**OVERVIEW: IMPERIALISM**

European powers had been interested in acquiring overseas possessions since the 1500s, and colonization of foreign lands had also been occurring since that time, but in the latter half of the 19th century, the character of such enterprises changed. Spurred by developments ranging from the Industrial Revolution to new strains of nationalism, European powers in this period embarked upon a furious quest to control as much of the world as possible. Nineteenth-century imperialism differed from earlier colonialism in that European nations were more interested in gaining exclusive access to an area’s resources than in obtaining land for settlements. By 1900, Europe and the United States controlled more than 90% of Africa, more than 50% of Asia, and nearly all of Polynesia. Many factors contributed to this race for empire.

**RACISM / ETHNOCENTRISM**

Europeans had long considered themselves superior to the “darker peoples” of the world – intellectually, culturally, and spiritually. European civilization was regarded as the ideal toward which all other peoples should aspire. Thus, many Europeans justified imperialism by claiming that they had a duty to “civilize” all the “primitive” peoples. These “primitives” were seen as being at a much lower level on the evolutionary scale; be being able to learn from the examples set by the imperialists who came and grabbed control of their lands, they would be able to “advance” more quickly and be delivered from what Europeans saw as ignorance, paganism, poverty, filth, and overall “backwardness.”

**ECONOMICS**

The Industrial Revolution had begun the process that would transform Europe from a subsistence economy to a market economy. Technological innovations had led to the factory system, which in turn led to an increase in the production of goods. Many feared that demand in European countries would not be enough to buy up all these products, and that if new markets were not found, overproduction would ensue and quickly lead to economic crisis. Thus, one strain of the economic push toward imperialism was a search for new consumers. Another strain involved the idea that Europe had a limited supply of raw materials to keep economies humming along. Imperialism thus would be the means to secure access to these raw materials.

**THE MISSIONARY IMPULSE**

In addition to colonizing the globe, Europeans for hundreds of years had also been sending Christian missionaries to distant regions to “save” the souls of “pagan” indigenous peoples. While initially carried out by priests under the supervision of the Church, by the 19th century the job of proselytizing and converting had shifted largely to civilian charity groups who were often more interested in spreading European civilization and incorporating indigenous peoples into a European economic system than in merely saving souls. These groups helped provide an important intellectual component of pro-imperialist arguments by reshaping ideas of Christian salvation so that they dovetailed nicely with imperialist goals.

**NATIONALISM**

The political landscape of the European continent had undergone some significant changes by the last half of the 19th century. In some countries, monarchies had either fallen or ceded much of their power to the military and/or legislative bodies. Allegiance to a king or queen ceased to be the most important factor in binding the people of a country together; instead, the main unifying force became the idea that people of each nation possessed a unique character that should not only be celebrated within the nation, but recognized and respected by other nations as well. In addition, the French Revolution had opened a Pandora ’s Box and given “common people” throughout Europe notions of someday gaining political say in the running of their countries. The 1830s and 1840s witnessed a growing discontent that culminated in revolutions in several European countries in 1848. Later, two major unification movements occurred, creating the nations of Germany and Italy out of what had been loose agglomerations of semi-independent states. New wellsprings of national pride thus sprang up as the lower classes became aware of their political might. Finally, technological innovations of the Industrial Revolution had led to major improvements in weaponry, and many were itching to flex new military muscle.

Imperialism provided an outlet for both nationalism and militarism. If a nation could increase its imperial possessions, it would elevate the standing of all its citizens among the peoples of Europe. New military might could be used not only to subdue indigenous peoples and gain control of their lands, but also to keep other European nations from gaining control of those lands. Thus began the “Great Game” of imperialism, in which European nations acted as if the one who ended up with the most imperial possessions would “win.”

**IMPERIALISM AND THE BUILD UP TO WORLD WAR I**

By 1900, European nations were locked in an ill-defined competition marked by tension, distrust, and military buildups. The possibility of armed conflict breaking out over imperial possessions became very real, and nations began to form alliances in case war did come. Meanwhile, nationalism became even more virulent in some regions, and many people reached the point where they actually wanted war to come so that their nationalist goals could be achieved. The combination of increasing militarism, strident nationalism, and entangling alliances created a powder keg that would eventually be set off with the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914, and years of cold hatred would flare up and produce the first truly global conflict.