

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 1

“Age of Empires”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

January the first, 1901, is the birthday of the twentieth century.

On this date, the most powerful entity on the planet is the British Empire, which rules over something between 20 and 25% of the world. The Empire’s sovereign is still Victoria, the monarch whose very name is synonymous with the times. In the United States, William McKinley has just been re-elected President, along with a new Vice President, Theodore Roosevelt. Many citizens of both nations are upbeat and optimistic, but there are clouds on the horizon. Both of these countries are elbow-deep in brutal colonial wars. Poverty and deprivation are rampant, even in the world’s most advanced nations. And neither the Queen nor the President is going to survive the year.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 1. Age of Empires.

The 19th century had been a century of profound changes. The world of 1901 was bound together much more tightly than it had been in 1801. There were now underwater cables, which meant that news could travel around the planet at the speed of light. At least in locations that were at one end of a cable. Compare that to the end of the 18th century, when news could travel no faster than the wind, by which I mean, news traveled on sailing ships.

In 1801, only a few hardy sailors had traveled all the way around the world. By the end of the 19th century, it was amusing to consider how long it would take an ordinary person to circumnavigate the planet. See Jules Verne, *Around the World in Eighty Days*.

The automobile and the radio had both been invented by the end of the 19th century, although these were still novelties in 1901, and certainly not likely to be owned by the average person. The typical mode of personal transportation was still the horse. The airplane was on the horizon, but by 1901, people knew it was on the horizon. Moving pictures were still a curiosity. Telephones and electricity were becoming established technologies.

As a power source, coal was king. Coal heated homes, ran the railroads, powered the mighty battleships that plied the oceans between continents, and drove the industrial revolution that transformed the world economy. Steam power was the power of the day.

Yes, the 19th century had seen so much progress that at the close of the century there was a cottage industry of people making predictions about the world of the 21st century. I think what's most interesting about these predictions is not whether or not they were accurate, but rather that people were making them at all. As far as I can tell, there was no one in 1801 making predictions about the world of 1900. People just didn't think that way in 1801. But by 1901, progress was something you took for granted. The world of tomorrow is going to be better than the world of today, just as the world of today is better than the world of yesterday. An example is the American author Edward Bellamy's novel, *Looking Backward*, which imagines a young man from Boston, Massachusetts of 1887 falling into a trance, and awakening in the wonderful world of 2000, where everyone has enough to eat, and no one is poor.

The urge to speculate about the future seems to have begun then, but it never really went away; instead, it became lodged in a new form of literature called science fiction.

Progress in the 19th century largely meant more and bigger steam engines. Steam engines are basically devices for converting heat into usable energy, and therefore a lot of 19th century science and technology revolved around investigations of chemistry and thermodynamics. Understanding of electricity and magnetism had also advanced greatly during the 19th century. By 1901, scientists understood the electromagnetic spectrum. They knew that the seemingly diverse phenomena of radio waves, infrared radiation, visible light, and ultraviolet radiation were all just different frequencies of electromagnetic radiation.

They were pretty sure that everything around us was made up of atoms, although this had not yet been proved in 1901. The electron had been discovered in 1897, but although scientists knew it was a unit of electricity, and a particle and not a wave, no other subatomic particle had yet been discovered, and the structure of the atom remained a mystery.

Radioactivity was a known phenomenon by 1901, but it was not well understood.

In the year 1900, the prominent British scientist Lord Kelvin – and yes, that's Lord Kelvin as in degrees Kelvin; he was the discoverer of absolute zero – Lord Kelvin gave an address in which he outlined the two remaining unsolved problems of physics. These were the black body problem and the Michelson-Morley experiment. Lord Kelvin, like many physicists of his day, believed that physics was close to explaining everything there was to explain about the physical world around us. There were just a few minor mysteries yet to be unraveled. Once scientists came up with the right explanations for these, our understanding of the natural world would be complete.

That same year that Lord Kelvin gave that speech, a 21-year-old German-born Jewish student is studying physics at Zürich Polytechnic. Within a year after getting his doctorate, Albert Einstein will solve both of Lord Kelvin's unsolved problems, but that won't complete 19th century physics, it will shatter it, and in the process, he will become the most famous scientist of the twentieth century.

