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# What Were the Underlying Causes of World War I?

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A Document Based Question (DBQ)  
World History

## STUDENT GUIDE SHEET

### What Were the Underlying Causes of World War I?

**Directions:** Over a four-year period from 1914 to 1918 Europe was beset by one of the most terrible wars in human history. This DBQ asks why such a catastrophe took place.

**It is suggested that you follow these steps:**

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1. Read the Background Essay.
2. Skim through the 11 documents to get a sense of what they are about.
3. Read the documents slowly. In the margin or on a Document Analysis Sheet record the main idea of each document.
4. Organize the documents by analytical category. Given the question, it would make sense for documents to be organized into cause categories. Initial documents might provide context.
5. Drawing from the documents, clearly state how each cause candidate contributed to the war.
6. Prioritize the causes and explain your priorities.

#### The Documents:

- Document 1: Emile Zola and the Reason for War, 1891
- Document 2: French, British and German Optimism on the Eve of War
- Document 3: European Alliances, 1914 (map)
- Document 4: "The Crime of the Ages" (cartoon)
- Document 5: Russian National Anthem and "Rule Britannia"
- Document 6: The Black Hand Supports War Between Serbia and Austria, 1912
- Document 7: Growth in Armaments, 1890-1914 (chart)
- Document 8: "The hammer or the anvil," 1899
- Document 9: "The Fool and His Folly," 1913 (cartoon)
- Document 10: The British Octopus (cartoon)
- Document 11: Colonial Possessions (map and chart)

## What Were the Underlying Causes of World War I?

### Introduction

At the turn of the 20th century Europe was feeling pretty darned good! True, it was the smallest continent in the world, but it controlled vast empires that circled the globe. The standard of living for the average person was high. European technology was unsurpassed. Even its culture of art and music were the envy of the rest of the world. In 1900 Europeans believed the world was their oyster.

But this feeling was not to last. By the end of 1918, after four long years of war, European confidence was badly shaken. Ten million soldiers had died on the battle fields and in the military hospitals; another twenty million soldiers had been wounded. Empires that had lasted for centuries lay in tatters. Writers wrote of broken dreams. Europe had entered the Great War riding on a song. Now, in November of 1918, no one was singing. What had gone wrong?

### Creating a Balance of Power

In the late 19th century European leaders believed that by creating a balance of power they could prevent large-scale war. The idea was that if the major powers of Europe — countries like England, France, Russia, and Germany — were balanced in strength, no one country could dominate the rest.

Otto von Bismarck, the Chancellor of Prussia who led the unification of the German states, had a special stake in peace because Germany was sandwiched between Russia and France. The last thing Bismarck wanted was to fight a war on two fronts. His solution was to make an alliance with at least one of these

nations. This proved to be difficult to do. When negotiations failed, he developed an alliance with Austria-Hungary and Italy, which became known as the **Triple Alliance**. In response, France and Russia and Great Britain formed an alliance known as the **Triple Entente**.

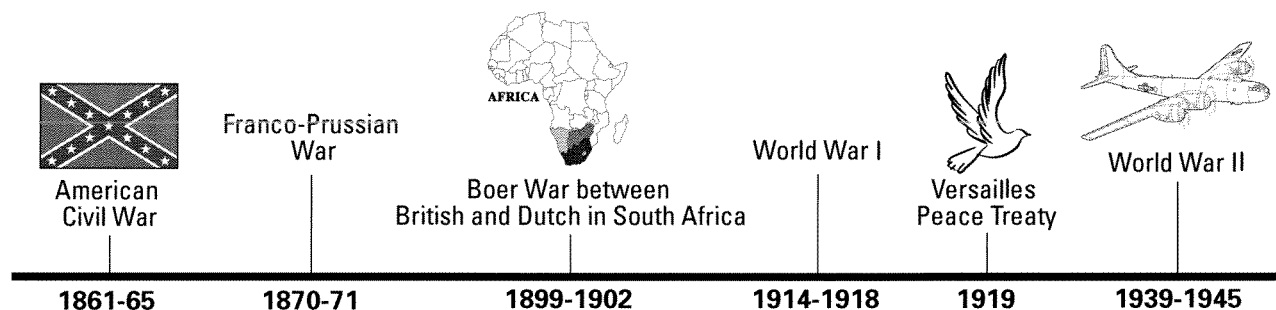
### Tensions Build

On the surface, these alliances could be seen as a way to maintain the balance of power and thereby preserve peace. But suspicions ran high. Political and military leaders spent countless hours developing plans in case a war might break out. Countries built up their arms adding ships, guns, and men to their arsenals

The tension between countries was matched by tension within countries. Especially in south-eastern Europe, in an area known as the Balkans, the spirit of nationalism and independence ran high. Some ethnic groups revolted. Two large powers, Austria-Hungary and Russia, stood by to collect the pieces. The region was a powder keg. All it lacked was a spark to set it off.

