HISTORY OF EMPIRES AND CONFLICTS

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Summary

This chapter considers the range and nature of organized violence generated by Empires, as well as forms of socio-economic and political conflict that have occurred under imperial rule across time and place. It will explore both the historical interaction between conflict and empire and the set of ideas and concepts that have been developed to explain such an interaction. The chapter deals mainly not only with the violent expressions of conflict historically associated to imperialism, but also pays some attention to the role of non-violent conflict in the unfolding of imperial histories.

1. Introduction

On the eve of the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the then US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was asked by an al-Jazeera journalist whether he feared his country might become a colonial power in using military force to topple Saddam Hussein's regime. 'We've never been a colonial power' the Defense Secretary replied. 'We don't take our force and go around the world and try to take other people's real estate or other people's resources, their oil. That's just not what the United States does.' Whatever one's opinion about the veracity of this claim, the statement crystallizes many of the reasons why questions of empire, colonialism, conflict and imperialism remain so powerful in contemporary world politics. No state today calls itself an Empire, and only

one Head of State – Japan's Akihito – claims the title of Emperor. In contrast, one hundred years ago (and for the better part of human civilization before then) most people across the world were subjects of one or another Empire, while rulers the world over coveted the role of Emperor.

Yet in our post-colonial world, the socio-economic, cultural and political hierarchies connected to imperialism still persist within and between nations, while the war, aggression and expansionism historically associated to successive empires remain an unabated feature of international politics. In this respect, Donald Rumsfeld's vigorous denial of the colonial character of US foreign policy in fact reveals a pronounced awareness that all big powers (not just the US of course) can still be seen as using force to acquire, exploit or control other peoples' territory and wealth – that is, be accused of acting like an Empire. It reflects a sense of unease among world leaders that the hostile deployment of force abroad and the accompanying temptation to dominate over foreign peoples and their resources leads inevitably to empire-building. And polities that become empires have historically only one fate: decline and - as in the case of Romans, Ottomans, Habsburgs or Soviets – eventual extinction.

The aim of this essay is to explore the historical connections between imperial rule and conflict across time and place. It will do so by focusing on three distinct but inter-related 'moments' in the history of empires and conflict: warfare, social struggle and political order. Clearly, such moments are never discretely separated in reality. But their analytical differentiation will allow us to identify the dynamics behind the history of empires and conflict at varying stages in diverse contexts. Moreover, although the experiences that fall under each of these headings plainly transcend the life of empires, imperial rule has inflected war, conflict and peace with very specific characteristics. As we shall see below, empires have recruited, mobilized and deployed armed force transnationally in order to conquer, pacify and subsequently exploit vast territories and their populations. This has in turn generated forms of resistance and accommodation where imperial authorities and their subjects have fashioned very specific strategies of conflict, negotiation and law-enforcement. Before proceeding to examine the tensions and contradictions in these strategies a few basic definitions are in order.

The English word 'Empire' is derived from the Latin *Imperium*, meaning 'command', 'authority', 'rulership' or simply 'power'. The Roman republic had until the turn of the first century AD used the term to denote the power invested in magistrates to declare war and enforce law. With the fall of the Republic, the word was transformed from an abstract into a proper noun, increasingly referring to an actual political entity - the Empire of the Roman People (*imperium populi Romani)*. This is the meaning which has persisted in the West, anecdotally reflected in the German and Russian monarchs' invocation of Caesar when proclaiming themselves respectively *Kaiser* and *Tsar* (as, incidentally, did the Ottoman Sultan Mehmet II who, upon conquering Constantinople in 1453 added the title of *Kayser i-Rum* - Caesar of the Romans - to that of 'ruler of two seas and two continents').

Among the empires of the East, the Chinese term *T'ien-Chao*, translated as 'Celestial empire' highlights another aspect of the concept, namely its cosmological connotations, and with it the promise of terrestrial order. Empires conquer and destroy, but thereafter

they seek to reinstate order and stability. The Ch'in and Han emperors were famously granted a 'mandate of Heaven' to rule over Earth ('All-under-Heaven', *T'ien hsia*). They were entrusted with restoring and protecting cosmological harmony after periods of conflict and turmoil and, if judiciously administered, this imperial mandate would secure the cosmic balance between Heaven, Earth and Man.

