

Olli Lecture

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“Imperialism”

Earlier this year, Ann and I visited a fabulous exhibit at the National Geographic Headquarters in DC. Its subject was the fascinating career of a Chinese sailor, Cheng Ho or Zheng He, depending on whether you speak Cantonese or Mandarin. He lived between 1371 and 1433 and British historian Sir Hugh Trevor Roper called him “one of the really great eunuchs of history.”

In spite of the fact that Cheng had been born into a Muslim family, he became an admiral in the navy of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) and commanded seven vast maritime expeditions into the Pacific and Indian Oceans between 1405 and 1433. The first was composed of 62 ships which sailed with 28,000 men aboard. The largest were huge vessels (sea-going junks) that dwarfed the later European ships that showed up in Chinese waters. Subsequent voyages reached Madagagascar after calling at ports in the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea.

Quoting Trevor-Roper again (The Rise of Christian Europe):

Only a little continuity was necessary and perhaps Chinese fleets, half a century later, would have arrived in Lisbon and London. Who would have supposed, at that time, that the reverse would happen: that instead, Portuguese fleets would arrive in Malacca and Calicut to divert the tribute of India and Ceylon westwards to Lisbon and Antwerp, and thereby initiate the new, half-millennial supremacy of Europe?

Well, we may be living at the end of that era launched so long ago by the Portuguese Vasco da Gama, who reached Calcutta in 1498, and Christopher Columbus who stumbled into the American Continent in 1492. Columbus was clueless about what he had found and went to his death thinking it was Asia. Da Gama knew better and used his marginally better artillery and marginally better caravelles to blow the Arabs out of their centuries-long control of the Indian Ocean and to pocket profits that were 60 times greater than the cost of his entire

expeditions. The Chinese could have done the same but their ruling class had decided that the barbarians had little to offer the fortunate residents of “the Middle Kingdom” and closed down their shipbuilding facilities that had astounded the world with their vast fleets.

As I mentioned earlier, I taught a course at George Mason on the history of the European empires that followed these astounding voyages:

- How the Portuguese were obliged to yield much of their treasure to the Spaniards, who took over Portugal in 1580.
- How the Spaniards slowly yielded their vast holdings to British, French, and Dutch interlopers.
- How the French and British battled it out for more than a century to determine which of those nations would control the seas of the globe. The outcome of that epic struggle was determined at Trafalgar in 1805 when much of the French and Spanish fleets went to the bottom of the Atlantic.

The British, of course, had lost a major portion of North America by provision of the Treaty of Paris of 1783 which gave the United States impressive holdings on the Continent (**see slide of 1783**). Just before these developments, however, the British Crown commissioned Captain James Cook (1728-1779) to sail to the South Pacific to map the transit of Venus in 1769. He succeeded in the mapping but on the way also discovered the Continent of Australia which the Dutch had already claimed. The matter was settled in Britain’s favor and they went on to install themselves in New Zealand and Tahiti; not bothering to consult the indigenous about the matter.

They also made up for their defeat in the United States at the Congress of Vienna in 1814-15 which allocated to British control such former Dutch possessions as the Cape Colony and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). Not a bad haul.

The French hadn’t gone out of the imperial business either. Between 1830-1847 they conquered much of Algeria (**image**) and a bit later (1858-1867) took over much of what we now call Vietnam (**image**).

While all this was occurring, Czarist Russia had been expanding its boundaries eastward and southward, beginning with the conquest of Kazan in 1552 Russian armies moved rapidly toward the Pacific which they reached in 1600. After exploratory expeditions by Vitus Bering [1681-1741] (as early as 1728), the Russians created the Russian-American Company in 1799 and the firm eventually had lucrative operations as far south as Fort Ross (just north of San Francisco) by 1812.

The great empire still remained Great Britain's and its "jewel" had since the eighteenth century had been India. There had been a little-known but gigantic struggle between the British and French in India where troop numbers are outweighed by the better known French and Indian War on this continent. Victorious in this struggle were the Indo-British forces under the command of Robert Clive (1725-1774) [image]. What's odd about this contest that almost eliminated French influence from the sub-continent was that Clive fought not in the name of Great Britain but commanded the forces of a semi-private agency called the East India Company, founded by investors in London in 1600. They ran India for nearly two centuries: organized armies, controlled trade, and even fought foreign wars.

- In 1824 the Company attacked and occupied the kingdom of Burma.
- When in 1838 a combined force of Persian and Russian troops moved into Herat in western Afghanistan, the British retaliated by sending an Anglo-Indian army of 4,500 troops and 12,000 camp followers into Kabul, the Afghan capital. They were annihilated at the Battle of Gandamak (January 13, 1842). [image]
- Elsewhere, the British East India company was doing better. There was, for example, the First Opium War (1839-1842) with China [image]. The Company had begun shipping opium grown in India (later Burma) to China in 1781 and by 1837 this trade had expanded five-fold. When the Qing Dynasty objected, the British seized Hong Kong in 1839 and by 1841 had captured Canton. The following year they added Shanghai to their conquests. China sued for peace and accepted the humiliating Treaty of

Nanking (August 1842) which opened up five “treaty ports” including Hong Kong to the foreigners.

