

## Chapter 6: Imperialism

“Imperialism” in the context of modern history refers to global empire-building by modern states - to distinguish it from the earlier expansion of European states (e.g. the Spanish empire in the Americas), it is sometimes referred to as “neo-imperialism.” Specifically, imperialism refers to the enormous growth of European empires in the nineteenth century, culminating in the period before World War I in which European powers controlled over 80% of the surface of the globe. The aftershocks of this period of imperialism are still felt in the present, with national borders and international conflicts alike tied to patterns put in place by the imperialist powers over a century ago.

Modern imperialism was a product of factors that had no direct parallel in earlier centuries. For a brief period, Europe (joined by the United States at the end of the century) enjoyed a monopoly on industrial production and technology. The scientific advances described in the last chapter lent themselves directly to European power as well, most obviously in that modern medicine enabled European soldiers and administrators to survive in regions like Sub-Saharan Africa that had been deathtraps for them in the past because of the prevalence of tropical diseases. In addition, ideological developments like the emergence of Social Darwinism and the obsession with race inspired Europeans to consider their conquests as morally justified, even necessary. It was, in short, a “perfect storm” of technology and ideology that enabled and justified Europe’s global feeding frenzy.

While Europeans tended to justify their conquests by citing a “civilizing mission” that would bring the guiding lights of Christianity and Western Civilization to supposedly benighted regions, one other factor was at work that provided a much more tangible excuse for conquest: the rivalry between European states. With the Congress System a dead letter in the aftermath of the Crimean War, and with the wars of the Italian and German unifications demonstrating the stakes of intra-European conflict, all of the major European powers jockeyed for position on the world stage during the second half of the century. Perhaps the most iconic example was the personal obsession of the King of Belgium, Leopold II, with the creation of a Belgian colony in Africa, which he thought would elevate Belgium’s status in Europe (and from which he could derive enormous profits). In the end, his personal fiefdom - the Congo Free State - would become the most horrendous demonstration of the mismatch between the high-minded “civilizing mission” and the reality of carnage and exploitation.

## Technology

Technology made the new imperialism possible. It vastly increased the speed of communication, it armed European soldiers with advanced weapons that overwhelmed resistance, and it protected Europeans from tropical diseases. Simply put, technology explains how European dominance grew from about 35% of the globe to over 80% over the course of the nineteenth century. In hindsight, European technological dominance was nothing more or less than a historical accident, the circumstantial development of tools and techniques that originated with the Industrial Revolution. At the time, however, most Europeans and Americans considered their technology as proof of their “racial” and cultural superiority.

For example, for the first time cities in Europe acquired the means to communicate almost instantaneously (via telegraph) with their colonies. Before telegraphs, it could take up to two years for a message and reply to travel between England and India, but after telegraph lines were constructed over the course of the middle decades of the nineteenth century, a message and reply could make the circuit in just two days. This, of course, vastly increased the efficiency of governing in the context of global empires.

Europeans were not just able to communicate with territories thousands of miles away thanks to technology - they could survive there as well. Africa had never been colonized by Europeans before the nineteenth century, except for relatively small territories in along the coasts. The continent was largely impenetrable to Europeans thanks to its geography: there were few harbors for ships, the interior of the continent had no rivers that were navigable by sail, and most importantly, there were numerous lethal diseases (especially a particularly virulent form of malaria) to which Europeans had little resistance. Until the second half of the century, Africa was sometimes referred to as the "white man's graveyard," since Europeans who travelled there to trade or *try* to conquer territory often died within a year.

That started changing even before the development of bacteriology. In 1841, British expeditions discovered that daily doses of quinine, a medicine derived from a South American plant, served as an effective preventative measure against the contraction of malaria. Thus, since malaria had been the most dangerous tropical disease, Europeans were able to survive in the interior of Africa at much higher rates following the quinine breakthrough. Once Pasteur's discoveries in bacteriology did occur, it became viable for large numbers of European soldiers and officials to take up permanent residence in the tropical regions of Africa and Asia.