The notion of Empire thus connotes not just the conquest and exploitation of foreign peoples and territories, but also the adoption of the famed 'civilizing mission' aimed at fostering order, progress and stability across the whole of the world. For Michael W. Doyle 'Empire is a relationship, formal or informal, in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society. It can be achieved by force, by political collaboration, by economic, social or cultural dependence' (Doyle, 1986: 45). An Empire dominates over a periphery through explicitly hierarchical means and, crucially, proscribes independent relations among its conquered populations. As Alexander Motyl has pointed out, drawing on Johann Galtung's structural theory of economic imperialism, an Empire can be conceived as 'an incomplete wheel, with a hub and spokes but no rim' (Motyl, 1999: 141). It is, in sum, an expansive polity which, with the assistance of military, political and cultural instruments of order, commands over and exploits a subordinated population from a metropolitan centre (Colás, 2007).

The ancient Greek term 'colony' (a territory settled by a metropolitan population and/or administered by a foreign power) and the nineteenth-century neologism 'imperialism' (the process and policy of dominating over foreign populations) are, as will be discussed further below, two concepts closely related to the history of Empires and conflict (Koebner and Schmidt, 1964). Most Empires have established overseas colonies through force, but not all Empires need be 'colonial' in this respect. The USA has for the past half a century arguably operated as a post-colonial Empire, while successive Chinese dynasties have through the centuries been notoriously reluctant to establish overseas possessions (bar the important exception of Taiwan). Similarly, although it can be argued that some states pursue imperialist (or sub-imperialist) policies without constituting formal empires (e.g. Hitler's Germany, Saddam Hussein's Iraq or Stalin's Russia), most Empires have in fact deliberately sought aggressive expansion and have indeed celebrated such enlargement.

Since Empires and imperialism almost invariably entail violent domination over foreign populations, it follows that conflict is a necessary corollary to these phenomena. One authoritative definition renders conflict as a dynamic triangulation of 'incompatible goal-states' between attitudes, behavior and contradictions among individuals or groups (Galtung, 1965). I shall be considering social conflict in its broadest expression, involving both international and domestic actors and ranging from largely peaceful disputes to forms of violent confrontation that include outright war. Thus, although conflict often takes on highly (inter)personal characteristics, the focus of this essay will principally be on larger social conflicts issuing from Empires and imperialism.

The following section opens with a discussion of the close connections between militarism and Empires. It will make reference to some ancient and early-modern experiences, but concentrates mainly on what Eric Hobsbawm calls the 'Age of Empire' from 1875 to 1914 (Hobsbawm, 1987). Questions of imperial territorial expansion will

be explored in tandem with the ways in which Empires have engaged in warfare, both among themselves and against anti-imperial forces. Section 3 analyses the ways in which imperial structures and dynamics generate socio-economic, political and cultural antagonism both within and among peoples. It also considers the legacies of such conflicts for contemporary societies. The final major section of the essay turns to the ways in which modern Empires in particular have sought to resolve, deflect or suppress conflict through ostensibly non-violent means. Here the focus will be on law-making as an alternative to war-making, and the claim that we now live in a post-imperial world characterized by forms of conflict which no longer involve the militarism, racism and predation which have historically characterized Empires.

2. Empires and War

2.1. Territorial Expansion

All empires are expansive polities. They grow from relatively small and geographically contained entities to encompass vast territories and their diverse populations. Rome was a small city-state on the banks of the river Tiber when it began its imperial career in the course of the fifth century BC, while the House of Osman (later to become the 'Ottoman Empire') started its own imperial trajectory as a confederation of tribal emirates in western Anatolia at the turn of the fourteenth century AD. From their original centers, empires expand chiefly through territorial conquest – by defeating rivals, fostering suzerains or, in some cases, securing allies in adjacent territories. This process can be sudden and brief (as in the spurt of Aztec expansion in the two centuries before the Spanish conquest) or protracted and long-lasting (as in the Roman and Chinese cases). In all instances, however, territorial acquisition - the corner-stone of empire-building – involves war, or at least the threat thereof.

The Roman case is archetypal in this regard. At its fullest geographical extent (by the start of the second century AD) Rome's empire stretched westwards into the Iberian peninsula, north to the British Isles, east into contemporary Iraq and south as far as the middle reaches of the Nile.

