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Nationalism and Imperialism, *c*.1880–1940

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Abstract and Keywords

The nature of European imperialism remains very contested. Much of the discussion revolves around notions of empire by rule and ignores both the wider context of Western expansion and the recourse to ‘informal’ influence in large areas of the non-Western world. Here the growth of imperial rivalries in the late nineteenth century is explained in terms of a far-reaching series of geopolitical crises, ignited by processes of political and economic transformation in non-Western states in the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, and East Asia. It is argued, nonetheless, that conventional accounts grossly exaggerate the ‘tooth and claw’ nature of imperialist competition before 1914, which was closely constrained by the requirements of Europe’s own politics. Until, that is, the onset of the Great Depression, and the rise of radical nationalist states in Germany and Japan, created the conditions for unrestricted imperialist warfare on a global scale, with catastrophic results.

Keywords: Imperialism, nationalism, imperial expansion, colonial empires, British Empire

Explaining Imperialism

THE extraordinary expansion of colonial empires in the second half of the nineteenth century is one of the most familiar chapters in the history of the modern world. Although historians make much of the partition of Africa, carried out for the most part between 1885 and 1904 (the second date is when Britain and France agreed upon their respective positions in Egypt and Morocco), partitions also occurred in Southeast Asia, with the parcelling out of Burma, Malaya, Vietnam, Cambodia, and the Indonesian archipelago; in Central Asia (where Russia scooped the pool); and in the Pacific, whose island groups and

archipelagos were divided between Britain, France, Germany, Japan (which took the Kuriles, Ryukyus, and Taiwan), and the United States. But this dramatic (and dramatically rapid) division of the imperial spoils is only part of a larger and longer story.

A longer story because in some ways at least the late nineteenth-century share-out of Africa and elsewhere can be readily seen as the grudging last act of a much longer process. After all, before the Europeans came to partition Africa, they had already divided and re-divided North and South America, the Caribbean, and much of South Asia, while in an act of pre-emptive partition, the British had laid claim to the whole of Australia by 1824. The 'independence' of the United States and Latin America loom large in their provincial histories, but from the point of view of indigenous peoples it meant little more than a change from one variety of European colonialism to another, and usually more aggressive, version. Indeed, a vigorous case has been made that in the partition of Africa, the European imperialists were 'scraping the bottom of the barrel': (p. 342) all the best prizes (to be found in the Americas and Asia) had long since been snapped up.[1] Far from approaching their tropical African colonies with a gleeful rubbing of hands, the European governments viewed their new responsibilities with a mixture of resignation and gloom. Whether this was true of all their new acquisitions, we shall see later on. But it was certainly true that on any long view the regions colonized by Europe in the late nineteenth century were also those where its cultural and demographic impress was to prove much less durable than in earlier spheres of expansion.

This is a larger story because, from another point of view, the partitions and annexations that loom so large on the map were merely the outward and visible sign of a vaster movement of Western expansion. The European powers and (after 1898) the United States may have been piling up a set of possessions where they governed, or claimed to govern. But they were also engaged in the headlong extension of their cultural, economic, and diplomatic influence over many parts of the world that remained technically sovereign. This was true in ex-colonies in Latin America like Argentina or Uruguay.[2] It was true of the Middle East where both the Ottoman and Iranian empires were subjected to more and more external interference. It was true of China, where the scale of European and American extra-territorial rights (most strikingly seen in the treaty port enclaves) was growing by leaps and bounds in the closing decades of the century.[3] Then the political, military, economic, and cultural power of the West in the non-Western world seemed to be reaching its peak. The fate of those states that had escaped Western rule was widely expected (both in the West and outside it) to be a form of tutelage at best.

Historians of European (or more broadly Western) imperialism up to 1914 have thus been faced with a double problem. They have to explain why the European states (including Russia, Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Britain—the 'Belgian' Congo was from 1879 to 1908 the private estate of the Belgian king) entered so enthusiastically into a scramble for territory often in places whose economic resources were scarcely a gleam in the speculator's eye. This requires an explanation in terms of the political process whereby the state and its government assumed the burdens of sovereignty. Acquiring 'formal' empire was after all a formal act that needed (sometimes)

parliamentary approval, an international treaty, or an explicit declaration of geographical boundaries. But historians also have to explain the much less visible forward movement of commercial, missionary, and diplomatic interests, the makers and agents of 'informal empire', who deliberately chose to veil their activities (or were forced to do so) to avoid provoking either local resistance or the jealous resentment of other great powers.[4] To complicate matters, some kinds of 'informal empire' seemed to depend very little upon the power and influence of a European *state*. Some could scarcely survive without it. Yet others (the obvious case is Egypt after 1882) could best be described (as Egypt often was) as 'veiled protectorates'—colonies in all but name.[5]

The historiography of imperialism reflects this difficulty. Thus much of the older literature is preoccupied with explaining why European governments seemed so willing to amass new territories in the tropical world and risk disputes with other great powers to make good their claim. Three main schools of thought emerged. The first insisted (p. 343) that territorial expansion was the response of governments pursuing the national economic interest as they (or those with most influence upon them) interpreted it. The race for markets, supplies, or fields of investment was seen as part of the struggle for national survival: colony-grabbing was nationalist economics.[6] The second saw empire-building as political theatre, or perhaps political circus. When the masses arrived in national politics, it was necessary to appease their crude jingo mentality, or expedient to do so. This was especially true for old or unprogressive elites who feared that without this distraction mass politics might turn inconveniently radical. In ideological terms, acquiring some (or more) empire could be held up as evidence of national vitality, a vindication of the 'national' project, and (if scope for emigration existed) as a physical strengthening of the national community. This was imperialism as the outgrowth of (European) nationalism.[7] The third saw the competition for colonies as the unavoidable by-product of European rivalry within Europe, perhaps even an effort to displace European tensions into less dangerous places where less was at stake. This was imperialism as nationalist diplomacy.[8] The volatile mood of late nineteenth-century Europe, stoked up by the state-strengthening rhetoric of governments and intellectuals, had created a tinder-box atmosphere in European politics. Rivalry outside Europe could not be avoided and an appearance of weakness might be fatal to political ambition at home. But dividing the property of powerless third parties was easier than adjusting borders within Europe itself, or reversing the verdict of previous wars.

