About The Age of Imperialism

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw key developments in U.S. imperial expansion, including the growth of U.S. political and military presence in Latin America and the Pacific Ocean as well as the expansion of American commercial and diplomatic influence through increased trade with China and the assertion of the Open Door policy. These developments were driven by a mix of economic interests, strategic concerns, and ideological beliefs. Together, these imperial actions laid the groundwork for the United States' emergence as a global power in the twentieth century and shaped its international role into the twenty-first century.

Imperialism in Asia

Expansion into China

The United States' push for trading privileges in China had its roots in competition with European powers. British traders had profited from smuggling opium into China during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as demand grew and Chinese attempts to restrict the drug intensified. This trade put China at a disadvantage, and conflicts between the countries led to the First Opium War in 1839–42, in which Britain defeated China. The postwar treaty, the Treaty of Nanjing, established trading privileges for Britain, including five treaty ports where British traders could trade in China. In addition, the Treaty of Nanjing required China to pay a large indemnity and cede Hong Kong to Britain. It was the first of many unequal treaties China would sign with Western powers. These typically contained a "most favored nation" clause in which China promised to the Western power all the rights and privileges it granted to any other foreign power.

The United States, which had already established trading outposts in China, wanted the same trade concessions Britain received. U.S. leaders also believed that an official diplomatic link to China would protect U.S. citizens living there. The Treaty of Wangxia (/wang*shyah/) was signed in 1844 near Macau, a Portuguese-occupied port that served as a hub for Western traders. (Macau formally came under full Portuguese control in 1887.) The treaty gave the United States access to five treaty ports and most-favored-nation status, establishing a formal diplomatic link with China. It also granted extraterritorial rights, meaning that U.S. citizens living in China were to be exempt from Chinese laws and subject to U.S. laws and courts.

Conflict over the opium trade and foreign rights in China continued. During the Second Opium War (1856–60), France joined Great Britain in defeating China. The war ended with the Treaty of Tientsin and the Convention of Peking, which legalized the opium trade, opened more treaty ports, and granted foreign powers broader rights in China. The treaties extended British rights in the country, and France, Russia, and the United States soon signed their own treaties with China to take advantage of these rights under the most-favored-nation clause. The world powers' broadening sphere of influence in China and the United States' desire to keep a percentage of the Chinese trade led U.S. secretary of state John Hay to issue his Open Door notes in 1899, establishing an international trade agreement that protected U.S. interests in China and governed U.S. policy in East Asia for many years.

Expansion into Japan

Japan's isolationist foreign policy of *sakoku* (locked country) lasted from 1603 until 1867. Its goal was to keep Japan free of foreign influence and to allow the country's shogunate, or military-controlled government, to retain power in Japanese society. However, Japan was not completely closed to foreign influence; the policy allowed some restricted trade and diplomatic relations with the Netherlands, China, and Korea. (Portugal had been an important Japanese trading partner in the 1500s, but Portuguese traders and missionaries were expelled in the early 1600s due to fears of Catholic influence and colonization.) The port city of Nagasaki, where foreign trade took place, became a hub of cultural exchange and Western influence in Japan.

After China's defeats in the Opium Wars of the nineteenth century and the country's resulting concessions to Britain, the United States and other Western countries established stronger spheres of influence in East Asia. Japan's proximity to China meant that it would soon be drawn into these spheres. In 1854, the United States became the first major Western power to sign a trade treaty with Japan. The Treaty of Kanagawa, also called the Perry Convention, granted limited trading rights and opened two ports to American ships. This agreement was made after American negotiator and naval commander Commodore Matthew Perry threatened to use force—he returned to Japan in 1854 with ten ships and 1,600 troops—to compel Japanese leaders to accept. This form of diplomacy, known as "gunboat diplomacy," was later used by President Theodore Roosevelt to secure U.S. interests in the Caribbean. Japan's forced opening to Western trade contributed to growing internal unrest and opposition to the shogunate, eventually leading to the Meiji Restoration in 1868, when imperial rule was restored and Japan began a period of rapid modernization.

Imperialist Policy and Practice in the Western Hemisphere

As the nineteenth century progressed, a series of revolutions in Spanish and Portuguese colonies throughout the Western Hemisphere led to the creation of many independent nations. These so-called Latin American Wars of Independence (roughly 1808–26) were influenced by Enlightenment ideas, inspired in part by the American and French Revolutions and by a growing nationalist sentiment in Latin America, and accelerated by the weakening of Spanish authority during the Napoleonic Wars (c. 1801–15). The successful independence movements largely ended continental Europe's colonial control in the Americas.

In response, the United States began to pursue foreign policy goals centered on protecting the Western Hemisphere from European interference. The Monroe Doctrine (1823) asserted that the Americas were off-limits to future colonization by European powers. Initially, U.S. efforts focused on cultivating diplomatic ties and preventing recolonization, but these goals gradually evolved into a more aggressive foreign policy that aimed not only to prevent European intervention but also to expand U.S. economic and political influence abroad.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the growth of factories and mass production helped the United States become an industrial powerhouse. By 1870, the United States had begun competing with Europe's industrialized economies for the first time. Between improved manufacturing methods and the rapid post–Civil War growth of transcontinental railroads, the United States found it easier than ever before to produce, transport, and sell goods in large quantities. This led to national trade surpluses and new opportunities for profit. Meanwhile, many Latin American countries rich in raw materials became export economies, often controlled to some degree by U.S. influence and investment. Between 1870 and 1910, the United States became the dominant economic power in Latin America.

In the early twentieth century, as the global balance of power shifted away from European empires, the United States expanded its role in international affairs. Its foreign policy goals grew to include establishing overseas trade networks, projecting military power, and defending its growing sphere of influence in Latin America and the Pacific. This shift laid the foundation for the emergence of the United States as a global power later in the twentieth century.

The Monroe Doctrine

The Monroe Doctrine was endorsed by Great Britain, which was itself competing with continental Europe for colonial wealth and had a vested interest in preventing the growth of the Spanish Empire. In fact, the doctrine was originally going to be a joint (or bilateral) U.S.–British declaration against continental European intervention in the Americas. However, U.S. secretary of state John Quincy Adams convinced President James Monroe that the United States needed to make its own declaration. Adams believed a joint statement with Britain might limit the United States' future expansion options. Thus, the United States issued its own policy statement, which became known as the Monroe Doctrine. This doctrine included the implication that the United States would, if necessary, use military force to prevent European powers from recolonizing any parts of the Western Hemisphere.

In 1823, the United States did not yet have the military force to back up its threat and at first relied on Britain's navy to enforce it. However, the Monroe Doctrine was important because it claimed a role for the United States in world affairs. As U.S. economic and military power grew in the mid- to late nineteenth century, the doctrine was interpreted more broadly and used to justify territorial expansion on the North American continent as well as intervention in Central and South America. President James K. Polk referenced the Monroe Doctrine to defend the annexation of Texas in 1845 and the addition of new territories to the United States after the Mexican-American War that followed in 1846–48. These territories encompassed much of today's American Southwest, including the states of New Mexico and California.