Figure 1. Growth of Roman Dominions under the Empire *(Source : https://gbgm-umc.org/umw/corinthians/empire.stm)*

The bulk of these territories were acquired through Roman triumph in the three Punic wars against Carthage (264-241BC; 218-201BC and 149BC) and the accompanying wars against Greek kingdoms, making the Mediterranean a Roman 'Mare Nostrum' by the start of the first century BC. Julius Caesar's Gallic campaigns in the middle of that century brought most of Gaul (roughly, today's France) under Roman rule, paving the way for the conquest of Britain in 43 AD. Thereafter, Roman power was only substantially extended into Dacia (mostly contemporary Romania) in 105-6 AD and, after the Parthian wars of the late second century AD eastwards as far as the Tigris. In addition to these conquered provinces, Rome also established a number of client kingdoms in the course of its expansion, including Armenia, Mauretania, Thracia in the contemporary Balkans, and Cappadocia in eastern Anatolia.

What becomes clear from this summary account of Roman imperial expansion is how central war was to the growth and survival of the Roman Empire. 'The most lucrative business of the Romans' the classicist Peter Brunt once noted, 'was war and government' (Brunt, 1971: 38). Rome was fundamentally a land empire, and as such relied on its army not just as a source of power, but also of plenty. Its navies certainly played a signal role in Roman expansion, and maritime commerce was critical in transferring Iberian oil, wine and metals to the metropole, or facilitating the export of cereals from Sicily and the North African provinces (Rome's granary) to the Italian peninsula and beyond. But the Empire's wealth issued mainly from land - through the cultivation of vast estates (the famed *latifundia*), via the extraction of taxes, slaves and tribute from conquered populations and territories, or by way of war booty.

The sociologist Michael Mann neatly captures this symbiosis between military conquest

and landed wealth when speaking of a 'legionary economy'. As Roman forces pacified new lands, they facilitated the wider traffic of goods, money and labor within the assimilated territories, and these were in turn consumed by the Roman legions, local auxiliaries and their commanders - both at home and abroad. 'Once a province was criss-crossed, taxes and military conscription of auxiliaries, and later of legionaries, was routinized … the new communication routes and the state-led economy could generate economic growth. This was not really a state-led economy in our modern sense but a military-led economy' (Mann, 1986: 276).

Roman society was thus deeply martial, and its empire has since served as a both inspiration and caution to societies with praetorian tendencies (those where military and civilian power are structurally intertwined). 'It is unlikely', Samuel Finer observes, 'that there are more than perhaps ten individual years over its entire span when Roman armies were not waging war somewhere or another, and in few previous societies was military glory so central an ambition to members of the ruling class' (Finer, 1997: 439). Keith Hopkins for his part calculates that 'By the reign of Augustus … an average of twenty years' service still required the enlistment of about one fifth of seventeen-year-old citizens', while up to one half of Roman citizens would have served for at least seven years. 'Among pre-industrial states', Hopkins continues, 'only Prussia under Frederick William I and Frederick the Great and Napoleonic France, and those for only short periods, achieved such consistent military effort' (Hopkins, 1978: 35).

Scholars of Ancient Rome have little extant documentation to accurately quantify the revenue and expenditure associated to military campaigns, but there is a general consensus that warfare was central to the socio-political and economic reproduction of the Empire. Roman commanders and politicians relied on the spoils of war, and tribute from conquered peoples to fund their networks of patronage, while celebration of military triumphs was an integral component of everyday Roman culture. 'One does not have to look very far', Susan Mattern has suggested, 'in the *Res Gestae* or in Latin sources generally, to get the impression that the Romans thought conquest was a good and glorious thing' (Mattern, 1999: 164). Yet this very munificence required constant military expansion, and in turn committed both Roman and local resources to the protection and administration of freshly conquered lands.

Here, one of the common denominators in the history of empires and conflict comes into sharp relief: namely the impact of peripheral wars on metropolitan politics. The 'Social War' of 99-88 BC and the subsequent crisis of the Republic were the expression of internecine Roman conflicts over what Michael Doyle has labeled the 'spoils of Empire': 'The Republican constitution, which had regulated the state while its national existence was threatened, succumbed to its own successes and its inability to regulate the distribution of booty and too-lucrative office' (Doyle, 1986: 92). Only the dictatorial authority of an imperial *Princeps* could, in the event, resolve the internal political crisis generated by external military expansion.

