

THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

REVERSE COLONIZATION IN EUROPE

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The drive towards imperium is as old as history. It seems that as soon as a tribe has become self-aware, it automatically becomes self-aggrandizing. All over the world, in all times and often from the most unlikely places, have arisen visionaries and tyrants anxious to expand their people's power and influence over their nearest neighbors.

In the beetling Balkans arose that Alexander of the Macedonians whose handsome features have been immortalized in the frescoes of Pompeii, who sought to bring the entire known world under the sun flag of the Greeks – and whose memory still inspires myths and national struggles today.

From the wolf-haunted slopes of the Appenines arose a hitherto obscure tribe, inspired by admiration of the Greeks and driven by a dream of racial domination and republican virtuousness – a dream that planted its eagle standards from the borders of Scotland to the edges of the Sahara, from Spain to Romania – a dream that shaped modern Europe and became transplanted wherever Europeans went.

From the parched uplands of Anatolia, arose a bearded, scimitar-wielding army, united by belief in a mortal-turned-god for whom all other gods were a blasphemy on the face of his earth – who took their swift horses and droning chants into the very heart of Europe.

From out of the trackless steppes of northeastern Asia irrupted the glittering riders of the Mongols, leaving shattered cities, mounds of skulls, and epicanthic folds all the way from Ulan Bator to Budapest.

From a cold island on the northwesternmost fringes of the civilized world arose a tribe of missionaries, adventurers, and merchants who, almost without realizing what they were doing, expanded their power by sea until they had created a vast dominion on which the sun proverbially never set.

In a highly ordered, highly civilized country at the heart of Europe, previously more famous for its composers and its genteel conformity, arose in the mid-twentieth century a ruthless force that sought to impose order and Germanness on the non-Germanic universe.

The drive to accumulate power and wealth and influence seems to be both perennial and insatiable. Just as non-human organisms always seek to maximize their numbers and living space, so human societies are either expanding or

contracting. To this extent, imperialistic tendencies seem to be an inevitable corollary of attaining a certain stage of advanced civilization.

The Old World is full of ineradicable imprints of empire – fragmentary Roman roads, shattered temples to Apollo, buried mosaic pavements, the “colossal wrecks” of a thousand Ozymandiases, noble constitutions and codes of common law, Latin and English phrases and concepts, and iconography that is so pervasive it is now called classical – the cultural legacies of centuries of ceaseless effort to expand and conquer.

These traces are alternately inspiring or dispiriting for today’s Europeans and European-descended peoples. Captain John Smith, who came from a sleepy Lincolnshire village near where I live to found Virginia, took with him to America the family crest earlier awarded to him by the King of Hungary – showing the three Turks’ heads he had personally removed from their owners in a single battle encounter. In the City of Vienna museum, there are still to be seen the captured Turkish banners and splintered lances taken during the Turks’ last attempt to make all of Europe in their own cultural image. In the great mosque – once the great church – of Saint Sophia in Istanbul – once Constantinople – survive glittering sixth century mosaics of Byzantine saints. Yet, whatever rousing thoughts or presentiments of doom may be stirred by such sights, they must always inspire wonder in the thoughtful observer.

There is no doubt that empires are intrinsically romantic.

Yet the reason empires are intrinsically romantic is because they are intrinsically melancholic. Again, just like nonhuman organisms, human societies meet with historical checks that in the end preserve a kind of grand cosmic balance. Even the longest lasting empires, the Roman and the Ottoman, each only lasted around six centuries (excluding the longer lasting Byzantine) – a blink in historical time – during part of which period they were in any case in precipitous decline from past glories.

By contrast, tribes and ethnic groups persist. Those tribes that have been ruled over by larger, more powerful tribes – paradoxically, especially if they have been persecuted by them – can often still be discerned amidst the wreckage, once the smoke from collapsed imperial enterprises has cleared. These groups may be shrunken in numbers and influence, but are nonetheless still recognizably present in their ancestral homelands and acutely self-aware. The empire which ruled them may be “at one with Nineveh and Tyre” – but the tribes often remain, permanent because rooted and united because related. Blood, it seems, is usually thicker than ideology.

Today’s citizens of erstwhile imperial powers often hark back nostalgically to imperial times. Many British Tories wax sentimental about the British Empire – and this is one of the motivations that makes so many British conservatives uncritically supportive of modern America’s empire building. Whatever the cause, they do like to see the British army shooting someone!

