

To what extent was  
the first decade of the  
20th century the age  
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The extent, to which the first decade of the 20th century, was the age of hope people thought it would be is contingent on the perspective taken on the changes and developments that were taking place at the time. Though it was to a great extent the age of hope people thought it would be, such an extent is limited due to fact that the changes that were taking place also led to a climate of anxiety which culminated in World War one. At such a point in time, new world order was being established and the notions of “ old orders” questioned.

Subsequently political instability flourished and shifts in the balance of powers occurred. Advancements in technology were prevalent, ensuring an improvement on the quality of life for all. Complemented by the leaps in technology and industrialisation, economic growth was consistently on the rise, giving people high hopes of a better future, however simultaneously creating rivalries amongst nations. Hence the first decade of the 20th century was a time of great change.

However it was the results of such changes which served to be catalysts for the new found tensions and rivalries amongst differing nations. As historian J. Joll asserted, “ Due to a rapid increase in economic development and imperial rivalries conflict was prominent. ” At the start of the new century the people of the world were optimistic and hopeful. A significant battle had not been fought in Europe for a prolonged period of time and as such people predicted that there would soon be world peace. However the events of history prove that this was not the case.

The employment of new political ideologies such as nationalism began to disrupt the status quo, as countries demanded independence from their imperialist fathers. National groups such as the Serb and Slavic people claimed the right of national " self determination. " However, great dynastic empires such as the Hapsburg and the Ottaman were not yet ready to permit such independence to their colonial sons. This in turn evoked bitter sentiment amongst the differing national groups and turmoil brewed in areas such as the Balkans, for example, the 1908 Bosnia-Herzegovina crisis.

Subsequently, state controlled education was introduced and there was a wave of nationalist propoganda to sway the public opinion in order of independence for his or her country. Furthermore, national groups and countries began adopting policies of militarism, with the belief that military action was a justifiable way to advance national objectives. This in turn led to a giant " arms race" all around the world. Such national aspirations created new sources of tension among the great powers as the various nationalist groups looked to the great nations for support.

Hence one comes to see that, although no real conflict was fought in the first decade of the 20th century, the events in the Balkans served as a catalyst for the newfound tensions amongst the great nations, which ultimately led to the outbreak of the war. It is in such light that the first decade of the 20th century was in fact not the age of hope people thought it would be. Further contributing to political instability was the emergence of a new world order. At the turning point of the 20th century, a unified Germany emerged as the strongest power in Europe.

Key to Germany's success included her large and efficient army, her industrial strength, and her growing population, providing a large labour force. 1 As such Germany posed as a threat to the security and balance of powers in Europe, and in particular to Britain's navy. Neighboring great nations such as France, Britain and Russia became weary of such a threat and consequently the formation of diplomatic alliances began. In 1902 Britain signed the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, which ensured that the British Navy had an ally in the Pacific.

The alliance was significant in the sense that it was the first Britain had committed herself for decades. However, the most controversial diplomatic agreement at the time was in 1904 when Britain and France signed the Entente Cordiale to settle colonial differences. 2 Although this was not an alliance, it proved significant as France and Britain had been enemies since the beginning of time, and the unification of both proved that Germany was a major threat to the balance of power in Europe.

Further in 1907 Russia and Britain signed an Entente, and now the Entente Cordiale had grown into a triple Entente between France, Russia and Great Britain. Such diplomatic alliances evoked sentiments of fear and anxiety amongst people, as they felt the security and stability of their countries were being threatened. As such one can interpret that the first decade of the 20th century was not the age of hope people thought it would be. At the turning point of the 20th century, notions of the "old order" were consistently challenged, such as the social structure.

At the time, the fundamental division which existed within most societies was that of class, that is the rich capitalist class and the working proletariat class. However near the end of the 19th century the working class started to question whether they were receiving fair treatment. By the start of the 20th century, the working class had become increasingly well-organised and was effectively agitating for an improvement on their lot, exerting direct pressure on their governments. The ruling class realized that if they were to remain in control widespread reform was necessary.

Consequently, the first decade of the 20th century encompassed much social reform, such as the creation of the Liberal administration in Great Britain, in 1905. <sup>3</sup> Subsequently, the working class won many rights and freedoms leading up to, and during this point in history. Similarly, at such a point of time in history the Women's suffrage movement began to take hold as well. This newfound social justice gave many people hope for a more equal future. Thus it is in such perspective, that one comes to see that the first decade of the twentieth century was an age of hope.

Advancements in technology promised to improve the life of people all around the world. Science gave man a new control over his environment, with the eradication or control of epidemics, improved medical knowledge and methods, rapid and efficient transportation, speedy communications and a greater lifestyle in general. <sup>4</sup> Developments in such a field resulted in various new and exciting inventions such as the steam train, moving pavements, cars and electricity. Such inventions ensured society that human progress was occurring and that in the years to follow life would be made significantly easier with the aid of these new innovations.

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Furthermore, advancements in technology aided industrialisation and economic growth through the creation of new efficient machinery. As such economic prosperity was on the rise all around the world, which ensured society of a promising future. Thus, it is in such context, once comes to see that the first decade of the 20th century was in fact the age of hope people thought it would be. Complemented by advancements in technology, economic growth was consistent around the world throughout the first decade of the 20th century.

As a result of industrialisation, countries were becoming more efficient in their production, due to the utilisation of undiscovered raw materials and the employment of new and effective processes. Such is evident through the assertion of historian V. Snil; "... the remarkable growth of the 20th century were based primarily on refinement and development of machines and processes created before World War I. " 5 As such, there was a substantial increase in material wealth, which was felt by the majority of society. However as history explains, such economic prosperity did not come with out consequences.

The economic revolution in Western Europe led to the competition amongst nations for supplies of raw materials and markets. Such in turn, generated rivalry for imperial possession, which then ultimately led to the aggregations of armaments. Hence one comes to see that although economic growth gave people hope and prosperity, simultaneously it sparked tensions and rivalries amongst nations, which ultimately led to the outbreak of the war. Thus in such context, one can pronounce the extent that the first decade was the age of hope people thought it would be as limited.

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The extent to which the first decade of the 20th century was the age of hope that people thought it would be, heavily hinges on the view and consequences that one focuses attention on. For example, though economic prosperity brought great hope for an increased quality of life or people, it also served to create rivalries and tensions amongst nations. It is through the consequences of the changes that were taking place that the decade proved to be one of the most significant in history. As historian J. Joll contends, "... the main features of the 20th century development can all be observed in 1900. "

In such a time frame, the world changed substantially in all aspects of life, that is, politically, economically and socially. However, the events of history prove that it was the results of such changes, which served as catalysts for the newfound tensions and rivalries which led to the outbreak of World War One. Hence, it is through such context that one comes to see that the extent to which the first decade of the 20th century was the age of hope people thought it would be was limited.