

Imposition of European Ideas and Values

As European countries established empires in Asia and Africa in the nineteenth century, they marked their presence in a number of ways. One of the most lasting was their attempt to imprint their culture onto their colonial subjects, or their cultural imperialism. As a result of their conquest of much of the world, Europeans believed that they were not merely militarily superior but culturally superior as well. It was necessary, Europeans believed, to replace these inferior cultures with their own and, thus, “civilize” the peoples of the rest of the world. Interestingly, this process of cultural assimilation and homogenization also took place in Europe, both in the colonizing countries themselves as well as in the Eastern European borderlands where Germany and Russia were independently embarking upon imperialist projects.

Rather than a thematic presentation, this reading will examine various cases of cultural assimilation and imperialism. Some of the examples are basic to the study of cultural contact and assimilation: the British in India, the French in Algeria, and the Americans and Canadians on the western frontier. While these are the customary examples of European (or Western) cultural dominance over non-European societies, the last three sections will widen your understanding of imperial contact. First, a section on Eastern Europe shows that cultural imperialism was not limited to extra-European territories; the people of Eastern Europe also experienced attempts at cultural assimilation under the Russian and German empires. Second, the example of Italian colonization in Ethiopia is an example of a mostly unsuccessful attempt at an imperialist takeover and cultural imperialism. Finally, while European imperialists attempted to impose cultural uniformity upon their imperial possessions, they were shaped by those cultures in return.

British India

Cultural imperialism in British India had two major characteristics: first, it exemplified the British desire to remake Indians into more civilized people and second, it was a means of control. The British could not raise an army of enough size to control their Indian subjects by force, so they relied partly on their culture of empire, into which they co-opted not only their representatives in India but also segments of the Indian population itself.

The development of the English language in India was an important marker of cultural imperialism, as the British used their native tongue to set the social standard. In India, as in England, being able to speak “The Queen’s English” became a mark of great distinction, one that was more difficult to attain for Indians with little prior knowledge of the language. The British colonizers, in essence, controlled access to the language; and since mastery of English was desirable for any Indians who wanted to succeed under the colonial administration, they needed to go to the British. The impact of British language policy on India was long-lasting, as English remains one of India’s official languages.

Another area in which the British introduced aspects of their culture into Indian culture was through sport. The British used sports as a more informal means to solidify

their control over Indians. In late nineteenth-century Britain, sports like cricket, rugby, and golf had become extremely popular. This explosion in popularity came in part because sports were seen as socially good; sports were believed to pass on values that created better citizens. Such values included teamwork, respect for authority (for example, the coach), and respect for the rules. The British believed that when these kinds of values were extended into everyday society, they could create a more docile society that would not challenge authority but rather seek to obey and even to work with it. For this reason, sports were particularly stressed at British schools in this and later periods. These sports, especially cricket, quickly became important to Indians in the same way mastery of the English language became important to them. Sport was, therefore, another means that the British used to maintain control in India; but crucially, it was a more delicate method than the use of force. Interestingly, like English is still one of India's official languages, today cricket is more of a mania in India than it is in Britain.

A third area in which British dominance was asserted culturally was through social clubs. Exclusive social clubs had long been a tradition among the British elite, and their establishment in India created a space where the colonial elite could mix apart from the rest of society. Clubs often became known for their rousing atmospheres and interesting events. Merely by being exclusive and interesting, social clubs attracted the attention of many Indians in the elite or professional classes who strove to show their own value in society. Very gradually, a few British social clubs admitted the occasional Indian. Strikingly, however, Indians began to imitate British culture by creating their own clubs. Again, as in the case of language and sports, the Indian adoption of clubs exemplifies a wider phenomenon in which Indians co-opted British culture, in essence accepting its desirability.

In short, language, sport, and social clubs reinforced British dominance over Indians by asserting British primacy in areas of culture. These were ways in which the British both implicitly and explicitly made known to Indians that British culture was superior and the correct way for civilized people to act. As the British defined the culture, it put them in a position of power over Indians who were interested in becoming more British or finding the favor of the imperial regime.

French Algeria

The British method of colonialism in India and around the world was relatively hands-off. In comparison, the French took a much more active role in their colonies. More French people settled there, there was a stronger military presence, and the French colonists made a much more overt attempt to entrench their colonial superiority. As the first colony of France's Second Empire, Algeria became the testing ground for ideas that the French then used as they acquired more colonies in Africa and Asia later in the nineteenth century.

A large influx of French settlers into Algeria formed the backbone of the imperializing effort. The population was large enough that three Algerian territories were organized as *départements*, or mainland French regions, and these regions eventually had representatives in the French National Assembly. Much of the colony was

organized along French administrative lines and run by Frenchmen; this contrasted sharply with the British method of rule in which they relied heavily on local leaders.

