Formal and Informal Empire in the Nineteenth Century
Transcript

Date: Tuesday, 18 October 2011 - 6:00PM
Location: Museum of London
I ended the first lecture in this series by describing and trying to account for the collapse of the European empires in the Americas in the half-century from the mid-1770s to the mid-1820s. This evening I want to explain the re-emergence of European empires in a new form in the second and third quarters of the 19th century and to discuss how and why they expanded when there was little real desire on the part of European states for new overseas colonial possessions.

This reluctance had a number of causes. The economic imperatives that had underpinned the old pre-industrial European empires had lost their power. Mercantilism, the idea of a monopoly of trade between the colonies and the metropolis, had given way to a general acceptance of free trade, driven partly by merchants in the colonies themselves. The liberation of the Americas from colonial control was to a degree the consequence of this drive.

In the 1820s European powers took the lesson and opened the colonies they still possessed to foreign ships. British policy by the 1830s and 40s gradually established free trade as the basic principle of world economic exchange, though not without a struggle, as can be seen from the furious debates over the Corn Laws, finally repealed in 1846.

In the era of free trade, European powers did not see the need to acquire colonies. The Vienna Peace Settlement in 1815 and the Congress System of the 1820s underlined the Powers’ determination to avoid international conflicts in Europe, so these were no longer around to spill over, as they had done in the 18th century, into colonial wars on other continents. Conversely, the Powers were also determined that colonial conflicts, should they arise, would be solved peacefully, just like European conflicts were, and not have any kind of knock-on effect on international relations within Europe. In any case, the major global colonial conflict, between Britain and France, had been resolved in favour of Britain, while the largest colonial empires, those of the Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese, had been largely destroyed, or lost their rationale because of the end of mercantilism and the coming of the age of free trade.

Free trade favoured above all the British, whose navy dominated the world’s seas in the wake of Trafalgar (1) and continued to do so until near the end of the century. British command of the ocean was absolute. By the mid-1870s the Royal Navy consisted of more than 500 ships, with roughly half of these being in active commission at any one time. 61 of these were ironclads (2); wooden vessels were still being phased out. Steam-powered or partly steam-powered ships were introduced already in the 1820s and the development of screw-driven vessels in the following decade formed the basis for a huge expansion in numbers of these fast ocean-going ships that were no longer dependent on the vagaries of wind and weather. The Royal Navy was far larger and more powerful than its nearest rivals, the French and American navies, and indeed from the 1870s it was official British policy to ensure that its strength should be greater than that of any other two navies combined.

With such massive naval predominance the British could control the access of other powers to overseas territories. They were the only power in a position to acquire and maintain a really large-scale empire, and correspondingly until the 1880s they were the only European state to possess one. By this time, more than 80 per cent of the world’s goods were carried in British ships. The British almost completely dominated trade with Latin America, for example; so there was no obvious reason why they should seek to convert economic power there, or indeed in any other part of the world, into the annexation of territory. And for much of the century there was no specific or explicit ideology of what came to be called ‘imperialism’, asserting the superiority of European civilization over others, or justifying the acquisition of colonies as a matter of policy.

The functions of such colonies that remained also began to diminish. In the 18th century, for example, the transportation of slaves (3) to the plantations of North and South America and the Caribbean had been a fundamental part of the trading relations of Europe with the Americas, helping the creation of major seaports like Liverpool, from where ships sailed to Africa with goods and money to buy slaves which they went to the Americas, allowing cotton, tobacco and sugar to be taken back to England. The slave trade, as I noted in my first lecture, fell foul of humanitarian, religious and rationalist ideas of human equality and human rights at the beginning of the 19th century, and the massive slave revolt in Haiti illustrated to many land- and plantation-owners the dangers of the institution, and the threat that mass discontent could pose to their interests. In particular, the Evangelical Revival in late 18th and early 19th century Britain brought to slave-owning areas radical missionaries who soon began to champion slaves’ rights.

