

The Historical Origins and Essence of European Imperialism and Colonization

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Imperialism and colonialism

One of the focal historical features of the western (West European) civilization was and is imperialistic colonization followed by the brutal social, economic, political, financial, etc. exploitation of the local peoples and their cultures.

By some academic understanding and formal definition, imperialism is a process of extending a nation-state's power by territorial occupation or by forming political, financial, economic, etc., hegemony (rule) over other people. In more simple words, imperialism is defined as the cases when one state (nation-state) controls the inhabitants and territory of another state (neighboring or overseas). In any case, the cardinal feature of imperialism is domination or control by one country or group of people over others. The others will point out that imperialism in a very broad way refers to the creation and maintenance of an unequal economic, cultural, and territorial relationship but usually between states and often in the form of an empire that is founded on domination and subordination.

Colonialism can be defined in a narrower sense as the creation and maintenance of rule, for an extended period of time, by a sovereign power over a subordinate and alien people. Colonization involves the physical settlement of settlers and the displacement of others (indigenous people) followed by the resettlement of places. In a more political sense, colonialism is the policy of a strong power extending its control territorially over a weaker people or nation (state). Colonialism, as a historical phenomenon, takes many different forms and is experienced by different people in different ways. Historical experiences of colonists have been many and varied, as, for instance, the British case illustrates (for example, David Livingstone who spent much of his life as a missionary and explorer in Africa). Historically and originally, the Latin (Roman) "colonia" meant a country estate but it soon acquired the meaning of such an estate deliberately settled among foreigners.

As a matter of very historical fact, imperial states (empires) have been rising and falling for different reasons. Concerning the falling, usually because of the foreign (outside) factor. The

best examples are Antique Egyptians, Persians, Macedonians/Greeks (of Alexander the Great), Chinese, Romans, Mongols, or Aztecs, and Incas in the Americas who all of them succeeded to create extensive territorial empires and, therefore, dominating their local or overseas regions.

In practice, in many particular cases, such empires have been physically isolated from one another (or from the rest of the world) by some kind of geographical barrier (deserts, oceans, seas, rivers, mountains, etc.).

The start of West European imperialistic colonization

We can say that West European imperialistic colonization started in 1492 by “discovering” the Americas by Genovese Jew Christopher Columbus who, basically, proved that these physical barriers were not so uncrossable. Today, we know that the Europeans discovered the Americas even in the year 1000 (Vikings) but why Ch. Columbus did it for the second time it is another part of the story (pay attention that in the same 1492 year, Spain started ethnic cleansing of the local Jews and Muslims).

We read in the official textbooks that the 1492 Columbus voyage was just a result of long-time efforts by West Europeans to control and expand economic ties (trade) with Africa and Asia (pay attention that the Portuguese navigators started occupying West Africa’s seacoast a century ago). Nevertheless, these (Iberian – Portuguese and Spanish) navigation efforts became the focal steps in the direction of West European imperialistic colonization followed by Eurocentric economic and later political globalization of the pre-modern and modern world.

The Europeans have been in the trade relation with Central and East Asia (the Orient) for a long time before 1492. Within those centuries, the economic demand by Europe for primarily spices but for other items as well as from the Orient has been provided by the land passing Central Asia and the Middle East (the Silk Road, etc.), and after that, it was transported via the Mediterranean Sea by the Italians (Venetians and Genovesians) and Dubrovnik (Ragusa) sea-merchants.

However, prompted by the territorial expansion of the state (Empire/Sultanate) of the Ottomans (Osmanli), who occupied long-time trade lines between the Middle East and Central Asia and imposed harsh taxes for the trade products, it was, basically, the Portuguese Prince Henry (the Navigator) who created the center for the overseas navigation with the final purpose to expand Portuguese trade and therefore domination overseas (avoiding Ottoman controlled trade-lines in the Middle East). Nevertheless, the emerging navigation (the sextant) and military technologies (cannons and firearms) provided West Europeans (firstly the Portuguese and Spaniards) superior instruments of conquest and colonization (of West Africa, South-East Asia, and Latin America). In other words, for the very reason to take at least part of the control of the valuable spice trade from the Orient, the Portuguese, and the Spaniards encouraged their sailors (navigators) to use the newest navigation and combat technologies in order to find alternative (out of the Ottoman control) trading lines with Central Asia, India, and China.

