Germany reckoned it had found the way to become a major player in that region, and then further east, by sneaking in the side door. It began to work on its plan for a Berlin-to-Baghdad Railway.

The railroad would be profitable in itself, both in its construction and its use. More than that, in speeding up transportation into and beyond the Middle East and by providing an alternative to shipping (across the Mediterranean Sea), it would be a kick in the stomach for Britain and all other interested parties. The plan got some muscle when, in 1903, Germany received a surprising concession from Turkey to construct the railroad through its territory.

The proposed railway was never completed; but the mere idea (and the concession) added fuel to already raging fire of European rivalries. (See Bowden.)

Most especially and dangerously was that so for Britain—the effective ruler from Greece through Persia, Mesopotamia, and down to Egypt and The Sudan and even down to South Africa.

So there was virtually no place Germany might wish to move into that was not already under British control. Already in 1895, a respected British commentator had observed that

A million petty disputes build up the greatest cause of war the world has ever seen. If Germany were extinguished tomorrow, the day after tomorrow there is not an Englishman in the world who would not be the richer. Nations have fought for years over a city or a right of succession; must they not fight two hundred and fifty million pounds of yearly commerce? (Quoted in Hoffman; and see Taylor.)

As will be seen below, the war that began in 1914 was sparked by an incident which, in a less jittery world would have had no impact at all on the world and would have led merely to the arrest and punishment of one angry Serbian student.

Devastating though that war was, its economic and political consequences were to bring on the much more devastating *second* world war—in ways and for reasons discussed toward the close of this chapter. (See Fussell; Bowden.)

The imperialized areas discussed above and below filled a strategic set of needs for industrial capitalism, which was for the *resources* (mostly minerals) vital for industrialism and for the military strength necessary to remain independent—or become stronger.

For those purposes, all nations had to buy, or through conquest, steal essential industrial resources (coal and iron and other minerals) from *outside*. All nations, that is, except one—the USA. We had everything needed at our fingertips.

## NINETEENTH CENTURY U.S. AGGRESSION

Rich in all resources though it was, throughout the nineteenth century the USA was among the most aggressive of imperialist nations, on *its own* continent and elsewhere. Here are some examples...

In the Pacific, the USA took control of Hawaii, Guam, and the Philippines—killing 300,000 Filipinos in the process.

In the Caribbean we joined Cuba's fight for independence from Spain. Then, when it was won, we were free to take Cuba for ourselves and we promptly did just that. Then, in order to hold it (that is, prevent self-rule), we created one police state after another, the last of which, ruled over by a thug named Baptista, who was overthrown by the revolution of 1959 led by Fidel Castro.

Without explaining to the world or our own people, for over a century we have maintained a U.S. Naval Base (and Guantanamo Prison) in Cuba. Any effort by Cuba to make us leave would mean a war they could not possibly win.

In Central America we gained direct or indirect control over Panama (which we forcibly carved out of Colombia). That led to a connected string of military interventions in Nicaragua and Guatemala (to make it safe for U.S. interests, which were exactly one corporation, the United Fruit Company), and El Salvador. (For the gritty details, see Magdoff; W. A. Williams, 1980; Jonas; Zinn.)

The rest of what the USA didn't (that is, *couldn't*) grab in the Western Hemisphere had been taken long ago by the British, Dutch, Spanish, or Portuguese.

All of that (and more yet to be noted) happened despite the fact that the USA and most of its people have long thought of U.S. policies as anticolonial. A main basis for that misbegotten belief (especially among politicians and historians) has been The Monroe Doctrine. (See Chapter 4.)

In our view, as we took over all of that part of North America that is now most of the USA, that was only westward expansion, natural and logical in order to realize our manifest destiny. Nor was it colonialism when we expanded as far as the Hawaiian and Philippine Islands; nor was it anything like colonization when we took over Cuba.

None of that was colonization, because we are *opposed* to colonization, *at least on our terms*, which is other countries colonizing what is "ours." So we are *anticolonial imperialists*. (See W. A. Williams, and Magdoff.)

## JAPAN: THE UNKNOWN QUANTITY

As the nineteenth century moved to its end, almost all of Asia except Japan had long been under the direct or indirect control of the Dutch, the British, or the French.

What was not already controlled or was difficult to defend was what most interested *Japan*. By the late 1890s, Japan's location, its growing strength, and its own ambitions were too much of an obstacle for all others. The Japanese had long been a *self*-isolated nation. Of all the industrial capitalist countries, it was the last to modernize. But once begun, it went at it with a wallop. (See Allen; Duus.)

As with the Europeans, Japan's own resources were inadequate for industrialization. But Japan had a highly centralized government, a strong military, and had long had a powerless working class—just what was needed for what it wanted to do as the nineteenth century ended.

Then—systematically, vigorously, and successfully—Japan set out to take over the resources of neighboring Asian societies. First appropriated, late in the nineteenth century, were the easy ones: Formosa (now Taiwan), Okinawa, and Korea. Then, in the 1930s, China and Manchuria.

South Asia and Southeast Asia were rich in resources, but well before Japan's muscles began to flex, they had been taken over by the Dutch (Indonesia), the British (India, Burma, Singapore, Thailand), the French (Vietnam), and the USA (Philippines).

Japan had long had its eyes on almost all of that territory. But it didn't have the strength to make its moves for most of it until 1941. And then, badly in need of oil, Japan began to make its play for oil-rich Indonesia. That in turn required keeping the USA at more than arm's length—overreached with the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

In the first decades of the 20th century, Japan had not yet come to be taken seriously, by either the Europeans or the USA. That underestimation was understandable, for as the century began, Japan was an unknown quantity in the West. That it was developing to the level of a first-rate industrial nation was, in effect, a secret—except to the neighbors it had invaded. In world affairs Japan was a bystander, not a participant. It was not part of the rivalry or unrest that created World War I.

## THE INEVITABLE WORLD CONFLICT

Hindsight sadly informs us that World War I was inevitable. All that was needed was a match to start what became a seemingly endless conflict. The match was struck in Austria-controlled Serbia, in June of 1914. While parading in an open car, the Austrian Archduke (then ruling over Serbia) was shot to death by a student.

That region—among many other imperialized societies—had been on fire ever since its imperial takeover, and the student was one of the many struggling to free themselves from the grip of the outsiders who had used and abused them. It doesn't seem to make sense—and it didn't—that the killing of one man (no matter who he might have been) could lead to the deaths of 10 million other people.

By 1914, there was not a single major power that had not, in one degree or another, invaded and taken over the peoples of the weaker societies.

All of Asia, all of Latin America, all of Africa was controlled, its peoples and its resources exploited and mistreated by one or more of the major powers of that time: Britain, Austria, France, Germany, Russia, Belgium, the Netherlands, the Scandinavians, Japan, and the USA. All were imperial powers, and taken together, they controlled the entire world for their own selfish interests.

But then the war came, and millions died, and tens of millions were wounded or had their lives destroyed. Few indeed among them had had anything to say about the decisions made in the decades leading up to the war. Few gained from the conflict.

Even worse, the war not only did not resolve, but *intensified* the problems and conflicts that had brought it about. As a result, what lay ahead was another and even more disastrous world war.