Thus in Demarara, part of British Guiana, acquired by Britain from the Netherlands in 1815, the arrival of one John Smith, sent by the London Missionary Society two years later, soon sparked discontent as he began to fight plantation owners for the slaves’ right to attend chapel services, and soon won their confidence. ‘Ever since I have been in the colony,’ he wrote back to the Society, ‘the slaves have been most grievously oppressed. A most immoderate quantity of work has, very generally, been exacted of them, not excepting women far advanced in pregnancy. When sick, they have been commonly neglected, ill treated, or half starved. Their punishments have been frequent and severe. Redress they have so seldom been able to obtain, that many of them have long discontinued to seek it, even when they have been notoriously wronged.’ Smith encouraged the
slaves to educate and improve themselves and made a number of them deacons of the chapel. Absentee plantation owners, including the father of the later Prime Minister Gladstone, were assured by their agents that all was well; but in fact conditions were so harsh that ten thousand slaves rose in rebellion in 1823. (4)

The rebels scored some initial successes, forcing colonial troops to retreat, but the rebellion was soon repressed, with surprisingly little bloodshed; the most the slaves did to the owners or their agents was to imprison them in the stocks where they themselves had often been placed. An even larger uprising, involving 60,000 slaves, took place under similar circumstances in Barbados in 1831, where the central figure was the Baptist preacher William Knibb, who had been championing the slaves against the plantation managers and described slavery as ‘one of the most odious monsters that ever disgraced the earth’. Very different were the origins of the great slave revolt in Bahia province, Brazil, in 1835, which was inspired by the Haitian rebellion earlier in the century, with the rebels carrying pictures of its leaders, and led by Muslim preachers who were able to mobilize slaves transported from Islamic states in west Africa. This was a more violent rebellion, (5) and like all the others it was put down with considerable force by the Brazilian army.

But these revolts caused growing alarm amongst European colonists, plantation owners and governments. The Brazilian slave trade was ended shortly after the great revolt, while the British Anti-Slavery Society persuaded parliament to abolish slavery in British-controlled areas of the world in 1833, (6) in a law that came fully into effect in 1838; it took some years until it was followed in areas under the control of the East India Company, but everywhere in the middle decades of the century, including the newly independent South American countries, slavery was formally abolished, and international treaties were negotiated for the suppression of the slave trade. Trade with the West Indies remained important for the British but it was gradually augmented and in some ways supplanted by trade with the cotton-growing states of the southern USA and with other parts of the world. Belief in the freedom of the individual went in the end hand in hand with advocacy of the freedom of trade. Evangelical missionary societies, far from being the harbingers of imperialism at this time, played a key part in the outlawing of slavery. And the growing social threat of slave revolts reduced the resistance of slave-owners and plantation managers to liberation.

The expansion of European overseas empires in the years from the end of the Napoleonic Wars to the beginning of the ‘Scramble for Africa’ came overwhelmingly as the result of choices faced by European nations as a result of developing situations in the rest of the world. Even where this seemed not to be the case, local events were decisive, as in the example of the French annexation of Algeria in 1830. Even here, however, local events were decisive. Algeria was formally part of the Ottoman Empire, but the autonomous governor of the province, the Dey of Algiers, was getting into financial trouble because its main sources of wealth, slavery, kidnapping and piracy – were declining. In 1816 for example the British forced him to surrender Christian slaves and all the money he had received for ransoming Christian prisoners (7). Putting up taxes only led to popular resistance. So in 1827 the Dey asked the French to repay money he had lent them during the Napoleonic Wars. The French consul refused to do this. The Dey summoned him to his court, called him a ‘wicked, faithless, idol-worshipping rascal’ and struck him with a fly-whisk. (8) The French press bayed for revenge for this insult. Marseilles traders saw an opportunity to get hold of Algiers for their own interests.

