What can historians learn from the study of past empires and imperialism?

The study of empire is an essential aspect of world history. As "all human cultures are at least in part the legacy of empires and imperial civilisations"[1], historians have a responsibility to examine the impact of these powerful entities on the past, present and future. This essay will therefore explore the patterns of wealth acquisition and violence emerging from the study of the rise and maintenance of imperial power, before examining the lessons that can be applied by historians to peacekeeping in the modern world. Through a nuanced understanding of past empires, we can gain insight into the complex dynamics of power and gain a word of advice and warning for the future.

Firstly, examining the emergence of past empires reveals to historians how and why they were able to rise and dominate where others had failed, and suggests the importance of a global peacekeeping authority such as the UN and of diplomacy in international relations today. For the study of these empires reveals a common pattern of military expansionism and a resort to conquest, which indicates the necessity of adequate countermeasures in the modern age to prevent future repeats of deadly military campaigns. While certain states may have acquired regional (hegemonic) influence without using hard power, these have tended to turn to violent means to extend and consolidate their power at some point during their rise and transformation into empires. For example, the early Roman Republic initially employed peaceful means of imperialism through establishing *Foederati* - smaller tribes bound by treaties of mutual defence with Rome - but was nevertheless locked in conflict with other regional powers such as the Etruscans, Gauls and Carthaginians throughout its existence[2]. Similarly, the Athenian-led Delian League began as a voluntary alliance of independent city-states formed to counterattack the Achaemenid Empire after the second Persian invasion of the Greek mainland (480-479 BC), yet had effectively become the Athenian Empire by the end of the

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[1] Harari, Yuval N. (2015). "*Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind",* New York: Harper, p.228.
[2] Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. (2022). *"Roman Republic: The Expansion of Rome",* Encyclopaedia Britannica, https://www.britannica.com/place/Roman-Republic.

conflict with Persia (c.460 BC)[3], since the allies were still required to pay tribute[4] despite the ending of war and were forbidden from leaving the League. In order to secure Athenian hegemony in the Aegean, revolts such as those in Naxos (471 BC) and Thasos (465 BC) were met with brutal force, and by time of Pericles' relocating the central treasury from Delos to Athens in 454 BC, Athens had firmly established itself as an empire.

Furthermore, studies of past empires have been crucial in illuminating the motivations for conquest. Historians have demonstrated that in their early stages empires have had to utilise violent and total forms of conquest in order to survive. In its early history, Rome as a city-state had to contend with numerous other tribes for control of the Italian peninsula. It was not merely enough to defeat them in battle, since a tribe recovering from defeat, even if placed into vassalage, was certain to return for revenge – the defeated had to be conquered, their territories and cultures assimilated. The Mongols in the 13th century had to learn the same lesson. For decades the various Mongol tribes conducted endless raids against each other, looting and routing the soldiers rather than capturing them – it was only until Genghis Khan revolutionised raiding by integrating defeated tribal members into his own that Mongolia was able to be unified by 1206[5] and the Mongol tribes transformed into a dominant fighting force capable of conquering Asia. The resort to military expansionism of emerging powers could also be explained by the Thucydides Trap[6], the phenomenon describing the tendency of war when an emerging power threatens to displace an existing regional hegemon. This applicably describes both the Persian invasions of Greece and the Peloponnesian War, as Athens had supported with Eretria the failed Ionian revolt (499-494 BC) against the hegemonic Achaemenid Empire under

[3] Holland, Tom. (2006). *"Persian Fire: The First World Empire and the Battle for the West",* New York: Anchor Books, p.366-367.
[4] Originally a war tax meant to finance the continuation of war with and combined counterattack of Persia, see Thucydides, *"The Peloponnesian War",* Book 1, chapter 96, section 1-2.
[5] Weatherford, Jack. (2004). "*Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World: Tale of Three Rivers (2)"*, New York: Random House/Three Rivers Press, p.44.
[6] Popularised by the American political scientist Graham T. Allison and primarily used to describe a potential conflict between the US and China; Thucydides (c.460 – c.400 BC) was an Athenian historian and general writing of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta (431 – 404 BC), dubbed the father of 'scientific history as opposed to the 'father of history', a title often ascribed to his predecessor Herodotus of Halicarnassus. See Cochrane, Charles N. (1929). *"Thucydides and the Science of History",* Oxford University Press, p.179.