Not all empires have been as profoundly militarist as the Romans. The Chinese Han empire for one, relied much more heavily on an extensive body of scholar-bureaucrats (the famed 'mandarins'- after the Portuguese for 'little bosses'). Later Han had no standing army, aside from the relatively small body of Palace guards and some 4,000

guardians of the empire's capital and its northern frontier (the so-called 'Northern Army'). Conscription was obligatory for all able-bodied men aged 23 to 56, but after a two-year military service, conscripts were discharged to form local militias which were only mobilized at times of political turmoil (Finer, 1997: 513). Once emergencies were over, both officers and soldiers were released from duty and so, uniquely for an empire of such dimensions and power, no permanent or extensive body of military officials emerged in the course of Later Han history. Whereas Rome's empire was, as we just saw, built on a structural connection between an extensive and pervasive army and the wealth created through tribute, slavery and private property in land, the Han Empire was reproduced through a largely civilian body of officeholders responsible for extracting and administering taxes through a complex bureaucratic infrastructure. Indeed on one calculation, the overall number of officeholders employed by the Han bureaucracy in AD 140 was anything between 300,000 and 500,000 - in proportion, roughly twenty times the number of civil servants employed by imperial Rome during the same period (Hopkins, 1983: 196).

2.2. Modern European Imperialism

The Roman and Han experiences give us a sense of how historically empires have, in different ways and with varying degrees of success combined extensive violence (territorial conquest) with intensive rule (administration) in projecting and maintaining their power. Two early-modern polities (the Habsburg and Ottoman empires) followed suit, reproducing many of the frontier institutions characteristic of Roman expansion (the reliance on auxiliaries, mobile land forces and war-booty) as well as some of the complex bureaucratic mechanisms of the Chinese (rationalized tax and tribute collection, dedicated revenue inspectors, detailed codification of land use). The centrality of land in all these forms of rule allows us to speak of imperial expansion as being fundamentally territorial.

Yet the 'long' sixteenth-century (1450-1650) which witnessed the rise of these two land-based empires also ushered in a momentous transformation in the history of conflict and empires. For the European 'discovery of the sea', which the Castilian crown unwittingly accelerated with Columbus' arrival on American shores in 1492, inaugurated a new phase of world-wide empire-building. This was to be characterized by the maritime expansion of a handful of western European polities across all corners of the globe, and their eventual colonization, occupation and control of four-fifths of the world's territory by the start of World War I. At least three features of this modern, chiefly European imperialism distinguish it from ancient predecessors, each in turn affecting the expressions of imperial conflict.
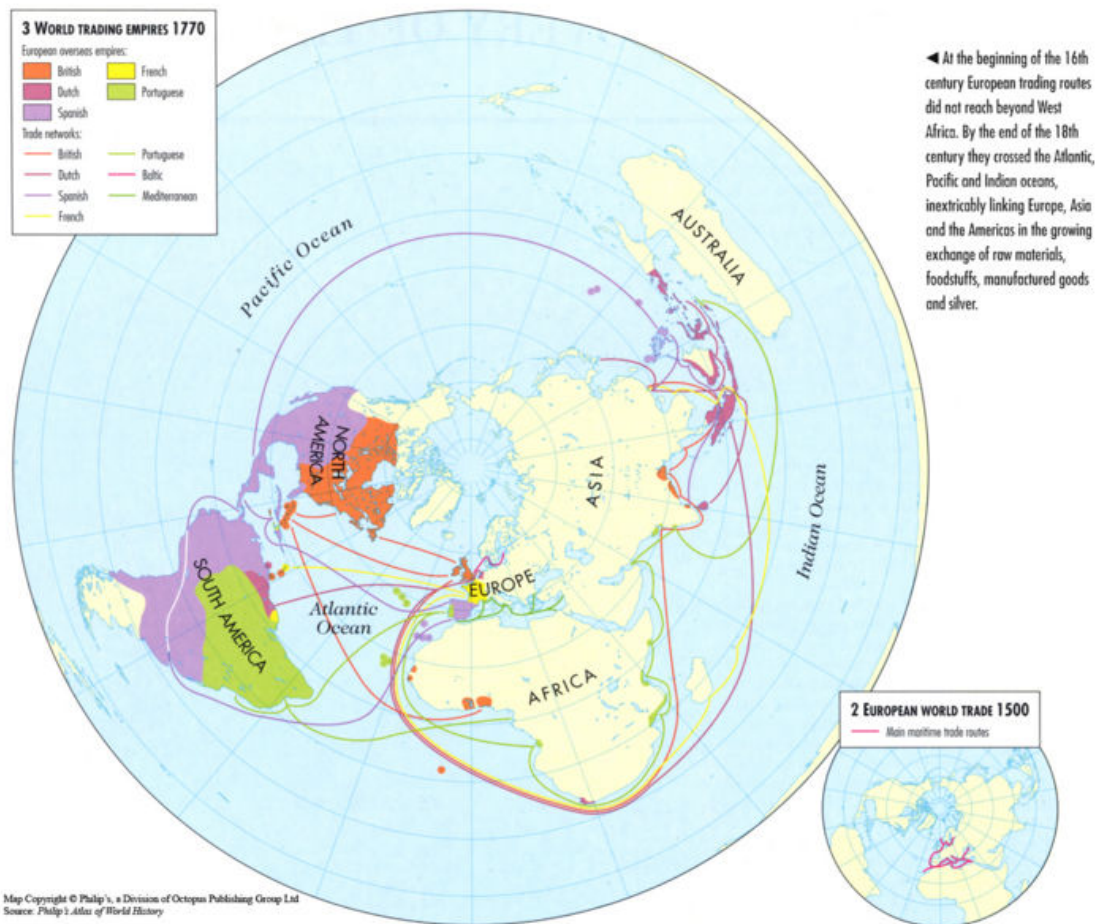
Figure 2. World Trading Empires.
https://qed.princeton.edu/index.php/User:Student/World_Trading_Empires_1770