It is obvious enough that explanations like these have little to say about the broader context of the West's encroachment on the non-Western world, and nothing at all about non-territorial forms of imperial expansion. Each suffers from the difficulty that while it might fit (at best) one case of European empire-building, it breaks down completely when applied to the next. It might be argued, for example, that appeasing the masses was an urgent priority in Wilhemine Germany, but this was hardly the case before 1905 in Romanov Russia.[9] Extending the national economy by acquiring new colonial monopolies might make some sense when the home economy was heavily defended by tariffs (as was the case with Russia), but what about Britain which maintained free trade until 1931? It might have been true that strong nationalist passions influenced the diplomacy of the

continental great powers, but (again) what about Britain?[10] We might be tempted to think that explaining imperialism in ways that exclude the premier case is not very profitable. Histories of European imperialism that leave Britain out have only limited value.

It is easy to see why for many years now historians have been attracted to a looser and more flexible understanding of imperialism, one that leaves room for a wider variety of 'imperial' relationships than the enforcement of rule. Indeed, more than fifty years ago, the most brilliant and original of the historians of modern imperialism proposed to define it as 'a function of [the] process of integrating new regions into the expanding economy'.[11] What John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson meant by this (and they were thinking primarily of Britain) was that the fundamental motive behind British expansion was to open new markets in the world beyond Europe. But they went on to insist that 'imperialism', by which they meant the *political* input needed to (p. 344) achieve this objective, varied widely from place to place according to circumstance. Where local interests cooperated willingly in removing trade barriers, it merely required a forceful diplomacy to ensure that British interests were not treated unfairly. But where they proved more resistant (the classic case was in China), gunboats, garrisons, and treaty port privileges might be needed to secure access for British trade and protection for British persons and property. In a third case, the full-blown exertion of British control (in other words formal rule) might be needed to reap the harvest of trade. There was an important proviso in the Gallagher-Robinson model: formal rule might be imposed in places of no commercial importance at all. But this was because they held a strategic significance, guarding the routes or overlooking the sea lanes connecting Britain to regions that were economically vital.

If we follow this lead, we might define imperialism as one state's attempt to impose its predominance over other societies by drawing them into its political, cultural, and economic system. This might be done by direct political control in the zone of expansion. But it was sometimes convenient to leave in place a notionally sovereign government. Often the motive was to delimit a sphere of economic exclusion, reserving trade and investment to the imperial power—but not invariably. Usually, the assertion of dominance was based on an ideological claim—the so-called 'civilizing mission'—and an appeal to the idea of a cultural hierarchy in which the 'progressive' energy of the West was contrasted with the sloth, regression, or barbarism of the non-Western world.[12] But imperialism was also a competitive activity and the states that cherished imperial ambitions varied considerably in their expansive capacities. Some were held back by the fear that a reverse overseas would damage their domestic regime. Most were concerned to prevent their imperial activities from igniting a major explosion in the cockpits of Europe. Those that lacked capital and geopolitical leverage hoped to exploit the divisions between the richer and stronger but could not always do so. Those that came late to the race found the best pickings had gone. And in a number of cases, the local resistance was just strong enough to make the risks of partition too high to court. A partition-by-war in which several powers were involved might well light the fuse for a European war. Hence the advance of the West into the non-Western world in the 'age of imperialism' between 1880 and 1914 was a curiously tepid affair in which no blood was spilt between the European

powers (they made up the deficit with that of Asians and Africans). Its impact was patchy and quite often shallow. And in the regions where all the great powers had large interests at stake, it remained, ironically, at its most incomplete.

Western Expansion

But what led Europeans (and sometimes their governments) to think that the domination of the non-Western world was remotely practicable, let alone in their interests? By the 1820s and 1830s the British and Dutch had acquired extensive eastern empires. (p. 345) The British had used their great base in India as a springboard for the commercial penetration of China, and then in 1840 for the military onslaught that forced on the Qing the first of the 'unequal treaties'. To guard their sea routes to India the British had seized control over the Cape and asserted a naval protectorate in the Persian Gulf.[13] They were also determined to let no other great power rule over the isthmus of Suez or command the Red Sea, and watched both ends of this maritime corridor from bases in Malta and Aden. The French had acquired two African bridgeheads: in the old Muslim state of Algiers and (in the 1840s) at the mouth of the Senegal river. The Russians were locked in their struggle with the Caucasus Muslims, the costly sideshow in their slow southward expansion into the Iranian borderlands.[14] But over most of Afro-Asia in the first half of the nineteenth century, European influence was conspicuously lacking and the imposition of European rule the dimmest of prospects.

There were several reasons for this. Firstly, it was far from clear that the European powers could manage successfully the territories they already controlled. British expansion in India had been frowned on in London as a costly and reckless experiment only permissible because the East India Company government could meet its military bills. The Dutch had made Java an enviably profitable venture, but lacked the military means to expand their control over the surrounding archipelago. Across much of Russian North Asia, Tsarist authority was the faintest of rumours. Secondly, except along coasts or inland waterways, European access to the continental interior of Asia and Africa remained expensive and difficult. Indeed, despite the efforts of European travellers, much of that interior was still little known. Thirdly, far from existing in a political vacuum, much of Afro-Asia was governed by relatively organized states that seemed for the most part perfectly capable of controlling their territories and excluding or containing unwelcome outsiders. China and Japan were the most striking examples of this. But even the riverine statelets of the Niger delta were strong enough to prevent European interlopers from breaking their grip on the inland trade of the region.[15] Fourthly, with such limited access to the Afro-Asian economies (scarcely a mile of railway had been built in India before 1850),[16] and with little prospect, as it seemed, of enlarging it greatly, colonizing Afro-Asia through trade, let alone by rule, held little appeal and promised few fortunes.

