

## **Q: what can historians learn from past empires and imperialism?**

**By Alfie Holdstck**

Famous philosopher George Santayana once said that “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”.<sup>1</sup> In this case it’s clear that the biggest lesson that historians can learn is that there is, and always has been only one real way empires can survive – integration. Core to an empire is a cohesive national community. A nation with a single religion or group will always be easier to govern and unless this criteria is met, humanity is “condemned to repeat the past” which will inevitably lead to its demise. The method of control for empires has always been debated, with methods varying from repression and colonisation all the way to collaboration and integration. Time and Time again, history will continue to prove that the imperial rule of an empire must take either of two routes: decline and cease to exist or ultimately the long term solution-the formation of a modern day state, that may only come around through integration.

When considering empire and imperialism it’s key to understand what it is that people see it as. Imperialism and empire is when a sovereign state holds power over another state or colony through military prevalence or through political control. Best described as a circle and its periphery; the inner circle maintains its power and influence as it expands the periphery to envelop other communities. Once there, they must maintain and sustain said control and if not it leads to failure and collapse. When considering this, scholars tend to think about some of the most brutal forces throughout history. For example the Spartan empire that defeated Athens in 431BC attempted to maintain and expand its periphery and empire through the use of repression.<sup>2</sup> However when dispossession occurs it always attracts criticism and

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<sup>1</sup> Shmoop Editorial Team (2008) Quotes - those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it., Shmoop. Shmoop University. Available at: <https://www.shmoop.com/quotes/doomed-to-repeat-it.html> (Accessed: January 7, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Peloponnesian War (2022) Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Peloponnesian-War> (Accessed: January 7, 2023).

opposition. The idea that one civilisation can be contained by another has always been sustained through history, but it's arguably much harder to do in practise than it is in question. By 371BC Sparta was rendered all but useless due to the Battle of Luctra which was a result of poor leadership and rule by the Spartans.<sup>3</sup> Their empire was solely inherited by blood and the threat of new cohesion brought fear which eventually showed it was destined to crumble. This was significant, as it was one of the earliest evidences of a failed repressive empire. Yet there are parallels that can be drawn to more modern empires, the uprising of Nazi Germany had common ground with the Spartan empire. The Germanic empire that was founded upon discrimination and military oppression also used policies such as Nuremberg laws- more specifically "The Reich citizenship laws" to attempt to restrict the rights of minorities.<sup>4</sup> Creations of concentration camps such as Dachau in 1933 showed early signs of the violent regime that was destined to unfold.<sup>5</sup> It's often argued that the Nazis regime was fuelled by hatred rather than fear. However, under a deeper analysis, it's evident to say that the policies that were implemented, prevented the Jews and other ethnic minorities from becoming equal to the Nazis and it becomes clearer that there was a strong fear at the forefront, a worry that they could become so even to everyone else and oppose the Aryan race that the Nazis wanted to establish. Yet, the mistakes of the previous Spartans lie interwoven through the Nazis party. Their greed in self expansion of the periphery and fear of minority races fuelled an imperial spirit that seemed to surround the nation. This critical failure by the Germans drew the attention of the triple entente who then fought the world war to restore balance. It thus reinforces the idea that in attempting to grasp complete

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<sup>3</sup> Sparta (2022) Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Sparta> (Accessed: January 7, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> The Nuremberg laws (no date) The Reich Citizenship Law. Available at: <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-reich-citizenship-law> (Accessed: January 7, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> Establishment of Dachau camp (no date) United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Available at: <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/timeline-event/holocaust/1933-1938/establishment-of-dachau-camp> (Accessed: January 7, 2023).

control, the use of repression will inevitably lead to collapse whether it be through internal or external powers.

Perhaps it's better to look at empire and imperialism on a global scale. One most interesting is the British empire, as its expansion is not completely responsible to its military prowess or the government. More specifically the primary reason for expansion into Asia is by the EIC. In cases of empire, most seem to be led by a monarch or democratic influence. However it's rare to see that a company expands in representation of a whole nation. In this style, a use of collaboration was efficient and effective enough that Britain was able to exploit India and its people for the abundance of resources- something that's later found in the example of the great scramble for Africa(1885)and the previous trans Atlantic slave trade(1710).<sup>6</sup> The use of collaboration may seem easy in principle, offering the people a new lifestyle and the developed creations of the British empire such as the Enfield rifle. But the term collaboration seems to vary from culture to culture. In a paper titled "the philosophy of collaboration" , mr Randrup, mr Briggs and Mr Druckenmiller suggest that it partly falls to "Collaboration Historicism" a term that questions if the culture and traditions shape the perception of "collaboration".<sup>7</sup> Assuming that this is true it would suggest why the following Indian Mutiny of 1857 would occur.<sup>8</sup> A shared mutual respect by both the EIC and India would be equal in part but from a new-modern perspective it's clear that the EIC and Britain were "masters" to India and abused their social poverty and rights in accordance to get their desired outcomes.

