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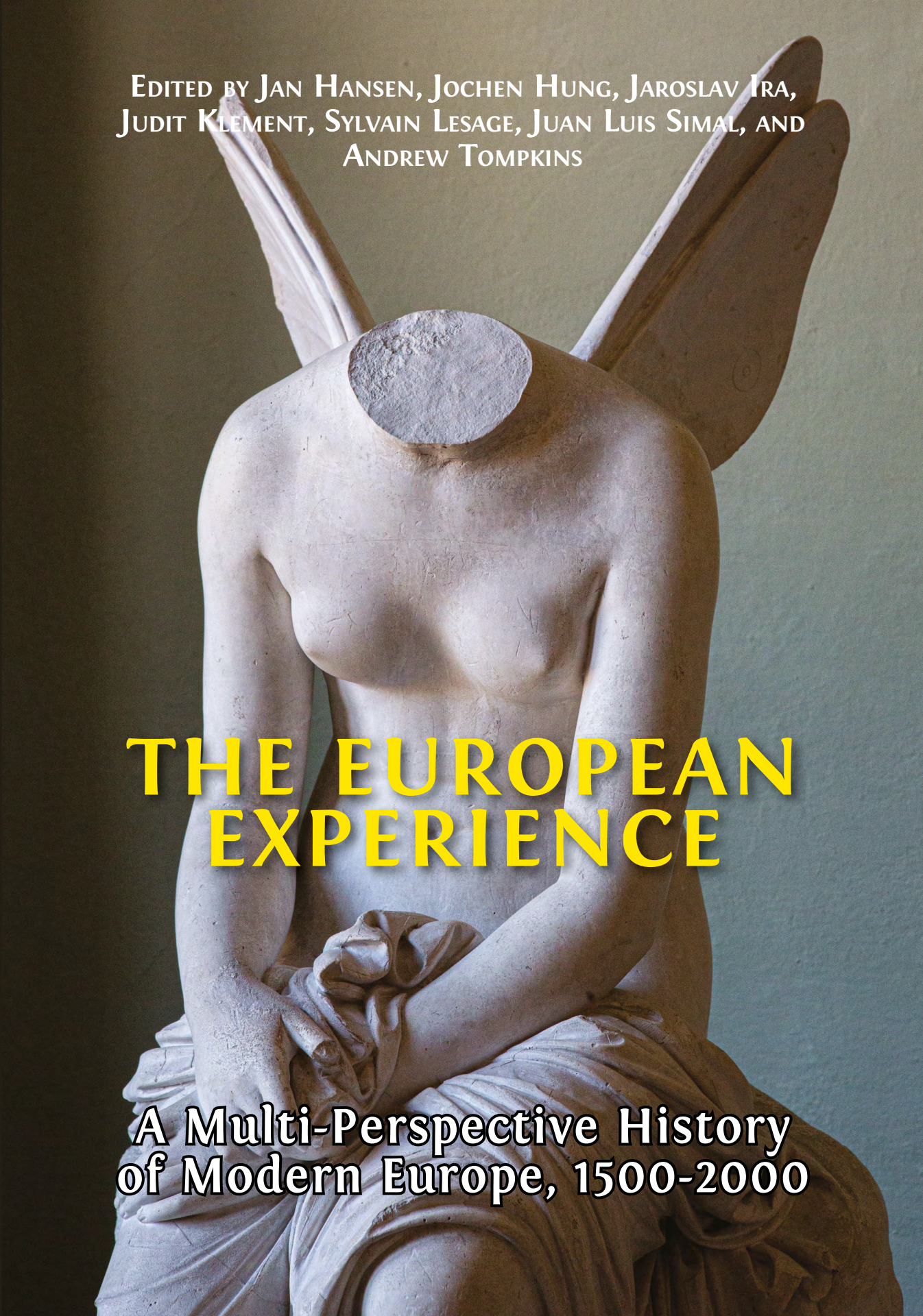

The European Experience

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

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3.2.2 Empire and Colonialism in Modern History (ca. 1800–1900)

