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I wish to thank Christopher Wheeler for suggesting this project to me during his time at Blackwell Publishing; he is a most persuasive editor and I regret that we did not have the opportunity to work together on this project beyond the original conception. Once again, as in the case of *A Companion to Europe, 1900–1945*, Tessa Harvey has been responsible for seeing the project through to completion and during this process her patience and intelligence have been invaluable. Angela Cohen has once again assisted with helpful and timely guidance. I sincerely thank all three of them.

My greatest debt is to the contributors who have taken on the daunting task of compressing enormous amounts of literature and complicated historical controversies into such a small space. I trust that readers will find their essays thoughtful and informative. I sincerely thank them for their efforts and for their forbearance in putting up with an editor who remains as demanding and overbearing as ever.
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Introduction
INTRODUCTION

Twentieth-Century International History: The Changing Face of Empire

GORDON MARTEL

The international history of the twentieth century is best understood as one of imperial struggle in which states – usually calling themselves nations – sought to impress their own version of modernity and progress on the world. The Great Powers of the world in 1900 consisted of Britain, France, Russia, and the United States; each believed in a destiny unique to itself, and each believed that this destiny could be realized only through the assertion of power over vast tracts of territory. Germany sought to join this club by transforming itself from a European into a World Power. Japan sought to join by virtue of establishing itself as the premier power in Asia. Within Europe, Austria-Hungary clung desperately to the hope that its unique multicultural system would enable it to continue to act as if one of the great, while Italy envisioned that a revived Roman empire in North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean would give it the right to be treated as one of the great. The great and the would-be great believed that the age of small states had passed, that they were remnants of a medieval – or primeval – past.

War broke out in the summer of 1914 because everyone who mattered believed they faced a simple choice between growth and decay, between expansion and impotence. In other words, between empire and servitude. The way in which that war was fought – won and lost – produced different reactions among victors and vanquished, which in turn caused another, if different, imperial conflict in the Second World War, the outcome of which produced a Cold War world in which the two antagonists proudly proclaimed their opposition to empire, while a Third World emerged to denounce them both as deceivers, hypocrites, and liars. The apparent victory of the world’s only remaining “superpower” when the Cold War ended promised to usher in a New World Order, but instead has produced only a new age of chaos in which the rhetoric of empire has changed while the underlying dynamics of the imperial process has remained the same.

* * *

Every Great Power before 1914 was an empire either in name or in practice. And yet, because commentators have mistakenly confused “empire” with the possession of colonies overseas, “imperialism” as a cause of war has been confused with contests outside Europe for maintaining or adding to these possessions. This attribution clearly fails the test of explaining the events of July, where none of those who mattered had their “imperial gaze” focused overseas. But the empire of the Habsburgs decided to end the imminent threat to its imperial integrity by crushing the Serb/Slav threat; the empire of the Romanovs responded by shielding its imperial satellite from destruction. The Serbs, who had precipitated the crisis by assassinating a future emperor, aimed to create an empire of their own, a “Greater Serbia,” not a
nation but an empire that was to include Croatians, Montenegrins, Bosnians – in fact, any Balkan peoples deemed to be devoid of “national consciousness” (deemed by the Serbs, of course). All states, great and small, chose to play the Great Game of Empire – but in Europe first, in Asia second, then in Africa and Latin America, and, finally, in the Pacific.

Before the First World War no alternative to empire was seriously considered by politicians, diplomatists, or by those who commented on their activities. The tide of history seemed visibly and irreversibly on the side of size. Small states would be reduced to satellites of the big. “The days are for great Empires and not for little States,” declared Britain’s colonial secretary, Joseph Chamberlain; territorial expansion was as “normal, as necessary, as inescapable and unmistakable a sign of vitality in a nation as the corresponding processes in the growing human body,” asserted Herbert Asquith (British prime minister in 1914). Those already big with empire offered explanations of why this was natural and good; those who aspired to possess one explained why it was unnatural and bad that they were without one. Every existing empire and every would-be one defined “nation” in a way that subsumed it, that gave shape and structure to the distinctive future that was its destiny.