### The Spark

Otto von Bismarck had predicted in the late 1800s that “some damned foolish thing in the Balkans” would ignite the next big war. In June, 1914, the Archduke Francis Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, visited Sarajevo. At that time, Sarajevo belonged to Austria-Hungary. Seven assassins had been sent to Sarajevo to kill the Archduke by the Serbian nationalist group, the Black Hand. The Black Hand wanted all the Serb people to be in one nation. And it wanted Austria-Hungary out.



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On the morning of June 28, the Archduke's car was instructed to take an unannounced route, but the driver of the car got confused and drove down a main road where Gavrilo Princip, one of



the Serbian assassins, happened to be walking. Princip was unmarried, unemployed and afflicted with tuberculosis; he expected to die in a year or two. As the car stopped to turn around, Gavrilo Princip shot and killed the Archduke and his wife.

### Chain Reaction

The Black Hand assassins hoped to use the killing to trigger a rebellion that would lead to a larger Serbian nation. But they triggered a lot more than that. The Austrian government was furious at the assassination. They blamed the Serbian government for not controlling groups like the Black Hand. On July 5, an Austrian ambassador met with the Kaiser of Germany. The ambassador got what he hoped for – a promise of full support.

One thing quickly led to another.

- On July 23 Austrian leaders demanded apologies from Serbia.
- On July 24 an angry Serbia sought help from Russia, and received a promise of support if Austria were to attack.

- On July 28 with no further response from the Serbian leaders, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia.
- In the next several days:

Russia declared war on  
Austria-Hungary,  
▼  
Germany declared war on Russia,  
▼  
France declared war on Germany and  
Austria-Hungary,  
▼  
Britain joined France and Russia.  
▼  
Europe was at war!

Four long years and ten million lives later, Europe looked for answers. What should be blamed? Who should be punished? What had been the cause of this catastrophe?

### About Causes and the Question

A useful way to think about causes in history is to see the difference between **immediate** and **underlying causes**. Take, for example, the causes of the American Civil War. Historians generally agree that the immediate cause of the Civil War was the decision by South Carolina soldiers to start firing on federal troops at Fort Sumter. However, historians do not believe that Fort Sumter explains why the Civil War was fought. For that one has to look for deeper, underlying causes like slavery, or the South's right to secede from the Union.

This DBQ is concerned with identifying deeper causes. Examine the eleven documents that follow and answer the analytical question before us: *What were the underlying causes of World War I?*

## Document 1

**Source:** Emile Zola, French writer, 1891, in James Joll, *The Origins of the First World War*, New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1992.

Would not the end of war be the end of humanity? War is life itself. Nothing exists in nature, is born, grows or multiplies except by combat. We must eat and be eaten so that the world may live. It is only warlike nations which have prospered; a nation dies as soon as it disarms. War is the school of discipline, sacrifice and courage.

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## Document 2

**Source:** A French citizen, 1912, in James Joll, *The Origins of the First World War*, New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1992.

How many times in the last two years have we heard people repeat "Better war than this perpetual waiting!" In this wish there is no bitterness, but a secret hope.

**Source:** Bertrand Russell, British philosopher, in James Joll, *The Origins of the First World War*, New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1992.

I spent the evening (of August 3, 1914) walking round the streets, especially in the neighbourhood of Trafalgar Square, noticing cheering crowds, and making myself sensitive to the emotions of passersby. During this and the following days I discovered to my amazement that average men and women were delighted at the prospect of war.

**Source:** Kaiser Wilhelm II, to departing troops in the first week of August, 1914, in Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Guns of August*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1994.

You will be home before the leaves have fallen from the trees.

Document 3

Source: Map created from various sources.