Military Defense and the Roosevelt Corollary

In his Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, President Theodore Roosevelt declared that the United States would act as "an international police power" in Latin America, particularly when European nations threatened to intervene to collect debts. This policy expanded the original Monroe Doctrine by justifying U.S. intervention not only to block European influence but also to intervene directly in the domestic affairs of Latin American countries.

Roosevelt's foreign policy was summarized in his famous phrase "Speak softly and carry a big stick." It emphasized negotiation backed by the threat of military force, especially naval power. In 1903, Roosevelt described "a thoroughly efficient navy" as part of the "big stick" of force and defense the United States should be prepared to use. Like many other global leaders at the time, Roosevelt was influenced by naval historian Alfred Thayer Mahan, whose 1890 book *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* argues that great powers need to control the seas. The United States took steps to expand and modernize its navy, which Roosevelt built into one of the largest in the world during his tenure.

From 1905 to 1907, Roosevelt put his foreign policy plans to work in the Dominican Republic. The country owed money to European creditors. France and Britain had already sent warships to collect this debt. Roosevelt arranged for U.S. officials to take control of the Dominican Republic's customs houses, its main source of income, as part of a broader agreement to ensure debt repayment and avoid European military involvement. Customs, or taxes paid on imported goods, were an important source of government revenue that the Dominican Republic could use for repayment. This action represented a significant reach into the financial affairs of other countries. Roosevelt later admitted that the Constitution did not clearly spell out presidential authority in such situations. However, he argued that because the Constitution did not forbid him from acting, he was justified in taking action to meet the crisis. As he put it, "The Constitution did not explicitly give me power to bring about the necessary agreement with Santo Domingo [the capital of the Dominican Republic]. But the Constitution did not forbid my doing what I did."

Beyond defending U.S. interests, the navy served as a tool of deterrence and international influence. Roosevelt later sent the Great White Fleet, a flotilla of U.S. battleships, on a global tour to demonstrate American naval power and reach.

Yellow Journalism

New types of journalism emerged during the late 1800s and early 1900s, including a type of sensationalized news coverage known as yellow journalism. As mentioned in the What Teachers Need to Know for Unit 2, Topic 3, yellow journalism had major ramifications for U.S. foreign policy as well as social policy. The term itself originated with a cartoon about a boy called the Yellow Kid who lived in one of New York City's impoverished neighborhoods. The cartoon was published in *New York World,* a newspaper owned by Joseph Pulitzer, and the Yellow Kid's popularity with readers helped drive newspaper sales. In 1896, Pulitzer's rival, William Randolph Hearst, poached the cartoon's creator to increase readership and profits at his own paper, the *New York Journal*. Pulitzer's and Hearst's rivalry did not end there. Whereas the muckrakers who later emerged from the trend of

yellow journalism would emphasize careful research and factual reporting, these media magnates published articles with splashy headlines, vivid illustrations, and dubious truths to attract readers.

As students will read about in the next unit, yellow journalism peaked in 1898 after newspapers published rumors about the sinking of the USS *Maine* in the harbor of Havana, Cuba. Their exaggerated and inflammatory reporting helped stir public outrage and is often cited as a contributing factor to the outbreak of the Spanish-American War.

U.S. Territorial Gains: Territories

Influenced by U.S. trade interests and the expansionist principle of manifest destiny (which students learned about in Unit 2), the United States in the late nineteenth century became more confident in laying claim to territories outside its contiguous territory in North America. The treatment of these territories signaled that the United States was using its power in new ways, exercising colonial control over populations without granting them citizenship rights. The 1898 Treaty of Paris marked the first time in U.S. history that a treaty brought new territories into the country without automatically giving people in the territories U.S. citizenship or providing the territories with a clear path to statehood.

Alaska

Purchased from Russia

U.S. state since 1959

After the United States purchased Alaska in 1867, the territory was initially placed under U.S. military control. In 1877, military control ended when authority was transferred to the Treasury Department. A civil government was not established until 1884, when Alaska received district courts and schools. A nonvoting Alaskan delegate was sent to Congress in 1906. While there had been some previous settlement, in the 1890s, prospectors and settlers began migrating from the "lower forty-eight" states in large numbers after gold was discovered in the Klondike fields in Canada's Yukon Territory, bordering Alaska.

The influx of American settlers (as well as earlier Russian settlers) had profound effects on Alaska's Indigenous populations. Settlers spread contagious diseases that killed many Indigenous people, and deforestation during the gold rush affected Indigenous hunting grounds. Indigenous people in Alaska did not receive U.S. citizenship until 1924 with the passage of the Indian Citizenship Act. Today, Alaska maintains a significant Indigenous population, with around 16 percent of Alaskans identifying as American Indian or Alaska Native.

Hawaii

Taken by military occupation and annexation

U.S. state since 1959

The Kingdom of Hawaii was founded in 1810 when King Kamehameha I consolidated control of the islands. By then, there was already a Western presence there, as the islands were a stop for American traders and whalers. Western influence expanded after the 1820s when missionaries from the United States and Europe arrived, beginning a wave of immigration to Hawaii and introducing Western institutions (such as schools) as well as religious beliefs.

Soon, American investors were buying large tracts of land in Hawaii's sugarcane fields, establishing private landownership and a plantation economy. As the Hawaiian and U.S. economies became increasingly linked, American investors and politicians moved to consolidate power on the islands. The 1875 Treaty of Reciprocity effectively rendered the Hawaiian economy dependent on U.S. trade, and the "Bayonet Constitution" of 1887 gave U.S. merchants additional political power in Hawaii.

In 1890, the McKinley Tariff Act removed duties on sugar for all nations and territories exporting sugar to the United States (such as Cuba). Hawaiian sugar traders lost their competitive advantage, and the price of sugar dropped. These changes gave merchants an urgent economic incentive to push for annexation. But it was the Spanish-American War (1898) that ultimately turned the U.S. government in favor of annexing Hawaii, five years after the overthrow of Queen Lili'uokalani. During the war, U.S. forces took control of the Philippines and Guam. These new acquisitions convinced President McKinley that U.S. naval bases and coaling stations were needed to defend U.S. territory in the Pacific Ocean. The United States had already begun expanding into the Pacific before the war. In 1867, it had taken control of the Midway Atoll, two islands in the Pacific Ocean approximately 1,300 miles (2,092 km) from Hawaii. (An atoll is a ring-shaped coral reef.) The Midway Atoll became a U.S. military outpost in 1903, and the military retained a presence there until the base closed in 1993.

As a U.S. territory, Hawaii's population and economy grew. Hawaiians, who were paying taxes without congressional representation, began pushing for statehood. The December 7, 1941, Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor showed both Hawaii's vulnerability and its value as a defense location, helping lead to the territory's eventual statehood in 1959.