Advances in medicine were joined by those in transportation. The steamboat, with its power to travel both with and against the flow of rivers, enabled Europeans to push into the interior of Africa (and many parts of Asia as well). Steamboats were soon armed with small cannons, giving rise to the term "gunboat." In turn, when Europeans began steaming into harbors from Hong Kong to the Congo and demanding territory and trading privileges, the term "gunboat diplomacy" was invented, the quintessential example of which was in the unwilling concession to western contact and trade on the part of Japan, considered below.



*A typical small and, in this case, unarmed steamship on the Congo River in Central Africa. "Steamers" as they were called varied greatly in size and armaments.*

In addition, major advances in weapons technology resulted in an overwhelming advantage in the ability of Europeans to inflict violence in the regions they invaded. In the 1860s, the first breech-loading rifles were developed, first seeing widespread use in the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 in which Prussian infantry utterly overwhelmed Austrian soldiers armed with older muskets. Breech-loaders were incredibly accurate and quick to reload compared to earlier muzzle-loading firearms. A European soldier armed with a modern rifle could fire accurately up to almost half a mile away in any weather, while the inhabitants of Africa and Asia were armed either with older firearms or hand weapons. Likewise, the first machine

gun, the Maxim Gun, was invented in the 1880s. For a few decades, Europeans (and Americans) had a monopoly on this technology, and for that relatively brief period the advantage was decisive in numerous conquests. Smug British soldiers invented a saying that summarized that superiority: “whatever happens, we have got, the Maxim Gun, and they have not...”



*A British soldier with a maxim gun in South Africa.*

## The Second Industrial Revolution

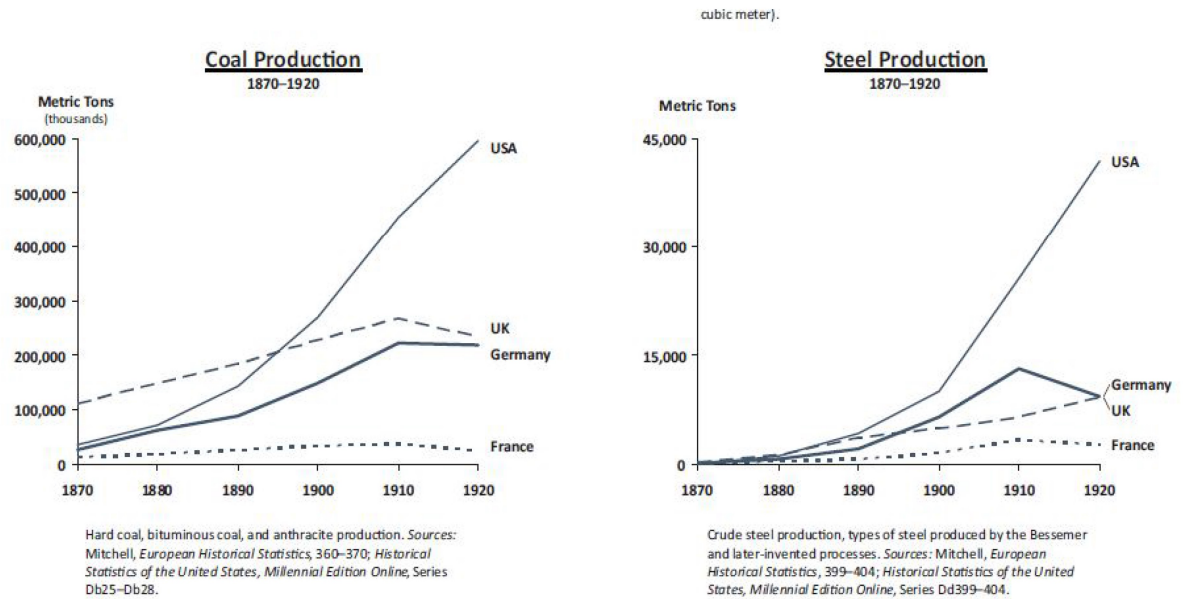
Technology thus enabled imperialism. It also created a *motive* for imperialism, because of a phenomenon referred to by historians as the “Second Industrial Revolution.” The Second Industrial Revolution consisted of the development and spread of a new generation of technological innovation: modern steel, invented in 1856, electrical generators in 1870 (leading to electrical appliances and home wiring by 1900 in wealthy homes), and both bicycles and automobiles by the 1890s. The American inventor Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone in 1876, and thousands of phones, carrying millions of calls annually, were in operation already by the early 1880s. These advances created a huge demand for the raw materials – rubber, mineral ores, cotton – that were components of the new technologies.