Esme Cleall, Markéta Křížová, and Matthijs Kuipers

Introduction

In the nineteenth century, large swaths of the world's territory came under colonial rule. By the early twentieth century, close to forty percent of the world's land area was under formal control of either longstanding imperial powers like Britain, France, Portugal or the Netherlands, or new claimants, like the United States and Japan. Most notably, Britain established formal rule over the entirety of present-day India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh in 1858, a year after the suppressed Indian Rebellion. In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, Africa was effectively divided by European powers. What set the so-called 'New Imperialism' of the nineteenth century apart from its early-modern predecessors was the shift to the full and formal incorporation of territories into European polities, as opposed to the haphazard and patchwork modes of domination that marked earlier rule, which was often carried out by nominally private entities like the British East India Company (EIC) and its counterparts in other empires. Overseas imperialism may have been around since the early modern period, but the 'red-bespattered maps' that showed an empire on which 'the sun never set' were a product of the nineteenth century.

This chapter explores why New Imperialism emerged, how it operated, and how it was met around the world. The answers traditionally point at economic incentives—imperial powers turned to formal control when informal control, the so-called 'gunboat diplomacy', did not achieve their aims—but as this chapter will show, ideological motives from above and below were just as important. Colonial ventures met anticolonial resistance of many sorts. Colonisers increasingly justified their exploits by claiming to 'bring civilisation,' and partaking in this so-called 'civilising mission' was not limited to citizens from imperial powers, but was a transnational European

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affair. Ideas on civilisation, gender, modernity, and race were all determining factors in the day-to-day workings of empire.

Violence, Profit, and Exploitation

One of the worst elements of European colonialism in this period was the transatlantic slave trade, which involved kidnapping men, women, and children from West Africa, and transporting them to the 'new world' over the infamous Middle Passage. Many died in dire conditions during their transport. Those that arrived were sold in the Caribbean and elsewhere in the Americas, and forced to work on plantations in hideous conditions, often until death. The enormous scale and cruelty of the transatlantic slave trade was the subject of contemporary critique, not least by abolitionists (many of them of African origin) who became increasingly vocal in the nineteenth century and who engaged with slave-owning interests in a war of representation over race, which had long-lasting legacies. There were some moves towards an abolition of slavery. Revolution in the French colony of Saint-Domingue, which brought into existence the Republic of Haiti at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was a decisive step that exposed the cruelty of slavery. Subsequently, slavery was officially abolished in the British Empire in the 1830s, in the French Empire in the 1840s, and in other empires (like the Dutch) later in the century. But enslavement continued to be an important feature accompanying colonial expansion. It expanded in some colonies (namely, Cuba, possessed by Spain until the very end of the nineteenth century), and also continued to be legal in some post-colonial states (southern USA, Brazil). The transatlantic slave trade also continued. In fact, in terms of the number of slaves transported across the Atlantic (even though we cannot estimate this precisely, since a great portion of this trade was illegal), the slave trade was actually at its highest in the early decades of the nineteenth century. The cruelty of the plantation slavery system also reached its highest point in the nineteenth century—paradoxically, due to the introduction of technical innovations, such as steam power for the sugar mills that increased the capacity of the plantations in the Caribbean, but which also raised the pressure on the enslaved workforce. Further enslavement in the Caribbean and elsewhere continued to have formative legacies throughout the nineteenth century.

Economic exploitation also fed into the creation of European empires in other ways. The Congo Free State, ruled infamously from 1885 to 1908 as the private possession of the Belgian King Leopold II, is often seen as one of the worst phases in the history of European colonialism. This was, according to some, 'imperialism at its cruelest'. Among the most gruesome practices, carried out in an effort to enforce rubber quotas, was a policy of physical

mutilation—cutting off hands—which became a prime symbol of colonial terror. But rather than seeing Congo as the exception, it can also be seen as representative of the exploitative politics of colonialism at large. A number of recurring themes in the general practice of colonialism can be discerned in the particular case of the Congo Free State. The exploitative nature of colonial rule is the first of these themes. At the start of his colonial reign, Leopold had to promise that the Belgian state would bear no expenses in Congo. This is a practice that can be observed in other empires as well. From 1830 to 1870, the Netherlands installed the policy of '*batig slot*' (positive balance), that stipulated that each year money had to flow from the Dutch East Indies to the Netherlands, and not the other way around. As some historians have pointed out, colonial rule was not always profitable. The returns on colonial investments were not always as high as imagined, and sometimes colonies lost money. The promise of riches, however, remained an incentive for colonial powers.

