

Striving of the Powers

1st chapter: Imperialism – what does that mean?

The era between about 1880 and 1914, the year of the outbreak of the First World War, is called Imperialism.

The word imperialism goes back to the Latin term “imperium” which stands for rule or power.

Imperialism expresses the relationship of a great power – you could also say an empire – to other countries or regions over which such powers have control and which are called colonies.

The ruling power aims at expanding not only its political sphere of influence, but also its military and economic interests for example, in order to be able to acquire raw materials or to enter and ensure new markets.

These interests have almost always been achieved by the use of force. But imperialism is not an invention of modern times.

In the Ancient World, the Greek and Roman Empires used similar means to extend their sphere of control and influence.

They conducted many military expeditions to extend their sphere of control in all directions of the world, and established centres of culture, trade and economy in foreign countries.

The main foundations for the era called Imperialism were laid in the age of discovery in the 15th and 16th century. In these centuries many Spanish and Portuguese sailors like Christopher Columbus or Pizarro landed in South America.

They captured valuables such as gold, silver or spices.

The people who lived there were partly sold as slaves or even killed.

The conquerors and colonial masters exported their concepts of civilization to the foreign countries along with the Christian religion.

In the era of Imperialism, those foreign civilizations were regarded as underdeveloped, savage and inferior.

Because of the technical superiority of Europe, the European colonial rulers considered themselves to be much more developed and civilized, and head and shoulders above the foreigners.

This view and sense of mission can also be discovered in numerous pictures dating from this time.

This holds true although many of these foreign people had a much older civilization and a more important history than their European rulers.

Here we see two Chinese philosophers, Konfuzius who holds a picture of the god Buddha in his hands, and Laozi. They both lived in the 6th century before Christ.

Claiming and insisting on an alleged natural superiority, the colonial masters justified their way of treating the colonized people like children, oppressing and exploiting them.

Besides, the pursuit of colonies served to distract the people at home from domestic issues, political problems or social tensions.

The distinct nationalism and a strong competitive mentality among the European nations can be considered a further reason.

This resulted in an energetic race for colonies.

2nd chapter: The race for colonies

The merchants were the first to call on their governments to occupy or conquer colonies. They wanted to obtain new markets to sell their goods, and to procure raw materials or cheap workers.

Bit by bit, all social groups and political camps accepted this pursuit of colonies because a sense of a new era was about to dawn.

The few people who nevertheless opposed the colonial policy, as for example the Social Democrats, were clearly in the minority.

In 1881, Tunisia became a French colony.

Until then, European colonialism had on the whole been limited to the occupation of some seaports in Africa and Asia by the old colonial powers Spain, Portugal, France, Great Britain, and the Netherlands.

On July 11, 1882, the English navy conquered the Egyptian seaport Alexandria, and as a result, Great Britain gained power over the whole of Egypt.

Since 1875, Great Britain has held the controlling interest on the Suez Canal which had opened in 1869. The Suez Canal was very important as a trade route and a military base.

The Suez Canal connects the Mediterranean to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, and opens the sea route to Asia and therefore to additional colonies.

Even the European nations which until then had no colonies, such as Denmark, Italy, Belgium or the German Reich, now joined in the race to obtain colonies of their own.

In 1884, the German Kaiser Wilhelm I. established the first German colonies in Africa with German South West Africa, Togo and Cameroon.

In 1885, German East Africa was added.

The reasons to establish as many new colonies as possible gradually changed. In the past, the focus had been on economic aspects, but then it became a matter of prestige to rule over new colonies.

Even tiny islands in the far-off Pacific Ocean were out of a sudden interest, and so came under the control of a European country.

Austria-Hungary was the only European great power during that time not to take part in this race as an independent colonial power.

3rd chapter: The distribution of the world

Around the turn of the century, Africa and Asia had been largely divided among the European colonial powers.

As for Africa, the British Empire was allocated Egypt, Sudan, British Somaliland, Uganda and British East Africa before the First World War. British colonies in the West of Africa were Gambia, Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast, and Nigeria.

In the South of Africa, Great Britain additionally ruled over Nyasaland, Rhodesia, Bechuanaland and South Africa.

France owned Madagascar and the vast region of the so-called French West Africa.

The German Reich ruled over German South West Africa, Togo, Cameroon, and German East Africa.

Angola and today's Mozambique were Portuguese colonies.

Italy ruled over Libya, Eritrea, and Italian Somaliland, and the Kongo was called >Belgian<.

Small groups of islands in the Pacific Ocean went by nice-sounding names as Marshall Islands or Bismarck Archipelago.

Ships of the colonial masters from the Netherlands, the German Reich, France and Great Britain met at the other end of the world.

The biggest colonial power was Great Britain. Apart from colonies in South America, Africa and the Pacific Ocean, the British Empire also possessed Canada, India and Australia.

Furthermore, Great Britain also laid claim to China which resulted in numerous disputes and conflicts.

4th chapter: Revolts and wars

The large Chinese Empire was strongly humiliated by the imperialist powers.