The Philippines

Ceded by Spain in the Treaty of Paris

U.S. territory, 1898–1946

During the Spanish-American War (1898), U.S. troops and Filipino revolutionaries worked together to topple Spanish control. Filipinos declared independence, named revolutionary Emilio Aguinaldo president, and set up a constitutional congress. However, after the Spanish were defeated and the Treaty of Paris transferred control of the Philippines to the United States, U.S. troops stayed and occupied the country themselves, reversing their earlier support for independence. The Filipino insurgency then turned against U.S. forces. The resulting Philippine-American War (1899–1902) lasted three years and was deadlier than the Spanish-American War, killing about four thousand Americans, more than twenty thousand Filipino combatants, and hundreds of thousands of Filipino civilians. An American civil government took over in 1902, officially ending the war, though resistance persisted, especially in the southern Philippines, where Moro Muslim communities opposed U.S. rule for years.

U.S. leaders described the occupation as a temporary custodianship to prepare Filipinos for self-rule. Religious conversion was one goal of the occupation, although Filipinos had already been exposed (and often converted) to Christianity under the rule of Catholic Spain. Protestant Christian missionaries and teachers set up schools in the Philippines. The Philippine Autonomy Act of 1916, also known as the Jones Act, promised residents independence and granted Filipinos an elected legislature for the first time. No deadline was set for this independence until 1933. The Commonwealth of the Philippines was established in 1935, beginning an independent government and transition period. Filipino voters elected Manuel Quezon as president of the commonwealth, which operated under a constitution approved by the U.S. Congress. In 1946, the year after World War II ended, the Republic of the Philippines became independent, and it remains so today.

Guam

Ceded by Spain in the Treaty of Paris

U.S. territory, 1898–present

Guam is the most populous of the Mariana Islands (previously known by the Spanish as the Ladrones), a group of islands in the western Pacific Ocean. It was ceded to the United States in 1898 and governed by U.S. military rule and U.S.-appointed naval officers until 1950. In 1950, control of Guam was transferred to the U.S. Department of the Interior, and Guam's Indigenous Chamorro people became U.S. citizens. A 1968 amendment allowed Guam's people to elect their own governor and legislature. Today, Guam remains an unincorporated U.S. territory: It has a nonvoting delegate in Congress, and its citizens cannot vote in presidential elections. Guam provided an important air and naval base for U.S. forces during World War II, and U.S. military bases continue to have a strong presence there. Today, Guam is a strategic hub for U.S. operations in the Indo-Pacific region.

Puerto Rico

Ceded by Spain in the Treaty of Paris

U.S. territory, 1898–present

After the Spanish-American War, Puerto Rico was briefly placed under U.S. military control before a civil government was established in 1900. The 1900 Foraker Act allowed Puerto Ricans to elect a legislature, but their governor and executive council were still appointed by the United States. Under U.S. control, the Puerto Rican sugarcane economy expanded, with U.S. corporations becoming the primary purchasers and distributors of Puerto Rican sugar for sale to the American market.

The Jones–Shafroth Act of 1917 granted Puerto Ricans U.S. citizenship, which made Puerto Rican men eligible for the World War I draft. (This law is distinct from the Jones Act passed for the Philippines in 1916.) The Jones–Shafroth Act also created a bill of rights for Puerto Rico and restructured the island's government, giving Puerto Ricans more control over internal affairs.

Another law often confused with the Jones–Shafroth Act is the Jones Act of 1920, part of the Merchant Marine Act, which requires that goods shipped between U.S. ports travel on U.S.-built, U.S.-owned, and U.S.-crewed ships. This law continues to affect Puerto Rico's economy by increasing shipping costs to and from the island.

Puerto Rico did not become self-governing until 1952, when the Puerto Rico Federal Relations Act of 1950 (also called the Commonwealth Bill) allowed Puerto Ricans to elect their own governor and establish a constitution. Today, Puerto Rico remains an unincorporated U.S. territory: Its Congressional delegate has limited voting powers, and its citizens cannot vote in presidential elections.

The Panama Canal Zone

Ceded by Panama in the Hay–Bunau-Varilla Treaty

U.S. territory, 1903–79

Initially, the United States debated whether to build a canal through Nicaragua or Panama. At first, Nicaragua seemed the more likely choice because the canal could make use of the country's large lakes. Meanwhile, Panama was considered less promising because a French company's earlier attempt there had ended in bankruptcy after disease-ridden construction efforts. Most members of Congress supported the Nicaraguan option. However, Philippe Bunau-Varilla, a French engineer and lobbyist with a financial stake in Panama, set out to change their minds. Knowing that Nicaragua was vulnerable to volcanic activity, he mailed every U.S. senator a Nicaraguan postage stamp featuring an image of a smoking volcano, Mount Momotombo. The dramatic

picture heightened concerns about the risks of building a canal in a volcanically active region. Persuaded by this imagery and Bunau-Varilla's lobbying, Congress voted in 1902 to select Panama instead. The stamp became famous as a small but powerful influence on one of the most consequential decisions in U.S. foreign policy.

Besides promoting U.S. investment and trade, the building of the Panama Canal was motivated by the desire to keep the Caribbean under American control. The Hay–Bunau-Varilla Treaty of 1903 gave the United States the right to operate the canal itself and to control five miles (8 km) of land on each side of the planned canal route. These ten miles (16 km) became known as the Canal Zone Americans who lived in the Canal Zone were known as Zonians. The Canal Zone's governor was appointed by the U.S. president. While Panama retained nominal sovereignty over the zone, the U.S. military retained the right to intervene there. Between 1908 and 1925, U.S. troops intervened several times to quell political unrest.

The canal construction system was deeply shaped by racial discrimination. Workers on the canal were separated into two pay grades. White technicians, engineers, and managers were on the more highly paid "gold roll." Laborers, who were typically Black or West Indian, were on the lower-paid "silver roll." To many, the separate pay structures were another symptom of U.S. imperialism. Salary discrimination persisted in the Canal Zone long after construction was complete. Workers in the zone who were U.S. citizens typically earned a higher "U.S. rate," while local workers, usually people of color, earned the lower "local rate."

Throughout the twentieth century, unequal treatment and disputes over sovereignty added to the ongoing conflict between Panamanians and U.S. forces in the Canal Zone. In 1964, riots broke out when a group of Panamanian students wanted to fly the Panamanian flag alongside the U.S. flag at a local high school. The riots resulted in Panama temporarily breaking off diplomatic relations with the United States.

Panamanians' increased demands for authority in the Canal Zone and U.S. diplomats' desire to keep Latin American countries on their side amid the ongoing Cold War (1947–91) contributed to the U.S. government's decision to cede the zone and the canal itself to Panamanian control. In 1977, President Jimmy Carter and Panamanian president Omar Torrijos signed the Torrijos–Carter Treaties. Based on the treaties' agreements, the Canal Zone was returned to Panama in 1979, and the Panamanian government took full control of the canal in 1999.