A second theme is the structural nature of the economic abuses and the far-reaching effects they had. This was not just excess in the search for profit, but an effort to reshape economies in the service of imperial powers. The resulting global economic system chiefly benefitted the West. The profitability of Congo's rubber exploits aside, the fact that this resource could flow into European markets and was used to manufacture tyres had a positive effect on industries well beyond the worth of the rubber industry itself. Other colonial crops had similar far-reaching effects. Cotton, which by 1831 made up for almost a quarter of the annual growth of the economy in Britain, reshaped or even created entire economies. This not only included the plantation economies of the Caribbean and, later, the United States, but also countries like Egypt and India, which were coerced into drastically shifting their domestic agricultural sectors to the production of cotton during the nineteenth century. In this way, the countries became connected to a worldwide market, but at a high price. India's own cotton processing industries were largely destroyed by British economic policies. Similar instances of de-industrialisation can be discerned in other colonies. Another effect was that the use of agricultural lands for cotton growing often took the place of sustenance farming, which made local populations vulnerable to capricious global markets.

Thirdly, while the 'promise of riches' might have been an incentive for the colonising powers, it would be a mischaracterisation to depict the exploitative and extracting colonial politics as an entirely rational affair. Deluded notions about what constituted progress or modernity were often a determining factor. Just one instance among many is the failed British introduction of breadfruit in the Caribbean, which was wrongly believed to be a highly nutritious food for the enslaved population, but turned out not to be the wonder food British colonisers imagined it to be. In other instances, entire economies were remade

based on ideas about progress, race, and civilisation—like with the so-called 'cultivation system' that was introduced in the Dutch East Indies in 1830. The intention of the system was to reorient Javanese agricultural production towards the production of crops for international markets. A central premise was that the colonies had to "contribute to the national wealth", but were unable to do so because Javanese peasants were on a lesser scale of civilisation and needed enforced discipline in order to be productive. Thus, the system forced landowners to use one fifth of their lands to grow export crops like coffee or sugar for the colonial government, and also forced landless peasants to work sixty-six days annually in government fields. The system was open to abuse, and the toll on Indonesians was often much higher than the nominal one fifth of land or labour.

Fig. 1: Josef Kořenský, "A group of palm juice collectors to prepare the drink 'toddy'" (19th c.), National Museum of the Czech Republic—Náprstkov Museum, https://en.esbirky.cz/search/subcollection/4502437. Photo from the archive of the Náprstek Museum in Prague.

Ideas, Ideology, and Imagination

Imperialism was not simply a matter of practice, but also of ideology. The idea that western European states could dominate extra-European territories was an ideology linked closely with ideas about white supremacy and cultural superiority. The (Indian-born) British writer Rudyard Kipling famously

discussed a "white man's burden" whereby indigenous people would have to be carried by their European counterparts along the road of 'civilisation'.

Interventions were justified by claiming a need to offer protection from barbarism. For instance, in the second half of the nineteenth century, slavery within Africa (characterised as a sign of African barbarity) was used as a principal justification for European colonial penetration on the continent—despite the hypocritical participation of Europeans in the ongoing, illegal slave trade between the continent and the Americas.

One chief agent of cultural imperialism and the dissemination of colonial ideologies were missionary societies, which expanded significantly from the late eighteenth century onwards. Both Catholic and Protestant missionaries were deeply interested in religiosity and converting indigenous peoples of all faiths to Christianity, but they were not simply aiming at a religious transformation. The transformation they sought would also impose widescale cultural shifts, from the adoption of Western forms of dress and clothing, to the reformation of marriage and sexuality, to reformed childbearing and childrearing practices. Almost every element of indigenous life and practice was considered appropriate for reconstruction from the missionary's perspective. Missionary organisations were formed even in countries without significant overseas empires, such as Switzerland and Norway. In some places, such as southern Africa and India, there was competition for converts between missionaries of different denominations.