But nothing much happened immediately apart from a naval blockade, which had no effect. King Charles X was nervous about antagonizing the British. However, by 1830 the British government was preoccupied with domestic troubles. Charles X also had deep problems at home, that would lead to his deposition later in the year, but he was backed by Metternich and the Holy Alliance, who thought the conquest of Algeria would make the French King popular and stave off the liberal revolt. So the army, thirsting to relive the glories of the Napoleonic era, pulled out the Emperor’s invasion plans from a bottom drawer. Charles announced that he was invading to avenge the ‘grave insult’ of the fly-whisk incident, bring piracy to an end and convert the Algerians to Christianity. Eighty-four French ships conveyed 37,000 troops across the Mediterranean and set up a well-defended base camp. 35,000 Ottoman troops arrived on 19 June 1830, but the French possessed better guns and routed them. (9) As they entered the Ottoman camp, they found sixty camels tethered there, and, lacking any idea of what they could be used for, shot and ate them. On 5 July the Dey surrendered on the condition that people’s religion was respected, and the French occupied Algiers. Napoleon had triumphed again, this time from beyond the grave.

The French, needless to say, did not keep their promises, and soon began turning mosques into churches, sparking resistance from the deeply Muslim country, led by the Sufi orders who had already rebelled against the taxation demands of the Ottomans. A young holy man, Abd el-Kader, who claimed descent from the prophet Mohammed, emerged as a leader, proclaimed a jihad, and inflicted repeated reverses on the French. By 1836 the French were facing defeat, so Louis-Philippe sent in Marshal Thomas-Robert Bugeaud, who used his experience with guerilla tactics in the Spanish Peninsular War to push the rebels back, razing their villages to the ground (thus introducing the Arab word razzia, scorched earth, to many European languages), and beheading Muslims taken prisoner. Victory finally came in 1847, when Abd el-Kader surrendered and left for Damascus. (10)

A motley crew of settlers began to arrive from Europe: French aristocrats who were dismayed by the turn taken by political events in the homeland and wanted to build a pre-1789 society in Algeria; Cistercian monks who built a monastery and farm; ex-soldiers granted land at the end of their service; socialist disciples of Saint-Simon, who wanted to build utopian communities; later on, revolutionaries deported from France after the 1848 June uprising; Italians, Spaniards, Maltese and many others. (11) By the time of the Second Empire the settlers had...
lost most of their original ideals and focused on opposing the rule of the military, whom they considered too pro-Arab.

On 24 October 1870 the new republican government in Paris passed a law giving Jews and settlers in Algeria French citizenship. Arabs and Berbers continued to be excluded from full rights. A local Muslim leader Bachagha El-Mokhrani declared a jihad against the French, outraged that Jews had been placed above Muslims and convinced the German defeat of the French was a sign of divine justice. (12) In 1868 French rule had been a major factor in a famine in which perhaps a third of a million Algerians died; French propaganda made great play with the famine relief operation mounted by the Church in Algeria, (13) but this too was a bitter cause of resentment. 150,000 Muslims rose in Mokhrani’s support and began besieging the towns where the French and settlers had retreated for safety. Within a short time the revolt was defeated; together with the 1868 famine, around a million had died, or around a third of the population.

The French revenge was harsh. The leaders were killed or sent to the Pacific island of New Caledonia. Up to half a million hectares of Arab land were confiscated. Pilgrimages to Mecca were severely restricted in order to cut off Algeria from the rest of the Muslim world. Arabic was even classified as a foreign language. Muslim social and educational institutions were destroyed. Within a few years the northern part of the country had been turned into three French departments, satisfying settler demands, while the southern part remained under army control.

Algeria was something of an exception to the general pattern of European colonial interests before 1880. More traditional patterns obtained in the rest of Africa, where three different interests intersected. The first of these was trading, as it had been for centuries. As the slave trade declined then came to an end, European trading bases began to deal in vegetable oils instead of slaves, (14) processing African-grown groundnuts and palms. But this created an intensified demand for slaves within Africa itself, so that the slave trade within sub-Saharan Africa continued well into the second half of the nineteenth century. By around 1880 trading bases, mainly British and French, were dotted all over the West African coast, and rivalry between them was becoming a source of conflict. And their respective governments intervened to try and make them financially useful by charging customs duties, which in turn meant annexing new entry points to the continent in order to stop smuggling. In 1850 for example the British government acquired the remaining Danish forts on the coast, Lagos in 1861, and the Dutch base of Elmina in 1872. The French acquired new posts on the coast of Senegal (15). Clearly too the possibility of these trading bases getting into trouble with African rulers and requiring military protection increased as their numbers and influence grew.