This form of rule is thus flawed by its own creation, in that no side of collaboration is

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<sup>6</sup> Transatlantic Slave Trade (2022) Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/transatlantic-slave-trade> (Accessed: January 7, 2023).

<sup>7</sup> Briggs, D.O., Randrup, N. and Druckenmiller, D.A. (2016) Robert Briggs | professor | Ph.D. | San Diego State ... - researchgate. Available at: <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Robert-Briggs-7> (Accessed: January 15, 2023).

<sup>8</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia. (2023) Indian mutiny, Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Indian-Mutiny> (Accessed: January 7, 2023).

necessarily equal. As seen with the Gauls as the Romans in 45BC the so called relationship was perceived differently by both sides. The Gauls wanted to share wealth and citizenship, but to the Romans they offered little.<sup>9</sup> The boundaries to which both sides conform is asymmetrical and thus the imperial rule of a collaborative empire cannot exceed time. Time will highlight the internal problems of collaboration and will bring the end of an empire in the form of internal revolution.

The best way to avoid any sort of threats, such as internal revolution is the idea of integration. And by allowing the people and civilians from the state you have taken over or captured to become one of your own, changes the national identity, fortifying and cultivating a new body of people. A prime example of this, is the edict of Caracalla (212 AD) that stated: any freeman under Roman rule, is granted, the full Roman citizenship- this includes things such as the right to vote, to become elected, ownership, or to appeal through the judiciary system.<sup>10</sup> By doing this is argued that many of the people who could be a potential opposition are rather integrated into a new reborn society that unifies under a new-found identity. Compared to previous examples such as the British empire, who forced people to take the British identity or those of the Nazis who use brutality through things such as the Gestapo and auxiliary police, the Romans used a new found system that allowed them to develop over time. However there are more recent examples that can be seen in the world around us, for example China. The modern state of China has developed over many years integrating its large and diverse population. Much like the idea of Russification, in China they have formed a national cohort. In this aspect the key part to becoming a National state is assimilationism which is where a nation either forces or asks its minorities to adopt the traditions, culture, language and religion of the majority. In the case of China 70 years ago

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<sup>9</sup> Gaul (2023) Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Gaul-ancient-region-Europe> (Accessed: January 7, 2023).

<sup>10</sup> Jasiński, J. (2021) Edict of Caracalla " imperium romanum, IMPERIUM ROMANUM. Available at: <https://imperiumromanum.pl/en/article/edict-of-caracalla/amp/> (Accessed: January 7, 2023).

under the PRC ( Chinese communist party) it used integration as a way to collectivise the nation under one banner.<sup>11</sup> A direct result of this is the modern state of china that has its National Assembly and has a large mass of people unified together.

It's thus clear to see that from the past studies of empire and imperialism that there is only one effective way to rule that can lead to long term success. The idea of integration appears supreme to the others as it manages to maintain and sustain the rule of the large mass of people that live within it. In some cases, it's clear to see that an empire has two routes. (1) short term success and then collapse and failure or (2) integration to long term success where it finally appears as one of the global superpowers such as China or Russia. Within this study, the various spectrum of empires proves that the repetition of mistakes seems to reappear in all the failed colony's. The ones that chose to adapt and "learn from the past", that was not seen by the prior repressive or collaborative empires, come out on top. These empires then make its way into modern day society as emerging national cohesive states. These states are proven to have been more successful by a factor of time, and from this historians can learn that a cohesive national state is the only way for a progressive society to develop. As Engels said "All history has been a history of class struggles, of struggles between exploited and exploiting, between dominated and dominating classes at various stages of social development."<sup>12</sup> And from this essay it's very clear that the formation of empires to this day is a direct consequence of struggle. The only difference is the union of people under the struggle is what makes empires stronger, and the shift of blame is what causes rifts- inevitably leading to an empires downfall.

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<sup>11</sup> Zhou, S. (2021) The Chinese path of integration and development among all ethnic groups from a comparative perspective between China and the west - international journal of anthropology and ethnology, SpringerOpen. Springer Singapore. Available at: <https://ijae.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s41257-021-00058-1> (Accessed: January 7, 2023).

<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Engels quote (no date) A. Available at: <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/89699?ref=social-development> (Accessed: January 7, 2023).