But one cannot help feeling that their politically incorrect allegiance is in inverse proportion to Britain's present state – that it is a desperate attempt to defy a less pleasing modernity. Today, the British government's writ does not run quite as far as China or Bengal; it could be argued that it barely reaches Chorley or Brixton! Who could blame today's impoverished Macedonians for getting a little misty-eyed about Alexander – or modern Mongolians for thinking that Genghis Khan wasn't such a bad sort after all?

Yet such nostalgic attitudes overlook one salient point – that imperialism and ethnic well-being are often antithetical. What is good from an imperial point of view is often bad from a national or tribal point of view. Imperialism inevitably means ethnic dilution, socio-political hubris, and cultural overstretch.

Alexander the Great exemplifies the mixture of arrogance, complacency, and blindness to human reality that characterizes the inveterate imperialist. He wished to unite the Macedonians and the Persians in a kind of civic nationalism, himself taking more than one Persian wife and encouraging his soldiers to intermarry with the Persians. He had been so monumentally successful in his undertakings that he seems to have thought that he was above biology – and that he could single-handedly drag mankind onto a new level of consciousness. He thought that Greeks and barbarians really were one and the same, and that Greek ideals were infinitely extendable. And yet when he died, his hard-won empire evaporated almost overnight.

Every erg of energy that is expended abroad is lost to the home country. Every young man who dies of fever, or falls in battle, or suffocates in Black Holes, or is beheaded on video by wild-eyed outlaws, is a young man whose potential has been lost to the home nation – and to what purpose? So that Emperor Nero could have a wider choice of catamites; so that African tribesmen could worship Christ instead of the gods of the trees; so that the East India Company's shareholders could have higher dividends; so that Iraqis could have hip-hop and abortion on demand.

I do not wish to caricature imperialism as merely a selfish desire to maximize power, wealth, and influence. I have already suggested that it is probably an ineradicable part of human nature. It is also clear that sometimes nations can be drawn into empire-building almost against their will, because it has become politically or strategically necessary. A major reason for Britain's expansion in the West Indies was to check the ambitions of Spain and, later, France. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Britain's expansion into Afghanistan and India was partly to deny an aggressive Russia access to warm-water ports, and partly to rescue British merchant-adventurers and carpetbaggers who had got themselves into hot water and who then had to be rescued. How could Britain avoid having an empire when all her European rivals were busily expanding theirs – threatening Britain's trade routes and military capabilities?

And no doubt some of the imperial visionaries genuinely thought they were doing good for the colonized peoples – just as, probably, some of today's

imperialist neoconservatives probably really think they are helping the people of Iraq. There are clear similarities between the rhetoric of the Victorian British, who justified imperial expansion in terms of bringing civilisation to people whom they were pleased to term “savages,” and the rhetoric of Bushian neoconservatives, who wish to impose global brotherhood and world peace at the point of a smart bomb. One can see why sometimes empires just grow like Topsy.

This probable inevitability of empire clearly undercuts my own argument! It also implies that nations that have once had empires should not feel guilty for their historical errors. If we made mistakes, so did everyone else. Those – like the Australian aborigines, the Amerindians, the Basques, or the Irish – who suffered to some extent under imperial rule – would certainly have behaved similarly had the situations been reversed. In any case, one simply cannot judge historical behavior by modern moral standards. So, to feel historical guilt is inappropriate; on this, sensible anti-imperialists must agree with the most fervent imperialists.

Notwithstanding this, I would like to cite de Tocqueville: “As a general truth, nothing is more opposed to the freedom and well-being of men, than vast empires.” He had discerned the salient fact that empire-building is inherently subversive of limited government and republican ideals. Empires, he could see, necessitated bloated bureaucracies, and meant that problems at home were all too often neglected. Having exploitable territories overseas has always afforded governments the opportunity both of distracting attention from domestic politics and of exporting potential troublemakers – whether criminals or restive younger sons. In the case of Britain, the existence of the empire may have helped to soothe the unhappy relations between Englishman, Scot, Welshman, and Irishman, by diverting energies that might otherwise have been expended in yet more Jacobite or Fenian plots.