U.S. Territorial Gains: Protectorates and Military Occupations

At the turn of the twentieth century, the United States held more imperial power than ever and had growing economic investments in Latin America. When Latin American countries experienced political or economic instability, the United States often imposed temporary military and economic control to protect its own interests, particularly the property and profits of American companies operating in the region. Although these countries remained formally independent, many became protectorates or virtual protectorates for the duration of U.S. occupations.

One example was Cuba. After the Spanish-American War, the U.S. military occupied Cuba and supervised the drafting of its new constitution. In 1901, the U.S. Congress passed the Platt Amendment, which required Cuba to include provisions in its constitution granting the United States the right to intervene in Cuban affairs and to maintain a naval base at Guantánamo Bay. These conditions limited Cuban sovereignty and ensured ongoing U.S. influence over the island.

Cuba

U.S. protectorate, 1902–34

Cuba officially gained independence from U.S. military occupation in 1902, following the Spanish-American War. Although Spain had renounced "all claim of sovereignty over and title to Cuba" in the Treaty of Paris, signed on December 10, 1898, the United States retained control of the island until it withdrew troops in 1902

and the Cuban republic was established. However, the Platt Amendment mentioned earlier gave the United States authority to intervene in Cuba, ostensibly to protect its independence. It was incorporated into Cuba's new constitution in 1902 and formalized through a treaty in 1903. After Cuban president Tomás Estrada Palma resigned in 1906, the U.S. military began a three-year occupation to quell political unrest and placed the island under the temporary control of a U.S.-appointed governor. U.S. Marines also temporarily occupied Cuba in 1912 in response to an armed rebellion led by Afro-Cuban veterans protesting racial discrimination and poor labor conditions.

Despite the repeal of the Platt Amendment, the United States retained control of Cuba's Guantánamo Bay naval base, which remains in operation today. Because it lies on Cuban territory under U.S. control, the base is generally considered outside the jurisdiction of most U.S. domestic laws. U.S.–Cuban relations remained generally friendly until the 1950s, when Fidel Castro seized power and established a communist government aligned with the Soviet Union during the burgeoning Cold War.

Nicaragua

Under U.S. occupation, 1914–33

The United States intervened financially in Nicaragua as part of President William Howard Taft's Dollar Diplomacy, a strategy that aimed to advance U.S. interests by supporting American banks and businesses abroad. In Nicaragua, this meant encouraging U.S. loans to the Nicaraguan government in exchange for influence over the country's finances and customs revenue. These efforts coincided with direct military involvement. In 1909, Nicaraguan president José Santos Zelaya, who opposed U.S. influence and had explored canal projects with European powers, was overthrown by rebel forces backed informally by the United States. After a period of instability, the United States sent troops in 1912 to support the new, U.S.-friendly government and protect American interests, including banking and infrastructure projects.

To further consolidate U.S. control, the Bryan–Chamorro Treaty of 1914 granted the United States exclusive rights to build a canal across Nicaragua. By this point, however, the U.S. had already committed to the Panama Canal and had little intention of building a second one. Instead, the treaty's main purpose was to prevent any rival power, especially Germany or Japan, from gaining access to a potential canal route. The treaty also gave the United States long-term oversight of Nicaraguan affairs, effectively making the country a quasi-protectorate. U.S. Marines remained in Nicaragua almost continuously until 1933, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy prompted a withdrawal of troops and a shift away from direct military intervention in Latin America.

Haiti

U.S. protectorate, 1915–34

Haiti, which gained its independence from France in 1804, was required by the 1825 Franco-Haitian agreement to compensate France for property lost as a result of the Haitian Revolution. This kept the country in debt to France for decades, increasing U.S. fears of European intervention in the Caribbean. Political instability in Haiti between 1910 and 1915 led the United States to send in the military to occupy the country and to take control of Haitian finances. The Haitian–American Convention of 1915 established a U.S. protectorate over the country. The treaty also established and empowered a military force called the Gendarmerie d'Haiti, commanded by the U.S. Marines and made up of Haitian and U.S. citizen soldiers.

U.S. rule in Haiti remained contentious. After a series of strikes disrupted the country in 1929, the U.S. government began developing a plan to withdraw from Haiti. Withdrawal was complete by 1934. The Gendarmerie (now called the Garde d'Haiti) remained, though under Haitian command. Despite the formal end of occupation, many Haitians viewed the U.S. presence as a violation of sovereignty, and the legacy of intervention shaped Haitian politics for decades.

The Dominican Republic

Under U.S. occupation, 1916–24

In 1905–7, under President Theodore Roosevelt, the United States intervened in the Dominican Republic to stabilize the country's finances and prevent intervention by European creditors. For the next decade, political instability threatened the country's financial strength. To protect U.S. interests, particularly American businesses' property and financial investments, the U.S. military sent troops to occupy the Dominican Republic in 1916. The Dominican president resigned days later, creating political chaos that led the United States to assume control of the country's government as well as its finances.

The U.S. military government disbanded the Dominican army and imposed martial law, administering the country through American naval officers. Dominicans resented the occupation, resulting in conflicts with U.S. troops. A guerrilla resistance movement known as the *gavilleros* fought against the U.S. presence, particularly in the eastern provinces. Meanwhile, the two nations' governments negotiated to end the occupation. In 1924, the United States withdrew its troops and transferred military authority to the Guardia Nacional Dominicana (Dominican National Guard), a new force trained and organized by the U.S. Marines.

The Banana Wars and New Orleans

Following its success in the Spanish-American War, the United States expanded its military and economic influence throughout Central America and the Caribbean. It conducted repeated military interventions in countries such as Cuba, Panama, Honduras, Nicaragua, Mexico, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. While these interventions were often justified as efforts to maintain regional stability or prevent European involvement, they were also motivated by the desire to protect U.S. economic interests, especially the investments of American corporations in industries like fruit, sugar, and tobacco. These conflicts and occupations became known collectively as the Banana Wars, a term that reflects the economic importance of bananas and other agricultural exports in shaping U.S. foreign policy in the region.

Even in independent nations like Mexico, Nicaragua, and Honduras, the United States advanced its business interests by supporting favorable regimes and protecting U.S.-based companies. One of the most powerful and influential was the United Fruit Company, a corporation founded in 1899 that would later become Chiquita Brands. United Fruit quickly grew into a modern multinational corporation, operating across Central and South America as well as the Caribbean. By 1930, it was Central America's largest employer, controlling vast amounts of land and heavily influencing local politics to secure favorable business conditions.

New Orleans played a key role in this economic system. As a major Gulf Coast port city with proximity to Latin America, it became a central hub for banana imports in the late 1800s and early 1900s. U.S. marketing campaigns helped popularize bananas with American consumers, while infrastructure in cities like New Orleans facilitated rapid transport and distribution. Several fruit companies operating plantations in Central America, particularly Honduras, based their headquarters in New Orleans, which served as a logistical and commercial bridge to U.S. markets.