The first of these was the mercantile character of the new empires. All the protagonists of modern European imperialism – initially Portugal and the Netherlands (less so Spain), subsequently France and Britain – were states and economies built predominantly on overseas trade. These polities certainly indulged in the ancient practices of plunder, predation and slavery, but they subjected these sources of wealth and prestige to a distinctively commercial logic - one that sought, as the saying goes, to 'buy cheap and sell dear'. The Atlantic slave trade and New World slavery were for example geared toward profit-making in the cultivation of exports (sugar, cotton, tobacco, indigo) or through the human traffic itself - not, as in the ancient world, toward combat and domestic service. Similarly, the purpose of overseas expansion was not (in the first instance at least) territorial aggrandizement but rather access and control of lucrative sea-lanes. This is why it was trading companies chartered by the state – the English East India or the Dutch East Indies companies, for instance – that spearheaded European overseas expansion.

A second characteristic of modern imperialism which flows from its commercial foundations is quite simply the global expanse of European empires. For good or ill, the seaborne mercantile empires of the modern era were the first to establish an integrated

network of colonial outposts across all of the world's five continents, organized by and for the metropolitan centre. Seville, Madrid, Lisbon and later Amsterdam, London, Glasgow, Bristol, Liverpool, Paris, Bordeaux and Nantes became the commercial and political hubs of empires whose commercial spokes radiated westward deep into the American continent and eastward along all the littorals of East Asia – including previously impenetrable China and Japan. By the eighteenth century Dutch, British and French vessels dominated intercontinental trade in spices, precious metals, fur, stimulants and of course, fellow humans – integrating previously autonomous socio-economic and political systems into a global hierarchy of trade which had in the infamous triangulation of African slaves, American sugar and European guns its most invidious expression.

A third feature of this modern Age of Empire was the widespread colonization and settlement of the Americas, Africa and Australasia by Europeans – the creation of what Alfred Crosby labeled 'neo-Europes'. That is, parts of the world like southeast Australia, the southern cone of Latin America or the North American coasts that are geographically distant from the Old Continent, but demographically, ecologically and socio-economically comparable to Europe (Crosby, 1986). While the history (some may say the destiny) of humanity has always involved mass migrations, the settlement of millions of Europeans overseas during the five centuries of expansion initiated in 1492 was unique in scale, scope and consequences. We should also include in this process of world-wide population movements spurred on and overseen by modern empires the experience of the estimated 10 to 20 million enslaved Africans who forcibly transported to work the New World plantations, the tens of millions of south and east Asian 'coolies' imported as indentured labor to various European colonies across the Indian, Pacific and Atlantic oceans, as well as the vast numbers of natives displaced and dispossessed by European colonization (see Potts 1990 for a breakdown in figures). On this reckoning, the numbers involved in modern imperial population transfers by far surpass their ancient predecessors, while the scope of movements plainly shifted from the regional to the global. Politically and socio-economically, the consequences of such demographic transformations were also unique in that they delivered distinctively modern forms of political mobilization and social identity – nationalism, ethnicity, race and racism.