European Alliances, 1914

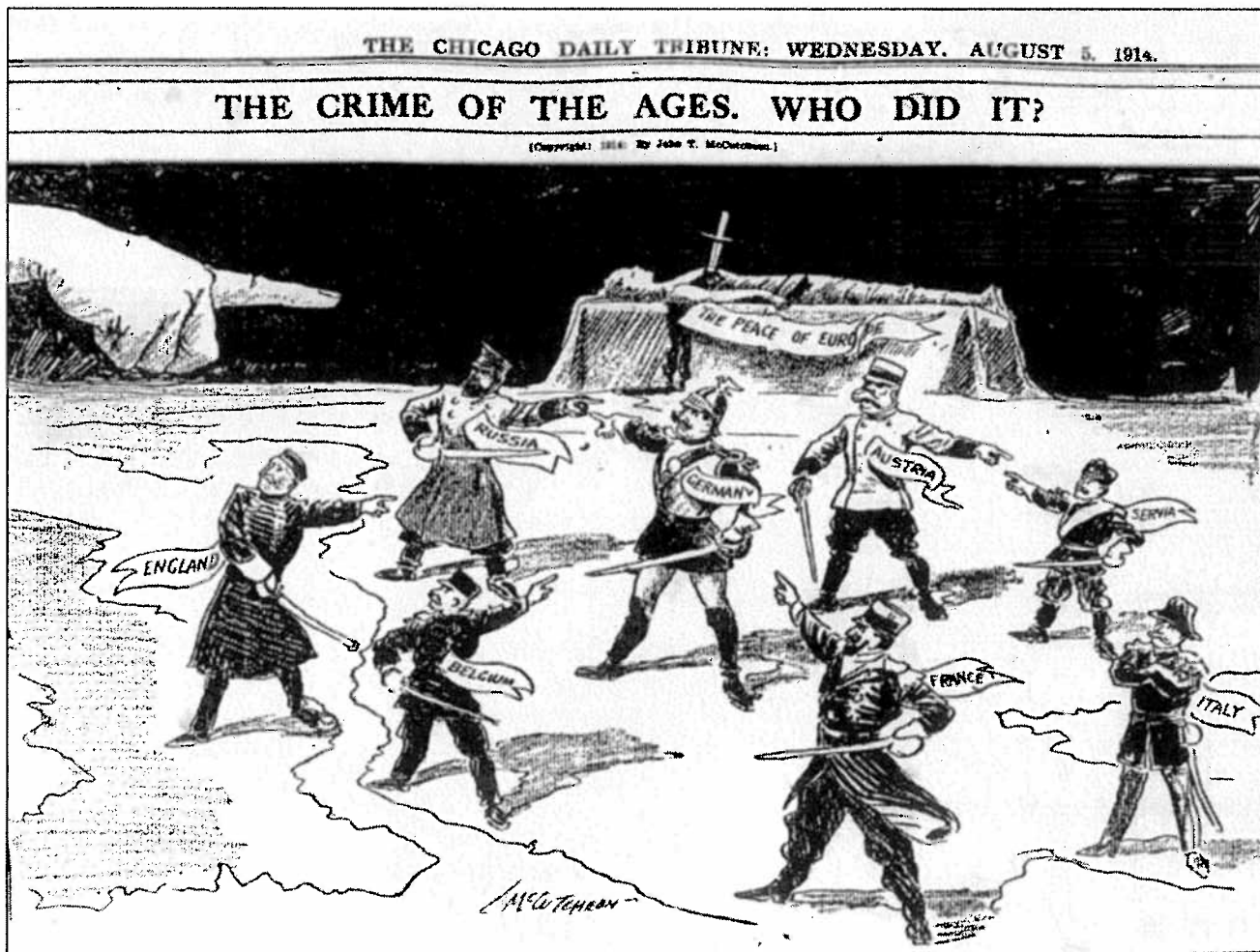
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Document 4

Source: John T. McCutcheon, cartoonist, *Chicago Tribune*, August 5, 1914.

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## Document 5

**Source:** Russian National Anthem, 1833-1917. Composed by Prince A. V. Lvov, winner of a contest, with lyrics by Vasily Zhukovsky (English translation).

### God Save The Tsar!

God save the noble Tsar!  
Long may he live, in power,  
In happiness,  
In peace to reign!  
Dread of his enemies,  
Faith's sure defender,  
God save the Tsar!  
(repeat previous three lines)

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**Source:** Poem written by James Thomson, a Scottish poet, and put to music in 1740 by Thomas Arne. Unofficial national anthem of Great Britain (excerpted lyrics).