By the 1860s, however, Europe's hesitant advance into Afro-Asia had begun to speed up. The caution that Europeans had shown hitherto in their dealings with its states began to give way to an aggressive self-confidence. The mid-century world in which so much of the Afro-Asian interior seemed beyond the reach of the European powers was replaced by one in which, by the end of the century, global connectedness was all but complete. Why had this happened? Perhaps the critical fact was the expansion of the Euro-Atlantic economy, which was now strong enough to absorb Europe's commercial relations with the rest of the world.[17] One obvious symptom of this was the increased flow of investment to fund the production of commodities like cotton, coffee, and sugar, and to pay for costly agricultural improvements like the draining of the Nile delta and the irrigation works in North India. But much the most striking was the huge flow of capital into systems of transport. The Suez Canal (completed November 1869) (p. 346) not only drastically shortened the voyage from Europe to India. It also made it worthwhile to extend the revolution in maritime transport brought by the iron-hulled steamship to the world East of Suez.[18] Above all, it was the building of railways that promised to galvanize the Afro-Asian interior. By cutting the cost of carrying bulk goods by three quarters or more, they would drag vast inland regions into the orbit of the commercial economy, multiplying consumers and producers at a stroke. Nor were these the only technological innovations to reduce the tyranny of distance. The spread of the telegraph across Asia (an undersea cable reached northern Australia in 1872) cut the time taken to transmit news and commercial information from weeks to minutes. Within Asia, the political and military value of the telegraph had already been demonstrated. Advance warning by telegraph allowed the British to prevent the spread of the 1857 Mutiny into the Punjab and to use the province as the base for the recapture of Delhi—the critical first step in regaining control of north India.[19]

The emergence of a global economy in which ordinary bulk goods as well as high-value luxuries were traded round the world with little price variation promised the spread of commercial prosperity to previously 'remote' or inaccessible regions, as well as new commercial opportunities to merchants, shippers, financiers, and industrialists in Europe. It also had huge implications for the geopolitical matrix that governed the relations of the main European states and their transatlantic offshoot in the United States. Before the transport revolution was exported to Afro-Asia, it was reasonable to expect that the growth of European influence there would be slow, patchy, and piecemeal. Even in China, where the European powers extracted a second round of unequal treaties in 1858–60, foreign businessmen found commercial conditions demanding, and the toll of failure was high.[20] The interior of Africa, except in a few favoured footholds like the Cape diamond district or the cotton fields of the Nile delta, had been a graveyard of commercial ambition once the slow throttling of the Atlantic slave trade set in following the British Slave Trade Act of 1807. Of course, none of this had prevented the spasms of mutual paranoia that punctuated Anglo-Russian relations as the agents of both powers schemed and intrigued in the vast borderlands of Central Asia. But the capacity of either to do the other much harm was in practice quite limited, and a decisive success in their 'battle for

Asia' was absurdly improbable.[21] The geopolitical implications of the new world economy changed all that.

Their impact could be seen in four different ways. Firstly, and most alarmingly, railway technology had the power to reorient the external relations of regions and states with sensational rapidity. Once a railway was built into an interior tract, its trade would flow along the new iron conduit and its prosperity depend on its new outside connection. Those who owned or controlled the main line and its branches would acquire overnight a position of economic and political dominance powerful enough to obliterate all rival influence. The local elite would now be their clients. To make matters worse, the new railway line from the coast to the interior allowed a foreign government to deploy its armed forces in the depths of a continent at the behest of its commercial 'men-on-the-spot', and turn yesterday's market into tomorrow's protectorate in the twinkling of an eye. Partitioning the world was no longer a fantasy. Secondly, the (p. 347) extensive mobilization of capital for investment in Afro-Asia (made possible by the growth of the Euro-Atlantic economy) hugely raised the stakes in the Afro-Asian diplomacy of the European powers. Once large financial interests (and perhaps the stability of Europe's domestic finances) turned on the safety of overseas property in Asian and African states, the pressures to interfere in their local affairs—to promote 'reform', 'discourage' default, or demand a 'concession'—became enormously greater. The likelihood was that such a 'financial protectorate' would graduate quickly into commercial annexation or its political analogue. Thirdly, what had hitherto been the preserve of the interested few, mad or bad enough to seek their fortunes in the chance-ridden corners of Asian or African commerce, would now broaden out (as the volume of trade and investment expanded) into a great 'national interest'. It would attract the attention of newspapers and pundits, politicians and publicists, and sooner or later the unpredictable force labelled 'public opinion'. Once this had happened, there would be much less scope for 'old' diplomacy to square the disputes between the 'men-on-the-spot', and muffle their screams with chancery flannel. The pressure to take up a belligerent stance—'to run before the jingo hurricane with bare poles' in Lord Salisbury's evocative phrase—would be all the greater.

Fourthly, the increasing leverage that European interests could now bring to bear in the autonomous states of Asia and Africa had 'collateral' implications that were even more startling. At bottom, the continued independence of those states rested on the ability to contain or control foreign business activity. Afro-Asian regimes had to tread the fine line between opening the door to commercial outsiders (in case, as in China, they simply kicked it in) and allowing them to unsettle their domestic politics. This could happen in a number of ways. Foreign merchants, after all, might displace the home-grown commercial elite. The imports they brought in might throw local artisans out of work. If they established direct relations with local producers, they might disrupt the existing pattern of credit and clientage. If they encouraged the landholding elite to convert their broad acres to cash crops and commodities, the result might be the proletarianization of the rural poor, the loss of customary rights, and even immiseration. Opening the door to commercial outsiders might enrich a minority but open the way to social unrest. Secondly, it was almost inevitable that foreign influence would spill over from commerce

into cultural life. The design and appearance of foreign-made fabrics, the habits and values of foreign merchants, their dress and deportment and their patterns of leisure, were bound to exert a powerful attraction. If foreign technical skill became the obvious means to increase local wealth (for example, by draining or improving the land), the urge to acquire it would reduce the appeal of 'traditional' education, and the social authority of those who supplied it. If opening the door meant the admission of missionaries (a missionary, remarked Lord Salisbury, was a 'religious Englishman with a mission to offend the religious feelings of the natives'),[22] then the cultural assault might soon become frontal. Before things had gone very far, the local cultural elite whose influence was at stake might be up in arms. Thirdly, those Afro-Asian states that tried to restrict the activity of commercial outsiders might find that those same outsiders already enjoyed the local backing of those who had profited from (p. 348) the new channels of trade or expected to do so.[23] Lastly, the bitterest of twists, those states that had embraced the new commercial future with the greatest enthusiasm, borrowing to improve the infrastructure of transport or their agrarian productivity, might discover too late that the scale of their debts, far from making them stronger, had exposed them much more to outside interference, and perhaps even bankruptcy. In short, entering the new global economy, like entering the earth's atmosphere, was a highly dangerous manoeuvre. Without a large dose of luck, or very fine judgement, those who tried it might 'burn up' on entry. At the least, it was likely to lead to a crisis.