Image: Colonization of India



In the process of revolutionizing world trade between (West) Europe and (South) Asia, the Portuguese explorers Bartholomeu Dias and Vasco da Gama were the first by organizing the successful (West) European overseas expeditions from 1487 to 1498 to round Cape of Good Hope at the southern horn of Africa (today in the Republic of South Africa). In such a way, they, in fact, opened a new trade line between (West) Europe and the Indian sub-continent (South Asia). However, the urgent need for fresh drinking water and food supplies simply led the Portuguese sailors to establish supply stations along firstly the western and later the eastern seacoasts of Africa followed by those in the Indian Ocean and South-East Asia. That was how West European colonial imperialism started.

Nevertheless, colonialism as a historical-political phenomenon can be defined as a policy by which a state-nation maintains or extends its control over foreign territories and people. In essence, there were/are historically two types of the policy of colonialistic imperialism:

- Movement of people from the mother country to another one for the reason to create a new type of political order;
- External powers' rule over the authentic people of the land.

The Portuguese sailors succeeded to establish trade lines to the south and east. The road to India along the African seacoast was, in fact, discovered by Lisbon. However, Ch. Columbus, a Jewish navigator, and trader from Genoa, had a new idea to reach (according to the mainstream textbooks) Japan or China by sailing west around the world. However, in fact, he knew that between Europe and Asia, it was a land (discovered by the Vikings in 1000) and practically he wanted to reach it probably for the very purpose to resettle the Spanish Jews to the new Israel before the pogroms in Spain started in the same year. For that purpose, he was simply late.

In any case, a very critical approach to the first Columbus trip in 1492 can be that such an overseas voyage (to Japan or China) was practically impossible for the reasonable reason that the ships of the time could not carry enough supplies (food) to sail as far as he hoped to go (except he believed that there was a land between West Europe and Asia-Pacific as, in fact, was – the Americas). In practice, Ch. Columbus did not find an alternative trade line to the Orient (as it is officially believed to be his prime purpose of the trip), he discovered (what, in fact, he wanted) the land between or later known as the Americas – two continents being very rich in many kinds of natural resources and arable land, if not in silk Oriental spices and silk. The next navigators and explorers from Spain and Portugal very quickly used the opportunity to conquer and exploit the New World of the Americas although it did not produce luxury products but at the same time, it offered many practical possibilities for both trade and colonization (grabbing of the land).

The 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas

The first official global division of the world (colonies) happened in 1494 – two years after Ch. Columbus “discovered” New World. In other words, for the reason to avoid political-military conflict between two Catholic states over their competing territorial-imperialistic expansion, under the umbrella of the Vatican (Roman Catholic Pope), Madrid and Lisbon signed the Treaty of Tordesillas (in Spain) which divided the world along an imaginary north-south line some 400 km. west of the Portuguese Azores Islands (a Lisbon possession in the Atlantic Ocean). The treaty was soon followed by the new Treaty of Zaragoza (Spain) in 1529.



According to the treaty, Spain (Castilla and Aragon) was granted territorial possessions to the west of this line, while Portugal gained possessions to the east. In short, the 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas established the authority of the Kingdom of Spain in the New World with the exception of Brazil, which Portuguese sailors discovered on their side from the line in 1500. It has to be noted that the treaty was signed four years before the Portuguese navigator Vasco da Gama in 1498 discovered the best use of Atlantic winds on way to Cape of Good Hope (1497–1499) and consequently reached the Indian sub-continent by navigation by local guides. Portugal, in turn, by the treaty obtained colonial power over Africa and the Indian Ocean – a lucrative trade line.