### Rule Britannia

When Britain first at Heaven's command  
Arose from out the azure main;  
This was the charter of the land,  
And guardian angels sang this strain;

Rule Britannia! Britannia, rule the waves:  
Britons never will be slaves.

The nations not so blest as thee,  
Shall in their turns to tyrants fall;  
While thou shalt flourish great and free,  
The dread and envy of them all.

Rule, Britannia! Britannia, rule the waves:  
Britons never will be slaves.



Document 6

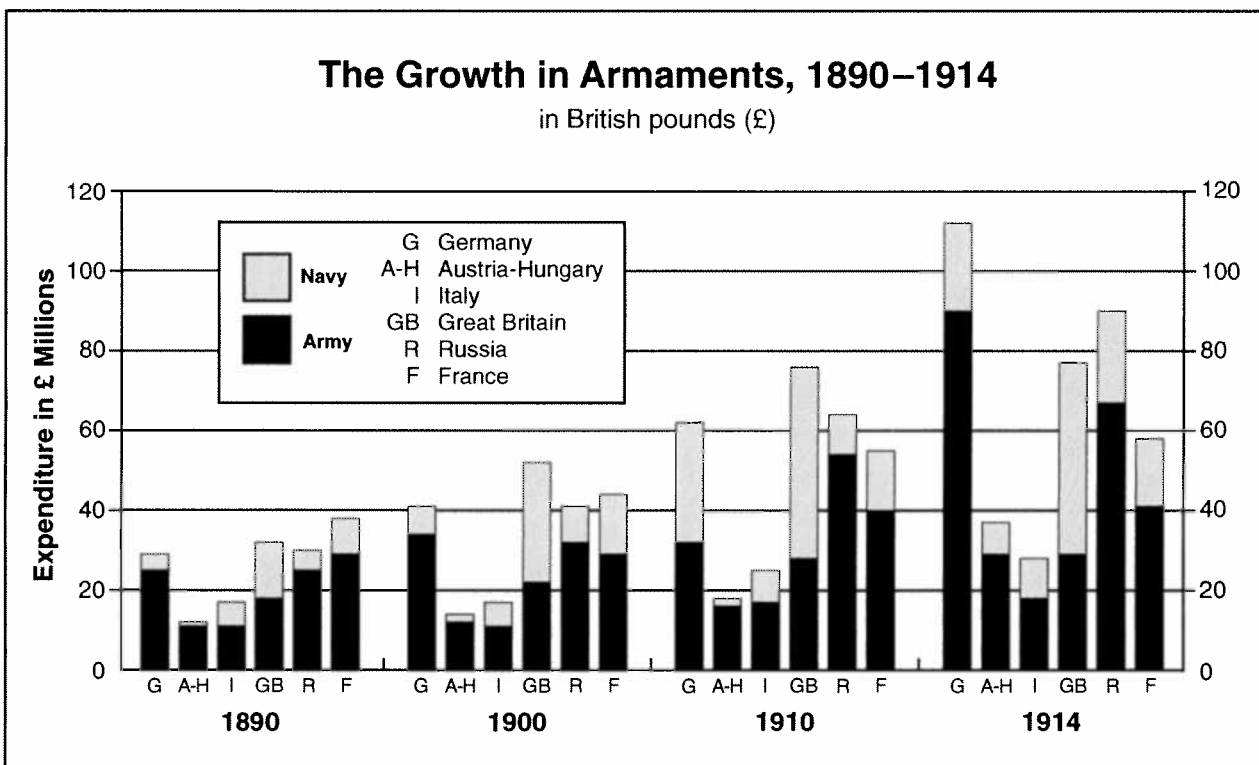
**Source:** Newspaper run by Colonel Dragutin Dimitrevic, head of Serbian military intelligence and founder of the secret society, "Union or Death" (called "The Black Hand" by its opponents), 1912, in James Joll, *The Origins of the First World War*, New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1992.

The war between Serbia and Austria ... is inevitable. If Serbia wants to live in honor, she can only do this by war. This war is determined by our obligation to our traditions and the world of culture. This war derives from the duty of our race which will not permit itself to be assimilated. This war must bring about the eternal freedom of Serbia, of the South Slavs, of the Balkan peoples. Our whole race must stand together to halt the onslaught of these aliens from the north.

