

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

According to the Oxford dictionary, 'learning' is acquiring knowledge through study, teaching or experience. The Cambridge dictionary also notes the 'process of getting an understanding' of something <sup>1</sup>, an example saying it is "essential...for producing successful outcomes'. Applied to history and the study of past empires: exploring how and why the past was different remains imperative, in an age governed by righteous 'activism', like 'cancel culture'. Whilst there is much to assimilate from studying past empires and imperialism, the main points are: how empires have moulded the contemporary world; why it is that empires are treated differently; how empires have become "unpalatable" <sup>2</sup> and how to ensure that the *idea of* discussion about them does not become the same.

When examining the impact of empires on the world, it is commonplace to simply think of the impact on civilisations at the height of each empire's imperialism. Whilst looking at what can be learned, the modern world must be included, as it would not be the same without empires.

Borders first initiated by the British empire and its colonies still remain stagnant issues. Many border placements still cause tension. India's 1947 division happened as Attlee's newly appointed government in 1945 took a decolonisation stance. Still, however, public opinion was displeased about the distant involvements, owing to the depletion of the government's exchequer from the second world war. India was seen as a "minority interest" in British public life, which led to there being no will for reassertion of the *raj*, even if the material resources were available<sup>3</sup>. This insight into attitudes of the public is significant in the residue of 21st century decolonisation, as it shows an ambivalence, characteristic of a nation whose longstanding empire (>300 years) and lasting repercussions are ignored. Additionally, with this

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<sup>1</sup> "LEARNING | English meaning - Cambridge Dictionary." 11 Jan. 2023, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/learning>. Accessed Jan. 2023.

<sup>2</sup> "Why is it important to study the British Empire?." <https://www.britishempire.me.uk/why-is-it-important-to-study-the-british-empire-.html>. Accessed Jan. 2023.

<sup>3</sup> "Modern India: The Origins of an Asian Democracy by Judith M. Brown." [https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/2370554.Modern\\_India](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/2370554.Modern_India). Accessed Jan. 2023.

example, Sardar Patel (senior leader of the Indian National Congress <sup>4</sup>) had to persuade Nehru and Gandhi through private meetings that the “one division” of India through the Cabinet Mission Plan would override the “many divisions” that could arise without it <sup>5</sup>. The pledge of non-violence from the Congress meant that resisting partition was not possible, as this would lead to the end of Congress and struggle with the Muslim league whilst British Government presided over the country’s police and military<sup>6</sup>. However, the impact of the empire can be seen as historians Talbot and Singh wrote of the “*maiming...brutality during the Partition massacres*”<sup>7</sup>, relating to the Indian Independence Act proposed by Lord Mountbatten, a legacy of colonial rule, on the 3rd of June 1947. Violence being connected to empires and their dismantlement is shown, as - although possibly indirect - (such as here: a result of the publication of the Radcliffe Line between Indian and Pakistani sections of the Punjab province) was initiated by British proposal. Furthermore, struggles surrounding decolonisation are conspicuously linked to the sordid side of imperial rule. An example in modern history surrounding the legacy of imperial rule is also the Suez Canal in 1956, where France and Britain resorted to war to make Arab leader Nasser fall<sup>8</sup>, which- as opposed to Eisenhower’s preferred approach of peaceful containment- the very escalation to war can be interpreted as blatant perfidiousness of a disintegrating British empire. Geographically too, the Suez Canal significantly assisted European projections of colonisation by providing access to Asia and the East-African coastline. Faster sea transport to India, (outlined in its initial 1869 construction plan) also assisted Britain’s strategic interests in the Eastern-Mediterranean <sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> "Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel - Biography, Facts, Life, and Contributions ...."  
<https://www.clearias.com/sardar-vallabhbhai-patel/>. Accessed Jan. 2023.

<sup>5</sup> "The Transfer of Power in India - V. P. MENON - sani panhwar.com."  
<http://www.sanipanhwar.com/The-Transfer-of-Power-in-India.pdf>. Accessed Jan. 2023, p.385.

<sup>6</sup> "Advent of independence, by A.K. Majumdar, with a foreword by K.M. ...."  
[https://books.google.com/books/about/Advent\\_of\\_independence\\_by\\_A\\_K\\_Majumdar\\_w.html?id=9HmynQEACAAJ](https://books.google.com/books/about/Advent_of_independence_by_A_K_Majumdar_w.html?id=9HmynQEACAAJ). Accessed Jan. 2023.

<sup>7</sup> "By Ian Talbot and Gurharpal Singh (Cambridge - JSTOR)." <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26200784>. Accessed Jan. 2023.

<sup>8</sup> "The New Imperialism." <https://eatonak.org/IPE501/downloads/files/New%20Imperialism.pdf>. Accessed Jan. 2023.

