

## **IMPERIALISM**

A policy aimed at conquering or controlling foreign people and territory. The essence of an imperial state is that it seeks to derive a benefit of some sort from those states and peoples unable to defend themselves against its superior military and/or economic force. This benefit may take the form of **power**, prestige, strategic advantage, cheap labour, natural resources, or access to new markets. Imperial states have achieved their goals in a number of ways. The most common method is through conquest and occupation, but the transportation of settlers and missionaries as well as market domination have also played a part in maintaining effective control over an empire.

There have been empires throughout history. The Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Romans, and the Mongols all sustained great empires. But it is the period of European expansion from the late fifteenth century onward that is now most often associated with the term. It is customary to divide European imperialism into two phases. Spain, Portugal, Britain, France, and Holland made up the first wave from about 1500, pursuing broadly **mercantilist** economic policies.

The second wave, sometimes referred to as the *new imperialism*, began during the 1870s and finally ended in 1945. It was led by Britain, which by the late 1800s was competing with emerging **great powers** such as Germany and the United States. How would Britain keep up in a rapidly changing world? Many felt that the answer rested in imperialism\ or the practice of gaining colonies for new markets and resources. Soon countries such as France, Japan, and the United States began to establish their own colonies, which became a source of pride as well as economic benefit. Many

Europeans felt that they had some obligation to bring their 'superior' culture to their colonies. Christian missionaries travelled across Africa and Asia to spread their religious beliefs.

One of the first targets for the new imperialism was Africa, whose countries were too weak to stop a European army. The 'scramble for Africa' began when Henry Stanley claimed the Congo River Valley for Belgium. France then claimed Algeria and built the Suez Canal. In response, Britain took over Egypt to control the Canal, which was crucial to its shipping routes to Asia. France then colonised Tunisia and Morocco, whilst the Italians, not to be left out, took Libya. By the early 1900s most of Africa was taken over by European colonists.

Like Africa, South Asia was soon dominated by the new imperialism of the era. Britain considered India, already conquered earlier, as 'the jewel in the crown', supplying the home country with valuable spices and raw materials. In East Asia, China refused access to foreigners, but the British made large profits by smuggling addictive opium into the country. In contrast to China, Japan was forced to accept European and American influence, which it took full advantage of in order to launch its own imperial policies in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. Although Latin and South America were not generally colonised by countries other than Spain, many of their economies were dominated by the United States and Europe.

There are five main competing theories of imperialism:

- A number of *conservative* writers argued that imperialism was necessary to preserve the existing social order in the imperial states, so that their internal social conflicts could be contained and channeled abroad. This was the view of figures such as Cecil Rhodes and Rudyard Kipling.

- For *liberals* such as John Hobson and Norman Angell, the increasing concentration of wealth within imperial states led to under consumption for the masses. Overseas expansion was a way to reduce costs of production and to secure new consumer markets. Imperialism was a policy choice; it was not inevitable. An imperial state could solve the problem of underconsumption by increasing the income levels of the masses through legislation or by transferring income from the rich to the poor.
- For *Marxists*, the liberal explanation is largely correct, but its prescription is not, since the state represents the interests of capital rather than labour. According to Lenin's famous argument, imperialism represents the final stage of capitalism. He argued that the First World War was the culmination of the competition among capitalist states for new markets and investment opportunities.
- *Realists* such as Hans Morgenthau argued that imperialism is primarily a manifestation of the **balance of power**, and that it is part of the process by which states try to achieve a favourable change in the status quo. The main purpose of imperialism is to decrease the political and strategic vulnerability of the state. The trouble with Lenin's argument according to this school of thought is that not all **capitalist** states have been imperialist, and not all imperialist states have been capitalist!
- Finally, there are a range of *social-psychological theories* inspired by the work of Joseph Schumpeter, who argued that imperialism was 'an objectless disposition on the part of the state to unlimited forcible expansion'. Such a disposition was a form of learned behaviour that was institutionalised in the imperial state by a 'warrior class'. Although the latter was created because of a legitimate need for the state to defend itself, the warrior class relied on imperialism to perpetuate its existence. The second wave of imperialist activity declined rapidly after the

First World War. It received renewed impetus with the rise of Nazism in Germany, but by the end of 1945 it was clear that an anti-colonial spirit prevailed among the international community. Both the United States and the Soviet Union were fundamentally opposed to colonialism and staunchly defended the **self-determination** of peoples. Europe could no longer sustain the economic costs of its far-flung empires and the newly formed **United Nations**, in response to growing unrest from **nationalist** movements in the colonies, began to promote **decolonisation**. Consequently, Britain ceded control of India and Pakistan in 1947, Burma in 1948, Ghana and Malaya in 1957, and Zimbabwe in 1980. In all, 49 countries were granted independence by Britain. The Dutch relinquished control of Indonesia in 1949. Portugal, the last European colonial power in Africa, granted independence to its colonies in 1974 and 1975. The French grudgingly left Indo- China in 1954 and Algeria in 1962 after bloody fighting with independence movements in both colonies. Despite international condemnation of European colonialism, vestiges of it remain. In some cases, the colony has decided to retain its status, primarily for economic reasons. Bermuda, for example, is still officially a part of the British Empire. In other cases, the struggle for independence continues to be the defining characteristic of the relationship. The Melanesians, for example, have struggled against French domination since the early 1980s. Moreover, a number of writers have argued that the United States and the Soviet Union were themselves imperialist, even though they opposed colonialism. Accordingly, during the **cold war** the *Pax Britannica* was replaced by the *Pax Americana* and the *Pax Sovietica*. Imperialism has been a permanent feature of world history. Despite the end of colonialism and the cold war, new forms of imperialism will undoubtedly appear. Whether they will be as malevolent as those of past is something that cannot, as yet, be determined.