In the initial phases of the Industrial Revolution, the raw materials necessary for production had been in Europe itself: coal deposits and iron ore. The other raw material, cotton,

that played a key role in the Industrial Revolution was available via slave labor in the American south and from weaker states like Egypt (which seized virtual independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1833). The raw material of the Second Industrial Revolution, however, was mostly located outside of the older areas under European control, which meant that European business interests pressured their respective governments to seize as much territory overseas as possible. For example, when oil fields were discovered in Persia in 1908, European interest in Middle Eastern imperialism reached a fever pitch, with European powers cultivating contacts among Arab nationalist groups and undermining the waning unity of the Ottoman Empire.

Mines and plantations were crucial to this phase of the imperialism in Africa and Asia, as they had been to the early European exploitation of the Americas. Mining in particular offered the prospect of huge profits. There were Canadian nickel deposits for steel alloys, Chilean nitrates, Australian copper and gold, and Malaysian tin, just to name a few mineral resources coveted by Europeans (of course, in the case of Canada, the people being colonized were Indigenous Canadians, and the colonists were themselves of European descent). Thus, while the motives behind imperialism were often strongly ideological, they were also tied to straightforward economic interests, and many of the strongest proponents of imperialism had ties to industry.

While the United States was not one of the major imperial powers per se (although it did seize control of the Philippines from Spain in 1898 and exercised considerable power in Central America), it played a major role in imperialism nonetheless. The US eclipsed Europe as the major manufacturing power and the major source of exports in a shockingly short period - from about 1870 into the early 1900s - driving Europeans to sometimes-hysterical levels of fear of being rendered economically obsolete. The response of European politicians and businessmen alike was to focus on territorial acquisition overseas to counterbalance the vast natural resources of the US, which had achieved its dominance thanks to the enormity and richness of American territory (seized by force from Native Americans). Thus, even though the US did not join in the Scramble for Africa or assert direct control of East Asian territories, fear of American economic strength was a major factor driving European imperialism forward.



*American resource production and industrial output vastly outpaced European production over time; already by the 1870s astute European observers correctly anticipated the rapid acceleration of American production.*

## The British Empire

The best known phrase associated with the British Empire from the middle of the nineteenth century until the early twentieth was that "the sun never set" over its dominions. That was, quite literally, true. Roughly 25% of the surface of the globe was directly or indirectly controlled by the British in the aftermath of World War I (1918). Enormous bureaucracies of "natives" worked under white British officials everywhere from the South Pacific to North Africa. The ultimate expression of British imperialism was in India, where just under 100,000 British officials governed a population of some 300,000,000 Indians.

Until 1857, India was governed the British East India Company (the EIC), the state-sponsored monopoly established in the seventeenth century to profit from overseas trade and which controlled a monopoly on Indian imports and exports. Through a long, slow creep of territorial expansion and one-sided treaties with Indian princes, the EIC governed almost all of the Indian subcontinent by 1840. India produced huge quantities of precious commodities, including cotton, spices, and narcotics. In fact, the EIC was the single largest drug cartel in world history, with the explicit approval of the British government. Most of those narcotics consisted of opium exported to China.

By the 1830s, 40% of the total value of Indian exports took the form of opium, which led to the outbreak of the first major war between a European power, namely Britain, and the Chinese Empire. In 1840, Chinese officials tried to stop the ongoing shipments of opium from India and open war broke out between the EIC, supported by the British navy, and China. A single British gunboat, the *Nemesis*, arrived after inconclusive fighting had gone on for five months. In short order, the *Nemesis* began an ongoing rout of the Chinese forces. The Chinese navy and imperial fortresses were nearly helpless before gunboats with cannons, and steamships were able to penetrate Chinese rivers and the Chinese Grand Canal, often towing sailing vessels with full cannon batteries behind them.



