

# An Introduction to 1905

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## Introduction

Thanksgiving 2019 seemed pretty ordinary in terms of events: sports seasons, school years, international crises, business mergers, the run-up to a presidential election... If you had been asked then to specify what aspects of 2019 would be deemed significant 20 or 100 years later, you might have been pretty hard pressed to come up with something. By Thanksgiving 2020, it was pretty clear that 2019 would be a landmark year in the history of the world, forever memorialized by COVID-19. We were quite quickly reminded that our assessment of "what is important?" changes over time and our ability to predict the future is pretty spotty. Similarly, how we look at the past changes. Not many people in 1919 spent much time thinking about the horrendous 1918 flu pandemic. But in 2019, many of us were looking to it for parallels and insights into our own experiences with the novel coronavirus pandemic.

In this module, we will explore some of the key events taking place in the world in 1905. They were chosen (as all the history that we study is chosen by someone for a purpose) to illustrate a moment in time and to connect that moment to larger developments in the great heap of facts, dates, people, and ideas that we call history. In particular, the events covered in this module have been chosen to highlight global connections and patterns, and to make several points about the nature of history.

## AN INTRODUCTION TO 1905

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INTRODUCTION

THE WORLD OF 1905

1905 was not the most important year in history, not even in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. You can argue about what that “most important year” might be; but it would depend mostly on your criteria for what is “important.” It might be the year with the most births or deaths. It might be the year with the biggest battles or most impactful laws. It might be the year someone came up with an idea that had big ramifications down the road. However, whatever year you might choose was almost certainly NOT recognized as being the “most important year” when it happened. As I write this, 2020 looks to be the most important year in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But, for all we know, *this* year (the year you are reading this) is the most important year and the ideas, developments, people, and battles that will resonate most decades later (let me know thirty or forty years from now). So, from one perspective, one year is as good as any another... and 1905 did have some pretty interesting and significant developments.

However, as much as you might learn about the events of 1905 (and the larger/longer trends and connections of which they were a part), the goal of this module is also to connect you to thinking about history. To do this, we will reflect not only on how people understand their lives and events at the time, but also on how they come to see later events in world history as being rooted in earlier events. We will also be asking why this one year - 1905 - was both so important and so ordinary. And finally, we will ask whether and why various events taking place in vastly different part of the world in 1905 might have something in common.

But first, let’s start with an overview of how the world looked in 1905. Then we’ll identify a few specific events of 1905 that we have chosen to look at more closely. And finally, we will consider some questions about how to make sense and use of the information and insights we will cover in this module.

## Key Terms:

Modernity



Population and Migration



Empires



Industrialization



Political Participation



Nationalism



German New Years postcard from 1905



## The World of 1905

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### *New York City Skyline, 1904*

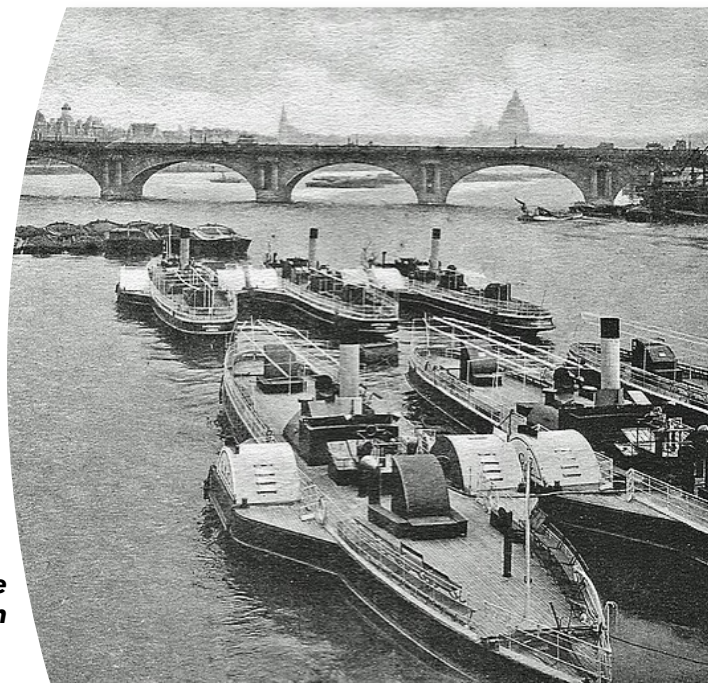
If we date the beginning of the “modern” world to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with the Age of Revolutions and the emergence of the Industrial Revolution, our year–1905–lies about half-way from then until now. These developments set in motion a remarkable set of changes across the world: We can use the word “modernity” to characterize these changes, which include:

