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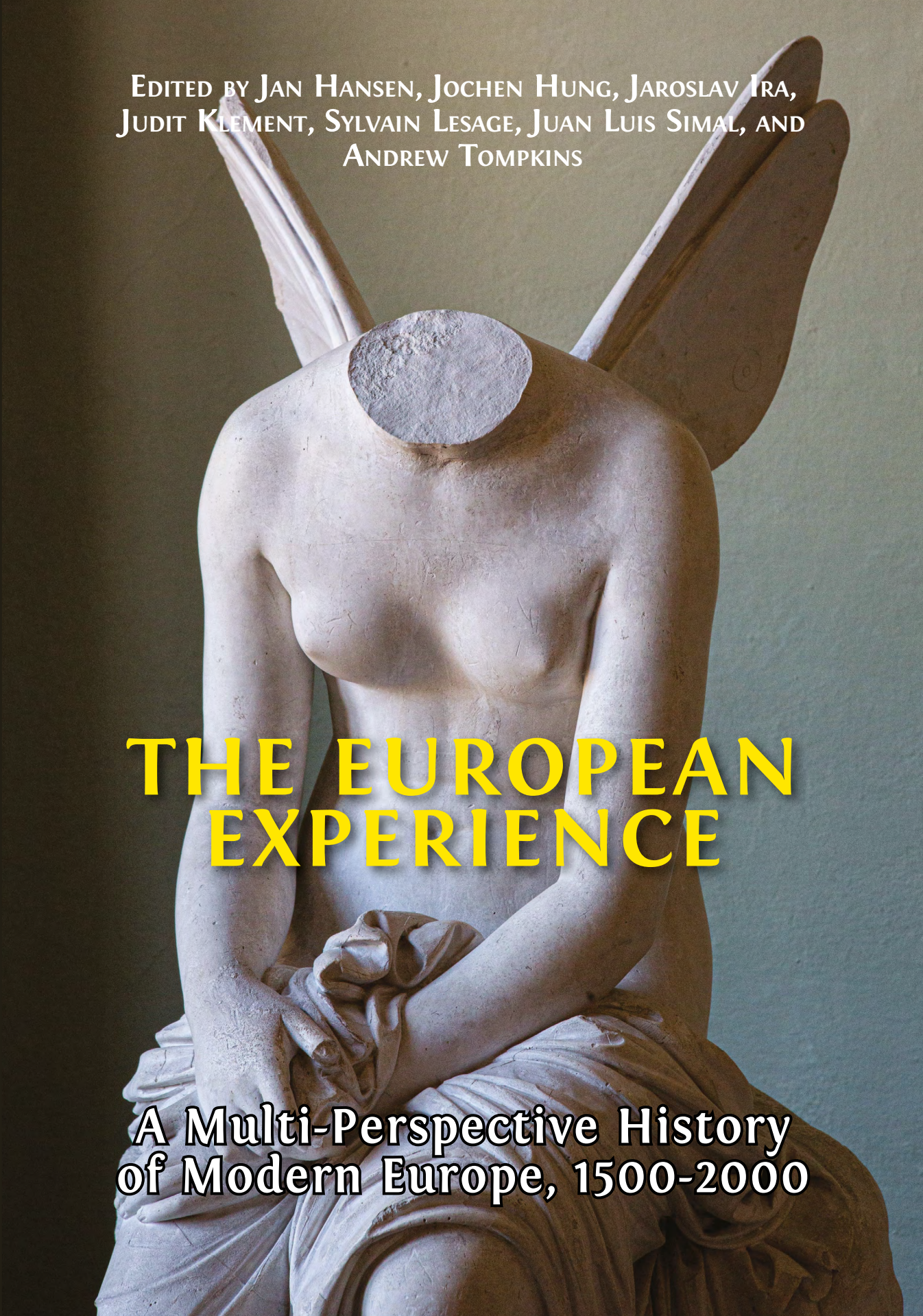

