

The First World For Oil 1914

Similarities with the 2014 Oil Wars 100 Years Later

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## Introduction

With this essay I want to provide a summary of why oil was the main cause of the First World War (1914-1918), which could be also called the First World War for oil, and also compare this oil war with the oil wars of 2014 one hundred years later. The main alliances of WW1 were England, France and Russia on one side, known as the ‘allies’, and Germany, Austro-Hungary and Italy on the other side, known as the “central powers”. See the following, very rough, map.



## The British and German Empires

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1900) England was what the U.S.A. is today. England was an empire extending from Canada and East Africa, to India and Australia, covering most of the globe as you can see on the following rough map (green colour).



However after her victory against France in 1871, Germany established itself as one of the great powers, and with its rampant industry she became England's main competitor. In a sense Germany was for England what China is for the U.S.A. today. The most important problem in the Anglo-German relations was Germany's wish to extend her influence to the Persian Gulf through the Ottoman Empire.



Even though the shaky Ottoman Empire had lost most of her lands, she was still extending to the Persian Gulf through what today are Syria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia (parts of the green area on the above map). The alliance between the German Empire, the Empire of Austro-Hungary, Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire, was a great threat for the English interests.



As you can see from my rough (red) diagram, the alliance between Germany, Austro-Hungary, Bulgaria and Ottoman Empire, would form a solid block extending from Germany to the Persian Gulf, since Syria and Iraq were Ottoman territories. A large part of the Balkans was also part of the Ottoman Empire at the time, and it was possible for the German Empire to connect to the Ottoman Empire and the Persian Gulf through Austro-Hungary, as you can see on the following 1912 map of the Balkans.

## The Balkans in 1912



The above situation was a threat for the control of the Persian Gulf, which is the richest region in the world in terms of oil reserves, it was a threat for the control of the Caspian Region, which is the second richest region in the world in terms of oil reserves, and which was controlled by the Russians, it was a threat for India, which was England's most important colony, and it would also bring the Germans very close to the Suez Canal and Egypt as you can see on the following map.



The Suez Canal and Egypt were under British Control, and were crucial for the control of India in South Asia, since the Suez Canal was cutting almost in half the distance between England and India. The Suez Canal (black circle) was inaugurated a few decades earlier (1869).



# The Triple Alliance Between England, France and Russia

Facing the rising German influence in the Middle East, the English tried and managed to close their long and significant disputes with the French and the Russians, in order to form an alliance against the Germans and their allies. The major disputes between the French and the English concerned their colonies in Africa (see the following map).



At the beginning of WW1, France was controlling almost all of West Africa (yellow colour), and England was controlling almost all of East Africa (red colour), and therefore Africa was a source of disputes between the English and the French.

However when confronted with the German ‘threat’, the French and the English rushed to close their disputes with a series of agreements known as ‘Entente Cordial’. As you can read at the following Wikipedia link, with Entente Cordial in 1904, England and France closed 1000 years of disputes and wars.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Entente\\_cordiale](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Entente_cordiale)

Among other things, with this agreement England accepted France's control over Morocco, which was crucial for controlling the Straits of Gibraltar, and France accepted England's control over Egypt, which was crucial for controlling the Suez Canal (see lines 1 and 2 on the following map).



Moreover, with their alliance with the English and the Russians, the French were hoping to take their revenge for their defeat from the Germans in 1871, and regain control of the rich in iron and coal area of Alsace and Lorraine, which was lost during this war. Coal was in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century what oil became in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and even the navies were using coal, until coal was finally replaced by oil in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century (1900). Indeed after the defeat of the Germans in 1918, the French regained control of Alsace and Lorraine.



Moreover, with the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the English promised that in case of victory they would offer the French some of the Ottoman Empire territories. According to this agreement, England would take the oil rich Iraq, and France would take Syria. Actually there was no Iraq and Syria at the time. The Ottoman territory that would be taken by the English with this agreement was later given the name 'Iraq', and the Ottoman territory that would be taken by the French with the same agreement was later given the name 'Syria'.

This is the reason that the members of the ISIS army (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) are saying that they are destroying the Sykes-Picot Agreement by reuniting Syria and Iraq. You can see the Sykes-Picot Agreement on the following rough map.



You can also read about the Sykes-Picot Agreement at the following Wikipedia link.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sykes%20%93Picot\\_Agreement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sykes%20%93Picot_Agreement)

Moreover with the Anglo-Russian Entente in 1907, the English and the Russians closed their centuries' long disputes for the control of Central Asia and the Middle East (Iran, Afghanistan and Tibet). You can read at the following Wikipedia link, that in 1907, the English and the Russians agreed to split Iran, Afghanistan and Tibet in spheres of influence.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-Russian\\_Entente](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-Russian_Entente)

The agreement between the English and the Russians allowed them to stop antagonizing each other and turn their attention to the Germans and the Ottomans who were a threat for the control of the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea.