- the movement of more people living in cities rather than the countryside
- general shifts toward the industrial production of goods
- an increase in ordinary people having a say in the governance of their own lives
- an increase in people adopting secular worldviews
- a dramatic increase in the world’s population
- the normalization of faster communication and transportation over longer distances
- an increased sense of global interconnectedness among diverse people around the world
- a debate about whether Western ways and ideas were a universal path toward the future, or just one of many

Many of these developments had been happening in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but by 1905 the pace and scope of these changes were historically unprecedented and often bewildering to those who lived through them. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, people around the world were wrestling (not necessarily successfully) with these changes and their implications. In some ways today, we are still wrestling with some of the same changes.

At the same time, a lot has happened since 1905 that had not yet taken place. Today, women not only vote, but now govern major nations of the world. Large-scale colonial empires are no more. Scholars have recognized the fundamental flaws in earlier claims that white supremacy had biological roots. For many, idealistic visions that communism could usher in social equality and justice had not yet been marred by the legacy of Soviet authoritarianism. In 1905, none of the later outcomes were yet known. In order to understand how people experienced these events at the time, we need to transport ourselves to an earlier world, when the forces of modernity were well underway, but their 20<sup>th</sup>-century legacies were yet to unfold.

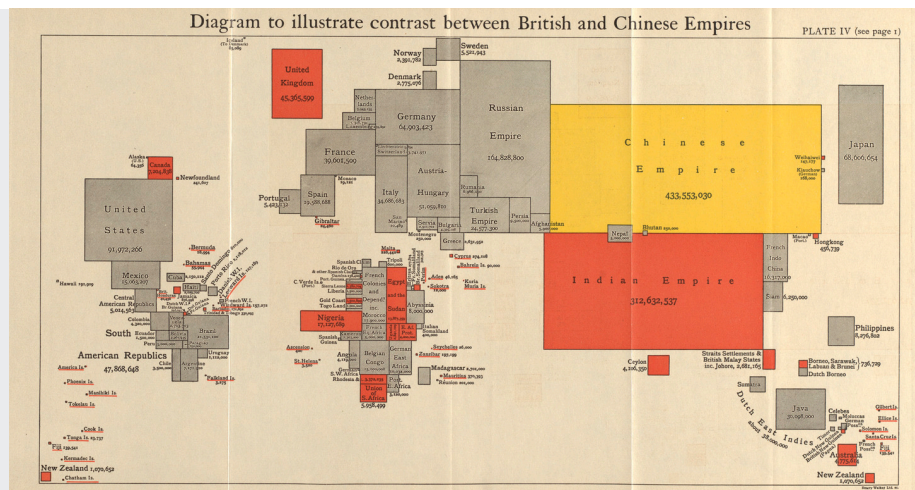
***Steamboats on the River Thames, London***



In terms of the state of the world in 1905 (or any other time), there's no "right place" to start. All aspects of change—political, economic, social, intellectual, environmental—are interconnected. But, let's start with population...

