

How have empires throughout history impacted the societies we live in today?

Studying empires is vital for historians to understand how these imperial powers have shaped the world. This is because for the last “two and a half millennia [humans have lived in empires”¹ meaning that throughout history empires have had considerable impacts over those they reigned even after the empire itself collapsed. This essay will explore the impact that empires have had as they started to disintegrate and the surmountable consequences this had on society. It will then survey the question, why have we let links to imperialism continue to impact us today?

The British Empire (1583-1997)² had colonised every single habitable continent at its height. Though it has impacted society in a plethora of manners, this essay will explore the independence movements which gained momentum, to be free from imperialism as well as the divisions that independence created.

Initially we must look to Ireland, the first British colony. The Irish threat to England had especially magnified after the English Reformation because while England had embraced Protestantism, Ireland still remained Catholic. In the wars that soon followed, William III of Orange³ emerged victorious . The Treaty of Limerick (3rd October 1691) marked the end of war and simultaneously the day Ireland became an English colony. From 1691-1728, the British imposed discriminatory Penal Laws through which the rights of

the majority Catholic population diminished. While Catholics lost their rights, the Protestant and Presbyterian populations encouraged to move to Ireland rapidly gained authority. Even though conflicts of class were prevalent between the Ascendancy and Presbyterians, the religious differences between the Catholics and Protestants outweighed these and resulted in centuries long resentment caused by the British Empire.

Another factor contributing to this hatred was the plantations emerging in Ireland. The most famous of these was the Ulster Plantation (1609) in the North of Ireland. Ulster was a turbulent area and so Protestants were encouraged to migrate there so England would gain power through the acquisition of land. This evidently led to hostility between the two groups and was yet another factor of resentment between them 3 centuries later. Although the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921), separated Ireland, the county of Ulster was partitioned, with Catholic majority areas given to the Republic of Ireland and those with Protestant majority forming Northern Ireland. Due to this, in post-1922 Northern Ireland, the resentment between the two unfolded once again in the form of discriminatory opportunities which favoured one religious group.

James Smyth, a Catholic citizen at this time, stated “the biggest employer in Belfast was the shipyard but it had a 95% Protestant workforce.”⁴ This injustice was experienced by

many other Catholics through job availability, the housing and voting system, which had been severely 'gerrymandered'. This led to the outbreak of The Troubles which although were not triggered by religious differences, were rooted in the systemic religious racism which stemmed from the colonisation of Ireland by the British through their harsh laws.

The animosity created by the British can still be seen in present day Belfast where 60 "peace walls"⁵ remain from The Troubles. These walls still act as the sectarian lines that split the different communities as fear of their removal could result in violence. Due to the British Empire, Ireland was partitioned into 2 separate nations as nationalists fought for independence to separate Ireland from the UK. However, this independence movement to gain freedom from imperialism occurred not only in Ireland but also in India.

The call for 'swaraj'⁶ had been heard in the Indian subcontinent since the beginning of the 20th century however, the involvement of India in both world wars without consulting the Indian leaders, allowed the independence movement to gain momentum until "full independence [was granted] in return for Indian co-operation in the war".⁷ When the Labour party came into power in Britain in 1945, Attlee stated that partition would be granted no later than 1948. However, this date was soon "brought forward to August 15th 1947"⁸ due to the religious differences that had bled into the calls for

independence and thus two very separate views of independence emerged. The first was to have a secular India but the latter was to divide the nation into separate countries along theological lines. This second view of independence was the one that eventually conquered and thus independence became synonymous with Partition.

