

European Imperialism in the 19th & 20th Centuries

An examination of the economic and
political factors that determined the
direction of European colonial expansion.

Woodruff D. Smith

**EUROPEAN
IMPERIALISM
IN THE
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TWENTIETH
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European Imperialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

Woodruff D. Smith

The sun *has* set on all the great European colonial empires. The age of imperialism has passed, the Western appetite for colonial expansion has subsided.

In the century following the Napoleonic wars, Europe engaged in a massive scramble for territory unmatched in modern history. Africa, the Middle East, China, and Southeast Asia were picked over by the European powers. The process of incorporation and decolonization has continued to the present day. *European Imperialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* reexamines the course of European imperialism, investigating its causes, and assessing its importance in history and today.

Imperialism is a complex phenomenon; its appearance is difficult to explain under any circumstances. This is especially true of European imperialism in the nineteenth century. The European powers had passed through an imperial era in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and had divested themselves of many of their colonial holdings. In explaining the reappearance of colonial imperialism in the nineteenth century author Woodruff D. Smith pays particular attention to the roles of industrialization and its social and economic effects. Following the industrial revolution, European industry could make large profits by selling its manufactured goods in overseas markets. At the same time the social and political effects of the industrial revolution were fragmenting the nations' political structures: powerful special interests emerged and the electorate became larger and better educated. Consensus of political opinion became difficult to achieve. Spurred by the need for new

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markets, imperialist ventures also provided a badly needed focus for political sentiments.

Virtually the entire world was drawn into the frantic imperial scramble of 1880 to 1910. The major European powers participated in the partition of Africa, Britain fought the Boer War, France and Britain divided the Middle East, Southeast Asia was annexed and subdivided, and the United States quarrelled with the European powers over rights to Latin America.

Professor Smith devotes much of his discussion to the operation and eventual effects of colonial systems. He analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of colonial rule, the varying styles and structures of colonial administration and the effects of colonialism on the world economy and international relations.

Imperialism has again disappeared as a worldwide political system, overshadowed by the new forms of international domination practiced by the current superpowers: military preeminence and an international web of financial organizations, multinational corporations, and military alliances. Whether imperialism has disappeared altogether remains to be seen.

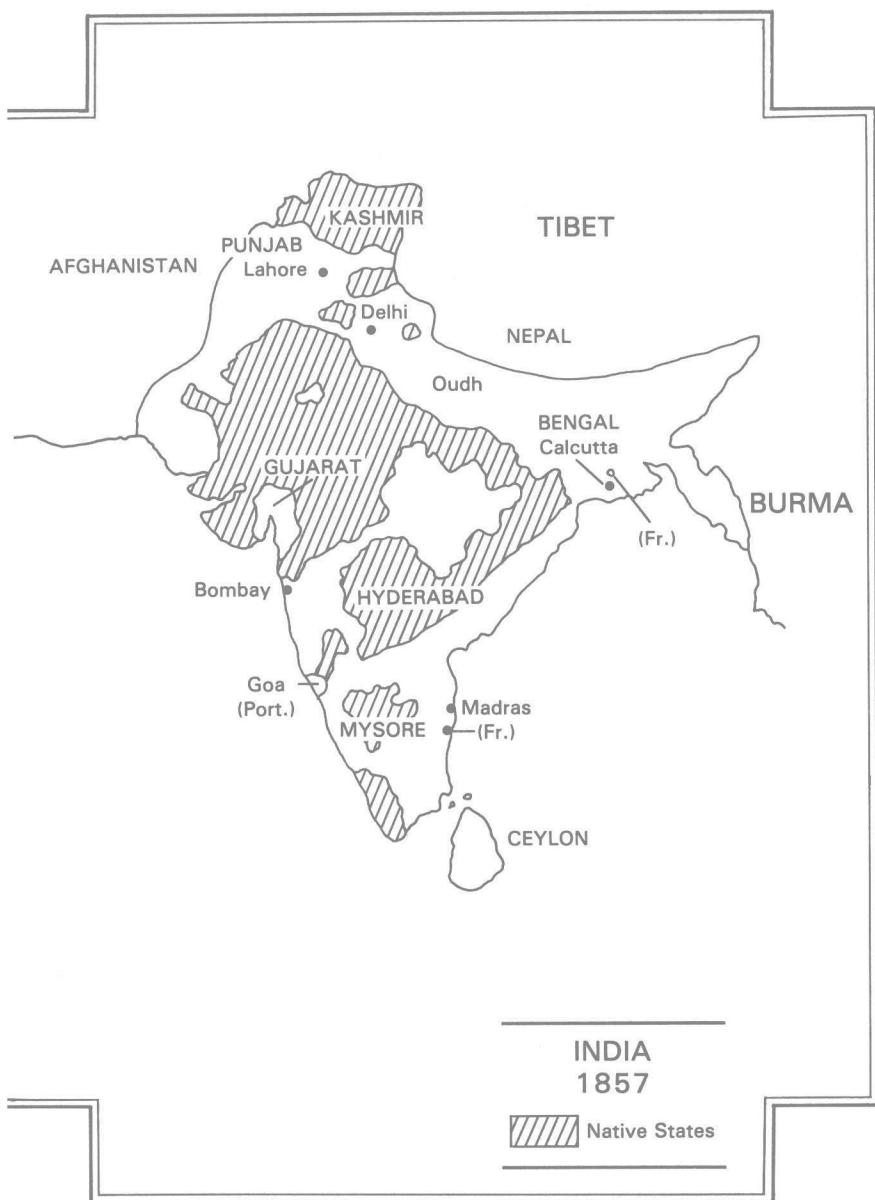
Woodruff D. Smith received his doctorate at the University of Chicago and is currently professor of history at the University of Texas at San Antonio. His articles on history and social science have appeared in many scholarly journals and he has previously published *The German Colonial Empire*.