Yet empires can also be fundamentally subversive of ethnic interests. Successful empires mean accelerated movement of peoples both in and out of the ancestral domain – to the extent that over time the originating ethnic group becomes weakened and eventually may become outnumbered, or even absorbed. Where now are the Spartans of the time of Thermopylae? There may be a lineal connection between the Romans of the great days and the Romans of today, but it is not immediately apparent.

Rome exerted a centripetal force on the whole world. Over the centuries of her rise and fall, the former city-state absorbed a host of immigrants: Etruscans, Sardis, Scythians, Carpathians, Goths, Germans, Angles, Vandals, Lusitanians, Iberians, Celts, Gauls, Avars, Bulgars, the Belgae, the Iceni, Bretons, Tripolitarians, Berbers, Dacians, Dalmatians, and many more. The Romans had made massive sacrifices to spread their empire, and now wanted to enjoy the fruits of their labors. They wanted people to pick their crops,

build their roads, clean their houses, sell imported luxuries, and even – the ultimate sign of decadence and carelessness – to man their fortifications.

As time went on, the small core of patrician families grew ever smaller, with more and more important jobs passing to newcomers who were not equally imbued with the founding legends and values. The decline was long obvious, yet seemed unavoidable. In any case, attempts to rescue the republic came to nothing, as every year such ideals meant less and less to Romans. Eventually, the ethnic minorities transmuted themselves into ethnic majorities, and this core Roman ethnic group was itself absorbed and passed out of history.

From his perspective and in his historical context, de Tocqueville's suspicion of empires is predictable. Less predictable, perhaps, is the anti-imperialist strain that is to be found in the writings of many great Englishmen. Often, the more patriotic or High Tory the man, the less imperialistic he was likely to be. There is a strain of Tory radicalism that eschews empires in favor of smallness. As that great English patriot and High Tory, Dr. Johnson, put it, "Extended empires, like expanded gold, exchange solid strength for feeble splendour." The Tory radical writer William Cobbett, famous for his evocative *Rural Rides*, wanted just a tiny proportion of the effort spent on maintaining the empire to be expended alleviating the desperate poverty of early nineteenth century England.

Today, the imperial legacies of the various former European imperial powers are still exerting a baneful influence on their originating nation states. As we all may have noticed, the postwar years in Europe have been dominated by the political left. The predictable result of this hegemony is that there now exists all across Europe a rich seam of ethnic angst and racial neurosis for the real or imagined sins of the imperial period when, according to the prevailing demonology, Europeans enslaved non-Europeans out of a combination of greed and sheer blind race hatred. What makes this argument so difficult to counter is that there is a large element of truth in it. And having historically exploited someone else's country *does* make it more difficult to object to someone from that country who comes to exploit "the mother country" in its turn. It is a kind of historical quid pro quo. If we are to assert our own right to govern ourselves, we must respect other peoples' right to govern themselves too.

Yet, even had this manufactured guilt not existed, the historical memory of empires can lead to delusions of commonality. Just as TV viewers sometimes think they know what a particular newsreader is like because they see his face on the television every day, so the awareness of possessing – or having possessed – a diverse empire can lead to those in the originating nation to believe they share a great deal in common with all the peoples of the empire. A well-known British writer of my acquaintance – a clever and cultivated man in most respects – believes he is more closely related to West Indian

Christians than to the French or Germans or Americans, simply because of the shared legacy of empire. Such views are widespread amongst a certain kind of nostalgic British conservative. And certain groups, like the Sikhs and Gurkhas, did indeed provide loyal service to the empire over protracted periods. It is only right that this service should be rewarded in some way – although one might have hoped this could have been done without ceding London's Southall district to the Punjab.

It has been suggested that one of the reasons the Tory administrations of the 1950s and 1960s did so little to limit immigration was for the patronizing reason that seeing Africans and Asians in England reminded them mistily of the days when a third of the world's surface was shaded pink. Britain's last colonial secretary, Alan Lennox-Boyd, was a good exemplar of this kind of grandly condescending approach. Although a genuine conservative, on the traditional right of his party, his Tory unwillingness to dissolve the already rapidly disappearing bonds of empire in the 1950s and 1960s obscured the realities of immigration, already transforming large areas of Britain's cities. He was so anxious not to offend former national "friends" in Bermuda and Barbados that he refused to do anything to halt or slow immigration from the Caribbean – and joined in the 1968 attacks on Enoch Powell with unbecoming enthusiasm.