Sometimes missionaries cooperated with and indeed benefited from formal colonial rule. Certainly, many were seen as imperial agents by indigenous people—such as in the run-up to the 1857–1858 Indian Rebellion, when perceived Christianisation was one factor that led to anti-colonial resistance. However, at other moments, the relationship between missionaries and the colonial state was hostile. Again, we can see this in British India, where missionaries were sometimes frowned upon and sometimes banned by colonial officials, concerned that they would generate agitation. The intertwined nature of missionary cultural imperialism and other forms of colonial activity is clear when we consider particular individuals who traversed neat distinctions between these categories of action. This can be seen in the example of David Livingstone, one of the nineteenth century's most famous missionaries, who originally started working as a missionary for the London Missionary Society, but whose explorations across southern Africa also attracted the attention of other agents of imperialism such as geographers—with his findings widely lauded, and later funded, by the Royal Geographical Society. Livingstone became a celebrity figure in his own lifetime, and subsequently became a key figure in the cultural memory of imperialism in Africa, immortalised in many statues and imperial culture.

Missionary activity was just one domain of cultural imperialism: cultural imperialism was also manifest in the spread of European languages across the globe, the spread of European dress and ways of living, and 'Western' style education. The spread of European medicine, particularly in the late nineteenth century, served to showcase the 'superiority' of European science, its capacity to save lives and cure diseases, thus winning support from the newly subjected populations; but on the other hand, by using the bodies of native populations as study material (often without asking for consent) the practice of medicine in non-European settings further confirmed colonial domination.

There were also other sciences that were closely tied to colonialism. In fact, colonies often became 'laboratories' for developing European natural science, or testing grounds for medical experiments. The progress of science and medicine, in turn, was used to legitimise colonial expansion. Thus, colonialism and science reinforced each other—colonialism structured scientific thought and gave new directions to research.

Anthropology, the science of the study of humanity, was established as a standard academic discipline in the course of the nineteenth century, and its objectives and methods were defined within the frame of the second colonialist thrust of European expansion in other continents. Intellectual, specialised systems of knowledge thus immediately acquired political relevance, as through anthropology the supposed superiority of the white European was established as a rationalised, positive 'truth'.

Throughout the nineteenth century museums were purposefully constructed as "temples of science"—a phrase often used by contemporary authors—and as repositories of objective, tangible knowledge. Through museum displays the aspirations of Europe to political and cultural superiority over the rest of the world were given 'scientific' support through showcasing the 'primitiveness' of non-European technologies or non-European religious superstitions. Similar messages were presented in 'ethnographical shows'—live displays of non-Europeans, performing their 'everyday life' in front of paying audiences. These shows were enormously popular in Europe between the 1870s and the First World War.

Through institutions like these, members of nations not directly involved in colonial enterprise could show what Ulla Vuorela has termed (for the case of Finland) "colonial complicity". Colonialist and imperialist discourse was not limited to those countries directly involved in expansion overseas. There were societies within Europe that had remained outside explicit colonial interests or overseas possessions, but nevertheless engaged in colonial projects in a variety of ways—and also benefitted materially from these interactions. They actively participated in hegemonic discourses as these were developed in the colonising metropoles, thus identifying themselves with 'European'

normative civilisation and discursively degrading the non-European rest of the world. For example, if they did not participate directly in physically dominating and exploiting overseas regions, they could participate indirectly in the colonising thrust through acquisition, description, and categorisation of objects brought from afar. Present-day museums are inheritors of this ethos, and are still endowed with the authority to affirm what is historically and culturally significant.

Specific forms of such colonial complicity can be studied in Central and Eastern Europe, region that had often experienced external political as well as economic and cultural pressures from their immediate neighbours: Russia, Prussia/Germany, Austro-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire. Faced with these pressures, the inhabitants of the region were developing a sense of belonging to the whole of 'Europe' as a geographical, political, and cultural category. But there were also specific discursive strategies and reference points that explicitly opposed Central and Eastern European reality to Western European colonial empires, thus breaking the clear-cut dichotomy of 'European coloniser' and 'non-European colonised'.