This, then, was the global scenario that began to take shape in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The means to expand into the Afro-Asian interior were ready at last. The speculative motive was strong. The private interests were gathering. Public interest was growing. Information—often partisan, unreliable, self-interested, and crude—flowed more freely. The lobbies howled more loudly. But at the same time, the non-Western states at which all this was directed seemed less and less able to control their own local politics, or to strengthen their hold over their external defences. Far from being able to manage the Western intruders, they now seemed too weak to prevent a disorderly scramble between them. Viewed from the West, this new situation was both enticing and alarming. The weakness of Afro-Asian polities meant that Western business would be free to refashion their economies, or at least to exploit them. But it raised the worrying prospect that governments at home would soon be drawn into the struggles of their commercial adventurers or be pressed to protect the 'national interest' against the threat of commercial exclusion. Indeed, by the end of the century, it was widely assumed in the West that the non-Western world would soon be partitioned between a half-dozen (Western) 'world states',[24] and that those states failing to lay claim to their share would enter the age of 'world politics' in a fatally weakened position.

The Imperialism of Coexistence, 1880–1914

It was thus hardly surprising that in the main Western states lobbies and movements sprang up to argue that national survival required imperial expansion. In fact this opinion was also felt strongly in those smaller powers, like the Netherlands and Portugal, whose imperial claims now faced a challenge from rival men on the spot—French, British, or German. It was nourished by three domestic developments that converged towards the end of the century. The first was the growth of a popular press to meet the demands of new urban populations.[25] This was a platform from which the demand for expansion could be trumpeted, embellished by tales of heroic white men bringing light to regions of African darkness or Asian intrigue. While European governments varied considerably in their deference to the press (French ministries were thought especially susceptible to what British diplomats called France's 'reptile press'), few could ignore an orchestrated bellow of patriotism, however bogus its (p. 349) source. The second was the rapid expansion of financial institutions to channel domestic savings abroad—the process by which Europe had become the 'world's banker'.[26] The concerns that emerged to gull the investor with hopes of quick profit portrayed jungles and deserts (as well as more promising regions) as new Eldorados. The late-century gold rushes played into their hands, and they could often rely on a venal financial press to whip up a speculative frenzy.[27] The third was the widely held belief that now was the time to strengthen the grip of the 'nation' on the mind of the masses. In part this reflected the fear of political elites that new working-class voters, if left to themselves, would refuse to support the costly apparatus of naval and military power and weaken the state against its predatory neighbours. But it also arose from the prosaic concerns of social and economic state-building. State education, welfare entitlements, and the policing of borders all emphasized the new ways in which a 'national' identity—assumed or imposed—was now fundamental to the functions of a modern society. The cry was taken up by a medley of those staking a claim to public attention, not least the purveyors of mass-consumption products and 'popular' culture. None of this meant the sudden conversion of mass public opinion to 'imperialist' expansion. But it greatly widened the circle of those with an interest in winning state backing for their far-flung adventures, and gave them a much louder 'echo-chamber' through which to bring pressure on hesitant governments.

It is thus easy to see why it became an historical cliché that the era between the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1 and the First World War was one of unrestrained rivalry between the European powers for colonial possessions or their commercial equivalent in the form of concessions and spheres; and why immediately after 1918, and for much of the time since, it became usual to blame the anarchic pursuit of imperialist gain for the catastrophic explosion of European conflict.[28] But if we inspect the competition of the European states more closely, it is the caution with which they dealt with each other, not their hunger for territory no matter the cost, that really stands out. This pattern becomes clear if we trace the course of events in the three epicentres of geopolitical turbulence that preoccupied European governments (and eventually the United States) in the three decades before 1914.

The first of these lay closest to Europe in the ‘Near’ or ‘Middle’ East.[29] In the mid-nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire still ruled over much of southeastern Europe, including modern Bosnia, Albania, Macedonia, and Bulgaria, as well as parts of modern Romania, Serbia, and Greece. Today’s Turkish Republic, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Palestine, Cyprus, and Crete formed parts of Ottoman provinces, and the Ottoman government also administered what is now western Saudi Arabia (the Hedjaz) and the Holy Places at Mecca and Medina. The Ottoman sultan regarded the *khedive* (or viceroy) of Egypt as his vassal, and made similar claims over Libya and Tunis. The break-up of this sprawling political system was regarded in Europe with a mixture of anticipation and alarm. Those eager to liberate its Christian communities (Orthodox, Catholic, Armenian, and others) from what they saw as Muslim oppression urged the expulsion of Ottoman power from Europe ‘bag and baggage’. In Russia, the recent growth of ‘pan-Slav’ identity, a longer tradition of religious solidarity with the (p. 350) Orthodox Church in its ‘Turkish captivity’, and a Tsarist *Machtpolitik* at least as old as Peter the Great, made control of the Straits and Constantinople and the destruction of the Ottoman Empire an object of almost obsessive ambition.[30] But in London, Paris, Vienna, and (later) Berlin, such a massive extension of Russian imperial power into southeastern Europe and the Mediterranean was quite unacceptable. For the British especially, Russian control of the Straits, combined with what seemed a slow grinding advance south from the Caucasus, threatened their short route to India and perhaps Russia’s arrival at the head of the Gulf. Everything turned, so it seemed, on the Ottomans’ success in reinvigorating their state, modernizing their army, and increasing their revenues: the vital ingredients of what the West called ‘reform’. An improved Ottoman state would be less offensive to Christian feeling in the West and deny Russia the excuse for interference. But in the mid-1870s, everything went wrong. The Ottomans plunged into default on their loans and then into bankruptcy. Amid the political chaos, the repression of Christians (the ‘Bulgarian Horrors’) provoked a furious Western reaction and offered the Russians the excuse that they needed for armed intervention. The prospect of Russian control of the Straits and of a Russian client-state on the shores of the Mediterranean loomed large. At much the same time, Egypt, the most dynamic economy in the Near East, also collapsed into bankruptcy. By 1880, the attempt to impose external control over its public finances in the interests of foreign bondholders had brought its politics to the brink of revolution.

