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Imperialism & the roots of the Great War

In history textbooks, the period from 1871 to 1914 is known as the age of imperialism. During this period, the European powers extended their control over the rest of the world to an extent never seen before. In 1870, Dutch control over the Netherlands Indies was effectively limited to Java and a few outposts on the other islands. French rule in Indochina was virtually negligible, while the British were only just beginning to reestablish control of India after the Mutiny of 1857. By 1914, the Europeans ruled over nearly the whole of South and Southeast Asia. Similarly, in 1870, Africa was still largely *terra incognita* for the Europeans. Settlements were limited to South Africa and Algeria, although there were a few scattered European possessions on the coast of West Africa, as well as the Portuguese territories in Mozambique. However, by 1914, European rule had spread to the entire continent, with the exception of Liberia and Ethiopia. At the same time, European influence also grew in the Ottoman Empire, Persia, and China.

It seems extraordinary that a period during which the European powers so obviously conquered the world is also generally considered to have been a period of relative tranquillity, sometimes called the age of armed peace. This can be explained by the fact that most historical texts have been written by Europeans and that Europe experienced a period of prolonged peace between 1871 and 1914.

Still, in the imperial hinterlands, wars were constantly being waged – to colonize new areas and to crush episodic rebellions. The best-known examples of such imperialist conflicts are the Boxer Rebellion in China, the German wars against the Herero people in southwest Africa, the South African War, and Kitchener's conquest of the Egyptian Sudan. There were many other conflicts that received a lot of coverage in the newspapers of the day, but most have long been forgotten. These include the prolonged struggle of the French against the African resistance leader Samori in West Africa, the Maji-Maji wars in East Africa, the French conquest of Madagascar, and the Dutch wars against Aceh

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and Lombok in Indonesia. In most cases, annexation preceded war, because resistance came only later. In these instances, the military operations were not considered acts of war, but rather campaigns against rebels.

As a result, it is not easy to quantify the military activities that took place during this period. Nevertheless, we do have some statistics at our disposal. In their book *The Wages of War, 1816 – 1965*, the political scientists J. David Singer and Melvin Small survey all the wars that occurred during 150 years of modern history.[1] On the basis of certain criteria (most importantly, the number of casualties), they determine that ten larger disputes during the period 1871 – 1914 qualify as colonial wars. These are four British wars (against the Zulu's, against the Mahdists, the Second British-Afghan War, and the Boer War in South Africa), two French wars (in Madagascar and Indochina), one Dutch war (the Aceh War), two wars in the Philippines, and one Italian war (in Ethiopia). They also specify seven smaller wars. Thus, of all the many military operations during this period, only seventeen could be classed as fully fledged wars.

In his book *Colonial Small Wars, 1837 – 1901*, Donald Featherstone describes twenty-two important British wars during the period 1871 – 1900, as well as a multitude of incidents and skirmishes along the northwest frontier of India.[2] The period after 1900, which saw the 'pacification' of Kenya, Nigeria, and the Gold Coast, was not much better. A book on the Netherlands Indies Army during the period 1871 – 1914 provides a colorful list of "troubles," "irregularities," "expeditions," "disturbances," "actions," and "uprisings" in which that army was involved.[3] In all, it lists thirty-two operations, even when the thirty years of war in Aceh are considered as a single military operation. There has been no comparable review of French warfare, but Gabriel Hanotaux and A. Martineau describe about forty colonial operations and campaigns in their 1930 *Histoire des colonies*.

Overall, it can be concluded that during this period three major colonial powers were involved in at least a hundred colonial military operations.

Several case studies on specific regions offer more detailed insight into what actually took place. Helge Kjekshus's study of German warfare in Tanganyika is especially illuminating.[4] The most important war in Tanganyika was the German campaign waged to suppress the Maji-Maji Rebellion. This war, named after the magic water that Africans in the region believed changed bullets into water, raged from 1905 to 1907. Because traditional military methods were not effective in dealing with guerrilla warfare, scorched earth tactics were applied on a large scale. By targeting the civilian population in the agricultural regions, particularly during the sowing season, the Germans broke armed resistance by means of starvation. In the fourteen years running up to this major war there had already been eighty-four military

1 J. David Singer and Melvin Small, *The Wages of War, 1816 – 1965 : A Statistical Handbook* (New York : Wiley, 1972).

2 Donald Featherstone, *Colonial Small Wars, 1837 – 1901* (Newton Abbot : David & Charles, 1973).

3 The book is H. L. Zwitser and C. A. Heshusius, *Het Koninklijk Nederlands-Indische leger, 1830 – 1950* (The Hague : M. Nijhoff, 1977).