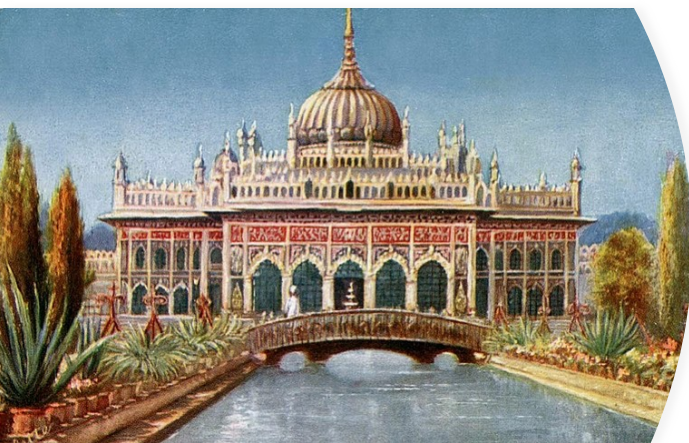
Global population had been growing rapidly across the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In total, there were 1.7 billion people in total (55% in Asia, 27% in Europe, and 18% everywhere else). In large parts of Europe and North America, scientific innovations in health care and sanitation had led to the reduction of disease and longer life spans. Between 1840 and 1940, there were also vast migrations. About 150 million people from Asia and Europe moved to the Americas and Oceania, creating more diverse populations in their new homes.

The cartogram below shows the rough shape of the world, adjusted in terms of population in 1916. By examining it, we can come to several conclusions. First, we can see where most people in the world lived. However, this map looks a lot different than maps based on geography and borders. Maps that prioritize the land governed by states can be misleading, since they don't tell us where the people are. Nor do they tell us who speaks what language, who is rich, or how trade works.



**Global population cartogram by Lionel Curtis, 1916**

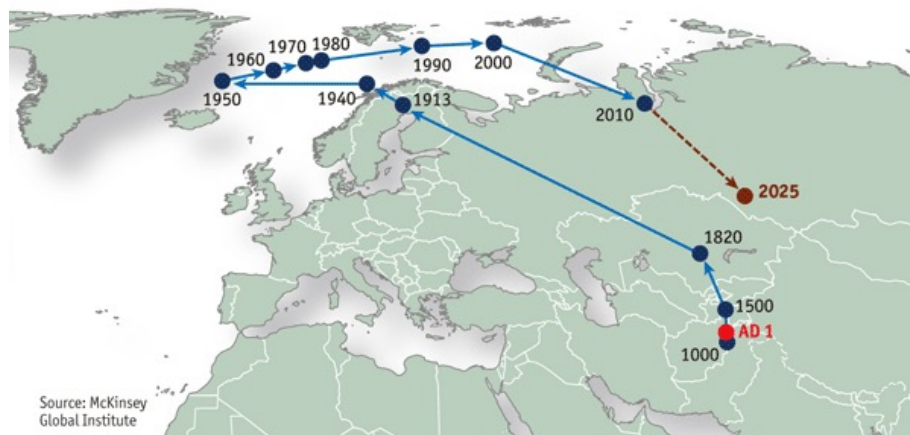
Another thing this map shows us is that there are a lot of empires – we see the British Empire, the Chinese Empire, the Russian Empire, and the Turkish Empire all labelled on the map. The French, German, Japanese, American, Dutch, Belgian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Austro-Hungarian Empires lack such a label on this map, but these were also empires and undoubtedly count.



**Postcard of the Hooseinabad, Lucknow India, 1905**

When we think of empires, we often think of grandeur; but we should not forget that empires are in essence the domination of power by one group of people (defined geographically or ethnically) over other groups of people. Ironically, the two largest overseas empires (the British and French), which reached the heights of their power in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, were controlled by countries that proclaimed that their political rule over others rested in their so-called "modern" values of individual self-worth and democratic values. The same is true of the United States, which did not extend even its limited form of democracy to people in lands it ruled in the Philippines, Alaska, Hawaii, Puerto Rico or elsewhere

In 1905, the world was also increasingly interconnected. International trade as a percentage of the total economy had doubled since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Global trade was dominated by Europeans and Americans (mostly through their empires). Figure 2 shows how the global center of economic gravity has moved over time. You will see the big shift in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (and the shift back in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century).