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Document 7

**Source:** Adapted from *The London Times History of the World*, new edition edited by Richard Overy, 1999.



**Note:** By 1914 the Entente Powers could field 2.23 million men, Germany and Austria-Hungary 1.2 million.

## Document 8

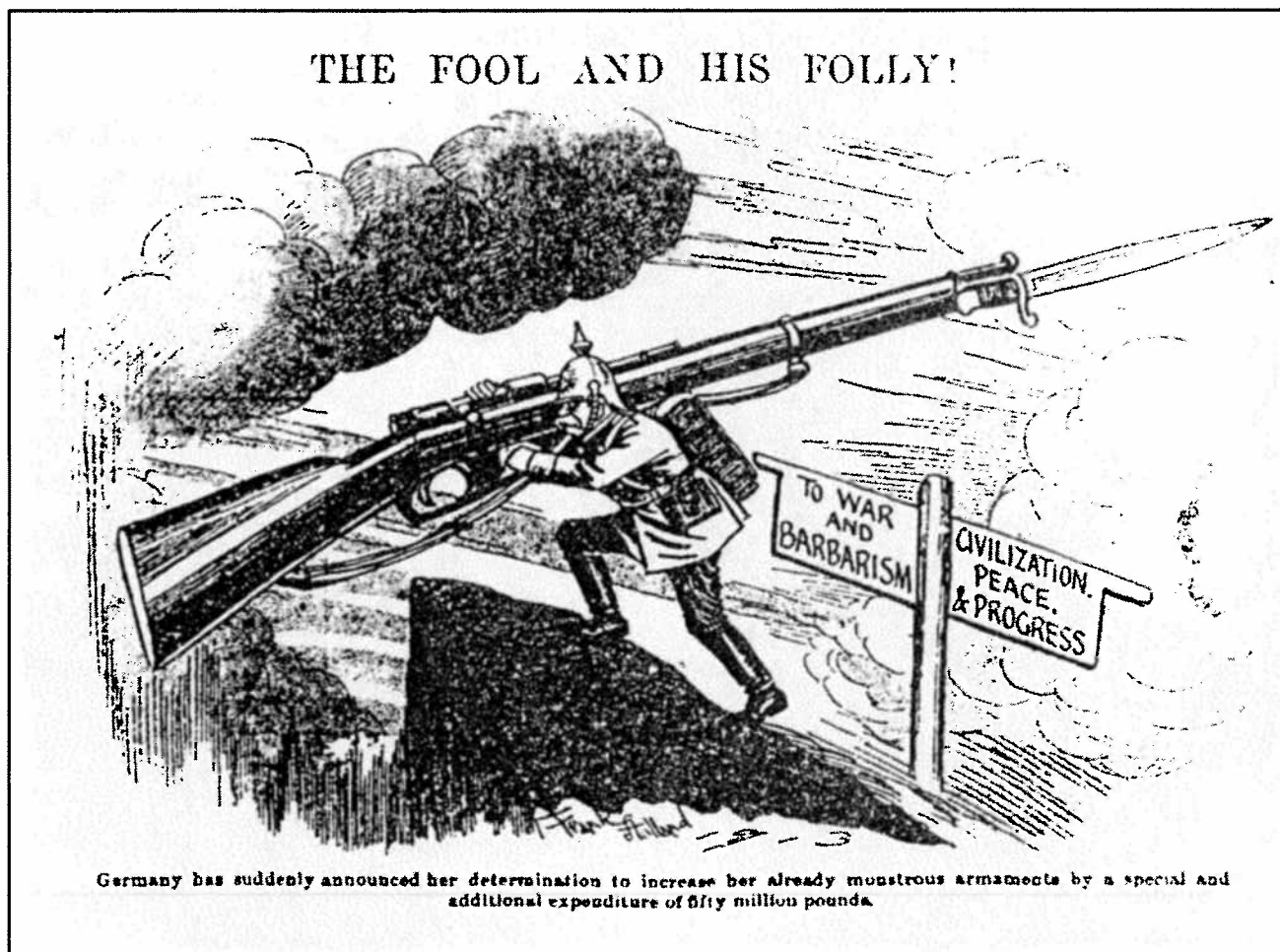
Source: From James Joll, *The Origins of the First World War*, New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1992.

*Prince Bernhard von Bulow, German Chancellor, speech to the Reichstag  
December 11, 1899*

...we realize that without power, without a strong army and a strong navy, there can be no welfare for us. The means of fighting the battle for existence in this world without strong armaments on land and water, for a nation soon to count sixty millions, living in the centre of Europe and at the same time stretching out its economic feelers in all directions, have not yet been found. In the coming century the German nation will be either the hammer or the anvil.