The second major aspect of the European impact on Africa could be seen in the growing number of European explorers. The rapidly growing prestige of science and scientific knowledge in the 19th century fuelled the idea of exploration – the exploration of the solar system and the universe, the world of diseases and infections, the basic constituents of matter and the material world, and not least the mapping of other parts of the globe. Exploration, funded by institutions like the Royal Geographical Society, became the subject of popular enthusiasm. With the growth of literacy and education and the expansion of the newspaper industry, this grew to something like media frenzy by the mid-19th century. The search for the source of the River Nile virtually became a public obsession in England, with the Royal Geographical Society funding the expedition by Burton and Speke in 1856, and the self-funded Samuel Baker with his wife Florence in 1865. (16)

Here too an adventure story tailor-made to inflame the Victorian imagination, for Baker had spotted the young woman, blonde and blue-eyed, while visiting the slave market in Vidin, in the Bulgarian part of the Ottoman Empire; outbid by the local pasha, Baker bribed her keepers and ran away with her, marrying in Bucharest. Florence claimed to be a Hungarian aristocrat whose family had been killed in the 1848 revolution, when she was only three years of age; her nurse had smuggled her out to a refugee camp in Vidin, where she was adopted by an Armenian family who then took her to the slave market to be sold and groomed for the harem. Not everyone, probably wisely, believed these remarkable stories. Yet Baker himself had an adventurous past, having studied engineering in Germany and been engaged in railway building in Romania. After living for a time in Ceylon, he spent the 1860s in African exploration, accompanied everywhere by Florence; in 1869 he was made a major-general in the Egyptian army (17) and led a force of 1700 freed convicts on an expedition to suppress the slave trade in the equatorial regions of the upper Nile – his successor in the post was General George Gordon of Khartoum. Baker was an enthusiastic big game hunter in Europe, Africa and America, publishing books in which he claimed to have killed wild boar armed only with a knife (though in this illustration it’s not clear who’s hunting whom). (18) Baker was indeed knighted for his services to exploration, but Queen Victoria refused to receive him at court because, as she observed correctly if somewhat severely, he had been ‘intimate with his wife before marriage.’

As Baker’s career shows, exploration became a global activity, often carried out by men who themselves had a global background. Thus for example Paul du Chaillu, who claimed to be the first European to see a live gorilla, (19) in the 1850s, and brought a number of skeletons and preserved gorilla corpses back to France to exhibit. Chaillu was also the first European to observe pygmies, as recounted in his book The Country of the Dwarfs; he described the hunt for them in similar terms to those in which he portrayed his hunt for the gorilla, and the book in which he recounted his discoveries, which became an immediate best-seller, was influential in the development of racist classifications of humanity in the late nineteenth century. (20)
Born on the island of Réunion, or possibly in Paris or New Orleans, Chaillu was educated by missionaries in the west African territory of Gabon, where his father was a French trader, and began exploring the hinterland in the 1850s. He made considerable sums of money by lecturing and writing about his experiences, presenting them in such sensational terms that they were widely disbelieved, or assumed to incorporate hunting stories he had heard from African acquaintances. He kept chimpanzees as pets, and relayed African legends about gorillas abducting women and taking them into the forests, and since the writer Edgar Rice Burroughs was familiar with the stories Chaillu wrote for children about his experiences, it’s been argued he was the model for Tarzan. (21)

The most important of the explorers in political terms was however Henry Morton Stanley. Born in 1841 in Wales as John Rowlands, he was illegitimate and was brought up in a workhouse. He sailed to New Orleans, jumped ship, and found a job with a rich trader called Henry Stanley, who eventually adopted him. Stanley fought on both sides in the American Civil War, then became a journalist, which led to his being imprisoned by the Ottomans and then being engaged by the legendary editor of the New York Herald, James Gordon Bennett, to find the missing British missionary David Livingstone. (22)