*A British commemoration of victory in the Opium War. The Nemesis is in the background on the right.*

In the end, the Royal Navy forced the Chinese state to re-open their ports to the Indian opium trade, and the British obtained Hong Kong in the bargain as part of the British Empire itself. In the aftermath of the Opium War, other European states secured the legal right to carry on trade in China, administer their own taxes and laws in designated port cities, and support

Christian missionary work. The authority of the ruling Chinese dynasty, the Qing, was seriously undermined in the process. (A second Opium War occurred in the late 1850s, with the British joined by the French against China - this war, too, resulted in European victory.)

Trouble for the British was brewing in India, however. In 1857, Indian soldiers in the employ of the EIC, known as *sepoys*, were issued new rifles whose bullet cartridges were, according to rumors that circulated among the sepoys, lubricated with both pig fat and cow fat. Since part of loading the gun was biting the cartridge open, this would entail coming into direct contact with the fat, which was totally forbidden in Islam and Hinduism (note that there is no evidence that the cartridges actually *were* greased with the fat of either animal - the rumors were enough). Simultaneously, European Christian missionaries were at work trying to convert both Muslims and Hindus to Christianity, sometimes very aggressively. This culminated in an explosion of anti-Christian and anti-British violence that temporarily plunged India into a civil war. The British responded to the uprising, which they dubbed “The Mutiny” by massacring whole villages, while sepoy rebels targeted any and all British they could find, including the families of British officials. Eventually, troops from Britain and loyal Sepoy forces routed the rebels and restored order.



*A British depiction of the Sepoy Rebellion, attributing the uprising to greed rather than its actual causes. Note also the use of racial caricatures in depicting the sepoys.*



After this Sepoy Rebellion (the term that has long since replaced "The Mutiny" among historians), the East India Company was disbanded by the British parliament and India placed under direct rule from London. India was henceforth referred to as the "British Raj," meaning British Rulership, and Queen Victoria became the Empress of India in addition to Queen of Great Britain. She promised her Indian subjects that anyone could take the civil service examinations that entitled men to positions of authority in the Indian government, and elite Indians quickly enrolled their sons in British boarding schools. The first Indian to pass the exam (in 1863) was Satyendranath Tagore, but white officials consistently refused to take orders from an Indian (even if that Indian happened to be more intelligent and competent than they were). The result was that elite Indians all too often hit a "glass ceiling" in the Raj, able to rise to positions of importance but not real leadership. In turn, resentful elite Indians became the first Indian nationalists, organizing what later became the Indian independence movement.

## Africa

While India was the most important, and lucrative, part of the British Empire, it was the conquest of Africa by the European powers that stands as the highpoint of the new imperialism as a whole. Africa represents about a quarter of the land area of the entire world, and as of the 1880s it had about one-fifth of the world's population. There were over 700 distinct societies and peoples across Africa, but Europeans knew so little about the African interior that maps generally displayed huge blank spots until well into the 1880s. Likewise, as of 1850 Europeans only controlled small territories on the coasts, many of them little more than trading posts. The most substantial European holdings consisted of Algeria, seized by France in the 1830s, and South Africa, split between British control and two territories held by the descendents of the first Dutch settlers, the Boers. The rest of the continent was almost completely free of European dominance (although the Portuguese did maintain sparsely populated colonies in two areas).

That changed in the last few decades of the nineteenth century because of the technological changes discussed above. The results were dramatic: in 1876, roughly 10% of Africa was under European control. By 1900, just over twenty years later, the figure was roughly 90%. All of the factors discussed above, of the search for profits, of raw materials, of the ongoing power struggle between the great powers, and of the "civilizing mission," reached their collective zenith in Africa. The sheer speed of the conquest is summed up in the phrase

used ever since to describe it: “the Scramble for Africa.” Even the word “imperialism” itself went from a neologism to an everyday term over the course of the 1880s.