The phonograph, a device for recording sound, was available in 1901, but it was no competition for live music. People went to the opera house, the theater, or the music hall for their musical entertainment. Or, they played the piano at home. The music industry, known at the time in America as "Tin Pan Alley," made its money from the printing and selling of sheet music to be performed in the home.

Educated people listened to opera and classical music, the avant-garde listened to ragtime, and everyone else listened to bands.

[Music: "There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight"]

Do you recognize that tune? That was "There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight," which was a popular song of the time. It's still pretty well known today; its title has become something of a figure of speech. And if you don't believe me, ask Jack Nicholson's Joker.

I want you to remember that song, because it may pop up in the podcast again.

If you look at a map of Europe in 1901, you will see regions that look pretty much the same as on today's maps, and regions that look quite different. The most obvious difference is the four sprawling empires of central and eastern Europe: Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire.

There is no Eastern Europe as we know it today. Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Russia all meet together at a point in what today would be Poland. But there is no Poland. Nor is there a Finland, or Czech or Slovak states.

Farther south, Austria-Hungary butts up against the Ottoman Empire, except where the small states of Serbia and Montenegro buffer the confrontation. Bulgaria exists, with somewhat different borders, while Romania and Greece extend over mere fractions of the territory they control today.

The youngest of these four middle European empires is Germany, which had only come into being in 1871, and is therefore only 30 years old in 1901. Oddly enough, although there had been

a German people and a German nation in the abstract since ancient times, this is the first true German state in history.

The ruler of the German Empire in 1901 is Kaiser Wilhelm II. His grandfather, Wilhelm I, was the first Kaiser of the new German Empire upon its founding. Wilhelm I was an old-school Prussian monarch, who believed in limited democracy and unlimited military. His son, Friedrich III, was far more progressive than his crusty authoritarian father, and most people, in Germany and around the world, looked forward to the day when the old man would finally pass on, and his modern, liberal son would reign over a more modern, more liberal Germany.

Unfortunately for Friedrich III, and probably for the world, the old man hung on to the age of 90, dying in the year 1888. Friedrich by this time had throat cancer, an illness that was all but incurable in the 19th century, and so he reigned as Kaiser for a mere 99 days before passing away himself.

And so Wilhelm II became Kaiser at the age of 29. From the beginning, he made it clear that he rejected the liberalism of his father, and his mother Victoria, eldest daughter of the British Queen, and meant to carry on the spirit of his grandfather. During his reign, the Kaiser was noted for his peculiarly upturned mustache—made possible by that cutting-edge personal care product of the day, petroleum jelly—and his equally peculiar approach to international diplomacy, which was akin to a bull's approach to a china shop. We will have more to say about both these traits, especially the second one, as the podcast moves forward.

Germany is one of the ten major powers of the world in 1901, along with Britain and the United States, which we have already mentioned. Let's take a look at the other seven. Since we're already in eastern Europe, we'll continue on, there.

[music: *Tales of the Vienna Woods*]

In 1901, the ruler of Austria-Hungary was Kaiser Franz Josef. Born in 1830, Franz Josef has been Austrian Emperor since he was 18, and in 1901, he is 70 years old, with 51 years under his belt as Emperor. His reign has been eventful, and not in a good way. His younger brother Maximilian was executed in 1867, after an ill-fated attempt to rule as Emperor of Mexico. His son and heir apparent, Crown Prince Rudolf, killed himself at the age of 30, after his father ordered him to end an illicit love affair, or so goes the story, although some suspect murder. Franz Josef's wife, Kaiserin Elizabeth, was assassinated by an anarchist in 1898.

The suicide of the Crown Prince, Franz Josef's only son, and the death of Maximilian, left the Emperor's next younger brother, Karl Ludwig, as heir presumptive. But shortly after Rudolph's death, Karl Ludwig renounced his succession rights, and so, that left his son, Archduke Franz

Ferdinand, the Emperor's nephew, as heir presumptive. Those of you who have read ahead in the history of the twentieth century know that the Emperor is destined once again to experience the assassination of a family member.