The peoples of the empire, it was widely felt, just needed "education" – and perhaps the application of a little soap – to become dusky Englishmen. A famous advertisement of the late nineteenth century, for Pears Soap, showed a white child washing a black child with the magical bar, revealing a gleaming white skin beneath, much to the delight of the little black child. Although this advertisement was arguably saying that "we are all the same under the skin," ironically today this same advertisement is often featured in school text books as a prime example of colonial racist attitudes.

Accordingly, although Britain, France, Holland, Spain, Portugal, and Russia may have relinquished their imperial outposts, that is not the end of their connections with their former possessions. They all, of course, continue to transfer monies to their former colonies, despite those former colonies' proud boasts of "national independence." As they withdrew, the imperial powers took various souvenirs with them. There were innumerable cultural souvenirs, such as Britain's honors system, which is redolent with "Orders of British Empire" (soon to be renamed "Orders of British Excellence" if a recent parliamentary committee's un-poetical recommendations are implemented). The British have the Commonwealth – in which it is only Britain's wealth that is held in common. All former colonial powers preserve such fragrant memories, like elderly men dozing in the sun.

But there were also human souvenirs of empire. Britain took mementoes in the form of millions of Africans, West Indians, and East Indians from the former British colonies. The British Nationality Act of 1948, perhaps the most

foolish legislation ever to pass the Mother of Parliaments, effectively granted British nationality to a quarter of the world's population. Thankfully, not all of them noticed! Today, around 7.9 percent of the UK's population is from ethnic minorities – most, even now, originating directly or indirectly from former colonies.

Upon quitting Algeria, France kept not just the white *pieds-noirs*, but also the loyal Arab *harkis* – both of which decisions were completely understandable, even laudable. To this day, France also possesses a small population from Martinique, Reunion, and the other French overseas territories – many of whom are so integrated into French life as to be active supporters of Jean-Marie Le Pen's Front National. But by now, France has also acquired the largest Muslim concentration in Europe – an alienated ethnic power bloc of around 8 percent of the total population (around five million) that is constantly threatening to overthrow France's secular republican state, and that surely cannot be held in check forever. One wonders how much Jacques Chirac's opposition to the war in Iraq is attributable to a belief in the efficacy of international law – and how much is attributable to the brooding presence of this menacing minority.

As she rolled up most of her possessions in the Dutch East Indies and the Caribbean, Holland felt she could not leave behind all of her Moluccans and Dutch Guyanans, so allowed many of them to open restaurants and carry out political assassinations in Amsterdam instead of Aruba. Around 9 percent of the modern Dutch population is considered to be nonwhite, consisting mostly of Antilleans, Surinamese, and Indonesians, plus some Turks and Moroccans.

Portugal held onto her empire until the 1970s, but then, under the baneful influence of the communist revolutionaries who toppled the old Estado Novo regime, felt she could not just forget her Cape Verdean, São Toméan, Mozambiqan, Angolan, Goan, Macanese, or Brazilian "fellow Portuguese," many thousands of whom all came to prefer life in Lisbon to life in Lourenço Marques – although the latest figures for Portugal (2000) show that there are still only 200,000 ethnic minority members in the country, around 1.8 percent of the population. To this number must of course be added the unknown number of *assimilados* and descendants of *assimilados* – as the non-race conscious Portuguese termed colonial subjects who had magically become "Portuguese" by converting to Catholicism and learning the language.

The postcolonial process and effects were not uniform across the former imperial powers. Spain had had an extensive empire in north Africa. She still retains precarious toeholds in Ceuta and Melilla, somewhat to Madrid's embarrassment – the government refused to send a senior representative to Melilla in 1997 to commemorate the five hundredth anniversary of the city's annexation by Don Pedro de Estopiñán y Virués, whose sword-waving bronze statue still waves lonely defiance at the Moorish vastness to the south. Spain of course also owned practically all of South America at one point – yet until recently this had not made Madrid permit mass immigration from the former

dependent territories. Until 1998, only around 1.5 percent of Spain's population was non-Spanish, and the majority of these were other Europeans. But since 1999, immigration into Spain, notably from North Africa and Latin America, has quadrupled. Ironically, Ceuta and Melilla, once thought of as citadels of Christendom on the heathen coast, are now important conduits for illegal Muslim immigrants into Spain. A new nationality law, passed by the supposedly conservative Spanish government in 2003, has effectively given citizenship rights to millions, mostly in Latin America.