The pseudo-science of “geopolitics” was born in the age that gave rise to those other handmaidens of empire: anthropology, sociology, and eugenics. The map of the future sketched by the geopoliticians was stark in its simplicity – the future belonged to Russia and to the United States, each with its “heartland” impervious to attack, each utilizing rails of steel to connect its mineral resources to its cities, its food supply to its teeming masses. Halford Mackinder – the father of this dubious science – sought to overturn his own logic by insisting that Britain, through its empire, could overcome its geographic limitations: ships at sea could replace railways over land; the Canadian prairies, African minerals, and Indian masses could substitute for the “natural” advantages enjoyed by Russians and Americans. But where did this leave the Germans? the French? the Austro-Hungarians? – not to mention the Italians, the Japanese, the Turks, and even the Serbs? In the language of geopolitics, on “the periphery”; in the language of eugenics, among “the decadent.” So the question was, as the German chancellor, Prince Bernhard von Bülow, put it in 1904, whether twentieth-century Germany was to be “the hammer or the anvil of world politics.” The Germans sought options to avoid their otherwise certain fate: Bismarck had been mistaken in his belief that a united Germany could remain a quiet and quiescent conservative force at the center of Europe. One school of thought suggested a diet of ships, coaling stations, and colonies; another a drang nach osten, with a railway running from Berlin to Baghdad. The kaiser refused to choose between these alternatives: the imperial center, extending south and east, would be complemented by the colonial periphery, launching pads from which to threaten or cajole the older empires in Africa, Asia – and even the Americas. In this imperial design, the alliance established with Austria-Hungary in 1879 was vital.

The Habsburgs could continue to enjoy the fruits of empire only as long as they played second fiddle to the Hohenzollerns. Wilhelm II showed what he thought of them when he thanked Franz Josef for acting as his “brilliant second” during the Moroccan crisis – a crisis that had been conjured up to show the French that their empire was mortgaged to the German army. The Habsburgs willingly accepted their role: second fiddle still left them with a vast multinational empire that produced unprecedented prosperity in Vienna and Budapest; without Berlin to support them they would be at the mercy of the discordant voices within the empire. Conversely, the French refused to accept the role assigned to them by the Germans – they had already agreed to play second fiddle to the British when they abandoned their Egyptian ambitions in the entente cordiale of 1904. When their prime minister wavered in the face of German threats, Sir Edward Grey conjured the British Expeditionary Force into existence in order to stiffen their resolve. Thus was the “continental commitment” made to preserve the British Empire.

The First World War did not erupt, volcano-like, as a result of “mounting tensions” bubbling below the surface or because of the “escalating
arms race” or because of the “alliance system” or because of diplomatic miscalculations arising from the secretive “old diplomacy.” War broke out because southeastern Europe was the one spot where the imperial fears of Austria-Hungary and Russia collided, on the one kind of issue that assured each of them of the support they needed from their allies. The apparent parallels with the Moroccan crises of 1905 and 1911, with the Bosnian annexation crisis of 1908, with the tensions arising from the Libyan and Balkan wars of 1912 and 1913 are misleading – the Great Powers never came close to war. The alliances and armaments, diplomacy and investments arose from assumptions concerning empire; they were its instruments, not its source.

The war as a contest for empire also determined the actions of the less-than-great. Italy and Romania, both apparently committed to their allies, Germany and Austria-Hungary, declared their agreements null and void and waited on the sidelines until one side or the other proved willing to meet their expansionist demands. Japan joined the Entente in order to seize German territories in the Far East; Turkey joined the Central Powers in order to realize the dreams of the Young Turks. Denouncing the cosmopolitanism of the sultan’s court, rejecting Islam as the foundation of empire, and inventing a secularized Pan-Turranianism, the “modernizing” regime in Constantinople offered an imperialist ideology that would unify all Turkic-speaking peoples within the mythical entity of “turan.” Turkey went to war to recover those parts of the empire that had recently been lost, to include their turkic “brothers” in Russian Azerbaijan and Persia, and, eventually, to establish an empire that would stretch from the Balkans to China.

The imperial dreams of all those involved have largely been ignored in favor of the standardized version of the war as an Anglo-German confrontation. Commonplace too is the belief that the war was a tragedy because it was really fought for nothing: this was no clash of civilizations, no ideological confrontation between different philosophical systems. It must then have been precipitated and prolonged by wicked men in high places – by militarists, the manufacturers of armaments, fat financiers, and the politicians who convinced them. Almost unthinkable is the reality that most contemporaries saw the war as one on which their destiny depended – and that they were prepared to fight for empire. We can, however, believe this of the Italians; little talk of “making the world safe for democracy” or “abolishing militarism” emanated from Rome. The Italian position was relatively clear and straightforward: they held back in July 1914, and waited for the bids to come in (sealed in imperial envelopes that would include £50 million in cold, hard cash). The Italians have never been forgiven for stating their aims so starkly. Woodrow Wilson thought he could cheat them out of their ill-gotten gains when he denounced “secret agreements, secretly arrived at,” but the Italians, who would suffer over 600,000 dead for the sake of the promises they had received, refused to abandon them – and when they believed themselves cheated at Paris in 1919, they turned to the fascists who proudly proclaimed their revisionist ambitions.