The European Experience

A Multi-Perspective History of Modern Europe, 1500-2000

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1.4.2 Europe's Other(ed)s: The Americas, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East in Modern History (ca. 1800–1900)

Ramachandra Byrappa, Jaroslav Ira, Ozan Ozavci, and Martin Wagner

Introduction

The nineteenth century was the age of an unprecedented global transformation. In the period between 1800 and the 1910s, the world grew closer through advancements in transport and communications, while on the other hand, political and cultural differences became more visible. At the beginning of the century a small number of European empires controlled thirty-five percent of the world's landmass, but by the 1860s this number had risen to sixty percent, and in 1914 to an astonishing eighty-five percent. This was both the result and the cause of new spaces and frontiers opening between different modes of power: geopolitical, economic, military and technological. For example, while Asian societies had supplied over sixty percent of the world's gross domestic product in 1700, by 1913 this share amounted to only 24.5 percent, and it was Europeans who now claimed the commanding share of global GDP, at 68.3 percent. The rise of Europe as the world's dominant power profoundly shaped the way that Europeans understood the rest of the world and themselves. Yet at the same time, they had to contend with the rise of new, non-European players on the world stage, such as the United States and Japan, that were poised to make their mark on the following century.

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The United States of America

Nineteenth-century views of America reflected profound changes on both sides of the Atlantic. The United States, an embodiment of political ideas from the European Enlightenment, ascended to economic power while also evolving into a new model of polity for mass society. It attracted immigrants from the Old World, as well as the attention of European observers who yearned to understand it. It was only in the twentieth century that the mania for all things American became commonplace, as Americanised popular culture poured into the Old Continent, accompanied by a growing political and military presence. But the nineteenth century remained an era of observations, comparisons, and reflections; many ideas and models, including artistic styles and university systems, still transferred from Europe to America, rather than the other way around.

European views of the US ranged from admiration to aversion. At the threshold of the long nineteenth century (1789–1914), many liberal or democratic-minded Europeans became fascinated by this new constitutional, democratic polity that had formed at the other side of the Atlantic—even if it was racially exclusive, particularly when compared to surviving absolutist regimes in much of Europe. A place of refuge for some, America was seen by many as a model of political organisation for the future. Others were amazed by the efficiency and immense productivity of the American economy, the rapid pace of growth in many American cities, or the relatively high standard of living that transcended rigid barriers of social class. There were however many European intellectuals who voiced an aversion to America's apparent shallowness, its lack of intellectual creativity and bourgeois mediocrity, often accompanied by a critique of consumerism and mass culture, as well as growing fears of Europe's own 'Americanisation'. Some observers went even further and condemned what they considered to be capitalism taken to the extreme; the 'rule of dollar', which was symbolised by events like the expulsion of Native Americans from their homelands driven by land speculation, or by production sites such as the notorious Chicago slaughterhouse, described by the Czech writer František Herites (1851–1929) as a "mixture of human brutality, human ingenuity, and human greed."

For good or bad, Europeans perceived differences between each side of the Atlantic, despite transnational connections, common traditions, and a constant transfer of ideas. One such example was the model of great exhibitions. Building upon European predecessors, the Chicago World Fair in 1893 was a showcase of American civilisation and an opportunity for many Europeans to visit the United States. Among them were dozens of Czech visitors who left their testimonies in travel accounts. In the eyes of these observers, the

sheer scale of the fair reflected the essence of America. This was enhanced by the urban setting of Chicago—perceived as the quintessential American city, while the gateway of New York still retained something of the Old World—with its immense and rapid growth, its towering skyscrapers, the rush of its commerce, and its ethnic heterogeneity. For many observers it was the epitome of American civilisation at large and, what is more, a city that was becoming a global centre in the modern world. Josef Štolba (1846–1930), the Czech playwright and traveller, characterised Chicago in 1887 as "the most prominent city of feverishly active America, a city that represents the New World in a most truthful way, providing on a small scale the accurate image of this whole new part of the world."