<sup>9</sup> "The Cabinet Papers | Britain, Egypt and the Suez Canal."  
<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/cabinetpapers/themes/egypt-suez.htm>. Accessed Jan. 2023.

Elsewhere, it is regarded that the Ottomans used provincial boundaries to maintain peace, and endeavoured to limit conflict with borders. After the Ottomans' collapse post World War I, British and French imperialistic boundaries were imposed, seemingly unacknowledging of the Ottoman model, and fused hostile groups<sup>10</sup>. The French took Syria, and Lebanon to their allies (the Maronite Christians) and the British shifted Hashemites from Hejaz (western region of Arabian Peninsula) to rule Iraq and Transjordan (now Jordan). Exemplified here is the Eurocentric imperialist approach whereby entities that suited and aided British and French interests and politics were created. Whilst it could be argued that certain colonial boundaries are obsolete in the current political climate, modern tensions in areas previously listed highlight the continued contention. The Persian Gulf (exacerbated by the European concept of the modern state and boundaries in defining ownership of oil deposits)<sup>11</sup> or areas such as the Chagos Islands, whereby the UK administers the archipelago as part of the British Indian Ocean Territory (formed, 1965) remain contemporary examples.<sup>12</sup>

As well as this, British parliamentary and judicial institutions still exist in many parts of the world. Amongst the 13 colonies, founded 1607, as part of English colonial governing of the American coastline, each colony had a charter between it and the king of England or Parliament and charters of royal colonies made for direct rule by the king. Legislatures controlled by the salary of the governors used influence to keep governors (appointed by the king) in line with colonial strategies.<sup>13</sup> This remains today, with each colony being run by a government headed by a governor and legislature, modern congress [similar to British parliament] and the American President [similar powers to the king].<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> "Ottoman Empire Borders Versus Modern-Day Borders." 3 May. 2016, <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/ottoman-empire-borders-versus-modern-day-borders/>. Accessed Jan. 2023.

<sup>11</sup> "Territorial disputes in the Persian Gulf - Wikipedia." [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Territorial\\_disputes\\_in\\_the\\_Persian\\_Gulf](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Territorial_disputes_in_the_Persian_Gulf). Accessed Jan. 2023.

<sup>12</sup> "British Indian Ocean Territory - Wikipedia." [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British\\_Indian\\_Ocean\\_Territory](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Indian_Ocean_Territory). Accessed Jan. 2023.

<sup>13</sup> "2a. The Colonial Experience - USHistory.org." <https://www.ushistory.org/gov/2a.asp>. Accessed Jan. 2023.

<sup>14</sup> "Chapter 3: Government in England and the Colonies - Digital History." [https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/teachers/lesson\\_plans/pdfs/unit1\\_3.pdf](https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/teachers/lesson_plans/pdfs/unit1_3.pdf). Accessed Jan. 2023.

Legislative independence of Dominions (self-governing colonies) from Britain and status as nation states came about in 1931 through the Statute of Westminster, which renounced Westminster Parliament's right to legislate for Dominions and conceded British authority over Dominions' governments. However, the Act initially applied to the six Dominions: Canada, Newfoundland, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa and the Irish Free State. All of these except the Irish Free State (Republic of Ireland since 1949) are still linked to the British crown through the Commonwealth of Nations (seen as originating from the very Statute of Westminster), showing how contemporary legacies of colonial rule remain present.<sup>15</sup> As an alternative example, the Ottoman legacy can be seen in Turkish politics. The decline of the Ottoman empire, whereby the concern for national unity and law and order prevails shows this. Also, the constant emphasis on the need for being "one and together" (*birlik ve beraberlik*), and the forcing of unanimity has resulted in a barrier to the emergence of adversarial politics in Republican Turkey.<sup>16</sup> Lastly, the so-called Turkish Revolution, targeted values of the *ancien regime* (especially Ottoman Islam, seen as a hindrance to progress) and wished to transform values without changing society significantly.<sup>17</sup> This accompanied the Republican wish for the elitism and utopianism of the Ottoman Empire to be reflected in the modernisation project, where Turkey would "catch up to the West" by raising new elites by Republican values.<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, an exploration of why it is that empires are treated differently; or alternatively: those questions such as why some empires are deemed more controversial is poignant.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> "The settler colonies: Legislative independence - UK Parliament." <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/legislativescrutiny/parliament-and-empire/parliament-and-the-american-colonies-before-1765/the-settler-colonies-legislative-independence/>. Accessed Jan. 2023.

<sup>16</sup> "The Ottoman Legacy and Turkish Politics - JSTOR." <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24357689>. Accessed Jan. 2023.

<sup>17</sup> "Chapter 15 Transitions to Democracy: Turkey's Experience in ...." <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9783110846881.239/pdf>. Accessed Jan. 2023.

<sup>18</sup> "The Turkish Political Elite. By FREDERICK W. FREY. (Cambridge, ch. 3). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2127565>. Accessed Jan. 2023.