The geopolitical implications of this double disaster were staggering. No other great power was willing to see such a colossal enlargement of Russia’s imperium. No one could be sure that the loss of so much of its territory would not lead to the general collapse of the Ottoman Empire, in Asia as well as Europe—thus spreading still wider the zone of political chaos. In Britain and France, the rise of what was seen as a populist anti-Christian regime in Egypt by 1881 threatened financial loss (to the bondholders), political embarrassment (both ruled large Muslim populations), and (to the British particularly) strategic uncertainty, since the Suez Canal had become the express route to India. Yet the risks of a ‘forward policy’ to safeguard ‘national interests’ were dauntingly high. For all European governments, the danger that nationalist or xenophobic feeling (like the Russophobic ‘jingoism’ in Britain in the late 1870s) might push them into unwanted

confrontations was a constant threat. Faced with the chance of a general war, the European governments muddled their way to an untidy compromise that preserved Ottoman rule across the southern Balkans, denied the Russians a Mediterranean client-state, and created a financial regime—the Ottoman Public Debt Administration—to pay off the Ottomans' debts. The outcome in Egypt was just as untidy. There the British did intervene to smash the Arabi government in September 1882 and impose a client-regime. But they insisted that their presence was 'temporary' and carefully preserved the privileged status of other Europeans. Far from annexing the country or declaring a protectorate, they did all they could to conceal the scale of their influence even after deciding by the late 1880s that they could not withdraw. The omnipotent Lord Cromer, the 'whisper' behind the Egyptian throne, remained a mere 'consul-general' to soothe diplomatic outrage in Europe.[31]

(p. 351) Perhaps the British were lucky that their occupation of Egypt was not generally seen as upsetting the balance on the European continent, and that no other power was prepared to join France to enforce their withdrawal. But their uneasy position and the need to conciliate their European neighbours weakened their claims in the second great zone of Afro-Asian instability that now opened up. By the late 1870s, the prospect of exploiting the African interior commercially had become much more attractive, and seemingly more practicable. The steamer and railway would open it up. Henry Morton Stanley's descent of the Congo (1876–7) revealed a huge river system, navigable above Stanley Pool (modern Kinshasa). The Suez Canal brought Zanzibar and its East African trade network closer to the trunk route between Europe and India. The French in West Africa dreamt of a Trans-Saharan railway. The discovery of gold in the eastern Transvaal (but not yet on the Rand) encouraged the hope of finding still more in what is now Zimbabwe. Although the European powers agreed (at the Berlin West African conference in 1884–5) that 'effective occupation' should be the test of territorial claims, the British found it expedient to agree that the filibuster-king of the Belgians Leopold II should take as his prize the whole Congo basin, while the German chancellor Otto von Bismarck was appeased with the offer of modern Tanzania (but not Zanzibar), Namibia, and Cameroon.[32] As it turned out, these lines on the African map preceded anything that resembled 'effective occupation'. They signalled instead the onset of struggle by the states and polities of the African interior against the wasting effects of European influence and firepower. The competition for treaties and trade between rival European men-on the-spot, their appeal for support to their backers at home, and the rousing of 'jingo' emotion in popular politics, made the partition diplomacy of the 1890s an ill-tempered, sabre-rattling affair. It climaxed at Fashoda in late 1898 when a handful of Frenchmen gave up the attempt to claim the Upper Nile in the face of Lord Kitchener's army, fresh from defeating the Mahdist state at Omdurman in September.

The 'scramble' for Africa has often been treated as proof of the ruthless aggression of the European states and their willingness to go to any lengths to acquire supposedly valuable colonies. The truth is more subtle. The predation and violence that the Europeans inflicted on Africans is undeniable. So is the contempt with which they treated Africans' property rights (including the right to their own labour). But except in the special

circumstances of the South African War of 1899–1902, no blood was shed *between* Europeans. For all the jostling of the men-on-the-spot and sound and fury of their sponsors at home, European governments (with the partial exception of Italy)[33] showed no inclination to fight each other on behalf of their African claims.[34]

The same was true of the third epicentre of geopolitical turmoil that appeared in East Asia after 1895, when China's defeat at the hands of Japan (the dispute was over Korea), and its recourse to European loans to pay an indemnity, raised the spectre of the rapid implosion of the Qing imperial state, and a division of spoils, if not of spheres, among the Western powers and Japan. The race for concessions and bases, the abortive rush to reform by the court in Beijing, the Boxer rebellion and the occupation of North China, largely by Russian and Japanese troops, all seemed to be driving towards the break-up (p. 352) of China, and its fractious division between multiple claimants.[35] And unlike tropical Africa, the economic and geopolitical stakes in China were thought to be high. China possessed a commercial economy that was ripe for the plucking by foreign-owned railways; and political control over its vast interior was bound to shift the balance of power not just in Asia, but across the whole of Eurasia. In London, the threat of a 'scramble for China' at a time when Britain was still in the toils of its South African war was acutely alarming. With Russian troops in Manchuria, a German sphere in Shandong, and French designs on South China, the idea of proclaiming a 'Yangtse protectorate' to guard British interests in the huge riverine hinterland stretching back from Shanghai was considered and rejected as too risky a move. Instead the British concluded an alliance with Japan against the danger that Russia and France (already allies in Europe) might try a joint squeeze on their (or Japan's) East Asian interests.[36]

Fear of China's partition was in fact premature. Among the banks and finance houses with interests in China, international cooperation was greatly preferred to cut-throat competition. Moreover, the easy assumption that the Chinese authorities would simply cave in before the face of foreign demands turned out to be wrong. Instead, provincial administrations pursued 'rights recovery' and China's 'self-strengthening' against foreign attempts to control the construction of railways. When friction between Russia and Japan over Korea and Manchuria burst out into war in 1904, it was the Russians who suffered a crushing defeat on land and sea. The balance of power in East Asia now seemed to rest with those who disliked the break-up of China since Japan was unlikely to challenge the combined opposition of Britain and the United States, both of which favoured an 'open door' policy over one of partition. The real danger in China on the eve of the First World War was less an agreement by the great powers to divide up its assets, or a military struggle for concessions and spheres, than the failure of the new post-revolution regime to impose its authority over the provincial authorities.