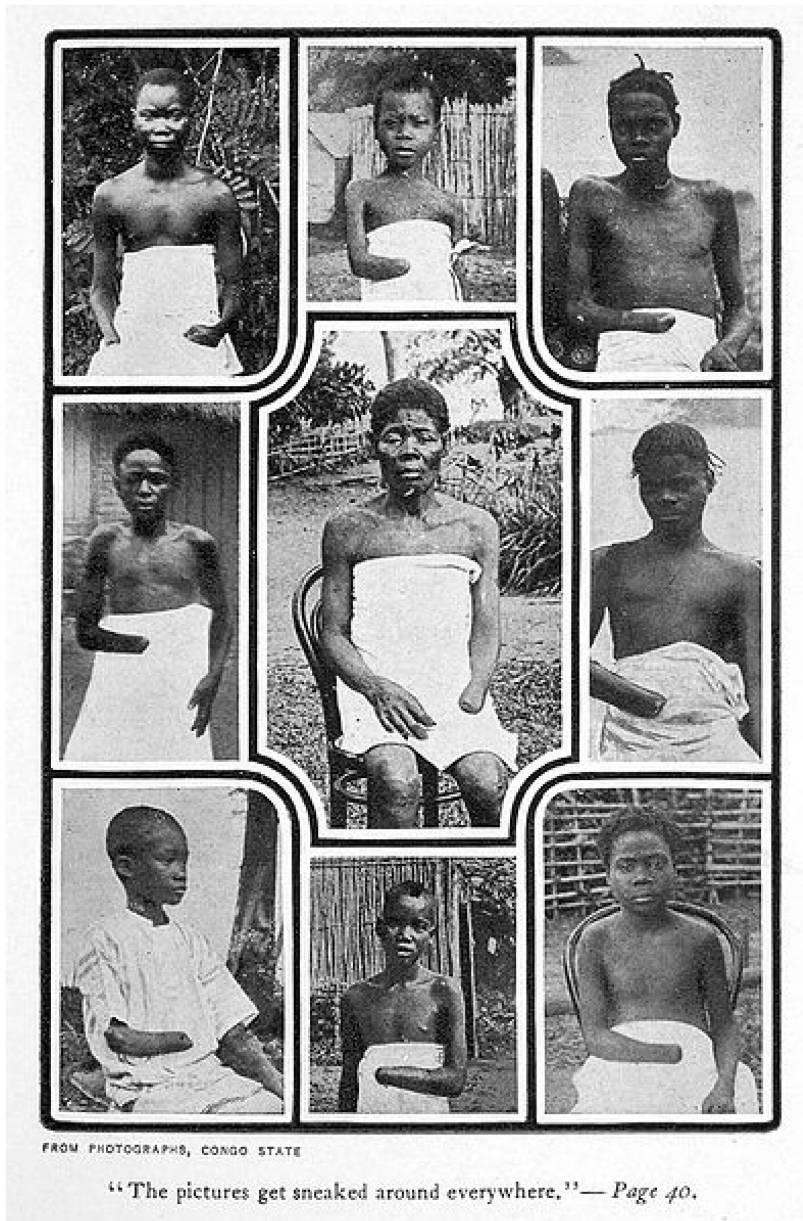
In 1884, Otto Von Bismarck organized the Berlin Conference in order to determine what was to be done with a huge territory in central Africa called the Congo, already falling under the domination of Belgium at the time. At the Congress, the representatives of the European states, joined by the United States and the Ottoman Empire, divided up Africa into spheres of influence and conquest. No Africans were present at the meeting. Instead, the Europeans agreed on trade between their respective territories and stipulated which (European) country was to get which piece of Africa. The impetus behind the seizure of Africa had much more to do with international tension than practical economics – there were certainly profits to be had in Africa, but they were mostly theoretical at this point since no European knew for sure what those resources were or where they were to be found (again, fear of American economic power was a major factor - Europeans thought it necessary to seize more territory, regardless of what was actually *in* that territory). Thus, in a collective land grab, European states emerged from the Conference intent on taking over an entire continent.

The Berlin Conference was the opening salvo of the Scramble for Africa itself, the explosion of European land-grabs in the African continent. In some territories, notably French North Africa and parts of British West Africa, while colonial administrations were both racist and enormously secure in their own cultural dominance, they usually did embark on building at least some modern infrastructure and establishing educational institutions open to the “natives” (although, as in the Raj, Europeans jealously guarded their own authority everywhere). In others, however, colonization was equivalent to genocide.