It’s what happened after this that gave Stanley his real importance, however. The Herald commissioned him to trace the course of the river Congo from its source to the sea; starting out with a company of 356, he eventually arrived at the mouth with only 114 left, none of them European. Disease took its toll but so too did Stanley’s brutal discipline, which included frequent floggings of his bearers. As Burton wrote, ‘Stanley shoots negroes as if they were monkeys.’ ‘The savage’, Stanley wrote, ‘only respects force, power, boldness, and decision.’ Not surprisingly he is said to have been the model for the figure of Kurtz in Joseph Conrad’s novella Heart of Darkness. On a subsequent expedition one of his officers bought an eleven-year-old African girl and gave her to cannibals to see how she was cooked and eaten, though it was only after he died of fever that Stanley found out what he had done.

Stanley’s knowledge of the Congo led to his being commissioned by King Leopold II of Belgium, who thought that possession of the Congo basin would yield prestige for his country and profits for himself. His government was not interested in pursuing this idea. So he set up a private company, wholly owned by himself, under the guise of an international exploration society and got Stanley to mount further expeditions to sign economic agreements with local African rulers, which Leopold then falsified to make it look as if they were ceding territory to his company. Stanley’s expedition constructed roads, which, however, helped the slave traders’ business; his expeditions, which continued into the early 1890s, opened up lakes, mountains and large tracts of territory to European knowledge, but also laid the foundations for King Leopold’s exploitation of the region, and naturally aroused alarm in the British and French, who sent another explorer, Pierre Brazza, to open up parts of the Congo basin to French influence. As yet, all these interests were mainly economic, but the rivalries they were beginning to generate between European states would soon have major repercussions in the international arena.

Stanley’s famous meeting with David Livingstone, and the massive publicity it generated in Europe and America. Livingstone’s fame derived from his combination of scientific, religious and moral interest in Africa: born in 1813, he grew up in a strict religious household, but also developed an interest in science, and saw his mission as trying to reconcile the two at a time when they seemed to be coming into conflict with one another. He trained in medicine, but felt called to go to Africa as a missionary in 1841, and soon began exploring the continent; unlike, say, Stanley, he traveled light, with only a few bearers, and so was not seen as a threat by local chiefs. However, when he did lead a larger expedition, sponsored by the British government, to explore the Zambezi with a view to opening it up to trade, he proved a poor organizer. His steamboat kept stopping because its paddle-wheel was continually being fouled by bodies thrown into the river by slave-traders. (23) ‘I am prepared to go anywhere’, Livingstone said defiantly, ‘provided it be forward.’ But he quarreled with his assistants, most of whom resigned or were dismissed, and eventually the government recalled the expedition; its scientists had made many discoveries but they had failed to find a navigable route along the Zambezi. Similar problems dogged his attempt to find the source of the Nile. He did however map out many of the major geographical features, mountains, rivers and lakes, of the upper Zambezi region.

At the same time, Livingstone founded a number of mission schools and wasted few opportunities for religious conversions; many years later, some of these schools gave an education to young men who became leaders of African nationalist movements, which is no doubt one reason why Livingstone has been remembered positively in independent Zambia. (24) And the reports he sent back to England continually stressed the need to combat the slave trade, which still existed in the areas he went through. Ironically, as his expeditions steadily got smaller, he came to depend on the help of Arab slave-traders. In his last expedition he was often ill, but after his death in 1873 his bearers carried his decomposing body for a thousand miles to the coast for return to Britain. This combination of courage and piety, science and faith, and determination in the faith of adversity, made Livingstone’s life an inspiration for Victorians, helped by Stanley’s journalism; he became a legend. His activities however laid the foundation for later British territorial expansion, even though he himself had no interest in it.