Looked at more closely, the age of Europe's 'high imperialism', when the clash of ambition was supposedly reaching its climax, was a patchy affair. It was true that the Europeans had divided up Africa (almost completely) to the crowing and wailing of the interested parties. But except in South Africa and perhaps also in Egypt, the stakes had been low and compromise easy. In China where the stakes were certainly larger, the rival

contenders found that they had to cooperate against Chinese resistance at the time of the Boxer rebellion. No European power contemplated fighting another to force a Chinese partition: none had the strength to impose its will on the region. In the Near and Middle East much the same picture emerged. The Ottoman Empire showed a surprising resilience.[37] Despite their mutual fears and suspicions, or perhaps because of them, the European powers preferred to keep it in being rather than face the dilemmas of dividing it up. Nor should we be surprised at the general timidity of European statecraft. It is easy to exaggerate the scale of European interests in the non-European world: only Great Britain had important foreign investments outside the home continent. While most European statesmen (and Americans as well) believed themselves living in the age of 'world states', 'competitive coexistence', not a war to the death, was (p. 353) the motto they followed. That meant much puffing and croaking in the manner of bullfrogs, not a fight to the finish. It's not hard to see why. Britain and France had little to gain. In Russia, Austria-Hungary, and Germany, the ruling elites might have fingered their swords, but they knew very well that a general war over China or Africa would inflict terrible strains on their multi-ethnic empires at home. Here the 'logic' of nationalism was not the pursuit of imperial ambition in the world beyond Europe but its careful restraint. For the nationalisms that mattered were those of Czechs and Poles, South Slavs and Ruthenians. Keeping them quiet required a conservative policy, not rocking the boat of Europe's balance of power. It was the reckless desertion of this long-standing policy amid the chaos that followed the two Balkan wars of 1912–14 that brought Europe's house down in July 1914. Nationalism not imperialism set off Armageddon.

The New Imperialism of the Inter-War Years

It used to be argued that the end was in sight for Europe's overseas empires after 1918. With their moral credentials in tatters, their wealth and manpower depleted, and their rule under siege by discontented colonials, they could hardly resist the new global doctrine of national self-determination. The defeated 'Central Powers'—the Germans, Habsburgs, and Ottomans—had their empires broken up. Bolshevik Russia, defeated by Germany in March 1918, lost control of its 'Romanov' Empire in the Caucasus and Central Asia, as well as in Europe. In the Middle East and East Asia, Arab, Turkish, Iranian, and Chinese nationalisms asserted the claims of new nation states against the undeclared empires and 'veiled protectorates' of the European powers. The Washington treaties of 1921–2 guaranteed China's integrity. The age of partitions was over: the world of nations was on the march. Or so it seemed.

But when the dust had settled, much of the old imperial order remained in place, even if in a new guise. In the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Pacific 'Far East', Russian power was restored. Federal union was the form, the Communist Party the glue, but empire the reality. Germany's lost colonies were shared out as 'mandates' under League supervision, but for all practical purposes they were governed as colonies. The same was true of

Ottoman Syria and Lebanon, awarded to France as the mandatory power.[38] The British were keen to lay down their mandate for Iraq, which became independent in 1932. But only because they could use it more cheaply as a pensioner state on their air route to India.[39] In face of nationalist movements in Egypt and India, the British conceded degrees of self-government in the byzantine endeavour to divide and confuse their opponents.[40] They were largely successful. In tropical Africa, 'indirect rule' through 'traditional' chiefs and 'customary' law reduced political life to a strictly local activity. Perhaps only in China, where the West had been weakest, was the (p. 354) promise of nationalism sustained through the post-war decade. But that too was about to change.

The catalyst was the Great Depression. The sudden implosion of the global economy in 1929–31 wrecked the half-liberal, half-imperial order over which Britain and France, Europe's two victor powers, had hoped to preside with American help, and through which they meant to restrain both German resurgence and the unruly ambitions of Russia and Japan. Depression destroyed the authority of liberal politicians in Tokyo and Berlin and drove a deep wedge between London and Washington.[41] As its impact sank in, a new kind of world order swam into view. As trade contracted, the 'open' global economy began to break up into a series of blocs, guarded by tariffs or currency rules. Economic survival now seemed to depend upon the control of the zone from which imports were drawn and to which they were sent. For industrial states without a massive home market (the American pattern) or a vast trading empire (the British), the implications were dire. They spelled out the need for a new and more ruthless form of economic imperialism, far more thorough and real than the slash-and-burn colonialism of Leopold's Congo Free State. What made this more urgent was the far stronger sense of domestic political danger than Europe's ruling elites had felt before 1914. The spectre of Bolshevism loomed over the battered economies of Europe and Asia. Indeed, to many observers in different parts of the world, the crisis of capitalism seemed to confirm that Marx and Lenin had been right all along: the capitalists had delayed but could not evade their ultimate fate. But if this was a message of cheer to leaders and led on the Left, it convinced many others that they faced a supreme emergency: drastic measures were needed to escape economic collapse, intense social conflict, and the politics of class war.

For the 'have' powers, the solution was straightforward. Those with empires or (like the British) with additional zones of informal pre-eminence, could secure them by tariffs or bilateral agreements (as the British did with Argentina, Denmark, and elsewhere).[42] Those with a home market could rely on protection—the American model. Those without either—the 'have-nots'—faced exclusion from world markets, and the wreck of their own. This was the context in which Tokyo abandoned the indirect form of expansion it had practised in China for much of the 1920s and sanctioned first the forward movement of the Kwantung army in Manchuria in 1931 and then (from 1937) the all-out war to control maritime China. The 'Great East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere'—the doctrine invented to dignify Tokyo's actions—invoked the common interest of East Asians in resisting exploitation by the West in an artful fusion of imperialism and nationalism.[43] In Hitler's Germany, which took refuge in exchange control and barter trade,[44] the economic domination of an East European hinterland was soon supercharged in Nazi ambitions by

the colonization of the ‘East’—the vast realm of southern Russia and Ukraine to be cleared of their ‘backward’ inhabitants. If the pre-1914 imperialists had followed a ‘gentlemanly’ code of honour among thieves, as they stole the land and freedom of non-European peoples, this was imperialism without limits and with no holds barred.