Among the worst cases was that of Belgium. King Leopold II created a colony in the Congo in 1876 under the guise of exploration and philanthropy, claiming that his purpose was to protect the people of the region from the ravages of the slave trade. His acquisition was larger than England, France, Germany, Spain, and Italy combined; it was eighty times larger than Belgium itself. The Berlin Conference’s official purpose was authorizing Leopold’s already-existing control of the Congo, and at the Conference the European powers declared the territory to be the “Congo Free State,” essentially a royal fiefdom ruled, and owned, by Leopold directly, not by the government of Belgium.

Leopold's real purpose was personal enrichment for himself and a handful of cronies, and his methods of coercing African labor were atrocious: raids, floggings, hostages, destruction of villages and fields, and murder and mutilation. (This is the setting of Joseph Conrad's brilliant and disturbing novel, *Heart of Darkness*.) Belgian agents would enter a village and take women

and children hostage, ordering men to go into the jungle and harvest a certain amount of rubber. If they failed to reach the rubber quota in time, or sometimes even if they did, the agents would hack off the arms of children, rape or murder the women, or sometimes simply murder everyone in the village outright. No attempt was made to develop the country in any way that did not bear directly on the business of extracting ivory and rubber. In a period of 25 years, the population of the region was cut in half. It took until 1908 for public outcry (after decades of dangerous and incredibly brave work by a few journalists who discovered what was happening) to prompt the Belgian Parliament to strip Leopold of the colony – it then took over direct administration.



*A few of the millions of victims of Belgian imperialism in the Congo.*

One comparable example was the treatment of the Herero and Nama peoples of southwest Africa by the German army over the course of 1904 - 1905. When the Herero resisted German takeover, they were systematically rounded up and left in concentration camps to starve, with survivors stalked across the desert by the German army, the Germans poisoning or sealing wells and water holes as they went. When the Nama rose up shortly afterwards, they too were exterminated. In the end, over two-thirds of the Herero and Nama were murdered. This was the first, but not the last, genocide carried out by German soldiers in the twentieth century.

## Effects

Almost without exception, the economics of imperialism can be described as “plunder economies.” This entailed three tendencies. First, colonial regimes expropriated the land from the people who lived there. This was accomplished through force, backed by pseudo-legal means: unless a given person, or group, had a legal title in the western sense to the land they lived on, they were liable to have it seized. Likewise, traditional rights to hunt, gather material, and migrate with herds were lost. Second, colonial regimes expropriated raw materials like rubber, generally shipped back to Europe to be turned into finished products. Third, colonial regimes exploited native labor. This was sometimes in the form of outright slavery like the Congo, the Portuguese African colonies, and forced labor in French and German colonies. In other cases, it consisted of "semi-slavery" as on the island of Java where the Dutch imposed quotas of coffee and spices on villages. In other areas, like most of the territories controlled by Britain, it was in the form of subsistence-level wages paid to workers.

In addition to the forms of labor exploitation, European powers imposed “borders” where none had existed, both splitting up existing kingdoms, tribes, and cultures and lumping different ones together arbitrarily. Sometimes European powers favored certain local groups over others in order to better maintain control, such as the British policy of using the Tutsi tribe (“tribe” in this case being something of a misnomer - “class” is more accurate) to govern what would later become Rwanda over the majority Hutus. Thus, the effects of imperialism lasted long after former colonies achieved their independence in the twentieth century, since almost all of them were left with the borders originally created by the imperialists, often along with starker ethnic divisions than would have existed otherwise.

In a somewhat ironic twist, only certain specific forms and areas of exploitation ever turned a profit for Europeans, especially for European governments. Numerous private merchant companies founded to exploit colonial areas went bankrupt. The entire French colonial edifice never produced significant profits – one French politician quipped that the only French industry to benefit from imperialism was catering for banquets in Paris, since French colonial interests hosted so many conferences. Since governments generally stepped in to declare protectorates and colonies after merchant interests went under, the cost of maintaining empire grew along with the territorial claims themselves. Thus, while economic motives were always present, much of the impetus behind imperialism boiled down to jockeying for position on the world stage between the increasingly hostile great powers of Europe.