<sup>19</sup> "Why is it important to study the British Empire?." <https://www.britishempire.me.uk/why-is-it-important-to-study-the-british-empire-.html>. Accessed Jan. 2023.

To begin, glorification of empires is continually thought of as controversial, owing to empires' often negative legacies, yet some (e.g. Roman) seem to be revered. Many attribute this difference in attitude, e.g. towards the Roman and British empires, as being due to the ancient versus recent history of Roman and British. Roman warriors are accepted as living in a society with completely different norms and values, and construction. The glorification of the Roman empire is cited as being partly due to Virgil's epic *The Aeneid*, written at the request of Augustus to promote propaganda.<sup>20</sup> Virgil's portrayal of Jupiter, King of Gods proclaiming to the character Aeneas that "*no limits, space, or time...:power, empire without end*"<sup>21</sup> were granted. Virgil uses Jupiter's divine authority to justify the Roman Empire. The fact that traces of the Roman Empire are still felt in the modern day world, also contributes to perceived justification of glorification. Founded in 625 BC and falling in AD 476, the Roman Empire's advances in technology and science, like aqueducts, roads and tools in agriculture (crop rotation, pruning and manuring are still used today!) are astounding. Additionally, literature (with poets like Virgil and Ovid) and law (with processes such as preliminary hearings, which still exist) show the advancement of this ancient empire.<sup>22</sup>

Survivors of injustice and brutality from the British empire remain, as decolonisation was between 1947-1997. The continual presence of violence is documented throughout the empire. In 1902, a War Office report documented between 1857-1899, 15 wars in the British Empire, involving more than 3000 British troops. Threats of violence were constant in colonial society as the British tried to transform native societies.<sup>23</sup> Violence is shown as British officials created a vast number of detention camps housing as many as 1.5 million

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<sup>20</sup> "Virgil's Glorification of the Roman Empire." 12 Oct. 2016, <https://neilshah456.wordpress.com/2016/10/12/virgils-glorification-of-the-roman-empire/>. Accessed Jan. 2023.

<sup>21</sup> "The Aeneid by Virgil - The Internet Classics Archive." <http://classics.mit.edu/Virgil/aeneid.html>. Accessed Jan. 2023.

<sup>22</sup> "Traces of Ancient Rome in the Modern World." 12 Oct. 2022, <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/article/traces-ancient-rome-modern-world/>. Accessed Jan. 2023.

<sup>23</sup> "Britain's Empire: Resistance, Repression and Revolt Hardcover." <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Britains-Empire-Resistance-Repression-Revolt/dp/1844677389>. Accessed Jan. 2023.

members of Kenya's Kikuyu community in the last years of colonial rule in Kenya.<sup>24</sup> Such horror is in living memory, not able to be attributed to seismic moral shifts from differing societies (as with Roman times). Economic impacts are exigent too, estimates are that the British syphoned off ~ \$45 trillion from India and even today, reports show the 101 companies listed on the London Stock exchange (mostly British) have mining operations in 37 sub-Saharan African countries, and collectively control over \$1 trillion worth of Africa's most valuable resources. The British government ensuring British access to African raw materials is indisputably redolent of imperialism.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, discussion must not be overridden by fear. Confronting our past aids post-colonising countries to understand their actions and comprehend the persistent reality of empires. "*The history of empires is the history of human misery*" is the conclusion made by Piers Brendon, questioning the moral audit of the British empire.<sup>26</sup> An acknowledgement of the *grave moral deficit* colonising countries' legacies is evident, yet history's purpose would be defeated if colonial sources were omitted. An edited version of the past is no version at all. Students are bound to encounter racist or problematic language in sources, as this was integral to colonisation; racial hierarchy, a pillar of the British empire.<sup>27</sup> These sources cannot be dismissed as outdated, however, as racism itself is unfortunately not exclusive to the past.

Examining atrocities of the past, not apologism, contributes to important learning.

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<sup>24</sup> "'Legacy of Violence' documents the dark side of the British Empire." 11 Jul. 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/07/11/1110853580/legacy-of-violence-documents-the-dark-side-of-the-british-empire>. Accessed Jan. 2023.

<sup>25</sup> "Britain's scramble for Africa's energy and mineral resources." 1 Jul. 2016, <https://waronwant.org/resources/new-colonialism-britains-scramble-africas-energy-and-mineral-resources>. Accessed Jan. 2023.

<sup>26</sup> "A Moral Audit of the British Empire | History Today." 10 Oct. 2007, <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/moral-audit-british-empire>. Accessed Jan. 2023.

<sup>27</sup> "Studying the empire: can history students avoid pitfalls of the past?" 14 Oct. 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/oct/14/studying-the-empire-can-history-students-avoid-pitfalls-of-the-past>. Accessed Jan. 2023.

Eliza Mills