Rapidly growing cities that were often compared and contrasted to their European counterparts were likely to epitomise the new American civilisation in the eyes of Europeans. But so too did America's vanishing indigenous peoples and receding native wilderness, both of which were seen—and sometimes idealised, by authors like the German writer Karl May (1842–1912)—as original and authentic, but part of a disappearing America. And yet, some of the critics from the Old World saw in the expanding American civilisation a particularly European dimension. When the Czech poet Josef Václav Sládek (1845–1912), a visitor to America in the 1860s, wrote a poem called 'Na hrobech indiánských' ('On the Graves of Indians') along with a series of other reflections, he targeted his moral condemnation at Europeans, or the "White Man". The accompanying illustration by his Czech compatriot Mikoláš Aleš (1852–1913) of a Native American chieftain facing a majestic female figure representing European civilisation made it utterly clear that the aggressive expansion of American civilisation was but an offspring of European expansion and hegemony. For all its differences, America was often seen as the completion of the worst, or the best, of the European self.

This example reminds us of the necessity of taking a more nuanced and differentiated approach in studying perceptions of the 'other'. For the representatives of stateless nations, such as the Czechs during the nineteenth century, the melodramatic story of European civilisation advancing at the expense of 'less civilised' Native Americans might well have resonated with debates over stateless ethnic groups or new national communities, and whether they must inevitably succumb to established state societies. At the same time, the empathetic view of Native Americans was but a part of a broader European intellectual tradition, in which the perspectives of universal humanism were combined with a romanticised view of the 'noble savage', including other racialised stereotypes such as 'redskins'.

Britain, as its former colonial ruler, was arguably affected most deeply by the rise of the United States. With the end of the American Civil War in 1865 and the

completion of German unification in 1871, two modern powers appeared on the world stage that forced Britain to confront its weaknesses, both commercial and military. It desperately needed an ally and could not countenance an alliance between the two newcomers. So rather than foregrounding British supremacy, British elites started to advocate white supremacy, making space for others to join the club. For example, in his now infamous poem, 'The White Man's Burden', the author Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936) pleaded for the US to become a co-imperialist. At the same time, for many poorer British people, the 'New World' represented an opportunity to resettle and start a new life.

Fig. 1: Henry Meyer, *China—The Cake of Kings* (1898), Cornell University Library, https://digital.library.cornell.edu/catalog/ss:3293809.

Asia

Asia is the only continent that is not separated from the European mainland by a sea. Both Europe and Asia, perceived as historically and culturally distinct entities, are situated on a common Eurasian landmass with no indisputable border. Thus the question of what Asia meant to Europe and vice versa was, and still is, a question of what exactly counts as part of Europe or Asia. The idea of a dividing line marked by the Ural Mountains stemmed from Russian Enlightenment thinkers of the early eighteenth century, who strove to prove

that the Russian Empire was European. Whether the Caucasus Mountains or the Kuma-Manych Depression (north of the Caucasus) mark the border—and correspondingly whether Mount Elbrus or Mont Blanc qualifies as the highest peak in Europe—remains disputed today.

European representations of Asia varied in scope, quality, and sense of temporality. Was the Russian Empire European, Asian, or both? Or was it neither—was it an entity *sui generis*? The relationship of both continents was thus conceptualised either as a strict dichotomy or as an open-ended opposition that allowed for spaces in between. As Europe's 'other', Asia was framed as a 'counterweight' and thus perceived either on equal terms or on normative grounds. On the other hand, Asia could stand in as a symbol of a bright utopia or a frightening dystopia. Such representations carried different assumptions of temporality, including schemes of linear progress and the possibility of different paths to modernity: was Asia preceding Europe, lagging behind, or developing at its own pace? European images of Asia were intertwined with Asian self-perceptions that were themselves derived from Asian depictions of Europe. European representations of Asia, conversely, carried implicit representations of Europe itself. In 1789, the German poet Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805), for instance, characterised Europe's position among the continents "as an adult […] surrounded by children of different ages."