In the years 1894 and 1895, Japan successfully made war on China and henceforth ruled over a part of the Chinese Empire.

Already since the so-called Opium War between Great Britain and the Chinese seaports in the year 1839, the Europeans established several bases and commercial ports.

In terms of military matters, China was no match for the colonial powers, and that is why the Chinese emperor was at the mercy of the imperialist countries and interests.

Meantime, the peasants in the rural districts became poorer and poorer and started a revolt, the so-called Boxer Rebellion.

These rebels were named Boxers by the Europeans because they used the raised fist as a symbol of their fight.

The Boxer Movement grew, and the rebels finally decided to march towards Peking.

There they killed many missionaries and ambassadors of the colonial invaders.

The rebels made a statement on their cause in the English newspaper "Daily Express":

"The Western Civilization as we see it [...] has only existed since yesterday. The Chinese Civilization, however, has been thousands of years old. [...] And now you arrive from your Western World to teach us what you call your new ideas. You bring us your religion – a religion about a child, nineteen hundred years old; you want to build factories and so replace our fine arts, our craft and trade [...].

We raise an objection to all this. We want to be left alone, we want to be free to enjoy our beautiful country and the fruits of our ancient experience. If we ask you to leave you won't listen, and you even threaten us in case we don't give you our seaports, our land, our towns. Therefore we members of the association of the so-called Boxers came to realize, after due consideration, that the only possibility to get rid of you is to kill you."

One of the people who were killed then was a high-ranking German diplomat.

This resulted in a military suppression of the Boxer Rebellion.

Under the leadership of the German Reich, an alliance with soldiers of the German ally Austria-Hungary and the colonial powers Great Britain,

Italy, Russia, France, Japan, and the United States of America violently put down the revolt.

In a peace agreement, China was forced to pay a huge amount of money to the colonial powers as a compensation, and to open its market to the triumphant colonial powers.

Furthermore, the Chinese imperial family was additionally humiliated: So-called "expiation princes" had to travel to the colonial empires and apologize to the individual European governments.

But in the years to come, the colonial rulers were up against an increasing number of uprisings all over the world.

The rebels were often brutally butchered with great military effort.

Also in German West Africa, today's Namibia, the people rebelled against the German colonial power which resulted in the genocide of the native Hereros in the year 1904.

The rural families were evicted from their farms and driven away into the hostile desert where tens of thousands of them died a miserable death.

5th chapter: The end of diplomacy

The colonial powers were in need of bigger and bigger navies to spread their military force all over the world.

But that was only one reason for the beginning of the arms race.

Great Britain was without doubt the dominating maritime power of that period.

In 1889, the German Emperor Wilhelm II. tried to challenge Britain's position by issuing a naval law ordering the German Reich to build a great number of new battleships.

But Great Britain was not the only country feeling threatened by the construction of such a large German navy.

In France and Russia, the increasing German military presence aroused suspicion, as well.

So, even their strained relations with Great Britain concerning the colonies became insignificant.

So the military axis between Great Britain and France came as no surprise.

And thus the so-called >Entente Cordiale< came into being; which, translated from the French, means as much as >Cordial Agreement<.

In the year 1907, Russia joined in being the third important ally in the then called Triple-Entente.

For its part, the German Reich succeeded in forming an alliance with Austria-Hungary and Italy in 1882, the so-called Triple Alliance, which Italy, however, violated in 1902 by entering into a secret alliance with France.

In the year 1911, Europe was for a short time on the verge of war because France and Great Britain felt threatened by the stationing of the German war vessel SMS Panther in front of the seaport Agadir during what was called the Morocco Crisis.

In 1912, a last diplomatic attempt by Great Britain failed, so nothing could stop the arms race with the German Reich.

Diplomacy also failed after the Austro-Hungarian successor to the throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, was assassinated in the Bosnian city Sarajewo on June, 28th 1914, and, as a result, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia.

The diplomats were unable to prevent the resulting chain reaction of the alliances.

Russia mobilized its forces, Germany declared war on Russia and France, to which Great Britain reacted by declaring war on Germany.

So in the summer of 1914, the First World War began and the era of Imperialism came to an end.

The history of the colonies, however, was not finished yet and would not be settled for a long time.

Only after the end of the Second World War in 1945, Decolonization and the independence of the former colonies accelerated.

In the year 1997, Great Britain returned the administrative rights of its crown colony Hongkong to China but there is still one last crown colony left, situated between South Spain and Morocco in Africa, and that is Gibraltar.

6th chapter: Summary

Imperialism comes from the Latin word imperium and means as much as

- Rule or
- Power

The era which is called Imperialism are the years between

- About 1880 and 1914, when the First World War began

Besides reputation, colonies were important for

- offering access to new markets
- and to raw materials, as well as
- cheap workers or slaves

Entente stands for the military alliance between

- Great Britain and France,
- Later also called Triple-Entente when the third ally Russia joined.

The so-called Triple Alliance stands for the military alliance between

- The German Reich
- Austria-Hungary and
- Italy