## Document 9

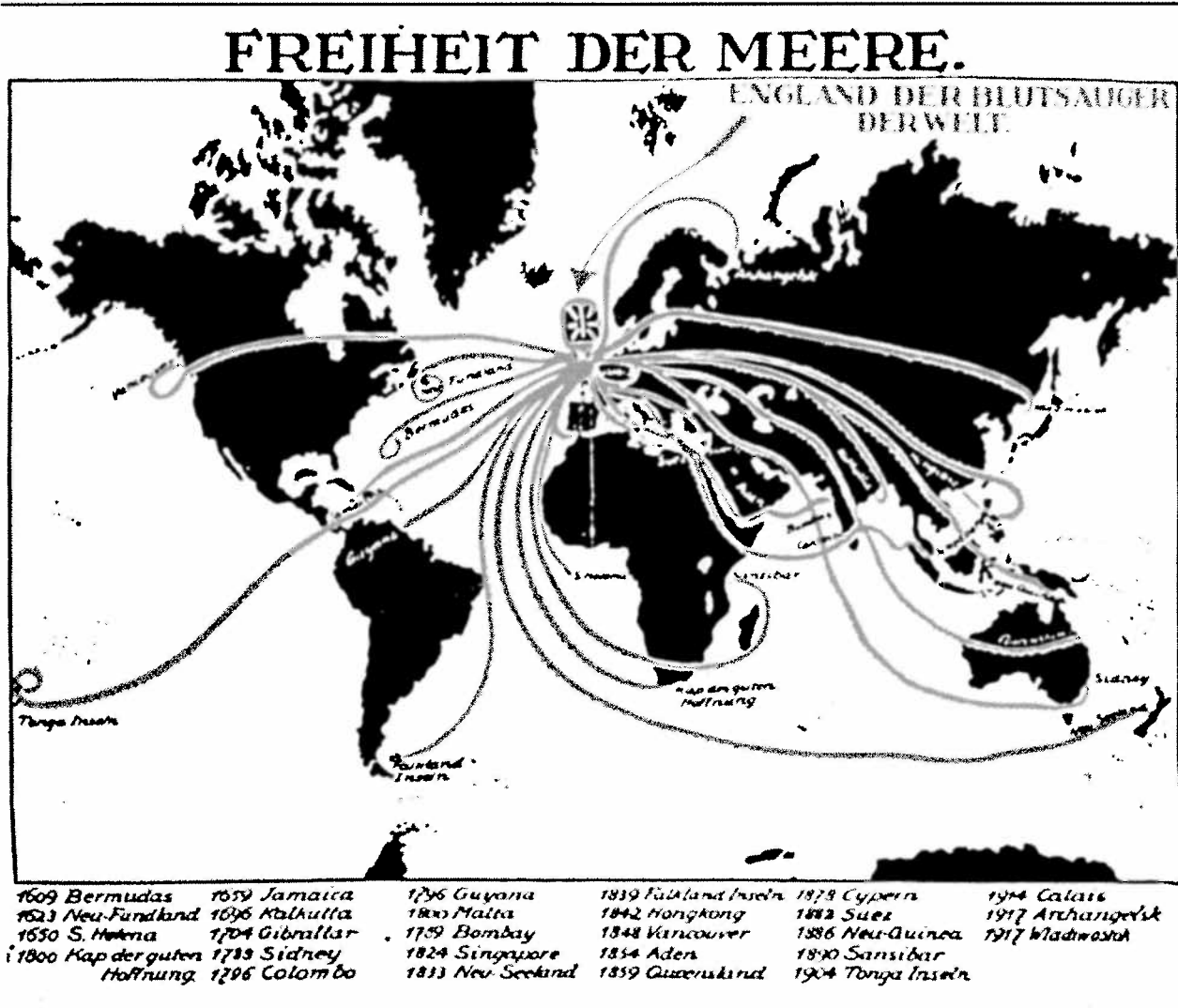
Source: *Reynold's Newspaper*, London, March 9, 1913.



Document 10

Source: German propaganda cartoon, 1917, GE104A, Poster Collection, Hoover Institution Archives.