(p. 355) What made it more deadly was the apparent indifference of the new imperialists to the crucial constraints felt before 1914. Then, as we have seen, it was fear of a European war, and the damage it might do to the brittle empires ‘at home’, that discouraged too much aggression on the Afro-Asian ‘periphery’. But though the new rulers in Tokyo and Berlin were not without fears, they were deeply opposed to the existing world order, had little incentive to prop up its weakness, and were increasingly sure that it could and must be pulled down. In their geopolitical thinking, as well as their ideology, they had nothing in common with Britain and France, the two jaded custodians of the ‘liberal-imperial’ order. To make matters worse, the new Soviet state, whose geostrategic potential was a critical factor in the imperial ambitions of both Tokyo and Berlin, was no less hostile than they were to the global regime favoured by Britain and France—and thus willing to sup with the devil in August 1939.[45] American alienation did not run so deep. But the breach between London and Washington that ruled out joint action until after war had begun was at least partly a consequence of American feeling that they had little to gain from a global regime that locked up so much of the world in the trading and currency blocs managed from London and (in a much smaller way) from Paris, Brussels, and The Hague. With the fall of France in June 1940, the trigger was pulled. The imperialism by coexistence, which had allowed Europeans to share out the globe before 1914, had run out of backers. It was about to be pulled down not by the revolt of its subjects but by the economic nationalism of those who aspired to build new forms of empire on the ruins of the old.

Suggested Further Reading

Three master-writings by R. E. Robinson and J. Gallagher, ‘The Imperialism of Free Trade’, *Economic History Review*, new series VI, 1 (1953); *Africa and the Victorians* (Cambridge, 1961); and ‘The Partition of Africa’, in *New Cambridge Modern History*, vol. 11: *Material Progress and World Wide Problems* (Cambridge, 1962), provide what remains the most powerful overall interpretation of the nineteenth-century encounter of imperialism and nationalism. Many of these insights are marshalled in Gallagher’s posthumous (1982) *Decline, Rise and Fall of the British Empire*, Cambridge. See also D. Lieven (2002) *Empire: the Russian Empire and its Rivals*; some of its key ideas are brilliantly summarized in his (1999) ‘Dilemmas of Empire: Power, Territory and Identity 1850–1918’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 34, no. 2, 163–200.

On economic aspects of imperial expansion, D. K. Fieldhouse (1973) *Economics and Empire 1830–1914* has yet be superseded. But see also K. H. O’Rourke and J. G.

Williamson (1999) *Globalization and History: The Evolution of a Nineteenth-Century Atlantic Economy*, Cambridge, MA.

The response of non-Western societies can be followed in: J. Lonsdale (1985) ‘The Race Against Time’, in R. Oliver and G. N. Sanderson (eds.) *Cambridge History of Africa, vol. 6: 1870–1905*, Cambridge; A. Hourani (1962) *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, Cambridge; M. Aksakal (2008) *The Ottoman Road to War in 1914*, Cambridge; T. Raychaudhuri (1989) *Europe Reconsidered: Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth-Century Bengal*, Delhi; A. Seal (1973) ‘Imperialism and Nationalism in India’, in J. Gallagher, G. Johnson, and A. Seal (eds.) *Locality, Province and Nation*, Cambridge; R. Bin Wong (1997) *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience*, Ithaca, NY; H. van der Ven (2003) *War and Nationalism in China 1925–1945*. A neglected classic is E. H. Norman (1940) *Japan’s Emergence as a Modern State*, New York. A panoptic view of the period is C. A. Bayly (2004) *The Birth of the Modern World 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons*, Oxford.

Notes:

(1) For a brilliant expression of this view, R. Robinson and J. Gallagher (1961) *Africa and the Victorians*. ‘European’ includes British.

(2) See J. Gallagher and R. Robinson (1953) ‘The Imperialism of Free Trade’, *Economic History Review*, New Series, VI, no. 1, 1–14. For informal empire in Argentina, H. S. Ferns (1960) *Britain and Argentina in the Nineteenth Century*, Oxford; for Uruguay, P. Winn (1976) ‘British Informal Empire in Uruguay in the Nineteenth Century’, *Past and Present*, 73, 100–26.

(3) For the treaty port system in China, H. B. Morse (1908) *The Trade and Administration of the Chinese Empire*. For a modern survey, J. Osterhammel (1999) ‘Britain and China 1842–1914’, in A. Porter (ed.) *Oxford History of the British Empire: The Nineteenth Century*, Oxford, 146–69.

(4) For this argument, J. Darwin (1997) ‘Imperialism and the Victorians’, *English Historical Review*, 112, no. 447, 614–42.

(5) For all its importance, there is yet to be a full scholarly study of the British regime in Egypt 1882–1954. For the Cromer period, the best recent account is R. Owen (2004) *Lord Cromer*, Oxford.

(6) The theory of economic imperialism found its classic expression in J. A. Hobson (1902) *Imperialism: A Study*, London, although Hobson stressed above all the role of surplus capital. For a close but critical examination of the theory, D. K. Fieldhouse (1973) *Economics and Empire 1830–1914*, London.

(7) An early scholarly version of this argument was W. L. Langer (1935) *The Diplomacy of Imperialism*, New York, 2 vols., vol. 1, ch. 3. For a German version, H. Pogge von Strandmann (1969) 'Domestic Origins of Germany's Colonial Expansion under Bismarck', *Past and Present*, 42. For Italy, C. Duggan (2002) *Francesco Crispi 1818–1901*, Oxford, 411–15, 670–709.

(8) An influential statement of this thesis was A. J. P. Taylor (1938) *Germany's First Bid for Colonies*, London. The date of publication is not insignificant.

(9) For Russian imperialism, the best introduction is now D. Lieven (2002) *Empire: the Russian Empire and its Rivals from the Sixteenth Century to the Present*, London, which has an excellent bibliography.