A notable example is Samuel Zemurray, a Russian immigrant known as "Sam the Banana Man," who arrived in New Orleans in 1905. He began by selling overripe bananas at a discount, using the city's rail and shipping networks to move them quickly. In 1910, Zemurray founded the Cuyamel Fruit Company and acquired large landholdings in Honduras to support his operations. Cuyamel soon became one of the major players in the banana trade and was later sold to United Fruit in 1930. United Fruit's headquarters on St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans still stands today.

About World War I

In the early twentieth century, competition and distrust among European powers steadily strained international relations and shaped domestic decisions within those countries. These mounting pressures resulted in World War I (1914–18), a conflict that reshaped Europe and unsettled the existing balance of power. Although the United States initially remained neutral, its position changed as the war expanded, resulting in the deployment of U.S. troops overseas and participation in postwar peace negotiations. The consequences of the war influenced political and economic developments in both Europe and the United States for decades to come.

Causes of World War I: MANIA

Historians often use the acronym **MANIA** to explain the main causes of World War I: **m**ilitarism (the belief that a nation needs a strong military to achieve its political goals), **a**lliances (agreements between countries to support each other in case of war or other threats to security), **n**ationalism (support for national interests above those of other countries or groups), **i**mperialism (the practice of gaining power as a country by taking political and economic control over other areas of the world), and **a**ssassination (of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, which sparked the war).

The Austro-Hungarian Empire

Austria lost a war against Prussia in 1866. In the wake of this defeat, with German states gaining power, Austrian leaders sought to stabilize their empire by reaching a compromise with Hungarian nationalists. In 1867, the so-called dual monarchy of Austria-Hungary was established. Although Emperor Franz Joseph had ruled the Austrian (Habsburg) Empire since 1848, the Compromise of 1867 split the empire into two distinct halves: an Austrian half and a Hungarian half. Each had its own parliament and internal self-government, but both were ruled by Franz Joseph and shared a common foreign policy, military, and finance ministry.

At its height, the Austro-Hungarian Empire was one of Europe's largest, both geographically and in terms of population, with more than forty-eight million people. It included the areas that would become the countries of Croatia, Slovenia, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, as well as parts of present-day Italy, Poland, Ukraine, and (significantly for this topic) Serbia. The empire included members of many different ethnic populations, some of whom had nationalist ambitions hampered by imperial control. These ambitions contributed to nationalist conflict that would, in turn, contribute to the violent resistance that set the war in motion.

Imperialism and Colonialism Add to Rivalry

Between 1870 and 1914, European empires expanded dramatically, with European powers claiming vast territories across Africa and Asia. By the start of World War I, India, much of Africa, and many other parts of the world were under European control. The British Empire alone covered a quarter of the world map. France also held a large overseas empire, while Russia controlled an enormous land-based empire stretching across Eurasia. Austria-Hungary maintained a vast land-based empire as well. Germany and Italy, having unified later, possessed smaller empires and were eager to expand.

In the early twentieth century, European economies depended on the resources and labor of their colonies. Industrial growth and consumer demand at home required a steady supply of raw materials, many of which were not available in large quantities within Europe. Oil, rubber, and other materials became essential for modern industry and transportation. Colonies also provided new markets for European goods and opportunities for investment and profit through global trade networks.

However, maintaining these empires was expensive, and European powers became increasingly protective of their colonial interests. As the economic value of colonies grew, so did fears that rival nations might interfere or try to seize control. Africa became a particular focus of imperial rivalry, as its wealth of natural resources—including gold, rubber, and copper—made it a target for competing European powers. Controlling trade in and with Africa and Asia offered strategic and economic advantages.

Many European nations competed for control of African territory, often through diplomatic negotiations that allowed them to avoid fighting each other while still expanding their colonial empires. For example, British forces occupied Egypt to protect Britain's investment in the Suez Canal, an important shipping lane that runs through Egypt. The canal was a vital link between Britain and its most prized colony, India, allowing faster and safer access from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean. Representatives from fifteen European nations attended the Berlin Conference (1884–85), which aimed to peacefully divide the African continent among the colonial powers. Germany and France clashed diplomatically over control of the African country of Morocco in 1905 and 1911. Other European powers, including Belgium, also sought control. Under King Leopold II, Belgium's rule in the Congo was marked by extreme violence, forced labor, and widespread exploitation of the local population.

European nations sought control of African land because it offered valuable resources, strategic advantages, and opportunities for wealth and global influence. Although tensions occasionally arose, the European powers generally managed their rivalries in Africa through negotiation rather than conflict. While the "Scramble for Africa" intensified imperial competition, it was the growing tensions in Europe itself—particularly in the Balkans and through complex alliance systems—that more directly contributed to the outbreak of World War I.

Militarism: The New German Empire

Before the mid-1600s, the region we now call Germany consisted of many semi-independent territories within the Holy Roman Empire, a loose confederation of principalities, duchies, and other political entities. The Thirty Years' War (1618–48) devastated much of central Europe and ended with the Peace of Westphalia, which affirmed the autonomy of these territories. Over time, two powers—Prussia in the north and the Habsburg hereditary lands in the south (often referred to as "Austria")—emerged as especially influential.

In 1870–71, Prussia led a confederation of German states in a war against France, known as the Franco-Prussian War. The German states won and unified into a new German Empire under Prussian leadership. Wilhelm I became the empire's first ruler, taking the title *kaiser* (derived from *caesar*), meaning emperor. Germany also annexed the French region of Alsace-Lorraine, a border territory rich in iron ore. French resentment over this loss deepened tensions between France and Germany and contributed to the animosity that helped spark World War I.

Unification fueled German ambitions to catch up with, and then exceed, other European nations' industrial progress. Germany experienced rapid advances in iron and steel production along with advances in later innovations like chemical and electrical technologies.

Kaiser Wilhelm II, who ascended to the throne in 1888, wanted Germany to become a great world power. Alfred von Tirpitz, secretary of state for the German navy, was influenced by the ideas of American naval officer Alfred Thayer Mahan, who argued that a great world power needed a great navy to gain control of the seas. Specifically, Germany wanted its navy to rival Britain's Royal Navy, which was by far the strongest in the world at the time. In 1898 and 1902, Germany passed bills that drastically increased the size of the German navy. Britain responded to the German expansion in kind, deciding to develop a new class of battleships and cruisers.

Britain relied on sea trade for much of its food and raw materials. Britain's Royal Navy protected the islands of Great Britain from foreign invasion and protected British shipping to maintain its large overseas empire. The British government constantly sought to make sure the Royal Navy was the largest and most advanced navy in the world. British shipbuilders began building larger and faster ships with heavier guns to stay ahead of Britain's rivals. In 1906, Britain completed the first of a new kind of battleship, named HMS *Dreadnought*. *Dreadnought*

was at the time the world's most powerful and technologically advanced warship. It was equipped with steam turbine engines and large guns that could fire farther and more accurately than those of other ships of the time. *Dreadnought* immediately made all other nations' battleships obsolete. Britain's rivals decided they needed to build their own modern battleships to compete.