The British Octopus



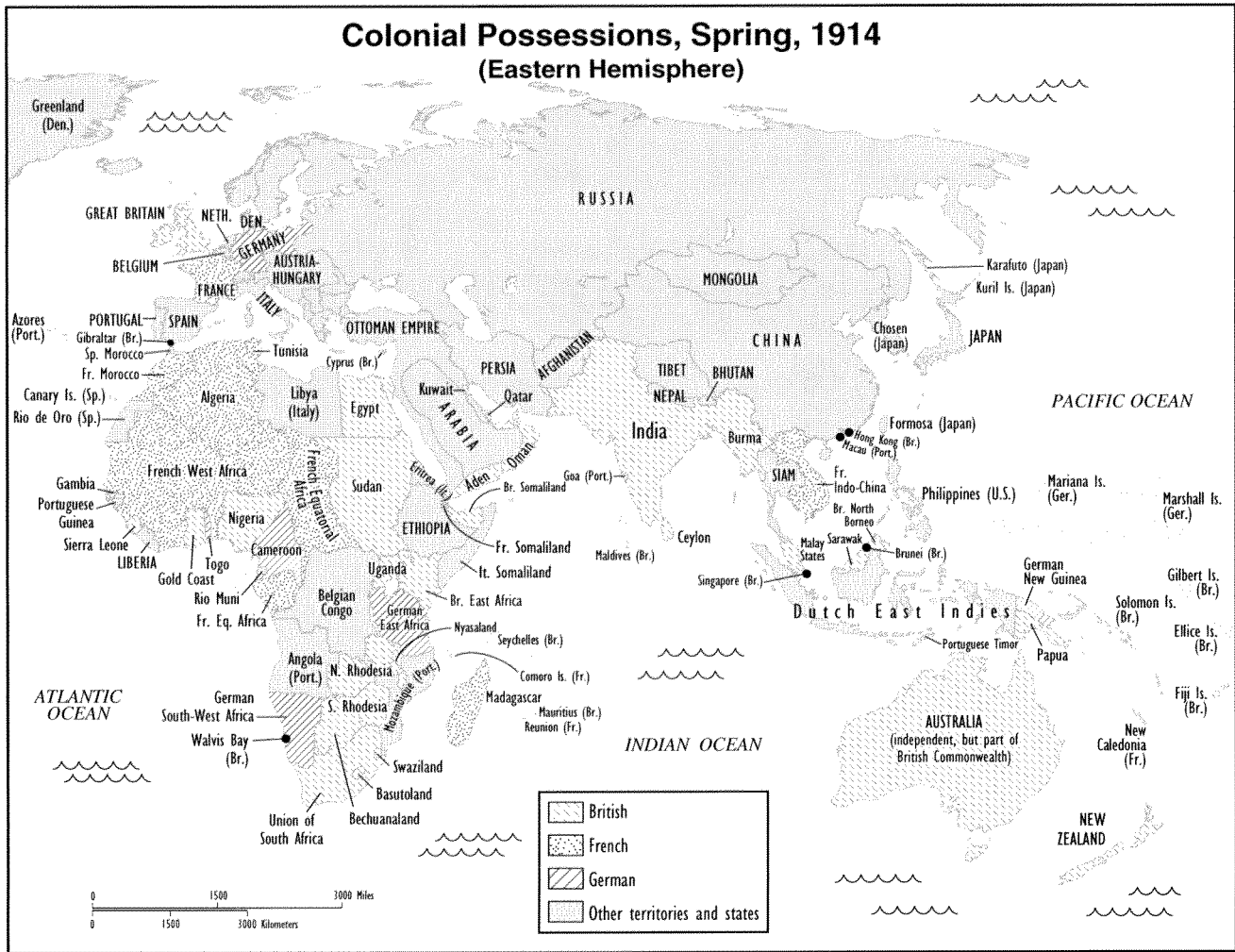
Freiheit Der Meere = Freedom of the Seas

England Der Blutsauger der Welt = England is the Bloodsucker of the World

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Document 11

Source: Map created from various sources.



Source: Colin Nicolson, *The First World War, Europe 1914-1918*, Essex, England: Pearson Education Limited, 2001.

Size of Colonial Empires in 1913		
	Area (sq. km.)	Population of Colonies
Britain	33,000,000	400,000,000
France	11,500,000	56,000,000
Germany	2,950,000	12,000,000
Belgium	2,400,000	15,500,000
Portugal	2,100,000	7,000,000
Holland	2,000,000	38,000,000
Italy	1,500,000	1,600,000
USA	324,000	10,000,000
Japan	300,000	17,000,000
Spain	250,000	700,000
Austria-Hungary	0	0
Russia	0	0