In the beginning, it was thought that Spain by the treaty received less valuable provinces compared to Portugal. However, the huge natural wealth of the (Spanish) New World very soon became obvious and extremely profitable for the Spanish (Habsburg) Crown as the conquest of both Americas Empires of Inca and Aztecs in the first half of the 16th century meant in practice extreme riches for Madrid nevertheless that a huge number of authentic before-1492 Americans disappeared because of harsh subjugation, forced labor, plundering, and epidemic diseases (followed by the forced Christianization of the local Indians). It is a fact that the majority of Spanish conquistadors (conquerors) went about their empire-building with (Roman Catholic) religious zeal and consequently simply did not consider any conflict between their profane and sacred motives for the Spanish imperialistic and colonization policies in the New World.

Very soon after the conquest of the new overseas land, both Portugal and Spain faced the same problem to be quickly solved: the lack of labor force for both their rich (silver/gold) mines (like Potosi in present-day Bolivia) and fertile plantations. The problem was solved by buying millions of African slaves from African and Arab agents and transporting them to both Americas. This practice was later continued by new conquerors of the New World – the Brits, French, Dutch, and after 1776 the Americans (of the USA).

New colonial powers

The wealth from the New World (especially gold and silver) financed a big number of Habsburg Spain's military actions in West Europe making at the same time Spain to be the most powerful state in Europe in the 16th century (at least up to 1588). Nevertheless, the Spanish huge global empire at the end of the same century became overextended and after an unsuccessful attempt to conquer England in 1588, the power of Madrid started rapidly to decline. Now, Holland became a new rising West European imperialistic and colonial power which have been building a trade empire in the next century and succeeded to control over most of the spice-rich East Indies (today Indonesia). Nevertheless, it became obvious as trade and technology have been developing in West Europe, both Portugal nor Holland did not have the population or resources to defend and/or extend their colonial empires. As a result, from the beginning of the 18th century, France and the United Kingdom (as established on January 1st, 1801) emerged as the leading global colonial powers and at the same time focal competitors in the process of building a global empire.

Nevertheless, the United Kingdom (the UK) as an island country was in the position to build its military power around the Royal Navy and, therefore, simply neglect the existence of a large standing army. In addition, the UK was trading for many raw materials (as it was lacking its own) and a very important part of its food.

As a consequence, London was gradually increasing its policy of expanding and protecting trade. However, contrary to the case of the UK, France was, basically, continental power as such having vulnerable borders, especially in the west but having geopolitical designs to expand its state territory in Europe. For those reasons, Paris was forced to keep a huge standing army and finance it. It became clear that the French navy was never able to overcome the navy of the UK. Another difference between these two countries as global colonial powers was that France was self-sufficient in food which simply meant that France was consistently more inward-looking at least in economic matters. At the same time, however, the population pressure in the UK encouraged and even forced emigration to overseas colonies, especially to North America (today the USA and Canada). As a result, the combination of these factors created a consistent advantage for the UK over France during the process of their imperialistic competition for overseas colonies, which, in fact, became a driving force in global politics and international relations of the time.

The economy as a driving force of modern form of imperialistic colonization

At least from the mid-17th century, it was the economic condition of affairs that forms the driving force of West European imperialistic colonization. If the consuming public in West European countries raised its standard of goods consumption to keep pace with every rise of productive powers, there could be no excess of goods or capital clamorous to use imperialistic colonization and exploitation in order to find markets. West European

capitalists have been investing in what is today known as Third World countries (former West European colonies) and imperialism became a direct result of such policy. According to John Hobson (1858–1940), the modern form of economic imperialism is, in fact, the endeavor of the great controllers of the industry for the purpose to broaden the channel for the flow of their surplus wealth by seeking foreign markets and foreign investments to take off the goods and capital they cannot sell or use at home.

Epilogue

West European colonial empires reached their peak just before WWI started. The UK among all of them was the largest global imperial power having colonial possessions from Canada to Australia, with France in the second place mainly having colonies in Africa. The British colonies had 388,644 million people, and these colonial subjects were subjected to something closer to absolute colonial rule.

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