Germany, in particular, responded to Britain's 1906 launch of HMS *Dreadnought* by passing a third naval bill later that year. The *Dreadnought's* design was so influential that similar warships built afterward—by Britain, Germany, and other powers—became known generically as *dreadnoughts*. Germany began rapidly constructing these new "big gun" battleships and investing in submarines powered by diesel engines, which allowed for longer underwater travel and stealthier attacks. German dreadnoughts featured advanced armor plating made from Krupp steel, a superior product of Germany's heavy industry that made its warships more resistant to torpedoes and artillery. Thus, the naval arms race not only heightened tensions between the two rivals but also accelerated the development of deadly new military technologies that would soon be used in war.

Nationalism: The Balkan Wars

In 1912–13, several Balkan countries launched a coordinated military campaign against the Ottoman Empire, which still held parts of southeastern Europe. Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece, and Montenegro formed the Balkan League to seize the territories still controlled by the Ottoman Empire.

In the First Balkan War of 1912, the Balkan League defeated the Ottoman Empire. The empire lost almost all of its remaining territories in southeastern Europe. In 1913, Bulgaria, dissatisfied with the division of territory, went to war against its former allies Serbia, Greece, and Romania and was defeated.

For Austria-Hungary, the most important consequence of the Balkan Wars was Serbia's growing power. As one of the victors in the Balkan Wars, Serbia had almost doubled its territory. Some Serbian nationalists sought to unite all southern Slavic peoples, including those within Austria-Hungary, into a Greater Serbia. Austria-Hungary feared that Serbia's growing strength and calls for Slavic unity could inspire rebellion among the Slavic populations within its own multiethnic empire. And now Serbia was powerful enough to threaten Austro-Hungarian authority. Austria-Hungary's rulers saw the Serbian expansion as an expansion of Russia's potential to threaten Austria-Hungary's territory.

The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in June 1914 by Gavrilo Princip, a Serbian nationalist and member of the secret society known as the Black Hand, provided the immediate spark that set off World War I. Austria-Hungary blamed Serbia and moved to punish it, and Serbia turned to Russia for support. This crisis triggered a chain reaction of alliance commitments, drawing in Germany, France, and Britain and turning a regional conflict into a world war.

War Weapons and Imperialism

European militarism was empowered by advanced mechanical, chemical, and electrical technologies that would be used in World War I. For instance, new energy sources like steam turbines powered ships, and chemical advancements led to nitrogen-based explosives (such as those in artillery shells). When the United States began manufacturing weapons for the war, it also used advanced technologies.

Many of World War I's weapons had been tested during the European conquest of Africa, where imperialist powers used them to control colonized populations. One of the most prominent was the Maxim gun, the first machine gun that was fully automatic, meaning it used recoil power to fire multiple bullets in succession without needing to be manually reloaded between shots. Invented in 1884 by Hiram Maxim, the Maxim gun was adopted by the British Army in 1889 and soon after by the Austrian, German, Italian, and Russian armies. It was used in combat for the first time in 1893–94 during the First Matabele War in Zimbabwe, where British soldiers used the guns to fight Matabele warriors. Thousands of Maxim guns were used in World War I, which became known as the "machine gun war."

Aerial bombardments also began as tools of imperial warfare. The first aerial attack took place in Libya, during an Italian war against the Ottoman Empire. An Italian pilot dropped grenades from an airplane onto Libya in November 1911, ushering in a new era for warfare. Airplanes had been used in conflicts prior to World War I for enemy observation and reconnaissance. However, World War I was the first war to use airplanes as platforms for weapons; soldiers bombed ground targets from the air, and pilots fought to control the airspace near their positions. Future wars would develop military aircraft even further.

The War and the United States

The United States' military and economic contributions were crucial to the Allies' eventual victory. U.S. involvement had many other effects, particularly on domestic legislation, industrial production, and the broader economy.

The United States as an "Associated Power"

The United States fought alongside the Allies as an associated power but did not formally join the Allied powers. (Some other world powers, such as Portugal and Japan, signed treaties that officially bound them to the Allies.) This decision was influenced by U.S. isolationism. By avoiding a formal alliance, the United States was not obligated to follow other nations' political directives, and it could pursue its own war goals—such as U.S. general John J. Pershing's demand that the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) remain independent units. President Wilson also thought that sending an independent force would give the United States greater political power to shape postwar peace. Many other nations aided the Allies as associated powers; the Treaty of Versailles includes twenty-seven "Allied and Associated Powers" who contributed to the Allied war effort.

The War and the U.S. Economy

The need for modern, mechanized weapons during World War I led to what is sometimes called a parallel "war of production" that took place behind the scenes. To coordinate this massive industrial effort, the U.S. government took a more active role in the economy. Several federal agencies were created or expanded to manage resources, control prices, and ensure efficient production. One key example was the War Industries Board, which directed factories to prioritize war materials, allocated raw materials, and standardized products. Other agencies, like the Fuel Administration and the Food Administration, regulated coal and oil supplies and encouraged food conservation to support the war effort. Together, these agencies helped mobilize the U.S. economy for war.

The war led to a U.S. economic boom that lasted forty-four months, pulling the country out of recession. This boom was partly due to the increased demand for exports, both to Europe and around the world, as the United States supplied goods that Europe could not produce in wartime. Many individual U.S. businesses, especially those that sold munitions to the government, reaped large profits.

Wartime loans contributed to a new role for the United States as a global economic powerhouse. After the war, the United States shifted from being a net global debtor to the world's largest net global creditor. Before the war, the United States had relied heavily on foreign investment to fund infrastructure and development. During and after the war, however, both the U.S. government and private American banks extended large loans, especially to Allied nations like Britain and France, to support the war effort and postwar recovery. As Britain struggled to rebuild its economy, New York began to rival London as the world's leading financial center, reflecting the United States' growing dominance in global finance.

U.S. Military Contributions

The corps was the largest unit within the AEF. A corps was made up of two or more divisions; on average, there were twenty-eight thousand troops in an AEF division. Each division was split into smaller groups, known as regiments and brigades, with defined combat or support roles. For instance, an AEF division typically included two infantry brigades comprising two infantry regiments each. Smaller units within these groups included battalions and companies.

Pershing based the AEF in the Lorraine region of France; the region's proximity to Germany allowed U.S. forces to launch offensives along the Western Front and support Allied operations against German positions in northeastern France. Most U.S. soldiers were sent to France, but a few units fought in other countries. The AEF's 332nd Infantry Regiment fought in Italy's Battle of Vittorio Veneto (October 24–November 4, 1918), the decisive Italian victory over Austria-Hungary that contributed to the downfall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. From mid-1918 to the spring of 1920, members of the AEF's 339th Infantry Regiment were sent to northern Russia and Siberia. There, they joined British and French troops fighting against the insurgent Bolshevik army, or "Red Army," in the Russian Civil War. This intervention was unsuccessful, and the Bolsheviks went on to win the Russian Civil War by 1920.