4 Helge Kjekshus, *Ecology Control and Economic Development in East African History : The Case of Tanganyika, 1850 – 1950* (London : Heinemann Educational, 1977).

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operations classed as battles according to German law. (The law, passed on June 27, 1871, stipulated that German soldiers involved in an official battle were entitled to a government pension.) In Tanganyika, a 'quiet' year thus entailed about six battles as well as many other violent acts, such as burning huts or stealing livestock.

In his article "The Politics of Conquest," John Lonsdale paints a similar picture of British activities in western Kenya between 1894 and 1914.[5] In this twenty-year period, there were nearly fifty incidents in the country that were so serious that the British thought it necessary to resort to or at least consider using force. In eleven cases the British refrained from action because they lacked the necessary military equipment; in two cases the expedition ended in defeat or retreat; in thirteen cases a display of military power alone was sufficient; and in twenty cases a punitive military expedition battle ensued. This means that on average during this period the British military engaged in one official battle per year.

These data clearly indicate that the conquest and pacification of Africa by Britain and Germany was a continual process. Not a single year passed without a war; in fact, not one month passed without some kind of violent incident or act of repression.

Some historians have tried to calculate the total loss of human life that resulted from violent encounters between Europeans and the colonized peoples. Up to now, no such calculations have been performed specifically on the period between 1870 and 1914. However, according to the economic historian Paul Bairoch, a reasonable estimate is that between 1750 and 1913 the lives of 300,000 European and 100,000 non-European soldiers were lost in the process of conquering 34 million square kilometers of African and Asian territory and of subjecting 534 million people in that conquered territory to European rule. Among their opponents, the number of lives lost is estimated to have been somewhere between 800,000 and 1,000,000. However, the total number of deaths resulting from the wars and subsequent forced migrations and famines was probably more like a staggering 25 million.[6]

Overall, the European armies did not suffer great losses in battle during their campaigns; 80 to 90 percent of deaths were related to disease and exhaustion rather than to actual combat. The British colonial war theorist Colonel C. E. Callwell rightly called the colonial wars "campaigns against nature,"[7] and, in the same vein, the British colonial secretary Joseph Chamberlain quipped, "The mosquitoes saved the West Africans, not the eloquence of the intellectuals."[8]

Asians and Africans were more likely to die in battle than of disease and exhaustion. However, it is difficult to assess the loss of life accurately because only the Europeans kept records, and these typically accounted only for the

5 John Lonsdale, "The Politics of Conquest: The British in Western Kenya, 1894 – 1908," *The Historical Journal* 20 (1977): 841 – 870.

6 Paul Bairoch, *Victoires et déboires: histoire économique et sociale du monde du XVIe siècle à nos jours*, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), vol. 2, 638.

7 C. E. Callwell, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1906), 57.

8 Quoted in George Padmore, *The Gold Coast Revolution* (London: Dobson, 1953), 35.

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deaths of their own troops. In the rare event that they actually quantified enemy deaths, the figures would ignore civilian casualties.

Nevertheless, there are some figures available, for example, for the Maji-Maji wars. The official German report, which was presented to the Reichstag in 1907, states that 75,000 Africans died. Other estimates, however, suggest that 120,000 to 145,000 died; some even estimate 250,000 to 300,000–a huge number for such a small region within Tanganyika. More than 90 percent of some tribes perished. A variation on Tacitus's famous quote – "They left a void and called it peace" – is applicable here.

The figures for the British-Zulu War of 1879 are equally staggering. Half of the 50,000 Zulu warriors who fought were either killed (8,000) or wounded (16,000). On the British side, 1,430 white men and 1,000 'Natal Kaffirs' were killed in this war that lasted only six months.