The entanglements of these various imperial fantasies and real efforts for political and economic dominance have been shown, for example, by Lenny Ureña Valerio in her study of the construction of 'Polishness' in Polish lands under German imperial domination during the period when Poland ceased to exist as a state, its territory being partitioned between Germany, Austria and Russia). She shows how 'Polishness' was constructed in identification with the colonial 'other' in Africa and South America, also facing quasi-colonial penetrations of the German state and German settlers.

The symbolic appropriation of far-away regions also found support in the new medium for knowing the world, photography—a technological invention that was also claimed to show the superiority of Europe over the rest of the world. It apparently offered an 'objective', 'truthful' depiction of a strange reality, but at the same time testified to its otherness.

Gender also became an important area of intervention in terms of cultural imperialism. As Gayatri Spivak famously put it, "white men saving brown women from brown men" was a recurring colonial trope in this period. Dating back to the Enlightenment, the status of women was seen as a marker of 'civilisation'. Indigenous women were thought to need 'saving' from a range of fates including *sati* (the Hindu practice of burning widows on the deceased husband's funeral pyre), child-marriage, polygamy and 'bride-wealth payments'.

Racial thinking, too, shaped the discourse and praxis of colonialisation, not least in its justification of exploitation and colonial violence. Even though the idea of race often remained implicit in the circles of government or education,

it was fed by a racial thinking and pseudo-scientific racism that developed steadily in this period. Religious ideas on race aligned with this form of racial thinking, and manifested among other things in a shift from 'monogenism' (which posited that all humans descended from common ancestors, namely Adam and Eve), to 'polygenism' (which argued that different categories of people had different ancestors) which many have argued led to 'harder' attitudes towards race.

Attitudes towards race were one factor that fed into the 'exoticisation' of the non-European 'other' in this period. Exoticism was closely linked with eroticism, and images of scantily clad indigenous women fed into understandings about empire across Europe, demonstrating the links between ideas about race and ideas about sexuality.

Imperial ideology was not uncontested in this period and, during the nineteenth century, there were also considerable acts of anti-colonial resistance. Anti-slavery rebellions (such as the so-called Christmas Rebellion of 1831 in Jamaica) had contributed to the end of slavery in the first half of the nineteenth century. Perhaps one of the most notable acts of imperial resistance was the Indian Rebellion (then called a 'Mutiny') which broke out in Meerut in 1857. Across the Indian subcontinent there were subsequent protests against a range of conditions including the introduction of the Enfield rifle (which, in requiring soldiers to bite the end of a cartridge rumoured to contain beef and pork fat, violated Hindu and Muslim religious practices), increased seizures of indigenous land, and perceived Christianisation and 'Westernisation.' The revolt was brutally put down by the British and many Indian people were killed. The shock that the Indian Rebellion generated back in the British metropole was extraordinary and led to an explosion of novels, plays, and poems, demonising the rebels and, in particular, the slaughter of European women and children. Many of the ideas that took hold in this period continued to shape the imperial imagination for the remainder of the century.

Conclusion

The central premise of this chapter is that nineteenth-century imperialism and colonialism can be distinguished from its early modern predecessors and postcolonial successors. Among the specific features that set this phase of European imperialism and colonialism apart, a few can be highlighted: the fact of the formal incorporation of territories in a relatively small number of empires; more systematic economic exploitation than before; a ruling ideology that was strongly marked by ideas about race, gender and 'civilisation' (defined through religion, but also scientific and technological advancement)

and that transgressed national and imperial borders. Also, there was great impact in both colony and metropole in terms of wealth, health, education. Empire was the focus of politics and activism, both 'at home' and in the form of anticolonial resistance. It was a source of pride for the ruling elites, and a bolster for nationalist sentiments. The relationship between different agents of imperialism was complex and has been the subject of much historiographical debate.

Discussion questions

1. The text mentions "colonial complicity". What does that mean?
2. Which role did religion play in European imperialism and colonialism?
3. Does the history of colonialism still shape Europe today? Why or why not?

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