The War at Home

While World War I was fought overseas, it brought dramatic changes to life on the home front. The U.S. government expanded its power to manage the economy, limit dissent, and shape public opinion through propaganda campaigns, rationing, and new federal agencies.

Freedom of Speech, Espionage, and Sedition

The 1917 Espionage Act and the 1918 Sedition Act were U.S. wartime laws that targeted dissent and, in the case of the Espionage Act, potential German spies. The Sedition Act, which targeted and censored free speech most directly, was repealed in 1921. However, many portions of the Espionage Act remain the law today.

Since World War I, the Espionage Act has sometimes been used to prosecute people suspected of spying. It was used in the 1950s to help convict Americans Julius and Ethel Rosenberg of "conspiracy to commit espionage" by selling nuclear secrets to the Soviet Union. It has also been used more recently to prosecute people who leak sensitive information related to national defense. Conviction for this crime requires proving that the information could harm the United States or help its enemies. In one well-known 1973 case, defense analyst Daniel Ellsberg was accused of giving classified Vietnam War–related documents, known as the Pentagon Papers, to national publications. The attorney general cited the Espionage Act as a law giving the federal government power to halt the information's publication. The Supreme Court ultimately ruled on the case and allowed newspapers to publish the material. Charges against Ellsberg were later dismissed.

In the 1919 *Schenck* (/skenk/) *v. United States* case, the general secretary of the Socialist Party was convicted of violating the Espionage Act by distributing anti-draft pamphlets. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes introduced the "clear and present danger" test when he wrote the Supreme Court's opinion. The test has since been used in several Supreme Court cases to determine whether speech is protected by the First Amendment. Note that the court's understanding of the precedent has changed over the years.

Louisiana and World War I

The state of Louisiana provided around seventy thousand to eighty thousand members of the U.S. armed forces in World War I. Camp Beauregard, a National Guard facility near Alexandria, Louisiana, was expanded and used as a training ground for soldiers during the summer and fall of 1918 as the AEF prepared to serve on the Western Front. Members of the 39th Infantry Division, including soldiers from Louisiana, Arkansas, and Mississippi, trained at Camp Beauregard.

Like other states across the country, Louisiana saw many cases of draft evasion during World War I. In 1918, Louisiana's governor enforced a "work or fight" order, echoing the national directive from the Selective Service. It required all draft-eligible men to either enlist in the military or take up a job deemed essential on the home front. While this order applied to men of all backgrounds, in the South, it was often enforced in racially discriminatory ways. White authorities frequently used it to push African American men into menial, underpaid labor, limiting their opportunities and reinforcing existing racial inequalities.

Despite conflict over the draft, Louisiana and the city of New Orleans showed support for the war effort. The mayor of New Orleans canceled carnival celebrations in 1918 due to the ongoing war, and New Orleans held a Liberty loan parade instead. (These parades were held in cities across the nation to encourage Liberty bond purchases.) National anti-German sentiment led to a 1918 renaming of New Orleans's Berlin Street to General Pershing Street, honoring the commander of the AEF. After the war, the New Orleans Victory Arch, constructed in the Ninth Ward, became the United States' first permanent memorial to World War I. The arch includes plaques bearing the names of Ninth Ward residents who served in the war.

After the War

By 1918, citizens in both Germany and Austria-Hungary were openly rebelling against the demands of the war. These rebellions would weaken the governments of the two strongest Central powers. German revolutionaries, including members of the military and the working class, demanded an end to the war as part of their November 1918 revolt. The loss of popular support, in addition to mounting military losses, helped trigger the German and Austro-Hungarian surrender. Subsequent decisions by U.S. and world leaders shaped a postwar peace—one that was inevitably fragile and failed to prevent a second global conflict.

Changes in Postwar Europe

The war redrew the map of Europe significantly. It ended the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and the German Empire, replacing the latter with the German Weimar Republic. The Allies, hoping to weaken the Central powers, supported independent statehood for nationalist groups within these powers' empires. The Treaty of Versailles, along with additional postwar treaties, set these new boundaries. Leaders attempted to make national borders reflect ethnic and cultural populations, but nationalist conflict and territorial disputes persisted. The treaty also created the League of Nations, an international organization intended to promote peace and prevent future wars.

- Germany lost portions of its territory to France, Belgium, Denmark, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. Some former German territories came under temporary control of the League of Nations, including the coal-rich Saar region.
- France regained Alsace-Lorraine from Germany.
- Austria proclaimed itself an independent republic after the Austro-Hungarian Empire was broken up by the Treaty of St. Germain in 1919. Hungary proclaimed itself an independent republic and broke from Austria, and its borders were set later by the Treaty of Trianon. Both Austria and Hungary lost territory.

- Poland was restored as an independent nation after having been partitioned in the eighteenth century.
- Yugoslavia emerged as a multiethnic nation-state with many southern Slavs and included the states of Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia and parts of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire and Ottoman Empire.
- Czechoslovakia emerged as a nation-state that combined people of Czech and Slovak ancestry. It included parts of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, including the Sudetenland, a region near the Sudeten mountain range with a predominantly German-speaking population. Although the Sudetenland had not been part of Germany, its ethnic composition became an ongoing source of tension between Germany and Czechoslovakia after the war. In 1938, the region received international attention when British, French, and Italian leaders attempted to appease Adolf Hitler by allowing Germany to annex the territory through the Munich Agreement.
- Romania doubled in size with territory gained from the former Austro-Hungarian Empire.
- Italy also gained territory from the former Austro-Hungarian Empire.
- The Ottoman Empire, which was among the Central powers, had much of its territory redistributed among the French and the British. Turkey, the center of the empire, was reduced to three hundred thousand square miles (777,000 sq km). The empire dissolved in 1922.
- Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Finland became independent from Russian rule.

The Russian Revolutions of 1917

World War I strained long-standing problems in Russia to the breaking point, sparking two revolutions in the same year. By early 1917, many Russians had lost faith in Czar Nicholas II. He was widely seen as a reluctant and ineffective ruler, and his government was plagued by corruption. His decision to take direct command of the Russian army in 1915 left the home government in the hands of his wife, Alexandra, whose German heritage fueled rumors, encouraged by the press, that she was a German spy. Her reliance on the mystic Grigori Rasputin further eroded public trust. The war revealed how ill-equipped, poorly supplied, and poorly led the Russian military was, and severe food and fuel shortages deepened the crisis at home.

The first revolution, in March 1917 (February on the Russian calendar), began with strikes and riots in Petrograd (formerly St. Petersburg) over bread shortages. When soldiers in the city's garrison mutinied and joined the protesters, Czar Nicholas II was forced to abdicate. He and his family were placed under house arrest. A provisional government, led initially by Prince Georgy Yevgenyevich Lvov and later by Aleksandr Kerensky, took power, but it faced competition from the Petrograd Soviet—an influential council of workers' and soldiers' deputies.