One result of this staggering defeat was the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864) during which rebels against the Qing dynasty attempted to topple the regime by armed force. They failed in that effort but millions of Chinese died in the resulting violence. While the Chinese government struggled with this internal violence, it found itself at war once again with the Europeans as Britain and France attacked China in the **Second Opium War (1856-1860)**. That one-sided conflict ended in 1860 when Anglo-French forces surrounded Beijing and forced the emperor into flight. The resulting Convention of Peking opened up 10 more ports to the foreigners, legalized the opium trade, ceded Kowloon (north of Hong Kong) to the British, opened up the Yangtze River to foreign shipping, allowed foreigners to travel throughout the Empire, yielded 400,000 square miles of Chinese territory to Russia, and provided indemnities to the British and French.

Notice that I said “British,” not the East India Company. That entity had been replaced by the British government in 1857 after the Sepoy Mutiny, a rebellion of the Company’s indigenous forces against the British, triggered by the introduction of the Enfield rifle into their ranks. India now became the British “raj” and in 1876 Prime Minister Disraeli had Queen Victoria proclaimed “Empress of India.” She loved the title.

I should not exclude the United States from this tale of empire-building. We had applauded the creation of the Republic of Mexico in 1821 as the Mexican chased out Spanish colonialists and invited US citizens to take up residence in their province of Texas. When, however, the Mexican republic outlawed slavery in 1831, Texans rebelled and in 1835 declared their independence from the regime south of the Rio Grande. You know all about the result: Andrew Jackson recognized Texas independence on his last day in office in 1837; President Tyler annexed the place to the US in 1845; and in May 1846 the United States declared war on Mexico and by provision of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (February

1848) added Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, and California to its empire. The United States had thus become a Pacific power.

We didn't wait long to take advantage of that newly-enlarged strategic position. In 1853, President Fillmore commissioned Commodore Matthew Perry to take a squadron to Japan to secure American rights with that nation. Ever since the 17th century, the only port in Japan open to foreigners was Nagasaki and that only to Dutch and Chinese merchants. Perry and his squadron succeeded in opening negotiations and in the following year negotiated a treaty with Japan at Yokohama that opened up an American consulate at Tokoyo. I should mention that Perry didn't arrive a moment too soon. That same year, Admiral Yefin Putyatin showed up at Nagasaki and began negotiations that opened up the Japanese trade to the Russians and granted the Czar joint control of Sakhalin Island.

Thanks to the Second French Empire (Napoleon III), communications with the "Far East" soon became more immediate when their vast investment in the Suez Canal was completed in 1869. The engineering genius behind this amazing, decade-long enterprise was Ferdinand De Lessups (1805-1894) who soon thereafter launched an effort to link the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans through another canal project in the Columbian province of Panama. That wasn't Napoleon's only imperial adventure. French forces used the Mexican republic's default on its national debt in 1862 to dispatch its armed forces to young republic. Thereafter, Napoleon III recruited the Hapsburg prince, Maximilian (1832-1867) and his wife Princess Charlotte of Belgium, to establish themselves as Emperor and Empress of Mexico. The effort was short-lived (1864-1867) since the American civil war had ended and US resources helped back the rebel armies of Benito Juarez. Maxmilian was captured and fell victim to a Mexican firing squad on June 19, 1867. Once more, Mexico was a republic.

The would-be Empress Charlotte (Carlota) was traveling in Europe seeking support for her husband's regime when it came to an abrupt end. Her brother, King Leopold II of Belgium (1835-1909) enjoyed a much longer reign unfortunately for the people of central Africa. Not long after he mounted the august Belgian

throne (1865), Leopold attempted to have his kingdom enter the lists of imperial powers by carrying the Belgian flag up the Congo River. He was a constitutional monarch and was very disappointed when the Belgian parliament refused to become involved in the venture. Instead, they permitted him in 1875 to form the International African Society, ostensibly a scientific organization, of which Leopold was president. Three years later Leopold hired the American journalist Henry Stanley to explore the Congo Basin and in 1885 the Congress of Berlin recognized the area that Stanley had explored as the Congo Free State (ruled personally by King Leopold).

Thus began one of the most hideous adventures in European imperialism. The Congo remains to this day a region of vast resources but in the late 19th century its most important product was rubber. To harvest this wealth Leopold employed forced labor and in the course of the decades he personally ruled the region somewhere between 8 to 30 million indigenous people perished. We'll never know how many; some of disease; some of atrocity. It was not until 1908, however, that the Belgian parliament required Leopold to accept his Congo Free State as a state-run enterprise.

The Europeans had overrun the American continent; projected their hegemony on the vast Asian landmass; and captured much of the Pacific. What remained? Africa. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 had not only facilitated the western conquest of Asia but had also invited European penetration of Africa. There were already western outposts there (the French in Algeria, Senegal, and Madagascar; the Portuguese in Angola and Mozambique; the British in the Cape Colony (South Africa); and now even the Belgians in the Congo).