The Japanese were aggrieved as well, in spite of losing only 300 men in the conflict. They joined the Italians, the Germans, the Russians, and the Americans on the long list of those who looked at the new world order and decided it offered them little. The disaffected were aggrieved not for philosophical reasons but for imperial ones: they looked to the swollen empires of the British and the French and concluded that the war had been fought solely for the purpose of enlarging them. And fought successfully, too: empire had proved a source of strength, not weakness. Historians who think the Boer War highlighted the weaknesses of empire think wrong: it demonstrated precisely the opposite. And a decade later the South Africans proved themselves loyal subjects of the Crown – as did the Anzacs and Canadians, Sikhs and Gurkhas, all of whom marched proudly to war at the beat of the imperial drum. While Germany and Austria-Hungary were running out of resources and slowly being starved into submission between 1914 and 1918, empire offered the Allies the bounty of the world in men, metals, and food.

No one believed that empire was dead after the First World War, and few believed that the League of Nations – and its system of “mandates” – was anything more than camouflage to hide the fact
that the Entente now ruled practically all of Africa, the Middle East, and the Pacific. Thus, the war and the peace conference that ended it were object lessons in the meaning of imperialism: the First World War taught everyone that war in the twentieth century was about empire – fought to keep it or to expand it, fought successfully by those who had it, lost by those who did not. Paradoxically, the world after the war was infused with idealism. What mattered in the world that followed the war were the competing ideals of the losers on the one hand and the winners who felt like losers on the other. The only realists left were the British and French – and they did not stand a chance in the ideologically charged world that they had themselves created. Pragmatism inspires no one. Neither the British nor the French could offer much to placate the idealistic demands emanating from within their own empires, where their policies veered from repression to indifference to retreat.

The likelihood of success on the part of the revisionists seemed remote to begin with: Russia was embroiled in civil war, Germany was in disarray, Italy on the verge of revolt, and Japan beset by rioting. Over the course of the next decade, all this would change – each of the revisionists would establish new regimes and lay idealist foundations for new empires. Each rejected its past in favor of a brave new world based on “modernist” philosophies of race and class, using “futurist” techniques of mass communication, propaganda, surveillance, and control to accomplish its radical new agendas. Among the revisionists, imperialism, far from being discredited, was strengthened, reshaped, and reconstituted into radical new designs that were bolder, more aggressive, and perhaps limitless; the response of the older empires of Britain and France lacked self-confidence. While the imperial military machine in India and Iraq, Syria and Algeria, was happy to go on quelling native revolts in the manner of the previous century, the imperial mentalité at home had changed.

The way that the war had been fought tore the heart out of the old imperial system. The empires of the Entente had been purchased at little cost to those “at home” in Europe. The vast expansion that occurred during the new imperialism of the nineteenth century had been accomplished by minuscule military forces usually commanded by down-at-heel aristocrats who failed to fit the modernizing liberal/republican mercantile regimes at home. The war, the propaganda, and the peace profoundly changed perceptions of empire, particularly in Britain, but also in France and the United States. In Britain, the most popular wartime rallying cry was “Save the Empire”; propaganda portrayed the kaiser and his cohorts as conspiring to destroy it. If this were true, the cost of empire proved unimaginably high: almost a million dead and a treasury nearly bankrupt.

The empire itself, which rallied round the Union Jack, began to demand a price as well: having fought for empire, they demanded less imperialism from London, more control for themselves. Granted independent representation in the League of Nations, given mandatory responsibilities in Southwest Africa and the Pacific, the “white dominions” throughout the empire seemed intent on going their own way – with the Statute of Westminster confirming that this indeed was the road to the future. In spite of the surprising loyalty of the Irish Volunteers to the empire and the war effort, demands for Irish independence grew more violent and more insistent from Easter 1916 onwards. In spite of India’s efforts in the war, Gandhi launched his first non-cooperation campaign. The “new empire” established at Versailles required unprecedented policing and administration: from Palestine to Iraq, the Middle East proved a hornet’s nest. By the 1930s, when the settlement of 1919 was under assault, an emotional equation had been made between the tragedy of the trenches and the persistence of empire. A generation had been sacrificed, the “best and the brightest” mowed down for the sake of what? The Irish Free State? Dominion status for India? A settlement for Zionists in Palestine? The only raison d’être for this “Third British Empire” was that it was to benefit “the natives” by setting them on the path to democracy. But what then was to be done when they took the rhetoric to be real and demanded, with increasing shrillness, that the imperialists leave? This was a dilemma not shared by the racial empires of Germany and Japan or the ideological ones of the USSR and the United States.