

The West in Asia
1850-1914

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Preface

WITH the dismantling of the major maritime empires after 1947, it has become fashionable for historians to deal with the history of those empires more and more from the point of view of the experience of the colonial peoples rather than that of their rulers. This attitude has certainly let a breath of fresh air into the closed room of what used to be called 'imperial history', in the writing of which the inhabitants of the colonial territories were seldom considered except as the beneficiaries of Western paternalism or as ungrateful and 'seditious' nationalists. The re-orientation of imperial history has undoubtedly been purposeful and, to a considerable extent, rewarding. Yet, in adding an extra dimension to our view of empire, concentration upon the effects of imperialism has somewhat obscured the causes. The present short introduction to the age of imperialism is, therefore, frankly Europe-centric. Except for the chapter on 'Nationalism and Revolt' it is concerned with the motives, events, and consequences of the West's overseas expansion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from the *West's* point of view. Furthermore, apart from references to the administration of colonial territories designed to demonstrate changing ideas of imperial responsibility and purpose, there is no detailed examination of Western *rule* in Asia. Essentially, this book is a study of aggression, of How the East Was Won and how it was fought over by rival imperialisms, of an episode primarily in European and American history. Of course, this does not mean that the response of Asians to the penetration of the West is neglected—this would not be possible, nor desirable if it were. The function of the historian is not only to demonstrate the nature and purpose of events as they were, or appeared to be, at the time, but also to place them in that wider context which only historical perspective can give.

PREFACE

The phrase 'age of imperialism' is used frequently throughout the following pages. What it means, this work should make clear. *When* it began is another matter. Most historians agree on 1870—a year after the opening of the Suez Canal. It is an arbitrary date but a convenient one. However, I have chosen in the present work to cover the period 1850–1914. The terminal date, that of the start of the First World War, also marks without doubt the end of the age of imperialism, though not of empire. The year 1850 is convenient because it allows the scene to be set with the sort of detail which gives an adequate frame of reference for the events of the succeeding years.

No view of the age of imperialism would be anything but misleading if it was confined merely to the description and explanation of political events. Ideas of empire play an important though curious role in the history of this period. For one thing, the influence of such ideas upon events was extremely small, and I have tried to explain why this was so. But they—and the civilisation from which they emerged—had a profound effect upon Asians, on both colonial subjects and those who, like the Japanese, escaped the imperial grasp. Though colonial nationalism only became a serious challenge to the Western empires after 1919, the seeds were sown in the age of imperialism.

Another important aspect of the period covered by this book is the economics of empire. Critiques of imperialism in the early twentieth century were almost entirely concerned with attacking it as—to use Lenin's words—the natural extension of capitalism. Today, the mono-causal interpretation of imperialism is no longer accepted—and rightly so—except by some Marxist historians. Nevertheless, the imperialists themselves frankly admitted that they were looking for economic profit from overseas expansion, and, generally speaking, nationalists in the colonial territories were anti-capitalist as well as anti-Western, because they believed that economic exploitation was not only the aim of imperialism but an achieved object. A detailed analysis of the exploitation of colonial possessions—if indeed there was such exploitation—is far beyond the scope of this work, but I have tried to answer, at least in general terms, the question 'Was Imperialism Profitable?'

This work is intended as no more than an introduction to the history of the period. It contains the essential facts and the relevant explanation of them. For more detailed works on specific aspects of the age of imperialism, the reader is referred to the notes on books for further reading (page 209).

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ASIA



Since the early sixteenth century, Asia had been in continuous contact with the West; but the rate of conquest was slow. From the mid-nineteenth century, however, the impact of the West became intense and abrasive: in nearly every Asian country the ruling élite was either superseded by an imperial power or was turned into a front for its colonial administration. The scramble for Empire provided the Western powers with a new arena for their traditional rivalries—until the outbreak of the Great War brought the main struggle back to Europe.

Recent studies have concentrated on the effects of imperialism on the subject nations. *The West in Asia* redresses the balance by examining this overseas expansion primarily, though not exclusively, from a European standpoint. It is a study of aggression, of how the East was fought over and exploited by rival imperialisms. The motives for European expansion emerge as complex: whereas the British flag certainly followed trade, France's desire for Empire was more cultural and religious, and the Russian penetration into Asia primarily political and strategic. The imperialists themselves did not consciously separate financial motives from political aims or cultural convictions: economic power symbolised the indisputable superiority of western civilisation. The actual profitability of imperialism for the West—as well as its corresponding cost to the East—is a question which is carefully analysed.

Michael Edwardes is an authority on Asian affairs and the author of such important works as *Asia in the European Age* and *Last Years of British India*. Students in particular will welcome this clearly arranged and lucidly written account of western imperialism in Asia. Seven full-page maps and a critical bibliography complete the book's usefulness.

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