Germany used to have its own "places in the sun" in the Cameroons, Namibia, and Tanzania, and a concession in Shanghai. It was a relatively liberal colonial master, to the extent that many Africans living in the German colonies gave active support to the Germans during World War I. Perhaps Germany was not an imperial power for long enough for this to have given rise to guilt after her colonies were stripped from her in 1918. In any case, although Germany has atrocious racial problems today, her largest immigrant group is Turks, of whom there are now some two million in the country—a number certain to be augmented if EU politicians are shortsighted enough to permit Turkey to join the EU. It is pleasing to record that the Conservative Democrat opposition is staunchly opposed to Turkey's entry—and unprecedented election results recently for the nationalist National Party of Germany and the German People's Union will also have sent a clear signal to Angela Merkel that Germans are increasingly concerned about immigration. It would seem that the somewhat neurotic—if understandable—post-1945 settlement is finally breaking asunder.

From 1885 to 1960, Belgium owned the Belgian Congo (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo). Belgium was a harsh colonial master and was heavily criticized for the suddenness with which she pulled out in 1960; there was a famous *Punch* cartoon showing a departing steamship with white faces looking over the stern at a desperately clutching black arm protruding above the water. Yet Belgium did not feel morally obliged to import many Zaireans (as they became a years after independence) by way of apology. She was too busy battenning on the more remunerative Flemings. Today, thanks partly to the presence in Brussels of the European Union headquarters, 25 percent of the population of Brussels is non-Belgian. Eleven percent of the country's population is classified as "mixed Fleming/Walloon" or "other." Although of course most of these non-Belgians are other Europeans, increased Muslim immigration has led to increasing electoral successes not just for the Flemish nationalist Vlaams Blok, but now also the Francophone Front National in the Walloon region.

Despite calamitous social problems, Russia still clings grimly onto relics of the Soviet empire in the Caucasus and central Asia—as the people of Beslan were reminded horribly a couple of months ago. The 2002 census figures are mired in controversy, but there are an estimated 176 peoples and nationalities

living within Russia. Of the 146 million population, 81.5 percent is regarded as Russian, 3.8 percent Tatar, 3 percent Ukrainian, 1.2 percent Chuvash, 0.9 percent Bashkir, 0.8 percent Belarussian, 0.7 percent Moldavian – with other groups with even smaller percentages making up a further 8.1 percent.

Other European countries, such as Ireland, Switzerland, and many in eastern Europe, never had empires of their own, and are accordingly immune to imperial guilt – some are even considered honorary “victims” – but all are nonetheless now experiencing or starting to experience racial problems. The white man’s burden, it seems, is to be shared equally amongst all of today’s white men – and women. Yet the problems are far more acute in the former imperial nations, and part of the reason for this is undeniably an imperial guilt complex.

Ultimately, the reverse effects of colonization can be catastrophic for former imperial powers. At the height of their power, it can seem to imperial powers as if they have been singled out by the gods, and that their success will continue indefinitely. As complacency spreads, a degree of carelessness creeps into both public and private life. Although there may be occasional minirevivals under charismatic conservative leaders, gradually the old values are forgotten until, eventually, they are wholly extinguished.

George Bush’s contemporary blend of indiscriminate global sabre-rattling and plans to grant amnesties to millions of Hispanics are somewhat reminiscent of late Roman hubris and will, if pursued, ineluctably lead to a similar end to today’s great superpower. It is interesting to note that today’s Roman legions – the unfortunate U.S. troops in Iraq – are using an unprecedentedly high number of so-called “private military contractors” in important security roles. This widespread use of mercenaries, and the difficulty of finding and retaining allies, suggests that American military might is already weakening, and that today’s imperial ideology is losing what compulsion it once had.

The “end of history” is not yet at hand – although in every generation imperial ideologues will try to bring this about. But try as they might, eventually Pax Americana will follow Pax Britannica and Pax Romana into the dim past – to become the stuff of legend and myth. As these world-historical phenomena pass, experience suggests that there will always be left behind the unpretentious nation and tribe – bloodied but unbroken, prevailing and permanent.

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