The provisional government attempted to continue Russia's involvement in World War I, a decision that proved deeply unpopular. Across the country, local soviets formed, and radical factions—particularly the Bolsheviks, a Marxist group led by Vladimir Lenin—gained influence by promising "peace, land, and bread." The Bolsheviks argued that Russia's problems could only be solved by overthrowing the ruling class of nobles, large landowners, and capitalists and transferring power to workers and peasants. Workers wanted higher wages and control of factories, and peasants demanded redistribution of land from landlords to those who farmed it. These demands gave the revolution its character as a struggle against the old ruling class and for a new social order led by the working masses. In November 1917 (October on the Russian calendar), the Bolsheviks overthrew the provisional government in Petrograd in a nearly bloodless coup known as the October Revolution.

Once in power, Lenin and the Bolsheviks declared a "dictatorship of the proletariat," meaning a government in the name of the working class, though in practice it became a one-party Bolshevik dictatorship. They withdrew Russia from the war by signing the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918. The treaty ceded vast territories—including Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia—to the Central powers while recognizing the independence of Ukraine, Finland, and Georgia (though many of these areas would later be reconquered by the Bolsheviks).

The Bolsheviks moved the capital from Petrograd to Moscow, and in July 1918, they secretly executed the czar and his family in Yekaterinburg. Opposition forces—collectively known as the White Army and including monarchists, liberals, and anti-Bolshevik socialists—rose against them. From 1918 to 1921 (with some fighting continuing until 1922), the Bolshevik Red Army fought and ultimately defeated these forces in a brutal civil war marked by famine, disease, and mass repression.

By the end of the conflict, the Bolsheviks had consolidated control over most of the former Russian Empire. In December 1922, they formally established the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.), creating a centralized, one-party communist state under Lenin's leadership—a regime that would soon take on the features of a totalitarian system.

Settling War Debts

The payment of German war reparations became an issue that required international diplomacy throughout the early twentieth century. Allied leaders most likely did not expect Germany to pay the entire debt—economists warned them that collecting this much debt would threaten international financial stability. In Germany, the reparations led to internal economic chaos and inflation, and the country was struggling to make payments within a few years.

In 1923, an international committee headed by U.S. financier Charles Dawes met to reset the terms of German payment. The plan the committee came up with, called the Dawes Plan, reduced Germany's annual payments and placed them on a sliding scale that would increase as the German economy improved. Foreign banks, including U.S. banks, agreed to loan Germany money. While the Dawes Plan was a short-term success, it was not a long-term solution, as Germany had to rely on foreign loans to make its payments. A 1929 revision called the Young Plan reduced the total amount Germany owed, but the worldwide Great Depression soon threatened Germany's ability to repay even the reduced amount. Germany did not make its final World War I reparations payments until 2010.

Another international debt issue occupied the world's powers in the years after World War I. Allied countries had accepted more than $10 billion in wartime loans from U.S. banks, and the United States wanted repayment. But these repayments proved out of reach in most countries' struggling postwar economies. While the Dawes Plan was being negotiated, Allied leaders offered to reduce the German debt if the United States would forgive the debt owed to it by Allied nations. Otherwise, these nations would need reparation payments from Germany to afford to pay the United States back. However, U.S. leadership refused to either accept this offer or cancel the debt owed to the United States. By 1933, most Allied debtor countries had defaulted on repaying their U.S. loans. The dilemma showed the interdependence between global economies as well as the United States' economic power.

Germany's Postwar Government

After its prewar government collapsed, Germany elected a national assembly and president in 1919 and drew up a constitution for a democratic republic. This government, the Weimar Republic, lasted until Hitler came to power in 1933.

Between 1919 and 1933, the Treaty of Versailles underwent changes, mostly in Germany's favor. The Allies had planned to allow Germany to join the League of Nations if Germany showed it could meet its international obligations and achieve stability. In 1926, Germany was granted membership; in 1933, Hitler would withdraw the country. Resentment toward the treaty, combined with global economic depression and its effects on Germany, helped Hitler gain support for his German nationalist program in the early 1930s. In 1936, Hitler remilitarized the Rhineland area of Germany, violating the Treaty of Versailles, which specifically required the Rhineland to remain a demilitarized zone. The League of Nations did not take significant action to stop Hitler, leading many observers to believe that the Treaty of Versailles would not be enforced.

President Wilson's Postwar Goals

Even before the United States entered the war, President Wilson envisioned how U.S. leadership could guide the world afterward. In January 1917, Wilson gave a speech to Congress that promoted "a peace without victory." He argued that if the war was only being fought to create "a new balance of power," it would not result in lasting global peace, only in winners and forced losers. Instead, Wilson wanted "a community of power" and "an organized common peace."

Wilson's Fourteen Points included changes he believed would bring this peace about, including self-determined nation-states in Europe. However, the specifics of his "adjustment of all colonial claims" were likely aimed at reducing the Central powers' empires, not those of the Allied powers (which also had large global influences beyond Europe). And despite the Fourteen Points' apparent support for colonized people's independence, Wilson did not recommend independence for most colonized areas in Asia and Africa.

The League of Nations was part of Wilson's postwar vision as early as 1916. That year, he spoke about a potential international "community of power" that would replace the current system of competing world powers. Both candidates in the 1916 presidential campaign supported such an association of nations. After the Senate rejected the Treaty of Versailles and the Covenant of the League of Nations in 1919 and U.S. senator Henry Cabot Lodge proposed treaty amendments, Wilson was determined to gather enough public support to change senators' minds. He began a cross-country speaking tour in September 1919, giving speeches that addressed objections to the treaty and explained his goals for joining the League of Nations. After giving thirty-nine speeches in three weeks, Wilson collapsed and was forced to cut the tour short. Soon afterward, he suffered a debilitating stroke. Wilson's poor health put him at a disadvantage in negotiations, as did his resistance to compromise with Lodge.

The League of Nations

The League of Nations itself was an unprecedented organization. The concept of international collective security was new—or at least much more important—to global diplomacy after World War I. The nonparticipation of the United States and the implicit lack of U.S. military and diplomatic support in case of a crisis threatened the league's ability to ensure collective security. U.S. nonparticipation also impacted the league's plan to impose economic sanctions against aggressive nations or nations that waged war. Sanctions would be ineffective if the United States, the world's greatest economic power, did not impose them.

While the United States did not formally join the league, many U.S. leaders worked with the league at times to achieve shared goals. The League of Nations only lasted twenty-six years, from 1920 to 1946. It was formally dissolved after World War II. The United Nations took its place, inheriting league agencies and tasks and this time including the United States among its members. Whether and to what extent the League of Nations failed as an organization, given that it did not prevent a second world war, remains a subject of debate.