The age of Enlightenment was accompanied by a preoccupation with Asia. Europe's 'armchair travellers' were inspired by China and its meritocratic social order, which stood in stark contrast to the unbeloved European aristocratic elite. In 1697, the German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz (1646–1716) praised China as the "Europe of the East", on the basis that both China and Europe were where "the highest culture and the highest technical civilisation of humankind are concentrated." However, in the early nineteenth century this positive image of Asia changed. In 1822, the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) judged that China possessed "no history", was untouched by "alien principle[s]," and that it had not been able to develop and was thus forced to remain "ancient". In contrast to European models of democracy and monarchy, "Asia as such [is] the breeding grounds of despotism," he wrote.

While Europe's economic and technical superiority was put on display in the industrial revolution, Europe's 'others' appeared to fall behind on the track to modernity—perceived as a linear process and equated with European progress. Whereas the Russian Empire after having defeated Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821) was regarded as a European power among equals at the Congress of Vienna (1814–1815), the loss of the Crimean War (1853–1856) raised questions over its status. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Russia's military and economy were characterised as 'backward'; its

system of serfdom alien to Europe. Thus Russian decline mirrored Europe's perceived superiority. The 'Great Reforms' of the 1860s were an attempt by Tsar Alexander II (1818–1881) to modernise Russia in line with Europe's great powers, further endorsing European convictions regrding the linear progress of history. And among Russian intellectuals, discussions never faded on whether the country should Westernise or stick to its Slavic roots. At the end of the century, however, defeat to an Asian power in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) led many European observers to again question Russia's status as a European power. But at the same time, Western European scholars could also be found rediscovering a Russian tradition as progressive and 'European': steam bathing, a tradition that was seen, paradoxically, as backward and non-European in Russia itself.

As the European powers rose to become globally engaged colonial empires, images of China mirrored Europe's aggrandisement. Once the centre of civilisation, now a periphery of the global economy, China was forcefully opened up to the world. When the Daoguang Emperor (1782–1850) banned the import of opium from British India to China, British and later French gunboats—symbols of Europe's technological advancement—waged two Opium Wars (1839–1842 and 1856–1860). China's traditional political system and its weak military forces appeared to justify European interventions as means of modernisation. China was then divided into spheres of influence, as depicted by an illustration in the French newspaper *Le Petit Journal* published on 16 January 1898: a helpless Chinese bureaucrat is forced to watch from a position of inferiority as the European powers and Japan carve up his country. To overcome Western dominance, Chinese reformers pursued Westernisation to various degrees, whether full-fledged or with Chinese characteristics. China's resistance against all foreign presence in the country culminated in the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901), a militant uprising that triggered a wave of anti-Chinese sentiment back in Europe, including new metaphors describing the Chinese as evil, dangerous, or, in the words of Kaiser Wilhelm II (1859–1941), a "yellow peril".

The Middle East and Africa

The regions that came to be collectively known as the 'Middle East' at the start of the twentieth century, namely the Levant, Mesopotamia, the Arabian Peninsula, Persia, and Asia Minor, as well as the African continent, were sources of opportunities and threats in European eyes. After the loss of the Americas, as imperial competition for colonies shifted from the west to the east and south, the Middle East and Africa became critical strategic gateways

to Europe, but also provided valuable markets and resources that helped to sustain European economies and uphold a measure of political stability.

When Napoleon Bonaparte's men invaded Egypt in 1798–1801, the goal of French strategists was not only to cut the jugular vein of Britain's imperial relationship with India, but also to colonise Egypt as a substitute for possessions in the West Indies, in the meantime recovering Pondicherry and other French possessions on the Coromandel and Malabar coasts. However, the French *démarche* culminated with fiasco in 1801, as the Anglo-Ottoman forces drove the French armies out of the Levant.