It was not only Britain and Germany that conducted wars on such a scale. The Aceh War waged by the Dutch in Indonesia was no less devastating. Here also the European casualties were recorded in more detail than those of the opposition forces. During the entire conflict, 2,000 soldiers from the Netherlands Indies Army were killed in action and another 10,000 died from disease. On the Indonesian side, it is estimated that 60,000 to 70,000 Acehnese were killed and 25,000 died from disease and exhaustion in labor camps. In total, about 100,000 men perished and another 500,000 people were wounded in the war. As mentioned previously, the Netherlands Indies Army was also involved in another thirty-one military operations at the time, although these were far less significant.

The huge discrepancy between the number of European and non-European lives lost in battle can be attributed to the superiority of the European firearms. This is apparent from Hilaire Belloc's famous lines:

> Whatever happens, we have got
> The Maxim gun and they have not.

The effectiveness of these weapons was a cause for great pride among European officers, politicians, and reporters. A well-known example of that effectiveness was the Battle of Omdurman, near Khartoum, in the British campaign against the followers of the Sudanese religious leader known as the Mahdi. As the sun rose on September 2, 1898, battle commenced. At the end of the morning, the British commander General Horatio Kitchener put away his binoculars and remarked that "the enemy has been given a good dusting." This was an understatement: by 11:30 a.m., nearly 11,000 Mahdists had been killed and another 16,000 wounded. In contrast, the Anglo-Egyptian army counted 48 dead and 382 wounded. Winston Churchill, who took part in the campaign as a journalist and as a soldier, called the battle "the most signal triumph ever gained by the arms of science over barbarians."[9] The Mahdi's tomb was opened, his nails were taken as souvenirs, and the rest of his body was burned. The Madhi's successor, the Khalifa, escaped and was not seen again until a year later, when he was killed in battle on November 24, 1899.

Considering the overwhelming superiority of European firearms, the most successful way for colonized peoples to fight the Europeans was to refuse to engage in conventional battle. In guerrilla warfare, local skills such as knowledge of the terrain, popular support, and familiarity

9 Both quotes are from H. L. Wesseling, *Divide and Rule: The Partition of Africa, 1880 – 1914* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1996), 253.

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with the local conditions gave the indigenous peoples an advantage. Where this was the case, as in Madagascar, Indochina, and Morocco, the 'pacification process' took much longer and required far more effort from the Europeans.

The process was called pacification because the aim of these military operations was to create a permanent state of peace by gaining absolute control. In this respect, these conflicts differed from classical European warfare. The main characteristic of colonial wars was that they were instigated not just to defeat an enemy, but also to annex the opponent's territory and to subject the population.

As Clausewitz's famous formula has it, "war is the continuation of politics by other means." In other words, political aims determine wars. In the 'ordinary' European wars, the aims were usually limited. The peace agreements often included ceding territory, but usually this would only concern a particular region. In contrast, colonial wars were absolute: The colonial conquerors came to stay. Their aim was the permanent and total subjection of the population.

The nature of the aims driving the colonial wars had consequences for the outcome. Normally a war is said to have been won when the opponent is beaten and accepts the victor's terms. But when is a colonial war won? When is an opponent defeated? How can victory be defined?

There were usually no peace conditions and often it was not even known who the opponent actually was. Colonel Callwell drew attention to this problem in his book *Small Wars*. He claimed that in contrast to 'civilized' wars, in small wars there were no clear targets such as a ruler, a seat of government, a capital city, or any large group of people. Callwell exaggerated somewhat, but in many cases the enemy was indeed difficult to identify.

There also was another problem. The Europeans not only had to defeat the opposition but also had to make sure the local population subsequently accepted them as the rulers. The French generals Joseph Gallieni and Hubert Lyautey developed a general theory of colonial warfare in which they addressed this issue. They made a distinction between slow action, which was aimed at gradually purging the resistance in a particular region while establishing permanent occupation, and quick action, which involved military action against the enemy. Gallieni and Lyautey summarized their strategy as "Fight if necessary, but fight as little as possible." Their own two most famous maxims were "To destroy only to reconstruct" and "With pacification a great wave of civilization spreads out like an oil slick."

