

Brief for Melvyn Bragg podcast

The legacy of the British empire in the 20th and 21st century.

The debate for this podcast is whether the legacy of the British Empire is as influential on the world during the 20th and 21st century as it appears to be. There are three key themes which show the effect of the British empire these are the commonwealth an organisation still alive today formed primarily of old British colonies, as well as whether the empire caused world war one and two. They are all caused to some degree by the legacy of the British Empire, however, there are other factors which caused the formation of these events. The aim of this podcast is to debate whether the legacy of the British Empire caused the formation of the commonwealth and the beginnings of two world wars.

Key historians are highlighted in this colour

Debate is highlighted in this colour

• **Commonwealth**

○ Background

- The Commonwealth of Nations is an organisation of 54 sovereign states. Many of the members of the Commonwealth were territories which had historically come under British rule at various times by settlement, conquest or cession.
- The Commonwealth was first officially formed in 1926 when the Balfour Declaration of the Imperial Conference recognized the full sovereignty of dominions. Known as the "British Commonwealth", the original members in the beginning were the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Irish Free State, and Newfoundland.
- End of the empire was 1997 but began declining in 1945.

○ Role today

- It exists to increase international co-operation and trade links between people all over the world. They take practical action that advances towards its shared values and principles'.

○ (**Debate**) However, the formation was almost inevitable due to the nature of the alliance system shown by the League of Nations which is a similar organisation.

- However, the commonwealth was made with the intention of it being filled with the Britain current and former colonies.

• **World war 1**

○ One cause of World War I was imperialism which meant that European nations ruled smaller countries, (colonies), and they competed with each other to amass more colonies.

- The purpose of imperialism was and is to build up national wealth and influence by owning colonies.
- Both France and Britain had many colonies in Africa and Asia
- In the 1880s and 1890s, Germany and Italy decided they wanted a colonial empire too. This global competition for land caused confrontations and conflicts in many places.

- For example, Great Britain almost went to war with France and the United States during the 1880s over colonies.

○ (**Debate**) However there are other long term causes of World War 1 not just the legacy of the empire.

○ **Dhires Nathwani agrees that imperialism is the main cause for World War two "Imperialism was a cause because building an empire needs manpower such as an army and a navy to conquer and keep the land"**

that they colonised. The alliances system meant that a local conflict could easily result into an intimidating global one.”

- •Nationalism
 - Nationalism was a prominent force in early 20th century Europe and a significant cause of World War I. Nationalism is an intense form of patriotism or loyalty to one's country. Nationalists exaggerate the value or importance of their home country, placing its interests over and above those of other nations.
 - German nationalism was a new phenomenon, emerging from the unification of Germany in 1871. It became fascinated with German imperial expansion and was resentful of the British and their empire.
 - Rising nationalism was also a factor in the Balkans, where Slavic Serbs and others sought independence and autonomy from the political domination of Austria-Hungary.
 - Jennifer Llewellyn, Steve Thompson argue in their article that nationalism was the short term factor that ignited world war 1 “It was this pan-Slavic nationalism that inspired the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in June 1914, an event that led directly to the outbreak of World War I.”
- •Allied system
 - Many countries had made alliances with one other. They agreed to protect each other. If one was attacked, the others would defend them.
 - This resulted in the triple alliance and the triple Entente
- •Militarism
 - Militarism could have caused the war due to the naval and arms race. The main event of Militarism causing World War one was the naval rivalry which was made after 1900.
 - Britain had the most powerful navy in the world. The new Keiser Wilhelm announced his intention to build a bigger German navy than Britain. Britain felt very threatened by this. Germany's navy was much smaller than Britain's navy but the British army was put all over its colonies so they can be protected. Germany didn't have a big Empire like Britain but most people agreed, at the time, they were the best trained and the most powerful. The Kaiser felt he needed a bigger navy than Britain to protect its country.
 - While Britain and Germany built up their navies, the major powers on mainland Europe were also building up their armies. The problem for Germany was that if the war

broke out they would have to fight both Russia and France at the same time.

- •They came up with the shefflin plan to prevent fighting a war on two fronts.

- **World war 2**

- The Versailles Treaty forced Germany to give up territory to Belgium, Czechoslovakia and Poland, return Alsace and Lorraine to France and cede all of its overseas colonies in China, Pacific and Africa to the Allied nations.
- Historian for the treaty of Versailles being the cause of World war 2 is Michael Neiberg who says “It literally is an attempt to remake Europe,” “I’m not one of those people who believes the treaty made the Second World War inevitable, but I think you could argue that it made Europe a less stable place.”
- (*Debate*) Other factors
 - Hitler
 - He caused WW2 by his policies to reclaim the land lost as well as expand Germany into Poland and Czechoslovakia
 - A result of the treaty of Versailles
 - Simon parker argues that Hitler wasn’t the only reason the war could have happened without him but that the start of World War two was linked to Hitler. “Hitler dragged Europe back into war in 1939. That is not to definitively say that without him there would not have been a second global conflict, especially when the situation in the Far East is taken into account, but the story that did unfold is inherently bound up in the story of Hitler’s rise and his determination to build a dominating Third Reich.”
 - Appeasement
 - Neville Chamberlain kept giving Hitler what he wanted a bit of Czechoslovakia which he granted for the sake of peace but Hitler went against it and then invaded Poland. (short term causes)
 - Britain could have stopped him earlier but went with an easier course of action to avoid war but it ended up helping to cause one.
 - Failure of the league of nations
 - Japan conquered Manchuria in 1932. The League objected, but could do nothing. When the League supported China, Japan left the League.
 - Hitler announced that Germany was leaving the League in 1932.
 - Italy invaded Abyssinia in 1935. Although the League officially condemned the Italians, France and Britain were caught making a secret agreement to give Abyssinia to Italy.
 - If the League of Nations had been effective it could have kept peaceful cooperation but nations were blinded by their own greed in the pursuit of wealth and power.