And while I'm running through the Emperor's family, I might as well mention his third and youngest brother, Archduke Ludwig Victor. Ludwig Victor never married and had no children. This was probably because he was gay, and pretty open about it for the time. He liked to hang out at the central bathhouse in Vienna, and admire – and sometimes more – the young men to be found there. One day in 1906, the Archduke put the moves on the wrong guy, and got slapped in the face for it. Now, it's one thing to keep quiet the fact that the Emperor's little brother is gay; it's quite another to try to cover up a member of the Imperial family getting publicly slapped in the face. People talked, and the Emperor was forced to exile his little brother to his summer palace, far away from Vienna and further temptation.

But there's a tale from the Vienna Woods I bet no one's ever told you before.

As for the Empire itself, Austria-Hungary exists as something of a historical anomaly. There had been a time when Austria was the most powerful German state, and many would have predicted that if a unified German state were to arise, it would be Austrian might that would bring it about. But in the end, German unification happened because Prussia elbowed Austria aside and took charge itself. As Austria became more and more marginalized within the community of German states, it responded by looking south and east.

Austria-Hungary became a dual monarchy in 1867, in response to Hungarian agitation for equal status with Austria. The formal name of the state was the Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy, but it was and is known by many names, including Austria-Hungary, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and sometimes simply Austria. You can call it what you like; I'm probably going to call it all those things. Within the Empire, Hungary had its own parliament, and Franz Joseph held the title King of Hungary in addition to Emperor of Austria. There was even separate Austrian and Hungarian citizenship. Only in military and foreign affairs were the two realms truly united. And this fractured empire, with two parliaments—both of which have to agree on empire-wide policies, like the military budget—is proving unwieldy to govern.

So at the beginning of the twentieth century, Austria-Hungary is a multiethnic Empire with a German ruling class, outside of Hungary. Nine million of its citizens have as much right to call themselves Germans as any other German, but they were outside the German Empire. The other 17 million or so were Polish or Italian or Slovene or Czech or Hungarian or Rumanian or Croat or a member of one of dozens of other ethnic groups.

So the dilemma of Austria is this: on the one hand, we have nine million Germans outside the German Empire. On the other hand, to bring them into the German Empire would give the new German state 17 million non-German citizens. To divide the Empire into German and non-German components was unthinkable, at least to the Austrians. And so Austria-Hungary carries on, mostly because no one knows what else to do with it.

The ruler of Russia in 1901 was the 32-year-old Nikolai II. Nikolai's father, the previous Emperor, Alexander III, had put off the task of training his son in the ways of emperors. Perhaps he thought he would have plenty of time. But when he died at the unexpectedly early age of 41, Nikolai II became Emperor and autocrat of all the Russias. The young Emperor had few convictions, other than that his father had handed over to him absolute power, and he was determined to hand over to his heir no less power than what had been given to him.

Finally, we come to the Ottoman Empire, or just plain "Turkey," if you like, which in 1901 was under the rule of Sultan Abdul Hamid II. The 19th century has not been kind to the Ottoman Empire. Famously, it has been called the sick man of Europe, which is lucky for Austria, because Turkey makes Austria look modern and functional by comparison. Other Great Powers covet its territories, and it owes its continued survival at least in part to the inability of those other powers, especially Austria, Russia, and Britain, to decide who should get which pieces of the corpse.

Abdul Hamid is 58 years old in 1901. He has 12 wives and a reputation for brutality. His Empire has shrunk considerably since its peak. But consider that this Empire is more than 600 years old, having survived longer than the Western Roman Empire. Constantinople has been the seat of the Eastern Roman Empire, and then the Byzantine Empire, and now the Ottoman Empire for something over 1500 years.

The European territories of the Ottoman Empire in 1901 include modern-day Turkey, northern Greece, Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia. It's worth noting that although Bosnia is nominally part of the Ottoman Empire, it's been under Austro-Hungarian military occupation for decades now. Semi-independent Bulgaria is nominally part of the Empire, but is running its own affairs. The island of Crete is nominally part of the Empire, but after multiple revolts by Cretans who would rather be part of Greece, and ruthless Ottoman suppression, the European powers have taken control of Crete. Cyprus, similarly, is nominally part of the Empire but governed by the British.