Unfortunately, the theory that colonial conquest brought civilization was often not borne out in practice. The famous British colonial commander General Sir Garnet Wolseley maintained that in a war against an "uncivilized nation [a population without a capital city] ... your first objective should be the capture of whatever they prize most." For Callwell too this was the crux of the matter: "If the enemy cannot be touched in his patriotism or his honour, he can be touched through his pocket." This meant that the invaders often resorted to stealing cattle and burning villages and that "the war assume[d] an aspect which may shock the humanitarian."

Sometimes the goal of pacification and civilization turned into an operation of elimination and extermination. The most notorious example of this occurred in 1904 when General Lothar von Trotha issued the so-called *Vernichtungsbefehl* (extermination order) during the Ger-

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man war against the Hereros in southwest Africa. In this notorious proclamation, he declared, "Within the German borders, every Herero, with or without a gun, with or without cattle, shall be shot down. No woman or child shall be admitted: I shall send them back to their people or have them shot. These are my words to the Herero people." It was signed: "The great general of the all-powerful emperor, Von Trotha."[10]

Similarly, when the war in Aceh was going badly for the Dutch, a commentator remarked, "Our policy should no longer be aimed at their assimilation but at their elimination." On July 27, 1900, in his so-called Hun Speech, the German Kaiser said as much to the German soldiers being sent to China to quell the Boxer Rebellion:

> No pardon will be given, and prisoners will not be made. Anyone who falls into your hands falls to your sword! Just as the Huns . . . created for themselves a thousand years ago a name which men still respect, you should give the name of German such cause to be remembered in China for a thousand years that no Chinaman . . . will dare to look a German in the face."[11]

All these statements reflected the prevailing political climate in Europe, which had become harsher under the influence of social Darwinism. Even such a respectable and wise statesman as the British prime minister Lord Salisbury expressed such views: "'Eat and be eaten' is the great law of political as of animated nature. The nations of the earth are divided into the sheep and the wolves."[12] Similar views appear in many writings from the decade before World War I.

During the years of the 'armed peace,' the armies of the Great Powers, apart from Russia, did not engage in major warfare in Europe. This meant that the only way to see action and obtain fighting experience was to join the colonial army. Moreover, because the colonial officer also had to be a good administrator, there were more skills to learn than fighting. *Lettres du Tonkin et de Madagascar*, the collection of letters that Lyautey wrote between 1894 and 1899, gives a lyrical description of the life of the colonial officer. Lyautey describes with obvious pride the results of the "creative feats" of the colonial leaders: land reclamation, paddy fields, sleepy valleys transformed into hives of activity. "What nobler task for a man of action!" he exclaims.

But there is at first glance little that is heroic or soldierly in such peaceful achievements – in, as Lyautey put it, "laborious, thankless, and lowly jobs which are the daily and only productive task of the colonial officer." Anticipating claims that such work diverted the soldier's attention from the real task of defending his native soil, Lyautey wrote that it was nonsense to suggest that officers serving in the colonies were demilitarized when such manly qualities as initiative, responsibility, and militancy were constantly required of them. On the contrary, "it is the grandeur which colonial warfare alone, understood in that sense, bestows upon life."

The texts of Lyautey and Gallieni were published in distinguished journals and read by the intellectual elite. French newspaper readers, however, were more interested in the spectacular aspects of colonial warfare. Never before had the printed press reached an audience as

10 Quoted in H. L. Wesseling, *The European Colonial Empires, 1815 – 1919* (Harlow, Essex: Pearson Education, 2004), 187.

11 Ibid., 128.

12 Ibid., 126.

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large as in those years. In 1910, the Parisian daily newspaper *Le Petit Journal* sold 835,000 copies a day, and *Le Petit Parisien* even more at 1,400,000. These popular newspapers featured colorful, full-page illustrations of the heroic feats of the French colonial armies – for example, the struggle with the river pirates in Indochina, the execution of the rulers of Madagascar, the battle against the female soldiers of the King of Dahomey and the entrance of General Dodds into their capital, and the conquest of Morocco.