Cyril Radcliffe was commissioned with deciding the boundary lines, “a lawyer who had never been to India [and] never once visited the villages he was dividing”.⁹ His lack of knowledge the geographical position of each theological group, can be seen through the partition lines he drew through the provinces of Punjab and Bengal. Though Punjab had both a Hindu and Muslim population, it also had the largest Sikh population, however, it was split in half and given to each country with no regard for the residents' link to their homeland which transcended even their religious beliefs. The boundary lines were announced on the 17th August 1947, and thus began the largest mass migration in history which resulted in the displacement of 20 million people. The people that had been united under independence, were now divided along religious lines and thus the convoluted British partition of India resulted in the violence, abduction and rape of individuals. The “female body became part of the battlefield”¹⁰ and women were used as propaganda by both nations. Partition led to the first war (1947-1949) between India and Pakistan, at the end of which a sense of ‘the other’ had gripped each nation. This led to the nuclear arms race between the 2 nations as well as the tense relationship

between the two countries, which continues to heighten, due to religious conflict that stemmed from independence. Therefore, although the British did “unite”the Indian subcontinent by “creating a shared national conscious”¹¹, this unity completely devolved after the British Partition of India and instead left an animosity between 2 nations.

However, prior to the ‘British Raj’ India, it had been ruled by the Mughal Empire since 1526. Emperor Babur wanted to transform the Indian terrain with gardens of “running water courses”¹² and this architectural practice was embraced by his successors and ultimately resulted in the most known monument in India, The Taj Mahal. Though the Mahal is hailed as beautiful, the monument’s grandeur is amplified by the 2 walled gardens which follow Babur’s desire : they help to construct the symmetrical phenomenon that we now praise in the monument. This monument has survived both the Mughal and British empires and is now visited by an estimated 10 million annually. Thus the Mughals impacted India predominantly through their architecture, now a source of government revenue. Another building that has remained even after the empire disassembled is the Chhatrapati Shivaji station in Mumbai formerly known as Victoria Station under the British. Harari writes that the government “showed no appetite for razing such a magnificent building, even if it was built by foreign oppressors.”¹³ This theme of revering architecture built by repressive empires is seen through the Colosseum. It is said that the Colosseum was “built by enslaved Jews”¹⁴ after

the Roman Emperor Vespasian, ordered Jerusalem to be sacked. Thus we as historians must ask ourselves why have we still continued to appreciate the monuments, built under the rule of oppressive empires? Is it because we have left them to educate ourselves or has society formed a materialistic connection? Often, society will become so familiarised to these monuments, it will not pause to question how they were built, who built them, why they still survive even after the empires dismantled, but will accept them just as. It is vital that historians should seek to educate others about the origins of imperial influences so not to repeat the mistakes of the past but to instead recognise the roles that empires have played and still continue playing in our lives.

The cyclical structure of history is highlighted through the rise and fall of empires which amalgamate their culture with those they have conquered until a new identity is created and while the empire falls, this culture remains.¹⁵ For example, the Mughal Empire (1526-1858) was descended from the Mongol Empire (1206-1405), however while the Mongols focused on expanding, the Mughals integrated into the Indian subcontinent through their expansion and art and thus the two empires impacted society differently. It may seem that this imperial cyclical structure no longer survives today but we must turn our thoughts to the USA. It gained independence from imperial Britain in 1776 and began developing. The end of the world wars marked the ascendance of the US as a global superpower when it began to fund the once imperial Europe for its

reconstruction, through schemes such as the Marshall Aid. Its power is shown through the US dollar which is not only the currency of trade but also is the world's reserve currency. So we must ask ourselves the questions, have empires still persisted into this era? Do empires still continue to impact society today? Samir Puri argues that the US is an "informal empire"¹⁶ as it has military bases around the globe, possesses nuclear weapons, has satellites and holds economic power. Unlike past empires, the US is able to reach anywhere in the world due to technological advances and thus it could even be perceived as more powerful than any empire. This thus answers the second question as it shows that yes, we have let empires still impact our society today just under the disguise of classifying them as not an empire.

To conclude, empires throughout history have had lasting impacts in the societies we live in today. Therefore, historians must educate society on why we have continued to let these links to empires survive into today. We must highlight the struggles those faced under an imperialist regime and the leaps they took to be free of them. We must show the consequences of empire and the importance of stopping this cyclical history. It is vital that we keep an eye on rising international powers in order to stop the repeat of imperialism that still continues to threaten us today.

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