French efforts to make the Algerians French were the most direct of all the colonial powers. Algerian Muslims could become citizens of France, but only if they accepted the full French legal code, which contained clauses regarding marriage and inheritance that contradicted Muslim law. They could, however, serve in the French army or the colonial bureaucracy without becoming citizens of France. In either case, the implication was clear that French culture, values, and administration were superior.

While the French did attempt to make the Algerians French, sometimes they furthered the gulf between the colonizers and the colonized. To a certain extent, the French attempted to create a colony for their settlers that existed separate from the already established Algerian communities. Many of the French and European colonists were poor – most came from peasant backgrounds – but they considered themselves better than any Algerians. Because of these feelings of superiority, in the main cities the French chose to live in physically separate areas from the Algerians. The most striking example of this separateness, however, was the city of Bône. Before the French occupied Bône in 1832, the city had about 4,000 citizens. Quickly, however, the locals left and were replaced almost entirely by French, Italian, and Maltese colonists who established their own Europeanized city.

This kind of imperialist superiority complex was epitomized in Edward Said's foundational work, *Orientalism*, in which Said proposed that Europeans viewed "the Orient," or the non-European East, through stereotypes that diminished and exoticized the peoples of those lands. Such orientalism, Said argued, was part of an overall European attempt to belittle non-European cultures and replace them with European ideals. Said's work particularly criticizes French scholars, travellers, and novelists who depicted Eastern cultures, especially the Algerian people, in a derogatory fashion. These writers depicted "Orientals" as sensuous, violent people who needed the French occupation so that they could learn proper, "civilized" conduct. Other historians have subsequently shown that such derogatory views provided a further motivation for French imperialists to assimilate the Algerians into their own culture. The French believed that their culture was more advanced and more civilized; it made sense to them, therefore, to propose that the Algerians adopt French culture so that they, too, could eventually make themselves more civilized as well.

Native Americans

Ever since Europeans had first come to North America, they had assumed that their culture was superior to that of the continent's original inhabitants. However, during the early modern period, while the European empires claimed most of the continent's territory, they did not settle it. As first Americans and later Canadians began to settle further west, however, they began to consider how to deal with the Native Americans. In both countries, the solution was cultural assimilation.

American and Canadian policies regarding the Native Americans are examples of the most naked assimilationist imperialism of the nineteenth century. As the populations of both countries moved westward, they steadily dispossessed Native

Americans in a number of terrible ways. In both countries, Native American tribes were coerced into signing treaties to move them off land that settlers wanted. Sometimes, because of the nature of Native American understandings of property, they did not realize that they were signing away their land. Eventually, Native Americans throughout North America were moved to the land that the settlers did not want; these areas of land, most of which still exist, are called reservations. In some cases in the United States, the Native Americans rose up violently against the settlers, and they were invariably massacred.

Americans assumed that part of the reason Native Americans were uncivilized, or at least backwards, was because they had no concept of land ownership. The Dawes Act of 1887 attempted to rectify this backwardness. The act provided a land grant for any Native American who wanted to become a U.S. citizen and would abandon the tribal government. The idea of a land grant for individuals was itself a method of cultural assimilation, as it attempted to persuade Native American tribes to put aside the idea that land was held in common and instead see it as private property.

In Canada, authorities pursued cultural assimilation through the residential school system. Put simply, young Native American children were taken from their homes on the reservations and put into a boarding school where they learned European culture and became “civilized.” All aspects of their own culture were banned; they were not permitted to wear traditional dress, speak their own language, or practice their religion. Instead, they learned English; and, as almost all of the schools were run by Protestant or Catholic missionaries, they converted to Christianity. In some cases, students were sterilized to make sure that they did not reproduce such a “backwards” race. The program of assimilation was similar in the United States. Many Native Americans were forced to attend boarding schools where they would be “civilized” by learning English and the precepts of Christianity. Traditional religious ceremonies were outlawed throughout the country.

Even a mere description of the residential schools gives credence to recent claims that they exemplify cultural genocide. The schools were rife with abuses that have left massive wounds in today’s population of Native Americans. The schools were overcrowded and had poor sanitation, so disease was widespread. Sexual abuse and molestation was common, as was physical abuse. While some aspects of the residential schools, such as mandatory attendance, had been dissolved by the mid-twentieth century, the last school did not close until 1996.

American and Canadian attempts to assimilate Native Americans represent the starkest example of European (or, in this case, Western) cultural imperialism. It is also notable that while in the other cases considered in this reading cultural assimilation was haphazardly imposed and the subject people usually recovered, in North America the dominant culture was much more uniformly imposed, with drastic consequences.