There were significant implications for the nature of conflict attached to each of these features of modern imperialism. For one, naval power acquired special importance during this period. As seaborne trade became the mainstay of mercantile empires so, logically enough, did state authorities seek to bolster the protection of transoceanic sea-lanes. The consolidation and growth of standing navies in the course of the eighteenth century – most notably the British Royal Navy – was an expression of this 'bluewater policy' (Baugh, 1994), as was the marriage between commerce and coercion embodied in the Dutch and English East Indies companies. 'You gentlemen ought to know from experience' the Governor General of the Dutch company famously wrote to his directors in 1614, 'that trade in Asia should be conducted and maintained under the protection and with the aid of your own weapons, and that those weapons must be wielded with the profits gained by the trade. So trade cannot be maintained without war, nor war without trade' (quoted in Parker, 1991). More anecdotally, it is surely no coincidence that some of the decisive battles between European powers from the Seven

Years' War to the Napoleonic wars – the 1757 battle of Plassey, the Battle of Québec two years later, and most notably the 1805 Battle of Trafalgar – had a critical naval component.

The zero-sum logic of mercantilism also encouraged predation at sea – whether state-sanctioned (privateering and corsairing) or practiced without license (piracy). European Empires actively sought to emasculate their rivals, orchestrating and endorsing raiding expeditions against enemy vessels and often turning a blind eye to piratical campaigns in the 'peripheral' waters of the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean and the South China seas. Violence and terrorism – whether state-sponsored or purely mercenary – thus became integral components of this era of modern European imperialism.

As these inter-imperial rivalries were played out overseas, native populations and their rulers became engulfed in European power struggles. The age of modern imperialism globalized the military phenomenon which previous empires had only applied regionally, namely the use of local allies and auxiliaries in the fight against both indigenous insurgents and foreign contenders. As we shall see in more detail in the next section, imperial subjects – from the Senegalese *tirailleurs* to the Nepalese *Ghurkas* – were recruited to fight the world wars launched and driven by their imperial masters. Similarly, local political divisions were often exploited for purposes of conquest, pacification and subsequent policing. Occasionally too indigenous peoples could play inter-imperial rivalries to their own advantage – as the Iroquois confederacy did when allying themselves with the British during the American War of Independence, or Cuban nationalists did when encouraging the American defeat of Spain in 1898.

But perhaps the most significant consequence of modern European imperialism for the history of conflict and Empires was the destruction, decimation or - for the likes of Tasmanian aborigines and Chilean Araucanos - outright extermination that accompanied conquest and settlement. For indigenous populations which had experienced no previous contact with the white man (principally Amerindians and aboriginal peoples of the Pacific) the arrival of Europeans on their shores was to prove fatal. Contact with Old World pathogens combined with atrocious working conditions of entrusted labor in mines, rivers and fields, and the sheer brutality of occupation reduced the estimated pre-Hispanic populations across Spanish America to a tenth of their original size through disease, overwork and settler violence (Wolf, 1982: 133). As the settler frontier expanded into the interior of these lands, the relative equilibrium of existing habitats and modes of subsistence were violently disrupted by the voracious appetite of these new colonial economies for precious metals, raw materials, pelts and intensive farming, hunting and grazing. The absorption of native populations into the imperial trading circuits deepened existing conflicts over land and natural resources, and introduced firearms, horses and alcohol as highly destructive (and of course addictive) currencies in the establishment of hierarchies of power and dependence (Wolf, 1982). Beyond the 'neo-Europes' too, imperial wars of conquest and pacification, coupled with the incorporation of colonized peoples and territories into the world market produced death, dispossession and destitution on an often genocidal scale. To take but two examples: an estimated 10 million Congolese perished in King Leopold's Free Congo State from 1885 to1924 through murder, disease and overwork in rubber plantations, while anything between 12.2 to 29.3 million Indians starved to death under the watch of

the British Raj during the last decades of the nineteenth-century, principally as a result of 'free' market dogmatism (Hochschild, 1998; Davis, 2002).

Modern European imperialism, then, adopted many of the characteristics of its ancient predecessors: expansionism, militarism and the dialectic of integration and subordination. But the properly global reach of these new Empires, coupled with their extensive settler colonialism and their emphasis on maritime and commercial sources of power meant that conflict expressed itself in new forms. The next subsection looks in more detail at the ways in which warfare in particular was influenced and sometimes transformed by this new imperialism.

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