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PREFACE

THIS IS A SMALL BOOK ON A VERY large subject. It is written for the general reader and for students who want an overview of modern European imperialism and an indication of some of the major issues with which historians of imperialism are currently concerned. Obviously, such a book cannot go into detail on any aspect of the subject. I have attempted wherever possible to use particular cases of imperialism to represent larger phenomena that occurred in many different places and at different times. I have also included references to important works on the subjects discussed in each section of the book; preference has been given to recently published studies and to those in English which are most likely to be available to the reader. Although the book is not purely a narrative and is organized around a number of theses, the presentation of the theses is necessarily abbreviated and the support for them incomplete. They should be considered as means of structuring the material; fuller exposition must await future publications.

I should like to acknowledge the assistance of Ralph A. Austen and Sharon Turner, who read and commented on portions of the manuscript; Jane Helen Smith, who helped with the editing and proofreading; Elizabeth Perry, Marsha Jossierand, Lyn Bonnell, Julie Ash, and Ada Chavez, who typed parts of the text; and my graduate students in the history of European expansion.





Colonial Africa
1914

**COLONIAL
AFRICA
1914**

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Introduction

THE "AGE OF IMPERIALISM" IS OVER. Most of the clichés associated with the huge European overseas empires of the past three centuries have by now been negated by twentieth-century realities. The sun definitely sets on the British Empire, every day. What is left of the British Empire is a handful of dependencies of little or no benefit to Britain, representing obligations acquired in more expansive, although not always more optimistic, times. On the other hand, "imperialism" itself, as a variety of human political and economic behavior, appears to be quite alive, judging from events in Vietnam and Afghanistan.

The book presents an overview of Europe's imperialist career from the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 to the present; in other words, from the establishment of Britain's ascendancy as the major power in the world and the head of Europe's largest empire to the era of decolonization and the eclipse of Western Europe in world affairs. We shall examine the nature and extent of Europe's relations with the world overseas, the economic and political factors present in Europe during the era of industrialization that determined the direction of those relations, the effects of increased European penetration upon non-European

societies in the nineteenth century, and the explosion of European imperialism in the last quarter of the century. We shall also discuss the effects of modern European colonization in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East; the changes that occurred in Europe's economic relationships with the rest of the world in the twentieth century; and the process of decolonization in our own time. In the final chapter we shall try to assess the overall importance of European imperialism in world history.

A major difficulty arises almost immediately. What exactly is imperialism? Questions like this one at the beginnings of history books can be regarded as useful introductions to the material that follows or as exercises in pedantry, depending upon the reader's inclinations. Usually, historians are content to deal with subjects that possess hazy conventional meanings, since historians, perhaps more than most people, understand the inexactitude of social definitions and the frequent uselessness of attempts to clarify them. But in the case of imperialism, it is absolutely necessary to examine the meaning of the term. There is, in fact, no single accepted definition of imperialism that is useful for historical analysis. Rather, what we understand by *imperialism* is a set of social phenomena, sometimes only tangentially related to each other and grouped together by convention under the same heading.¹

In modern times, the concept of imperialism has included the forcible establishment of political control by one state over others through such means as colonies and protectorates (*formal imperialism*), the exertion of influence by strong nations over weaker ones through real or potential exercise of force, the exploitation of economic advantages held by industrial countries over nonindustrial ones, and so forth. "Imperialism" also refers to attitudes evinced both by elite groups and by mass publics in Europe toward other peoples — attitudes of racial superiority that justified exploitation and, sometimes, ideas of the obligations of "civilized" to "uncivilized" peoples. Imperialism was also an issue of domestic politics in most Western countries in the nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries. Fully developed imperialist ideologies, more directly related to the internal politics of European states than to the realities of the European presence overseas, existed almost everywhere. The term *imperialism* has thus referred to a great many different things. The kind of historical explanation one gives for it and the historical significance that is assigned to it depend largely on which definition one chooses.

A great many theories of modern imperialism exist, most of them developed in their original forms in the nineteenth century. There are many more explanations for particular events in the history of Europe's relations with the rest of the world which do not have the status of theories but which nevertheless have theoretical implications. To examine all but the best known of these would require the entire space of this book. Theories and explanations of imperialism are differentiated by many factors, and some are logically and evidentially superior to others. But one of the most important differences between them is that they fix upon different aspects of imperialism as the defining ones. The decision as to whether imperialism is basically a political, economic, intellectual, or psychological phenomenon is often made by theorists for reasons largely external to the facts with which they are dealing: ideological convictions, personal career experiences, beliefs about the normal direction of social causation, and so forth. The concept of imperialism possessed by a conservative retired colonial official, for example, is likely to be very different from that of a Marxist academic. The various faces of imperialism can be associated with each other in theories, but usually only by assuming that one aspect is more fundamental than the others, as for example Marxists do when they argue that economic events cause changes in other spheres of social life.