Assimilation in Eastern Europe

Most historians of nineteenth-century European imperialism overlook the Russian and German empires in Eastern Europe. Nonetheless, the impulses behind Russian and German imperial expansion were much the same as those behind British, French,

and American expansion; each country wanted more territory and the ability to expand their economies. Germany established a small overseas empire in the late nineteenth century, but in general it was a latecomer to imperialism. Russian imperialism was concentrated on its borders; throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Russia expanded its borders east, south, and west and conquered numerous peoples of different languages and races. In the nineteenth century, the Russian and German empires embarked upon large-scale programs of cultural assimilation and standardization, both in the territories they had conquered and at home.

The German program of cultural standardization, called the *Kulturkampf* or “culture struggle,” reflects European cultural imperialism as well as an attempt in all the major European empires to standardize their own cultures in the nineteenth century, in line with the emergence of nationalism. The *Kulturkampf* has a very specific beginning and end; it began in earnest in 1870, after the completion of German unification, and fizzled out after some success by the end of the century.

The *Kulturkampf* was begun under Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, who had overseen a series of wars from 1866-70 that “united” Germany with territory from Austria, Denmark, and France. Before this, however, the German state had been cobbled together since the early nineteenth century out of the ashes of the Holy Roman Empire. Bismarck thus tried to give this coalition of independent states a common “German” identity; this project was in keeping with the beliefs of nationalists at the time that every country should have a national culture. In basic terms, the German culture that Bismarck attempted to impose included the German language and the particular religion of Lutheranism.

The *Kulturkampf* is considered something of a hybrid, however, because its program of nationalization also extended to a large Polish minority who lived in territories Prussia had conquered in the late eighteenth century. The German attempt to assimilate the Poles was part of the *Kulturkampf*, but historians also refer to this program as “Prussification” or “Germanization.” The new German laws took aim at Catholicism, which was the religion of most Polish people, and banned the Polish language. It was an effort to enshrine the superiority of the German culture to go along with Germany’s political dominance over the Polish people. The Poles resisted Prussification fiercely; as part of the wider European nationalism in the nineteenth century, the Poles had developed a strong national culture that they defended against the Germans. In the end, while Bismarck’s *Kulturkampf* did standardize German culture in much of the newly united country, it mostly failed in Poland.

A similar program had already been attempted in Russia, where Emperor Nicholas I (r. 1825-55) began an attempt to standardize the culture in his vast territories shortly after the beginning of his reign. Historians call the program “Russification,” and it continued in various forms for the rest of the century. Throughout his realm, Nicholas attempted to cement religious orthodoxy, commitment to the monarch’s autocracy, and a program of nationality called Official Nationality (which conveniently defined the ideal Russian as calm and obedient to the monarch).

Like other nationalizing projects in Europe and like cultural imperialism in the European overseas empires, Official Nationality attempted to bind citizens and subjects to an identity based on a common language, religion, and culture. It was also based on

a feeling among Russian intellectuals that their nationality was superior to that of the peoples they had conquered. The attempt to Russify the subjects of the vast empire was accompanied by an effort to centralize government; the loss of regional autonomy was viewed as one way to assure the eventual victory of Russian culture.

The program was only partly successful and became less so the further one moved from the capital at St. Petersburg. The Polish provinces of Russia, for instance, where the Polish people had established their own national identity, were minimally affected. The people of modern-day Belarus and Ukraine, who lived closer to St. Petersburg, were more affected. Part of what stymied Nicholas' Russification was the fact that, like his other programs, this initiative depended on his orders being carried out by an unwieldy bureaucracy. Nonetheless, the desire to assimilate foreign cultures and replace them with the culture of the dominant nationality shows that the Russification programs of the nineteenth century fit neatly into the wider pattern of European empires that attempted to do the same overseas.

The Italian Imperial Experiment in Ethiopia

Imperialism was a matter of national pride as well as a means of economic exploitation, and this first reason helps to explain Italian imperialism. Italy was reunified in 1860 and wanted to show that it was the equal of the other European powers. Since Britain and France had obtained large empires and Germany was beginning to do the same, at the end of the nineteenth century Italy began to seek an empire of its own in Ethiopia.

Ethiopia was a special case in many ways, however. Much like ancient Egypt (and, to some extent, ancient Greece) has been de-Africanized in European literature, Ethiopia held a similar place. There are several reasons for this. First, Ethiopia had a long-standing Christian civilization. Second, the country had maintained ties with European countries in the late medieval and early modern periods. Third, Ethiopia's perceived isolation from the rest of Africa – the country is surrounded by the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, and deserts and mountains – freed it from association with the rest of the African cultures, which Europeans considered inferior. (Ethiopia was not actually isolated; the leaders of its church were always Coptic Christians from Egypt, and for centuries Arab slavers had decimated the population.) Partly for these reasons, Ethiopia had not been a target of European imperialism in the nineteenth century until Italy began to create its overseas empire.