Britain’s lack of interest in colonies in the mid-Victorian era was particularly clear in southern Africa, where the government tried in vain to restrict the northward movement of Boer settlers from the Cape, beginning with the Great Trek in 1836. (25) So London veered between annexing areas settled by the Boers, who were after all British subjects, and allowing them autonomy; the Transvaal for example was recognized as a free state in 1852, annexed in 1877, and given autonomy again in 1881. This indecision was to have major repercussions at the end.
of the century. In India, too, expansion was largely unplanned by Britain, but occurred in particularly on the initiative of the governor-general Lord Dalhousie, appointed in 1848. Dalhousie thought Indian-controlled states were inefficient and that income for the East India Company would be increased if he annexed them. Disorder in the Punjab following the death of its ruler and indeed creator Ranjit Singh in 1839 drew the British in, and it was annexed after fighting in 1849, alongside neighbouring Sind in 1843. Both controlled access to Afghanistan, where a disastrous British expedition had failed to establish control in 1842; all but one of the force of 16,000 were annihilated, the survivor, Dr William Brydon, seen here in lady Elizabeth Butler’s painting The Remnants of an Army arriving half-dead at Jallalabad. (26)

This rapid expansion of British India in the 1840s and especially the mid 1850s, when many parts of North India were taken under British rule, along with lower Burma, where Dalhousie acted in 1852 to protect British trading interests, created massive tension and resentment. Indians from these areas in the army feared they would lose their local privileges and have to pay higher taxes. The arrival of missionaries sparked fears of forced conversion to Christianity. Territorial expansion meant that Indian troops were now expected to serve more away from their homeland without additional pay, even in such faraway areas as Burma and China. British control was precarious. In mid-century the sub-continent had a population of around 200 million; it was not going to be a colony of settlement for the British; it was not going to be converted to Christianity; it was not going to be culturally assimilated into European ways of living. It did, however, yield massive revenues which were used to sustain a very large army recruited from the Indian population – so-called sepoys - 200,000 in 1857, under Indian officers, alongside 16,000 European troops with British officers in separate regiments. The resentments already building up among the sepoys boiled over when a new model of rifle, with pre-greased paper cartridges that had to be bitten open to release the powder; the tallow used to grease them was made from either beef fat, offending Hindus, or pork fat, offending Muslims. Sepoys refused to do this, and attempts to discipline them led to open rebellion. (27) Soon there was open war, with some key Indian states, whose rulers resented their loss of power and British interference with Hindu custom, throwing off British control and joining the uprising. Other Indian states remained loyal. In some areas the revolt took on a distinctly nationalistic character, though the diverse motives of the rebels, and the fact that many areas stayed calm, make it difficult to describe it as a concerted war of independence.

The British were driven back into forts and besieged. There were numerous massacres, most notoriously at Kanpur, (28) which inflamed public opinion in Britain and fuelled a massive wave of revenge as British forces regained the initiative and began punishing the rebels, shooting and hanging them in huge numbers, or using the traditional Mughal punishment of firing them from the mouths of cannon. As a result, the British East India Company was wound up in 1858 and replaced by direct government control: the beginning of the British Raj. The number of British troops in India was virtually doubled and sepoy recruitment confined to more loyal areas in the north. It was funded by a new and more acceptable taxation system based particularly on land as well as excise duties. A reserve system meant the army could be expanded quickly when deemed necessary, and it proved a major resource in, for example, the First World War.

So India became among other things a centre for the expansion of British trade in the east. On occasion this led to further acquisitions. Thus for example British government control was soon extended over the Malayan peninsula, where local states were forced to accept British informal control in 1873, in an attempt to protect trade with China against piracy – also a major factor in prompting the Dutch to extend their control over Indonesia in the 1850s. Like much else in this period, such expansion was piecemeal and unplanned; and the same can be said of the activities of the French in Indo-China, where Napoleon III sent troops to impose religious toleration at the end of the 1850s after some years during which French missionaries had been persecuted and killed; local French officials argued that further expansion was necessary to protect missions and trading interests, clashes took place with local and regional powers, and by the 1890s France was in full occupation of the entire peninsula, after capturing the key fort of Hunghoa in 1884, as illustrated here (29). In all of these examples, it was above all local European officials, merchants and missionaries who put pressure on metropolitan governments and not the other way round. Strongest of all was the pressure coming from European settlers, not only in South Africa but also in Australia. As the free European population of Australia grew, traders, whalers and sealers began to move eastwards into the Pacific.