## The Counter-Examples – Ethiopia and Japan

Even the (in historical hindsight, quite temporary) European and American monopoly on advanced technology did not always translate into successful conquest, as demonstrated in the cases of both Ethiopia and Japan. As the Scramble for Africa began in earnest in the 1870s, the recently-united nation of Italy sought to shore up its status as a European power by establishing its own colonies. Italian politicians targeted East Africa, specifically Eritrea and Ethiopia. In 1889, the Italians signed a treaty with the Ethiopian emperor, Menelik II, but the treaty contained different wording in Italian and Amharic (the major language of Ethiopia): the Italian version stipulated that Ethiopia would become an Italian colony, while the Amharic version simply opened diplomatic ties with Europe through Italy. Once he learned of the deception, Menelik II repudiated the treaty, simultaneously directing the resources of his government to the acquisition of modern weapons and European mercenary captains willing to train his army.

Open war broke out in the early 1890s between Italy and Ethiopia, culminating in a battle at Adwa in 1896. There, the well-trained and well-equipped Ethiopians decisively defeated the Italian army. The Italians were forced to formally recognize Ethiopian independence, and soon other European powers followed suit (as an aside, it is interesting to note that the Russia was already favorably inclined toward Ethiopia, and a small contingent of Russian volunteers actually fought *against* the Italians at the Battle of Adwa). Thus, a non-European power could and did defeat European invaders thanks to Menelik II's quick thinking. Nowhere else in Africa did a local ruler so successfully organize to repulse the invaders, but if circumstances had been different, they certainly could have done so.

In Asia, something comparable occurred, but at an even larger scale. In 1853, in the quintessential example of “gunboat diplomacy,” an American naval admiral, Matthew Perry, forced Japan to sign a treaty opening it to contact with the west through very thinly-veiled threats. As western powers opened diplomacy and then trade with the Japanese shogunate, a period of chaos gripped Japan as the centuries-old political order fell apart. In 1868, a new government, remembered as the Meiji Restoration, embarked on a course of rapid westernization after dismantling the old feudal privileges of the samurai class. Japanese officials and merchants were sent abroad to learn about foreign technology and practices, and European and American advisers were brought in to guide the construction of factories and train a new, modernized army and navy. The Japanese state was organized along highly authoritarian lines, with the symbolic importance of the emperor maintained, but practical power held by the cabinet and the heads of the military.

Westernization in this case not only meant economic, industrial, and military modernization, it also meant reaping the rewards of that modernization, one of which was empire. Just as European states had industrialized and then turned to foreign conquest, the new leadership of Japan looked to the weaker states of their region as “natural” territories to be incorporated. The Japanese thus undertook a series of invasions, most importantly in Korea and the northern Chinese territory of Manchuria, and began the process of building an empire on par with that of the European great powers.

Japanese expansion, however, threatened Russian interests, ultimately leading to war in 1904. To the shock and horror of the much of the western world, Japan handily defeated Russia by 1905, forcing Russia to recognize Japanese control of Manchuria, along with various disputed islands in the Pacific. Whereas Ethiopia had defended its own territory and sovereignty, Japan was now playing by the same rules and besting European powers at their own game: seizing foreign territory through force of arms.



*Japanese depiction of an assault on Russian forces. Note the European-style uniforms worn by the Japanese soldiers.*

## Conclusion

It is easy to focus on the technologies behind the new imperialism, to marvel at its speed, and to consider the vast breadth of European empires while overlooking what lay behind it all: violence. The cases of the Congo and the genocide of the Herero and Nama are rightly remembered, and studied by historians, as iconic expressions of imperialistic violence, but they were only two of the more extreme and shocking examples of the ubiquitous violence that established and maintained *all* of the imperial conquests of the time. The scale of that violence on a global scale vastly exceeded any of the relatively petty squabbles that had constituted European warfare itself up to that point - the only European war that approaches the level of bloodshed caused by imperialism was probably the 30 Years' War of the seventeenth century, but imperialism's death toll was still far higher. Until 1914, Europeans exported that violence hundreds or thousands of miles away as they occupied whole continents. In 1914, however, it came home to roost in the First World War.

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