Another major reason why Ethiopia is different is because when the Italians first attempted to take the country by force in the late 1890s, they failed. At the critical Battle of Adwa in 1896, Ethiopian forces routed the Italians, who had attempted to launch a surprise morning attack but did not realize that the Ethiopians had already awoken for church services. This defeat dashed the Italians' imperial hopes, and Ethiopia became the first African country to resist European imperialism. This was a major embarrassment for the Italians but a source of pride for Ethiopia.

In the twentieth century, Ethiopia accepted a status on the world stage that other African and Asian countries did not have. Ethiopia was the only African country accepted to the League of Nations; ironically, the League played an important part in

Ethiopia's downfall. Italy, under Mussolini, attempted to retake Ethiopia in 1935; the Italians were eventually successful in 1936. The conflict is best known as one example of the weakness of the League of Nations; Italy and Ethiopia were both members, but the League took no action to stop the war or save Ethiopia. The Italian imperial experiment in Ethiopia is notable because it does not accord with the general trend in which European powers overwhelmed and then exploited Asian and African subject peoples.

Imperialism and Culture

Thus far, this reading has discussed how cultures at the “center” of empires have imposed, or attempted to impose, their values on the “periphery.” Historians have recently exposed examples of how the relationship also worked the other way. The experience of interacting with non-Europeans changed European culture, and exposure to non-European values changed European values as well. This exposure occurred both in the colonies and at home, as European subjects were often permitted to immigrate to the “metropolis,” or the center of the empire.

As Said's *Orientalism* shows, empire was a pervasive theme in nineteenth and twentieth century European culture. While everyday concerns of the average British or French person may not have been affected by empire, the availability of certain products, such as tea for the wealthy, was a sign of their country's influence. Moreover, an empire was a source of national pride; in an era of strong nationalism in all European countries, this cannot be discounted. In Britain, for instance, the possession of an overseas empire was one of few things that could reliably unite the English, Scottish, Welsh, and Irish who lived under the British flag.

Stories of imperial adventure interested those back home. Romantic paintings of the death of General Wolfe at the Battle of Quebec in 1759, or of the life of explorer Captain Cook, were popular items in the decades following. So too were stories of explorers like David Livingstone, the British man who travelled much of the interior of Africa.

Popular novels, plays, and songs also drew heavily on the imperial experience. Empire, and particularly “the Orient,” occupied an important place in the popular imagination as a place of exotic people where the norms of European culture did not apply. This allowed the Orient to serve as a setting for many types of adventure stories or as a way to introduce an imaginative plot. One of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's most fanciful Sherlock Holmes stories, *The Sign of the Four*, creates suspense by introducing an exotic Indian treasure that British colonists had stolen.

Not only did contemporary literature work in favour of imperialistic agendas, it also became a means through which authors criticized European imperialism. Joseph Conrad's 1898 *Heart of Darkness*, for instance, is written as an indictment of the worst imperial exploitations. Much later, in 1960, renowned Algerian-born French author Albert Camus died while working on an autobiographical novel that he hoped would depict the negative aspects of French imperialism in Algeria.

At home, therefore, empire was also an important part of life for Europeans. The ways in which Europeans viewed the “East” were rarely politically correct and were too

often based on entertaining caricatures rather than reality, and accounts of life in the colonies too often focused on the exploits of rapacious adventurers instead of the fate of the subject people. Though the European empires have disintegrated, their legacy remains in the home culture in various ways, from the prevalence of African and Asian immigrants in European capitals to the popularity of Indian cuisine in British restaurants.

Summary

- The British maintained control of their colonial possessions in India thanks in part to an effective projection of their cultural superiority through language, sports, and social clubs; British culture was seen as desirable to many Indians.
- French colonial authorities in Algeria imposed their culture directly on the new society rather than co-opting local leaders as the British had done. In particular, the colony's administration was directly based on the French model and run by French settlers. The settlers set up their own communities and tried to keep separate from the local population.
- Both the American and Canadian governments enacted harsh measures to "civilize" Native Americans. First, the governments chased Native Americans off their traditional land and persuaded them to live on reservations. Next, their children were enrolled in boarding schools, and their culture was banned.
- Cultural imperialism also took place within Europe. The German government attempted to "Germanize" or "Prussify" the Slavic people of Eastern Europe, and the Russian government attempted to "Russify" Eastern Europeans.
- Italy's attempts at empire show that Europe did not wholly dominate the rest of the world. Except for a brief period before the Second World War, Ethiopia maintained its independence from Italy and established its cultural equality with the countries of Europe.
- The experience of imperialism also affected metropolitan cultures. The existence of empire was evident in many media as well as in a wider arrangement of exotic products that were more easily and more cheaply available.