Darius I, thereby prompting Darius and his successors to vow revenge on the Greek city-states[7], and "the growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in [Sparta], (was what) made (the Peloponnesian) war inevitable"[8]. The empires of which we know today were successful not only in defeating these hegemonic powers but also in annexing their land and integrating their peoples. The Persian threat to the Greek mainland was only quelled when Alexander defeated and conquered the Achaemenid Empire by 330 BC, absorbing it into the short-lived Macedonian Empire. Therefore, through the comparative study of imperial powers in their early stages, historians can see a pattern where, in order to survive and consolidate their influence, empires required more systematic modes of conquest by which assimilation took place instead of endless exchanges of unstructured conflict.

Motivations for conquest examined by historians extend beyond the simple need for survival in the early stages of empire to the acquisition of wealth and resources. When Rome had conquered its neighbouring city states, it expanded into Gaul, the Iberian Peninsula and Britain, bringing into the empire more resources such as land for agriculture, minerals, and access to new trade routes, by which came access to new markets for goods and slaves. Indeed, they only withdrew from Scotland since it was deemed more profitable to leave the Caledonians to themselves[9]. Similarly, the British Empire established colonies in India in 1858 to gain access to its abundant resources of cotton, tea and spices, in Africa from 1661 to the 19th century to control trade routes and take part in the Atlantic Slave Trade, and in America in 1607 to exploit natural resources such as timber, fish and tobacco. The Americas had been discovered in the first place because the Bosporus Strait had fallen into Ottoman hands after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, thereby cutting off access by European merchants to the Silk Road and spurring the Age of Discovery[10]. Oftentimes, conquest motivated by

[7] Holland. (2006). *"Persian Fire",* p.47-55 and p.171-178.
[8] Thucydides, *"The Peloponnesian War",* Book 1, chapter 23, section 6.
[9] Moffat, Alistair. (2005). *"Before Scotland: The Story of Scotland Before History",* London: Thames & Hudson, p.245.
[10] The historian Felipe Fernández-Armesto argues in his book "Pathfinders: A Global History of Exploration" that the fall of Constantinople in 1453 was a catalyst for European powers to seek new trade routes to Asia. He states that "the fall of Constantinople had made the search for new routes to Asia more urgent and intensified the competition between European powers to find them" (p.4). Fernández-Armesto also notes that "the Portuguese were motivated to explore Africa's west coast in search of a sea route to India after the fall of Constantinople" (p.11) and suggests that "the fall of Constantinople led the Spanish to fund the voyages of

the acquisition of wealth and resources was not even undertaken for the purpose of further enriching the imperial elite, but out of pure necessity. For example, Japan was driven to invade Manchuria in 1931 for its natural resources and fertile land due to rapidly increasing unemployment and homelessness, spiralling national debt, and growing social unrest at home, having had its economy crippled by the 1929 Great Depression[11].

The study of the motivations for conquest has been accompanied by studies of the mechanisms by which empires were consolidated. The acquisition and integration of territory and populations required an imperial ideology, cultural assimilation, and in some cases, extension of citizenship to the conquered peoples. Since Cyrus the Great, imperial rulers have justified conquest as a means to "spread a superior culture from which the conquered benefit even more than the conquerors"[12], and the most successful empires have been able to convert these conquered subjects to their imperial ideologies (and eventually into indistinguishable citizens) while also incorporating elements of their cultures into the empires'. The Rashidun and Umayyad Caliphates saw their mission as spreading Islam to the heathens, and to this day, the Middle East and North Africa remain predominantly Muslim. Similarly, the Spanish sought to consolidate their control over their South American colonies by converting the native populations to Christianity. The Romans assimilated many elements of the faiths of those they conquered into the polytheistic *Religio Romana*, until the imperial state religion was changed to Christianity in the 3rd century AD. The Roman cultural assimilation process was so successful "that by the time of the fall of Hispania to the Visigoths in the early 5th century AD, the ruling classes of the indigenous peoples were already thoroughly Romanized and spoke Latin as their first language"[13]. But despite these surface-level similarities, the process of religious and cultural