(10) Although it has been persuasively argued that support for empire became embedded in British opinion, this is not the same as popular enthusiasm for imperial *expansion*. See J. MacKenzie (1984) *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion 1880–1960*, Manchester.

(11) Robinson and Gallagher, 'The Imperialism of Free Trade'.

(12) See E. T. Stokes (1959) *The English Utilitarians and India*, Oxford; and T. R. Metcalf (1995) *Ideologies of the Raj*, Cambridge, for the classic case of the British in India.

(13) J. B. Kelly (1968) *Britain and the Persian Gulf 1795–1880*, Oxford, is the authoritative study.

(14) See A. Kappeler (2001) *The Russian Empire: A Multiethnic History*, Harlow; F. Kazemzadeh (1968) *Russia and Britain in Persia 1864–1914*, New Haven.

(15) See K. Dike (1956) *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta 1830–1885*, Oxford; M. Lynn (1986) 'The Imperialism of Free Trade and the Case of West Africa', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 15, 22–40.

(16) The dissatisfaction of British merchants with the slowness of the East India Company government to 'open up' India with railways and roads occasioned a parliamentary inquiry in the late 1840s. See A. W. Silver (1966) *Manchester Men and Indian Cotton 1847–1872*, Manchester.

(17) See K. H. O'Rourke and J. G. Williamson (1999) *Globalization and History: The Evolution of a Nineteenth-Century Atlantic Economy*, Cambridge, MA; for the larger picture, A. G. Kenwood and A. L. Lougheed (1983) *The Growth of the International Economy 1820–1980*, London.

(18) See D. A. Farnie (1969) *East and West of Suez: The Suez Canal in History, 1854–1956*, Oxford; J. Forbes Munro (2003) *Maritime Enterprise and Empire: Sir William Mackinnon and his Business Network 1823–1893*, Woodbridge.

(19) See C. A. Bayly (1996) *Empire and Information*, Cambridge, ch. 9; generally D. Headrick (1981) *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century*, Oxford.

(20) For European commercial difficulty in China, F. E. Hyde (1973) *Far-Eastern Trade 1860–1914*, London, ch. 5.

(21) See D. Gillard (1977) *The Struggle for Asia 1828–1914: A Study in British and Russian Imperialism*, London.

(22) A. Roberts (1999) *Salisbury: Victorian Titan*, London, 42.

(23) An early case was the desertion of the Bengal subahdar, Suraja Daula, by many of his leading supporters before his battle with Clive at Plassey in 1757.

(24) This phrase was used, and may have been coined, by Sir John Seeley in his *Expansion of England* (1883).

(25) For the French popular press and empire, W. H. Schneider (1982) *An Empire for the Masses: The French Popular Image of Africa, 1870–1900*, Westport, CT.

(26) The scale and direction of European lending is laid out in H. Feis (1930) *Europe the World's Banker*, New York.

(27) For this view of the City of London, see I. R. Phimister (2000) 'Corners and Company-mongering: Nigerian Tin and the City of London', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 28.

(28) A forceful statement of this was G. Lowes Dickinson (1926) *The International Anarchy*, London.

(29) The term 'Middle East' seems to have become current during the First World War. For treatments of these regions and the role of other powers from different perspectives, see the chapters in this book by Aviel Roshwald (11), Miroslav Hroch (9), and Theodore Weeks (10).

(30) See B. H. Sumner (1937) *Russia and the Balkans 1870–1880*, Oxford.

(31) See A. Schölch (Eng. trans. 1981) *'Egypt for the Egyptians': The Socio-Political Crisis in Egypt 1879–1882*, London.

(32) For the Berlin Conference of 1884–5, S. Forster et al. (eds.) (1988) *Bismarck, Europe and Africa*, Oxford; J.-L. Vellut (1992) *Un centenaire 1885–1985. Les relations Europe-Afrique au crible d'un commemoration*, Leiden.

(33) Duggan, *Crispi*, 670–709.

(34) From a different perspective, see Chapter 16 by John Lonsdale.

(35) For a recent scholarly treatment, T. Otte (2007) *The China Question*, Oxford.

(36) See I. H. Nish (1966) *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, London.

(37) For Ottoman reform, S. Deringil (1998) *The Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire, 1876–1909*, London; E. Rogan (1999) *Frontiers of the State in the Late Ottoman Empire: Trans-Jordan 1850–1921*, Cambridge.

(38) The authoritative account is P. S. Khoury (1987) *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism 1920–1945*, Princeton, NJ.

(39) See D. Silverfarb (1986) *Britain's Informal Empire in the Middle East: A Case Study of Iraq 1929–41*, Oxford.

(40) J. Darwin (1981) *Britain, Egypt and the Middle East: Imperial Policy in the Aftermath of War 1918–1922*, London; D. Page (1982) *Prelude to Partition: The Indian Muslims and the Imperial System of Control 1920–1932*, Delhi.

(41) M. Metzler (2006) *Lever of Empire: The International Gold Standard and the Crisis of Liberalism in Pre-war Japan*, Berkeley; Generally, H. James (2001) *The End of Globalization*, Cambridge, MA.

(42) The best account of the British case is T. Rooth (2002) *British Protectionism and the International Economy: Overseas Commercial Policy in the 1930s*, Cambridge.

(43) For the persistence of economic complementarity between Japan and the British Empire until 1937, see S. Akita and N. Kagotani (2002) 'The International Order of Asia in the 1930s', and Y. Kibata (2002) 'Reasserting Imperial Power? Britain and East Asia in the 1930s', both in S. Akita (ed.) *Gentlemanly Capitalism, Imperialism and Global History*, Basingstoke. For the thinking in the military clique that dominated the Tokyo government, A. Iriye (1998) 'The Failure of Military Expansionism', in S. Large (ed.) *Showa Japan: Political, Economic and Social History 1926–1989, vol. 1: 1926–1941*, London, 213–15, 223, 226–7. For an older discussion, F. C. Jones (1954) *Japan's New Order in Asia: its Rise and Fall*, Oxford.

(44) For an outstanding account, A. Tooze (2006) *Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy*, London.

(45) The best study of Stalin's diplomacy in 1939–41 is now G. Gorodetsky (1999) *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia*, New Haven.

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