By the 1830s they were trading guns and liquor with the Maoris in New Zealand, leading to frequent violent clashes and growing disorder, above all in the inter-tribal ‘musket wars’ which went on for several decades. When Edward Gibbon Wakefield, who had carried out the ‘systematic colonization’ of South Australia by large numbers of European settlers, set sail with a large number of emigrants for New Zealand, the British government declared British sovereignty in 1840 so that some kind of order and protection for them. The Treaty of Waitangi, signed the same year, was supposed to guarantee Maori land rights, but settlers, perhaps inevitably, ignored it, and a series of wars and small-scale violent conflicts began, lasting till the early 1870s. The British and the settlers were unable to defeat the Maoris, and although European settlers outnumbered them by the 1860s, a kind of uneasy stalemate was the end result, in which Maoris had been pushed out to the edge of European settlement but defended their interests there with some success.

From New Zealand, European traders fanned out further into the Pacific, looking for coconut oil and guano or bird-dropping fertilizer; increasingly too they began to kidnap islanders for forced labour on sugar plantations in Australia – so-called ‘blackbirding’; the British navy tried to stop this trade, as in this incident recorded in 1869, (30) but with limited success. Clashes with Polynesian states led to the usual process of annexation, including Fiji,
What was happening, therefore, was still above all by trade, but increasingly European governments felt obliged to be drawn in when trading interests came under threat. China provided a classic example. The Chinese Empire restricted entry to European goods, while exporting large quantities to the west, above all, tea. To redress the balance, the East India Company smuggled increasing quantities of Indian-produced opium into China, starting already in the 18th century. In 1838, not for the first time, the Chinese Empire intervened to stop the trade and destroy its products. British ships were boarded in international waters and their cargoes of opium seized and destroyed. British merchants were blockaded in their factories and starved of food till they agreed to hand over their supplies. In retaliation, the British sent a large force from India, still of course under the control of the East India Company, which seized Canton, and in 1842 the British acquired Hong Kong and opened four other ports for legitimate trade; the USA and France soon got their treaty ports too. Here as in so many other areas of the globe in the nineteenth century, freedom of trade was the key for the Europeans.

This was not the end: The Chinese Empire was unhappy with these concessions, and conflict broke out again, leading to an Anglo-French force of 18,000 marching on Beijing in 1860 [here’s a scene from the conflict at Guangzhou] (31). Members of a delegation sent to negotiate with the Chinese were arrested and tortured to death, and in retaliation the Europeans destroyed the old Summer Palace and forced the Chinese to open ten new treaty ports, pay a large indemnity, and agree to the opium trade so long as they could regulate it. This was a key moment in the decline of Imperial China, though hardly a glorious one for the Europeans. Gladstone condemned the first Opium War as ‘unjust and iniquitous’ and the trade in the drug as ‘infamous’; his protests had little effect.

Chinese weakness also opened up the way for Russian expansion in Asia. We don’t often think of Russia as a major colonial power. But in the course of the nineteenth century settler and traders moved eastwards, and local or regional officials began acting on their own initiative to conclude treaties with local states or neighbouring powers. Settlers on the central Asian steppe were threatened by the unstable but powerful Muslim states of Khiva, Bokhara and Kokand, and so Russian government forces gradually subdued these areas, turning the first two of these states into protectorates and incorporating the third into a new province. (32) By the end of the 1870s Russia controlled all of Central Asia, much to the alarm of the British. Of more direct interest to St Petersburg was the securing of access to the Pacific. The province of Amur was seized from the Chinese and in 1858 China accepted this as a fait accompli. Sakhalin Island was occupied, bringing Russia up against Japan.