The answer that we give to the question, What is imperialism?, therefore, is a key to the answers to other questions with which a book of this sort must be concerned, such as: What caused modern imperialism? Is imperialism gone forever, at least in its nineteenth-century forms, or is it present

today in international relations and domestic politics? What is the long-run historical significance of imperialism? We shall look briefly at some of the major explanatory approaches to nineteenth- and twentieth-century imperialism with these questions in mind.

Perhaps the greatest number of explanations of European imperialism see it either as an economic phenomenon or as a consequence of an economic phenomenon, and even approaches that concentrate on political or diplomatic aspects have an important place for economic factors. Europe, the first area in the world to experience full economic modernization and industrialization, became by the nineteenth century the "center" of a world economy, to which an increasing proportion of the non-European world became attached as an economic "periphery."² According to many historians, this "center periphery" arrangement constituted the basis of imperialism. European imperialism arose, therefore, from Europe's economic transformation in the early modern period, which gave it both a technological and an organizational superiority and a need for markets and sources of raw materials. These factors helped to create, even before the English Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth century, a vast network of unequal economic relationships centering on Europe. The particular forms that elements of this network took varied from outright colonialism to trading relations in which the use of force was kept in the background, but Europe was almost always at the center. With the advent of industrialization, the network centering on Europe spread further to encompass practically the entire world, and tightened because of European needs for ever-larger markets. Great Britain became the preeminent imperial power because it was the first to industrialize. With industrialization, the variety of the connections between European and non-European societies increased. Even though in the political sphere the colonial form was temporarily devalued at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, the degree of actual economic

dependency increased almost everywhere. For many reasons, the direct colonial form of imperial rule was imposed during the last quarter of the nineteenth century on large areas of the world, especially Africa. The subsequent dissolution of the large colonial empires in our own time was simply the end of a phase in the history of imperialism. According to most exponents of the "center periphery" economic approach, imperialism still remains and will do so as long as the distinction between center and periphery is maintained and continues to imply inequality and dependency. The "center" has, of course, been extended to include the non-European industrialized countries, especially the United States and Japan. But the basic model still holds.

Among the theories that take the economic approach to imperialism, probably the best known are the Marxist ones. Marx himself, although he did not emphasize imperialism in his work, nevertheless employed the "center periphery" distinction and argued that the imposition of colonial rule by Europe on the rest of the world was both inevitable and, in a way, beneficial, because it started non-European societies on the necessary, unilineal path to capitalism and industrialization, to modern class conflict, and thus to revolution.³ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries other Marxists, faced with the necessity of explaining developments that Marx had not entirely anticipated, adapted general Marxist theory to arrive at more comprehensive treatments of imperialism. Lenin, following to some extent the work of the English Liberal J.A. Hobson and writing in the context of what he hoped was an incipient revolution in a country not yet fully industrialized, advanced the best-known of the Marxist theories of imperialism.⁴ Lenin formulated his theory around the high rate of European external investment before 1914, a phenomenon particularly important for the industrialization of Russia. He argued that the declining profit margins of European businesses in the late nineteenth century, which were signs of the coming "crisis of capitalism" predicted by Marx, led

business people to attempt to find new opportunities for profit. They therefore exported their capital to overseas areas where the process of industrialization was less advanced and where large profits could be made by exploiting labor. In order to guarantee their profits against the actions of non-European governments and against competition, business interests investing abroad pressured the governments of the European countries into adopting imperialist policies. These included both occasional military actions to ensure a “correct” business climate and full-scale colonial acquisition. The latter led to the partition of most of Africa among the imperialist powers in the 1880s and 1890s.

There are many other economic theories of imperialism, both Marxist and non-Marxist, to some of which we shall refer in the following chapters. These economic theories tend to suffer from certain conceptual and factual problems. They define imperialism so broadly that practically any economic relationship between countries that are in any sense unequal in power or degree of development could be included under it. Whether such a broad view of imperialism is meaningful is open to question. Also, while economic phenomena obviously played an important part in the history of European expansion, it is often difficult to argue on the basis of available evidence that economic factors were primary causes of particular events. As we shall see, Lenin’s theory of imperialism does not, on the whole, work very well as an explanation for the partition of Africa, since the kinds of investment required by the theory were simply not present in most areas.

Some other approaches to imperialism have been deliberately formulated as counters to economic theories, most especially to Marxist ones. In a classic rejoinder to Lenin and Hobson, the economist Joseph Schumpeter argued in 1919 that late nineteenth-century imperialism was not a product of capitalism but rather of new conditions of modern social life.⁵ Traditional European elite classes, increasingly finding their behavior constricted by new social conditions in industrial societies, reverted, according to Schumpeter, to