Novelists also wrote about military glory and the colonial world – Rudyard Kipling is of course the best-known English apologist and prophet of Western expansion and the British Empire. A less well-known but very successful writer in his day was Ernest Psichari, grandson of the great scholar and writer Ernest Renan, who was a colonial soldier. In his novels, Psichari idolized the colonial army, whose deeds in the tropical forests of Central Africa and the immeasurable plains of the North African desert seemed to embody the great French traditions that were absent in urban France. In his work, he merges heroism, exoticism, and nationalism to produce a lyrical hymn praising the colonial soldiers who do not indulge in the materialistic and decadent lifestyle of metropolitan France but live an austere life of devotion and self-sacrifice in the colonies overseas.

Colonial warfare also influenced military thinking. Although there was peace in Europe during these years, there was an international arms race. The costs were so high that in 1899 the Russian tsar convened an international conference in The Hague to see whether the ongoing increase of armaments could be stopped or at least curtailed. Another conference followed in 1907 – but still the arms race went on. At the same time, disarmament fell into disfavor. The Russian foreign minister Alexandr Izvolsky called disarmament "a craze of Jews, socialists and hysterical women."[13]

Military experts studied the wars that were being waged, especially the Boer War in South Africa (1899 – 1902) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904 – 1905). According to the experts, these wars confirmed the theory that willpower and moral fiber were the most vital qualities in war and that, therefore, an offensive attitude was all-important. Writing in *Small Wars*, Callwell argued that offensive warfare should be directed toward breaking the morale of the opponent, that this should be achieved by a combination of strength and bluff, and that the commanding officers must continually seek and hold the initiative: "the enemy must not only be beaten. He must be beaten thoroughly."

This view, widespread in Europe at the time, gave the strong the confidence that they possessed the moral right to subject the weak, who were by definition inferior. Colonial wars were not only exciting – they were justified. More important, colonial wars were nearly always successful, and the colonial armies were therefore almost always triumphant. Of course, there were some exceptions – such as the British defeat at Isandlwhana and the Italian humiliation at Adowa – but these incidents were rare. As a rule, the colonial armies came, saw, and conquered.

There are striking similarities between the thinking of the colonial war theorists and the thinking of the great military theorists of the pre–World War I period.

13 Quoted in Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Proud Tower: A Portrait of the World Before the War, 1890 – 1914* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967), 324.

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Lyautey's colonial warfare theory that "passive defense can only lead to being overrun" differs little from Ferdinand Foch's claim that "passive defense cannot avert defeat." Similarly, Colonel Callwell's statement that "moral effect ranks almost before material gain" is echoed by Colonel Grandmaison's remark that "moral factors are not the most important; they are the only ones that matter in war."

There was another important and tangible link between the colonial wars and the Great War: Colonel Grandmaison had been Gallieni's adjutant in Tonkin. The British generals Allenby and Wilson had studied under Miller Maguire, the English theorist of guerrilla warfare. Some of the best-known generals from the colonial wars, such as Kitchener, Gallieni, and Lyautey, became ministers of war during World War I. Joffre had been with Gallieni in Madagascar before he became the first colonial officer to be appointed head of the French General Staff. Within the first months of the war, he nominated many colonial officers – Mangin, Franchet d'Esperey, and others – to high positions.

Soon the ideas about moral factors and the offensive spirit were put to the test. World War I was characterized by large-scale offensives accompanied by massive slaughter. This strategy was directly related to the colonial belief that willpower and morale were the decisive factors in war. As Foch said, "Victoire égale volonté." This belief that victory is achieved by breaking the will of the enemy was supported by expert analyses of imperial conflicts and colonial wars.

At the same time, colonial military novels presented a romantic view of military life: Colonial wars took place in an exotic, heroic world. War was difficult and harsh but the rewards were rich. These writings painted an image of war that made it possible, fifty years after the Battle of Solferino, to believe again in the glory of war. In this way, the small wars in the colonies paved the way for the Great War.

The colonial armies were accustomed to continually mounting attacks regardless of the probability of success, in order to sustain an image of European superiority. It is not difficult to see the connection between this approach and the predominant mentality of the World War I generals who valued willpower, moral fiber, and bold attack. As V. G. Kiernan ruefully wrote in *The Lords of Human Kind*, "Their generals in the rear, many of them with minds still farther away in the Asian or African campaigning grounds of their youth, could not be got to see the point."[14]

14 Victor Kiernan, *The Lords of Human Kind* (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1972), 320.

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