However from their alliance with the French and the English, the Russians did not simply expect to protect the oil rich Caspian Sea region from the German and Ottoman threat, but were also hoping to gain control of Constantinople, the Bosphorus Straits and the Dardanelles, which were controlled by the Ottomans, and which would give the Russians uninterrupted access to the Aegean and the Mediterranean Seas (see maps below).





At the following Wikipedia link you can read that with the Constantinople Agreement, the English, the French and the Russians, agreed that in case of victory, Russia would take control of Constantinople, the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constantinople\\_Agreement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constantinople_Agreement)

However even though the allies did finally win the war, Russia did not get Constantinople (today Istanbul), because Russia collapsed in 1917 and exited the war, since she entered a painful civil war between the tsarists and the Communists.

By agreeing with the Russians to split Iran into spheres of influence, the English would gain control of the Persian Gulf while the Russians would retain the undisputed control of the Caspian Sea, and together they could fight the Germans and the Ottomans. You can see on the following map that Iran is the region between the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea, holding itself a very large amount of oil and natural gas reserves. Iran is the second and fourth richest country in the world in terms of natural gas and oil reserves respectively.



However at the time most of the region's oil was coming from Iraq and Baku, since oil in Iran was only discovered in 1908.

The Anglo-Franco and the Anglo-Russian alliances, together with the Franco-Russian alliance, encircled Germany and her allies (see following rough map).



## The Role of the Balkan Countries in WWI

One of the reasons there was so much tension in the Balkans before the outbreak of World War 1, was that the Balkans was the connection between Germany and her allies with the Ottoman Empire and the Persian Gulf. The following map shows the Balkans before the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913.

The Balkans Before the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913



It can be seen on the above map, that with the status quo that existed before the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913, Germany would have no problem to connect to the Persian Gulf by railway, using the Austro-Hungary-Ottoman Empire corridor.

However with the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913, Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria and Albania, managed to annex almost all the European territories of the Ottoman Empire. Greece, Serbia and Romania, all of which were on the side of the allies during the First World War, formed a wall between Germany and the Ottoman Empire as you can see on the following map, (Bulgaria finally entered the war on Germany's side in WWI).

The Balkans after the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913



The German plan was to construct the famous Baghdad Railway, that would connect Berlin to the Persian Gulf (see later sections), and Greece, Serbia and Rumania were forming a wall against the Baghdad Railway Project. It is not a coincidence that World War I broke out on the 28<sup>th</sup> of July 1914, with the Austro-Hungary declaring war to Serbia, with all other countries running behind these two countries. The following map shows the Balkans today.



It can also not be a coincidence that the Balkan Wars took place in 1912 and 1913, and the First World War broke out in 1914. When I am saying that the Balkan Wars were not a coincidence, I do not mean that Greece, Serbia and Bulgaria attacked the Ottoman Empire because they wanted to prevent Germany from connecting to the Persian Gulf. These countries did want the Ottoman territories, and they were supported by England, Russia and France, in order to prevent the German-Ottoman connection. The Ottoman territories were simply their rewards.

As you can read in section ‘Reaction Among the Great Powers During the Wars’ of the following Wikipedia link, **Germany** was already heavily involved in the internal politics of the Ottoman Empire, and officially opposed the attack on the Ottoman Empire, but because it was obvious that the shaky Ottoman Empire could not protect for long her European territories from Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia, Germany was supporting Bulgaria from the opposite camp, which was called the ‘Balkan League’. And in the end, Bulgaria did indeed join Germany’s camp in WW1.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balkan\\_Wars#Reactions\\_among\\_the\\_Great\\_Powers\\_during\\_the\\_wars](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balkan_Wars#Reactions_among_the_Great_Powers_during_the_wars)

In the same Wikipedia link, you can also read that **Russia** was the primary mover of the Balkan League countries i.e. Greece, Serbia and Bulgaria against the Ottoman Empire. This seems very natural, since Russia not only wanted to prevent Germany from obtaining access to the Caspian Sea, but she was also a traditional enemy of the Ottoman Empire and wanted to gain control of Constantinople, Bosphorus and the Dardanells, which would allow the Russian Navy to access the Mediterranean Sea, as I already said.



You can also read in the same Wikipedia link that **Austria-Hungary** was totally opposed to the advancement of the Balkan countries, Greece, Serbia and Bulgaria, in the region. **France**, a Russian ally, informed Russia that she was not ready for a war. **England**, even though a supporter of the Ottoman Empire, encouraged the advancement of the Balkan countries. That's what Wikipedia says about the reactions of the Great Powers during the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913.

We therefore see that Germany and Russia were supporting the sides we would expect them to support in the Balkan Wars. However things were a bit more complicated for England. Because on one hand England was facing the threat of German expansion to the Persian Gulf and India, and on the other hand she was facing the threat of Russian expansion through the Straits of Bosphorus and the Dardanelles to the Mediterranean Sea, which could pose a threat for the sea corridor between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean i.e. the Suez Canal and the Red Sea.

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