In North Africa, what we know as Libya, Egypt, and Sudan are nominally part of the Empire, but the Sultan only controls Libya. Egypt and Sudan are governed by the British on the Sultan's behalf. In Asia, the Empire controls, again, Turkey, and the territories we know of as Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. The Sultan claims control over the entire Arabian Peninsula, but central Arabia is basically a wilderness, and the various Arab states on the southern and

eastern shores of the peninsula are to some degree independent and perhaps can even be regarded as British protectorates.

Are you noticing a theme here? The discrepancies between what the Empire claims to be and what it actually is. The problems of expressing this drive mapmakers and podcasters crazy, and this is why any map of the late Ottoman Empire is awfully, awfully vague, especially regarding the situation in Arabia. In 1901, few people expect this Turkish Empire to survive much longer. Of course, many didn't expect it to survive this long.

All right, so I need to mention four other countries to finish off this survey of the great powers of 1901. First up, we have France.

[music: *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*]

France at the turn of the twentieth century is experiencing a golden age of the arts. Paul Gauguin, Henri Matisse, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Émile Zola, Anatole France, the Folies Bergère, Claude Debussy, Camille Saint-Saëns, I could go on and on, if my French pronunciation were up to it. But her political history has been troubled. Since the French Revolution, France has been governed by the First Republic, the First Empire, a restored constitutional monarchy, a newer even more constitutional monarchy, a Second Republic, a second Empire, and now a Third Republic. One might guess that a Third Empire is waiting in the wings, but one would be mistaken.

The Third Republic has this reputation for weakness and instability. It was created during a national crisis, triggered by the disastrous defeat of France by the Prussians in 1870. Remarkably, a slapdash, jury-rigged Republic though it be, it will prove to be the longest lived government France has had since the Revolution, a distinction it holds to this day.

Major political issues facing France in 1901 are the management of France's impressive colonial empire, her long simmering grievance against Germany, and the bitter and often violent internal political confrontations between conservative Catholics, monarchists, and the Army, on the one hand, and liberal, religiously tolerant Republicans, on the other. In other words, the same political squabbles that have basically been wracking the country since 1789.

Just in the past 10 years, France has been scandalized by the collapse of the Panama Canal Company, stunned by an anarchist bombing of the Chamber of Deputies and assassination of the President, and torn apart by the Dreyfus Affair. In 1899, President Félix Faure died while having sex with his mistress in the Élysée Palace, because France. Hello? His successor, staunch Republican Emile Loubet, was a target of a coup attempt and an assassination attempt, although he did manage to survive both and serve out his term of office with his dignity more or less

intact. He got to preside over the Paris Exposition of 1900, best known today for having awarded a gold medal to the then cutting edge technology of Campbell's condensed soup. Campbell's has been putting that little gold medal on its soup cans ever since.

The nation of Italy has also seen turmoil. Italy's story is similar to Germany's in that, again, there have been an Italian people and an Italian nation since ancient times, but a unified Italian kingdom has only existed since 1861. It's barely older than Germany.

In 1900, King Umberto was assassinated by an anarchist. On his death, the crown passed to his only child, Victor Emmanuel III, who is 31 years old in 1901. His prime minister at the beginning of the new century is a non-entity named Giuseppe Sarocco. As his premiership is only going to last six more weeks, we won't spend a lot of time on him. The king, Victor Emmanuel III, on the other hand, is going to be with us for a while yet.

Our last two countries are the principal independent powers in Asia, China and Japan. These two countries, neighbors and rivals, are on opposing trajectories in 1901. Japan is very much on the rise, and China is on the decline. The reigning monarch of China in 1901 is the Guangxu Emperor.

[music: "Spring Blossoms on a Moonlit River"]

The Guangxu Emperor is the current representative of the Qing Dynasty, an ethnically Manchurian dynasty which has been ruling China since 1644. Ever since the Qing Dynasty came to power, it has imposed on Han Chinese men the traditional Manchu hairstyle, which is to shave the front part of the hair, just above the forehead, and to tie the rest of the hair into a long braid that runs down the back. The Han are the ethnic group we usually think of when we think "Chinese," as they represent 90% of the population and were running the country until the Qing came along. Other ethnic groups were exempt from this order, but it was imposed on the Han, to remind them who was boss. The penalty for a Han man refusing to wear his hair in the Manchu style was death. And you can see Chinese men wearing that hairstyle in old pictures, because it is still in force in 1901.