Eastward expansion even brought Russians across the Bering Straits into North America. (33) In the eighteenth century, Russian fur traders had hunted and traded in Alaska in increasing numbers, leading to armed conflicts with the local native American tribes, who were soon devastated by diseases brought across by the traders from the Eurasian continent. By the early 1800s the Russian-American company had taken control of most of this trade. Russian Orthodox missionaries moved in, giving negative publicity to the brutal methods used by the traders to subdue the native American population. By the middle of the century, otters, beavers and other fur-bearing animals had been hunted to near-extinction, competition from the Hudson’s Bay Company was proving increasingly intrusive, and the costs of communication across thousands of miles to European Russia were proving prohibitive. There were never more than seven or eight hundred Russians in Alaska, almost all of them in the two main coastal towns, and in 1867, recognizing all these problems, the Russian government sold the province to the USA for two cents an acre (34) – an act that native Americans there claimed they were not entitled to carry out, and disputed well into the twentieth century until the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971.

Russia in other words never really properly colonized Alaska. But it did colonise Siberia – initially using it, famously, as a destination for convicts, especially after the opening up of silver and salt mines in the eighteenth century. 865,000 convicts were transported to Siberia in the nineteenth century, and some areas, such as Sakhalin Island, contained more convicts than settlers. (35) Transportation was a convenient substitute for imprisonment for a number of European states in an era when there were no purpose-build prisons, populations were growing, property offences were increasing in number, and educated opinion was turning against the harsh corporal punishments and widespread use of the death penalty of the early modern period. (36) For much of the eighteenth century the British transported convicts to America, but when this became impossible after 1776, they turned to Australia, and by the 1820s some three thousand were being transported every year. But by the 1840s the number of private settlers had grown, and they began objecting to the continual arrival of convict shipments. The harsh and brutal convict regime aroused widespread criticism in Britain, and a report of 1835 led to convicts being rewarded by staged emancipation under a new system of probation. (37) Prison reform in Britain led to the building of model prisons like Pentonville, and provided an easier and less controversial alternative to transportation, which began declining in the 1850s and came to an end in 1867.

Ironically, perhaps, this was just the period in which transportation from France actually began. In 1852 Napoleon III’s government established a penal colony on Devil’s Island in French Guiana, (38) an unhealthy, brutal, often fatal prison through which 80,000 offenders passed until it was closed down in 1946; nowadays it welcomes more than 50,000 tourists each year. Meanwhile political prisoners, including more than 4,000 arrested in the Paris Commune uprising of 1871, and thousands more taken prisoner in the 1871 Algerian uprising, were sent to the Pacific island of New Caledonia, (39) through which some 20,000 convicts, most of
them ordinary offenders, had passed by the time it was closed down in 1897. Even some German states sent
offenders abroad, with the Kingdom of Hanover for example offering free passage to America to convicts as an
alternative to a costly term of imprisonment, and issuing them with false passports if they agreed.

This was in the end, perhaps, not a particularly important aspect of European colonization, though it was
certainly one that attracted a lot of attention. Throughout the period I’ve been discussing today, European
priorities were always economic. The experience of colonial revolutions and wars of independence since the mid-
eighteenth century made European states reluctant to acquire new colonial possessions. (40) Even in 1860
many parts of the globe, particularly in Africa, were still uncolonized. Yet the drastically changed balance of
power between Europe and other parts of the world, following on the development of industry, the military
reorganization of the European states during the wars of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and
the beginnings of decline and disintegration in some of the great non-European empires, the Ottoman, Mughal
and Chinese empires in particular, made it easy for European states to gain territories overseas. The imperative
here was trade: not exclusive mercantilist controls any more, but the opening up of new markets in a world of
free trade dominated by British maritime supremacy. There was no ideological drive to acquire territory, but
again and again, the disruptive effects of European trade, exploration and missionary activity on indigenous
societies and political systems caused conflict and led European states to recover their prestige and secure their
economic interests by intervening, in many cases leading to outright annexation or at the very least behind-the-
scenes control. The whole process was haphazard and there was no idea that colonial and imperial policy would
be governed by international agreements. But in 1880 all this was about to change, as we shall see in my next
lecture, on November 22nd.