**Global center of economic gravity, by McKinsey Global Institute**

This was not just a matter of bankers in London and Paris investing in railroads in India, Russia, and Argentina or agriculture in Canada or Australia. It also showed up in the flow of food, machinery, and consumer items. Industrially-produced commodities produced in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the U.S. West, and elsewhere were shipped for sale on a global market. New modes of transportation and communication facilitated faster movement of goods over longer distances, and knitted together not just elites, but sped migration, travel, and market connections that affected ordinary workers in both advanced and less economically developed countries.

Trade was only part of the story of dramatic economic growth and accompanying social change. Often spurred or facilitated by governments, there were major advances in production in agriculture and mining. Migration and free-flowing capital combined with local resources and markets to support production using technologies from the first (1760–1830) and second (1870–1900) waves of industrialization. Patent applications in the four leading economies went from 5,000/year to over 70,000/year between 1850 and 1910. More effective modes of production increased output in commodities and machinery and forced shifts in labor markets. New consumer brands (including ones you might be familiar with, like Kellogg, Coca-Cola, and Hershey) and new products like lightbulbs, typewriters, bicycles, and automobiles changed life at work and home. As a result of these interconnected developments, in the last century, global GDP per capita tripled.

Industrialization affected far more than economics. At this same time, population doubled, and in regions where the deployment of large-scale industrialization was well underway—Western Europe, parts of the eastern United States, and certain cities and regions in Central Europe, Russia, and Japan—the new “mechanical life” changed living and family patterns, fostered the emergence of a broad middle class, and drove the creation of urban areas of a size unimaginable a century earlier.



**Interior of textile factory, c. 1904**

However, these gains were not evenly distributed among countries or classes. The promise of industrialization—that unleashing the productive forces of society would lead to more prosperity, and more materially and economically comfortable lives—was not realized in all regions of the world impacted by it, nor by many workers whose employment and lives had been upended by it.

As the world was becoming more tightly bound economically, debates about the nature and conditions of life and people's relationships to one another accelerated in scale and scope as well. These debates centered around topics including political inclusion, social cohesion, identity, and the global balance of power. In places around the world, expanding ideas about individual liberty and dignity were leading to accelerated (if still small) steps towards distributing political power to middle classes and workers, as well as efforts in Western Europe and the United States to include women. Alongside calls to expand political participation, other ideas of social cohesion (usually grouped under the rubric of "socialism") advocated for a more equal distribution of economic resources. Furthermore, nationalism - the idea that a specific ethnic, linguistic, or cultural group deserved its own political entity or state - had been spreading in some places for several decades. As more people came to believe that adopting new national identities was critical for creating social cohesion and that group's economic, political, and cultural dignity and survival, the spread of this idea not only created new debates about identity, but presented intensifying challenges to the world's empires.

In sum, the world in 1905 was becoming modern. And in 1905, there was not only a lot of change, but the pace of change was picking up. This created anxiety. It also inspired innovation. And it sometimes sowed the seeds of revolutionary transformation. As new ideas of how societies should organize themselves were taking hold, people experienced the changes in their lives just as you and I do - one day at a time. Sometimes, they thought they were changing the world, and they were right. Sometimes, they were just going about their business, and they were changing the world just the same.

In coming lessons, we will examine the following developments and events of 1905, placing them both in the context of the world at that time, and in the context of the longer-term processes of which they were part:

- The Russo-Japanese War
- The Russian Revolution (of 1905, not the big famous one of 1917)
- The failure of women's suffrage in Britain
- The Partition of Bengal

Each class will include readings like this one, as well as relevant primary sources that you will read before coming to class. The module will also include a variety of activities and assignments, designed to connect you to the events discussed and to challenge you to think critically, historically, and reflectively.

**Mulberry Street, New York City, c. 1900**



# Image Citations:

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Asahel Curtis, Interior of textile factory, probably in Seattle, c. 1904, Public Domain, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Interior\\_of\\_textile\\_factory,\\_probably\\_in\\_Seattle\\_\(CURTIS\\_1566\).jpeg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Interior_of_textile_factory,_probably_in_Seattle_(CURTIS_1566).jpeg)

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