The Guangxu Emperor has officially been on the throne since 1875, when he was four years old, but in fact his aunt, the Empress Dowager Cixi, and the Imperial eunuchs have been running the palace. The Empress Dowager's regency officially ended in 1889, but in 1898, when the now 27-year-old Emperor attempted to reform the Chinese government and give China something like a constitutional monarchy, the Empress Dowager, who had remained an important voice at the court, effectively overthrew the young Emperor, who lived under something like house arrest for the rest of his life.

Of course, in China at this time, a palace coup gives you, well, the palace. The rest of China was increasingly being governed by local military commanders and from Europe. The major powers jockeyed for their spheres of influence in the Empire, and it seemed likely that China would be carved up into colonial territories by the European powers, just as they had recently done with Africa.

While it is not strictly true that public parks in China were adorned with signs that read “No dogs or Chinese allowed,” it is true that increasingly outsiders were calling the shots and native Chinese were being made to feel like foreigners in their own country. That was the reason why Shandong province in northeastern China saw the formation of a secret society that called themselves the Righteous and Harmonious Fists – foreigners just called them the Boxers.

The Boxers hated foreigners, Christian Chinese, and especially foreign Christian missionaries. In 1900, with on-again off-again support from the official Chinese government and the Empress Dowager, they laid siege to the foreign legations in Beijing, which provoked military intervention from all the great powers. Russia, Britain, France, Italy, the United States, Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Japan. Only the Ottoman Empire managed to stay out of it. The Boxer Uprising is still winding down as we begin our story in 1901.

Which reminds me that we haven't done Japan yet. The story of Japan's rise in the 19th century is remarkable. In brief, the nation of Japan was basically closed to outsiders until 1853, when a squadron of American naval vessels commanded by Commodore Matthew Perry arrived. Japan was still a medieval culture at the time, but the Japanese spent the next half century in an astonishingly aggressive and ultimately successful effort to catch up to the Great Powers. Japanese experts fanned out across the planet, studying how the other nations of the world ran everything from their public school systems to their navies and reported back. The shogunate ended, and was replaced with the restoration of Imperial power, which in turn led to Japan's first constitution, modeled on the Prussian system, with an elected parliament, the Diet, and a strong monarch as the executive branch.

Japan was governed by the Meiji Emperor during this transformation, and he still sits on the throne in 1901, at the age of 48. Meiji is his regnal name. It means “enlightened rule.” In both China and Japan, the Emperor is not referred to by name during his reign. In fact, in China, to speak or write the Emperor's given name is a capital crime. No, you're better off just referring to him as simply as His Imperial Majesty.

But the period of the Emperor's *rule* is given a name, and after his death the Emperor is referred to by the name of his period, as in the Guangxu Emperor or the Meiji Emperor. The Meiji Emperor's personal name was Mutsuhito, if you must know, but you can just call him Meiji the Great.

The Japanese took a great interest in Western armies and navies. They quickly discerned that Britain had the greatest navy in the world, and built Japan its own navy on the British model. As this involved hiring British shipyards, and purchasing British naval materiel, Japan and Britain developed a close relationship.

The Japanese studied the French army at first, but after the disaster of the Franco-Prussian war, they shrewdly settled on Prussia as the model for their army. So in 1901, Japan is the only Asian country with a constitution, a parliament, and Western-style armies and navies.

The Great Power that concerns Japan the most is Russia. In the 19th century, Russia's eastward expansion reached the Pacific Ocean. In 1860, Russia founded the Pacific port of Vladivostok, meaning that in 1901 there is a Russian fleet on Japan's doorstep, a fact which the Japanese have not failed to notice. By the way, Vladivostok means "ruler of the East" in Russian, which tells you something about Russian intentions.

In 1894, Japan fought a war with China, a war it was expected to lose. Instead, the Japanese smashed the Chinese Navy and drove China out of Korea, taking that country out of China's orbit and into Japan's. In the peace treaty that followed, China also ceded Taiwan and the Liaodong Peninsula to Japan.