But a tide of European imperialism opened up when Isam'I Pasha of Egypt (1830-1895), nominally a vassal of the Ottoman Sultan, sold Egypt's shares in the Suez Canal to Great Britain (not France) for 4 million pounds. Prime Minister Disraeli borrowed this money from the Rothschilds and therefore didn't seek parliament's approval. In 1882 a nationalist (and Islamic) riot broke out in Alexandria. The British bombarded the city, seized it and the Canal, and Egypt became unofficially

a protectorate of the Empire. They didn't leave until 1956. I believe that the Muslim revolt against the West can be dated from these incidents.

In another canal-related incident, in 1867 a little boy in the Orange Free State (Dutch part of South Africa) was found playing with a rock which turned out to be a diamond worth about 500 pounds. The rich diamond deposits of the region soon attracted the attention of a British national named Cecil Rhodes (1853-1902) who built a commercial empire on that wealth (De Beers) which at one time marketed 90 percent of the world's diamond trade. Next huge gold deposits were found in the Transvaal which had previously under Dutch (Boer) control. When the British tried to impose on Boer autonomy armed conflict broke out in 1898 that would last for three years.

Rhodes, as British governor of the Cape Colony, not only backed the suppression of the Boers, he actively pursued a project of building a railroad from the Cape all the way to Cairo, thus carving up East Africa for the British. He once wrote: *I contend that we [the English] are the finest race in the world and the more of the world we inhabit the better it is for the human race.* **(see soap advertisement).**

Not everyone shared that view, of course. Certainly not the French. They too had their own "civilizing mission" and had struck out from bases on the West African Coast to extend their reach eastward to the Indian Ocean. A French expeditionary force under the command of Colonel Jean-Baptiste Marchand (1863-1934) reached Fashoda on the Nile south of Khartoum on July 10, 1898. A larger British force under the command of Sir Herbert Kitchener (1850-1916) reached the same location on September 18 after having conquered the Sudan at the battle of Omdurham two weeks earlier (September 2). A standoff occurred and rumors of war abounded. The matter was settled peacefully the following year with the two imperial powers simply splitting the difference. No one asked the Africans what they thought.

No one had asked the Ethiopians either whether they liked Italy's pretensions to take over their country in 1896. They fought back and at an oasis called Adowa 80,000 Ethiopians overwhelmed an Italian force of 20,000 and slaughtered the whole lot. It may have been one of history's turning points.

On this side of the Atlantic there came another turning point at about the same time. On February 15, 1898, the US battle cruiser *Maine* blew up in Havana harbor with resulting deaths of 266 American seamen. On April 23 the United States declared war on Spain and on May 1 an American fleet under the command of Commodore George Dewey sank the Spanish fleet anchored at Manila in the Philippines.

I'm writing a book about part of this war, so I won't bother you with lots of details. You may wonder, however, about why an incident in Havana triggered an immediate American attack on the Philippines on the other side of the world. Well, President McKinley said he had labored hard over the Philippine expedition but decided in the end (as a good Methodist) that we needed to "Christianize" the country. Of course, the Spanish had been in the Christianizing business in the Philippines since the sixteenth century.

How does one explain this spate of imperialism that so characterized the planet at the end of the nineteenth century? One of the most famous explanations came from J. A. Hobson (1858-1940) who called it "a system of outdoor relief for the upper classes," meaning it was a way of finding outlets for capital that could not be found in existing western nations. Lenin agreed with that thesis in his ***Imperialism: The Final Phase of Capitalism*** (1916).

There were many who didn't accept this economic interpretation of imperialism. Foremost among them was the Anglo-Indian Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) who urged Americans to take on the conquest of the Philippines in his famous poem, "The White Man's Burden." In it he wrote:

Take up the White Man's burden—Send forth the best ye breed—Go bind your sons to exile...to serve your captives' need; To wait in heavy harness...On fluttered folk and wild—Your new-caught, sullen peoples, Half devil and half child.

Mark Twain (1835-1910) had a very different view. He wrote in the *New York World* in 1900:

We have no more business in China than in any other country that is not ours. There is the case of the Philippines. I have tried hard, and yet cannot for the life of

me comprehend how we got into that mess...I thought we should act as their protector—not try to get them under our heel.

I'll conclude with a quotation from my own book, The Revolt of the Aesthetes (1985). These are some lines penned by the Spanish fascist, Ernesto Giménez Caballero (1899-1988) when he stated:

We, the imperialists, are not ignorant of the fact that the class struggle is an eternal reality in History. Because there have always been the weak and the powerful, the handsome and the ugly, fools and wise men, cowards and the brave...

There has only been one means in the world to overcome this eternal rancor of classes: and it is, to transfer this social struggle to a different plane. To transfer it from the national plane to the international. A nation's poor and rich can only come to agreement when they both decide to attack other peoples or lands where there may exist riches and powers for all the attackers. The sentiment of social equality that begins all class struggles is only overcome by carrying this equality in attacking other countries which are not equal to us. It is this expansion of a nation's rich and poor, against other lands, which is what constitutes the intimate motivation of imperialism.