After the Napoleonic Wars and the Congress of Vienna in 1815, a new inter-imperial order was established to suspend armed conflict, yet colonial expansion all over the world continued almost unabated. With the piracy of the Barbary Corsairs as a pretext, the French invaded Algiers in 1830 with the exact same purpose of establishing influence in North Africa to compete against Britain in the Mediterranean. This time the British were preoccupied with events at home, in Portugal, and in the Dutch Kingdom, enabling France to invade Algiers and begin its conquest of Algeria, which helped inaugurate an era of European expansionism in Africa. By the 1910s, with the exception of Liberia and Ethiopia, the entire African continent was under European colonial rule. Lands were confiscated, territories were re-drawn on the map, resources were exploited, and along the way, millions of lives perished. During the anti-colonial resistance in Algeria alone, one third of the entire Algerian population (around one million people) passed away due to incessant fighting, famine, and epidemic diseases.

Conscious that colonial competition could spark inter-imperial wars in Africa, especially after the unification of Germany and its entry into the colonial contest, the European powers peacefully shared the lands of Africa among their colonies at the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, which went down in history as the Scramble for Africa.

A scramble for the Middle East never took place in the same, explicit fashion, nor was it ever formally colonised. The territories of the Ottoman Empire and Persia were too big and too dangerous to swallow, and were never annexed in one attempt by any of the European powers. The Europeans saw an existential threat in the annexation of the strategically and economically prized morsels from the empires of the Sultan and the Shah; any move in this direction could upset the balance of power in Europe and engender a general war, bringing the continent back to the horrors of the Coalition Wars in 1793–1815. Dubbed the 'Eastern Question', this most complicated and dangerous issue of international relations of the time indeed prompted the first armed conflict between great powers since 1815, the Crimean War of 1853–1856. Britain and France fought

against Russia due to their differing perspectives on the future of the Ottoman Empire.

Even though the Middle East was never colonised, each of the major European empires still managed to establish dominance in certain parts of the region. They exerted control over the Ottoman and Persian economies by signing free trade agreements with the local authorities during politically turbulent times for these Middle Eastern empires. Local monopolies were abolished and customs tariffs for European exports and imports were lowered, much to the benefit of the western metropoles.

Despite all these stark differences between the Middle Eastern and African experiences of European imperialism, a particular form of discursive practice ran through the nineteenth century. European direct control or dominant influence in Africa and the Middle East was justified time and time again when European colonialism and hegemony in Africa and the Middle East cast it as a duty on the part of the civilised European nations: the duty of civilising the rest, educating them, and thus rendering them "happier, wiser, better," to cite the British Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston. Both the African and Middle Eastern peoples came to be seen through an imperial and imperialist hubris, which homogenised them into an un- or semi-civilised other prone to barbarism and violence.

Conclusion

China, the Ottoman Empire and Persia were thus opened up by Europeans to the circuits of global free trade, which continued over decades to impoverish local economies. Local resistance movements and anti-colonial rebellions such as the Boxer War came to be associated in Western parlance with eastern barbarity, Islamic fanaticism, or the 'yellow peril'. Yet rarely, if ever, were the economic and psychological undertones of violence, or the European triggers of rebellion and civil war, taken into account. Political instability in the rest of the world supplied the powers with enough pretext for further intervention, expansionism, or the establishment of direct control, as outlined in the introduction to this chapter. But these manoeuvres only hardened local sentiments and politics, resulting in ideological backlashes as anti-liberalism gained traction in the non-European world as an offshoot of the nineteenth-century experience. Only Japan and the United States made their way into the privileged rank of great powers with their own imperial expansionism in the name of civilisation at the end of the nineteenth century. It was at this point that the context for a new international order was set. But it would take two disastrous and unprecedented World Wars for this new order to finally take shape.

Discussion questions

1. Are there any similarities or differences in how Europeans imagined other parts of the world in the nineteenth century?
2. What role did imperialism play in these images?
3. Are these images still influencing our view of the world? How and why?

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