This war was viewed by some as Japan's arrival as a Great Power, in much the same way that the Spanish-American war is viewed as America's arrival as a Great Power. But the Russians were not willing to share their status of rising power of the East with the Japanese. With the support of France and Germany, two other powers that had no use for Japanese competition in China, Russia was able to pressure Japan to return the peninsula to China.

This was humiliating enough, but it got even worse two years later when the Russians themselves leased the port city of Liushunkou, on the Liaodong Peninsula, from the Chinese. Now the Russians have two ports on Japan's doorstep. And Liushunkou, also known as Port Arthur, unlike Vladivostok, is usable all year round. So in 1901, the Japanese are biding their time and planning their revenge. It seems the only solution is – spoiler alert – war with Russia.

And so here we have the ten major powers of 1901. These countries and their successor states will continue to be central to our narrative throughout the 20th century. What strikes me as I look over this list of nations is that no fewer than seven of these ten states identify themselves as empires: Britain, Germany, Austria, Turkey, Russia, China, and Japan. We are left with just two republics, France and the United States, and one kingdom, Italy.

What is an empire, anyway? How is it different from a kingdom? Well, in one sense, that's a matter of opinion. But to fully understand the meaning of Empire, we have to go back to the people who invented the concept, the Romans. Our word Empire comes from the Latin word *imperium*, which doesn't exactly mean Empire but never mind that right now. Our word Emperor also comes from the Latin *imperator*.

No fewer than four of our seven empires claim descent from the Roman Empire. When the Ottomans took Constantinople, they had, as far as they were concerned, taken over the Roman Empire. One of the Sultan's titles, even in 1901, is "Kaiser i Rum," that is to say, Caesar of the Romans.

As far as the Russians are concerned, when Constantinople fell, Russia became the principal Orthodox power in the world, and Moscow therefore the new Rome. The Russian word "czar" is derived from Caesar, although in Russian it means something more like King than Emperor, and our Emperor Nikolai II is not technically a czar; he is an *Emperor*, although the title czar is often used informally. On this podcast, I'm going to try to stick to calling him "Emperor."

And then we have Austria, which claims to be the heir to the Holy Roman Empire following that empire's dissolution in 1806. The Imperial title in Austria, and in Germany, is Kaiser, a word also derived from Caesar.

And that brings us to Germany, which regards itself as the Holy Roman Empire reborn. The German word for Empire is *reich*, which means the Holy Roman Empire is the first *reich*, and the new German Empire the second *reich*. Spoiler alert: a Third Reich is waiting in the wings.

In some parts of the old Roman Empire, Kings ruled certain provinces at the pleasure of the Emperor or the Senate, and so one way of looking at an "empire" is that it is an entity that rules over kings. Since there are monarchs in India at this time, ruled over by Britain's Queen Victoria, here we have the justification for calling her an Empress, and referring to a British Empire.

Under the diplomatic conventions of the time, any non-European power that looks like an Empire, in that it has a monarch who rules over other monarchs or some such arrangement, also gets Empire as a courtesy title. So the Persian Shah, or King of Kings, gets to be counted as an Emperor. And so do the rulers of China and Japan.

And so there you have it. Seven empires. A proud boast in 1901, as you can tell from the fact that so many nations were so eager to claim the title. In our own day, when words like "empire" and "imperial" are seen in diplomatic contexts, it's usually an accusation. To be an empire, or to

have imperial ambitions, is regarded within our modern community of nations as something disreputable, if not downright evil.

If you were an anthropologist from another planet studying the human race, and all you knew about the twentieth century was that it was a period of time during which the term “empire” went from being a boast to being an insult, well that alone would tell you something important about the twentieth century. Maybe it tells you the most important single fact about the twentieth century.

We’ll have to stop there for today, but I hope you will join me next week and every week as we watch the history of the twentieth century unfold and contemplate how the world of 1901 becomes the world we know today.

Next week, we’ll take a closer look at Germany. We’ll consider what’s going on in Germany, how she views herself and the world, how the world views her, and her relations with the other great powers. That’s next week on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. January 1, 1901 is also the birthday of Australia. So, happy birthday Australia! This one’s for you.

[music: “Song of Australia.”]