

Thinking about TRADITIONS

New Imperialism?

The building of empires stretched back historically as far as the beginning of written history. How did the so-called new imperialism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries differ from earlier imperial traditions?

colonies occupied strategic sites on the world's sea lanes, and others offered harbors or supply stations for commercial and naval ships. Advocates of imperialism sought to gain those advantages for their own states and—equally important—to deny them to rivals. At other times, the political determinants of imperialism were rooted in the desire for power and prestige. French imperialism, for example, likely intended to restore France's international prestige after its humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–1871. In Germany as well, public opinion demanded colonies for reasons of German pride and validation after the state's recently achieved nationhood.

Imperialism had its uses also for domestic politics. In an age when socialists and communists directly confronted industrialists, European politicians and national leaders sought to defuse social tension and inspire patriotism by focusing public attention on foreign imperialist ventures. Cecil Rhodes himself once observed that imperialism was an attractive alternative to civil war. By the end of the nineteenth century, European leaders frequently organized colonial exhibitions where subject peoples displayed their dress, music, and customs for tourists and the general public in imperial lands, all in an effort to win popular support for imperialist policies.

Cultural Justifications of Imperialism Even spiritual motives fostered imperialism. Like the Jesuits in the early modern era, missionaries flocked to African and Asian lands in search of converts to Christianity. Missionaries often opposed imperialist ventures and defended the interests of their converts against European entrepreneurs and colonial officials. Nevertheless, their spiritual campaigns provided a powerful religious justification for imperialism. Furthermore, missionaries often facilitated communications between imperialists and subject peoples, and they sometimes provided European officials with information they needed to maintain control of overseas colonies. Missionary settlements also served as convenient meeting places for Europeans overseas and as distribution centers for European manufactured goods.

mission civilisatrice (mih-see-on sih-vih-lees-ah-TRIHs)

While missionaries sought to introduce Christianity to subject peoples, other Europeans worked to bring them “civilization” in the form of political order and social stability. French imperialists routinely invoked the *mission civilisatrice* (“civilizing mission”) as justification for their expansion into Africa and Asia, and the English writer and poet Rudyard Kipling (1864–1936) defined the “white man's burden” as the duty of European and Euro-American peoples to bring order and enlightenment to distant lands.

Tools of Empire

Even the strongest motives would not have enabled imperialists to impose their rule throughout the world without the powerful technological advantages that industrialization conferred on them. Ever since the introduction of gunpowder in the thirteenth century, European states had competed vigorously to develop increasingly powerful military technologies. Industrialization enhanced those efforts by making it possible to produce huge quantities of advanced weapons and tools. During the nineteenth century, industrialists devised effective technologies of medicine, transportation, communication, and war that enabled European imperialists to have their way in the larger world.

Imperial Medical Technologies By far one of the most common, debilitating, and often deadly of diseases affecting the tropical and subtropical regions of the world was and is malaria. As Europeans established colonies in the tropics, they faced a serious and often mortal threat from this mosquito-borne disease. The effective treatment of malaria in the form of quinine became a powerful weapon in the European quest to conquer and rule distant lands during the nineteenth century.

The remedy for malaria came to Europe from Peru, where the Spanish, including Jesuit missionaries, had discovered that indigenous peoples used the bark from the cinchona tree to treat various fevers. This “Jesuit bark,” as it was known, also worked well against malaria. When it became clear that cinchona bark could be used not only to treat malaria but also to prevent it, the bark quickly became the favored treatment for malaria. In 1820, two French chemists, Pierre Pelletier and Joseph Caventou, extracted the alkaloid of quinine from cinchona bark, and by the 1840s European colonizers kept quinine pills by their beds. The use of quinine proved to be a major force in the expansion of European empires and ultimately permitted small European populations to survive and prosper in tropical regions. By the time the British in India and the Dutch in Java began commercially planting cinchona trees in the 1880s to create a reliable supply of the bark, its active ingredient, quinine powder, had become crucial to the health of the empire.