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Christopher Columbus" (p.14) who set out in search of a new route to Asia in 1492. He also points out that the fall of Constantinople led to increased competition between European powers such as the Portuguese and the Spanish, where "Portuguese and Spanish, in particular, were driven to outdo each other in the race to discover new trade routes" (p.20). See Fernández-Armesto, Felipe. (2006). *"Pathfinders: a global history of exploration*", W.W. Norton.

[11] Young, Luise. (1998). *"Japan's Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Maritime Imperialism",* Los Angeles: University of California Press, p.83-93.

[12] Harari. (2015). *"Sapiens",* p.221.

[13] Keppie, Lawrence J. F. (1985). *"The Romanization of Hispania: An Overview",* Journal of Roman Studies, p.74.

assimilation has taken on innumerable forms throughout history and is unique to the case of each empire, demonstrating its enormous complexity. Religious and cultural assimilation are central mechanisms understood by historians as ways of unifying an empire and maintaining its power at its peak, yet they are also ways, as aforementioned, of spreading a 'superior' culture and religion. It is important to note that inequalities established through imperial ideology still harm society today in the forms of racial discrimination and interracial conflict[14].

Historians therefore need to play an active role both in helping to rectify existing damages caused by past empires and in advising on how best to keep modern empires in check. The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War is just one of several examples of 21st century military expansionism failing to be adequately restricted and serves as a reminder that imperialism is not a thing of the past, but rather a persistent phenomenon that can take on "many forms", including "covert" and subtle forms of extending influence and cultural domination[15]. The lessons learnt from the study of the rise of past empires can thus be applied to the modern 'empires' of the US, Russia and China. The historical tendency of dominant powers of defence pacts to try to establish hegemony could certainly describe the Warsaw Pact – the brutal suppression of the 1956 Hungarian Uprising is comparable to Athens' response to the Naxos revolt in 471 BC – and warns of a possible exertion of dominance by the US over NATO. The inclination of empires to resort to conquest, motivated by the acquisition of resources and wealth, could also explain the US' campaigns in the Middle East from the 1990s onwards, and offers an ominous warning that the growing problems of overpopulation and the climate crisis, if unresolved, could precipitate another large-scale global conflict[16]. It is more

[14] Stoler, Ann L., McGranahan, Carole, & Perdue, Peter C. (Eds.). (2007). *"Imperial Formations",* School for Advanced Research Press.
[15] Harvey, David. (2003). *"The New Imperialism",* Oxford University Press, p.3.
[16] Professor Elizabeth D. Ferris argues in her article "Climate Change, Migration, and Conflict" that "Climate change is likely to exacerbate existing conflicts, particularly in regions where resources are scarce. It could also lead to new forms of conflict, such as competition over water resources, land, and food. As climate change causes sea levels to rise, droughts and floods to become more frequent and more severe, and weather patterns to become more extreme and unpredictable, the number of people displaced by these events is likely to grow". She also notes that "overpopulation is also a contributing factor to resource scarcity and increased pressure on resources, which can lead to conflicts". See Ferris, Elizabeth D. (2011). *"Climate Change, Migration, and Conflict",* Journal of International Affairs, 64(2), p.23.

important than ever before that historians continue to study and make sense of the complexities of power and imperialism in order to contribute to the peaceful coexistence of and cooperation between nations.

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