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The British Empire and the Betrayal of Liberalism

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Introduction

It is a crude myth that the British Empire was a paragon of liberty, and therefore an institution that should be celebrated and defended. The empire's many apologists proclaim that it was the single greatest force behind the spread of liberal ideals and free-market capitalism across the globe. They concede that some atrocities took place, but that the end result – the expansion of Western civilization – excuses them. As the old saying goes, one cannot make an omelet without breaking some eggs.

The persistence of this myth, among both academics and the general public, reflects profound ignorance of what *liberalism* represents. Authentic liberalism is classical liberalism, the foundation stone of which is respect for individual freedom. Great liberal thinkers, such as the Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises, have recognized that human societies flourish when individuals possess equality under the

law and are allowed to pursue their goals freely.[70] The only restriction on this freedom is respect for other people's rights. The government safeguards this free society by protecting persons and their property from violent attack and from fraud. International relations work similarly. Nations interact most fruitfully when they meet in a spirit of mutual respect, acknowledging one another's dignity.

Empires are incompatible with liberalism. On the one hand, they are built and maintained through the violent conquest and exploitation of some peoples by others. The dignity of the conquered is perpetually violated. On the other hand, empires destroy the liberty of the conquerors themselves. The pressure of upholding an empire spawns a statist regime that subordinates the individual to the collective, most notably through the conscription of wealth and manpower, and that engages in constant wars with rival great powers. Eventually, this burden becomes too much, and the empire collapses.

[70] Ludwig von Mises, *Liberalism in the Classical Tradition*, trans. Ralph Raico (Irvington-on-Hudson and San Francisco: The Foundation for Economic Education and Cobden Press, 2002).

The British Empire, one of the biggest and strongest in world history, was necessarily one of the most destructive. The fact that the empire claimed its conquests were "liberal" makes them all the more objectionable.

A Road Not Travelled

Scholars often distinguish between the "First" and the "Second" British Empires. The First British Empire, a continuation of the earlier English Empire, was an absolutist monarchy. Its authoritarian policies prompted the Thirteen Colonies to secede in the late eighteenth century. After this point, liberal ideas, the Protestant Evangelical Revival, and straightforward *Realpolitik* forced the empire to reorganize. This Second British Empire, to justify itself, required a moral goal. Its leaders, together with a large segment of public opinion, became more attentive to the rights of overseas settler societies and to indigenous peoples. Some paid lip service to this ethical imperative; many more sincerely believed it.

In this Second British Empire, the settler societies – populated primarily with white British immigrants and their descendants – became self-governing dominions. The majority-native colonies, for their

part, were to receive efficient government that would impart as many benefits of British civilization as were deemed prudent. This commitment to social justice explains why, even now, many scholars defend the empire. They see it as a victory for Western values. In the words of historian Niall Ferguson, "[N]o organization has done more to impose Western norms of law, order and governance around the world."[71] Ethicist Nigel Biggar emphasizes the altruistic aspect: many Britons supported the empire not only because it benefited them, but because it "meant the opportunity to make a better life for other people."[72]

The apologists' conclusion is troubling, first of all, because it disregards the fact that a liberal empire, like a square circle, is a logical impossibility. To justify the imperial aspect, they must redefine liberalism. No longer can the term mean respect for individual freedom, minarchist government, and peaceful foreign relations. They must portray it as what is nowadays known as "liberal interventionism," the insidious use of coercion and

[71] Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), xxi.
[72] Nigel Biggar, *Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning* (London: William Collins, 2023), 29.

violence to combat so-called illiberal opponents abroad and shore up support at home.

The apologists' conclusion is also troubling because it overlooks or denigrates the real liberal alternative to empire in nineteenth-century Britain. As liberal ideas grew, a stalwart band of classical liberals, known as the Manchester School, became an influential pressure group in the mid-1800s. Its greatest theorist, the manufacturer Richard Cobden, encouraged Britain to forsake imperialism for a liberal future of free trade, minarchism, and non-interventionist foreign policy. He pointed out that the empire fostered jingoism and paranoia, and therefore unnecessary conflicts with other great powers. Because British territories were so scattered and exposed to potential attack, British jingoists were even more fanatical than elsewhere, and demanded ever greater amounts of troops and taxes to fund overseas wars. Britain was becoming a writhing mass of xenophobia, military uniforms, and state decrees. "[W]e have been the most warlike and aggressive people that ever existed," Cobden proclaimed in 1852, as Britain readied itself for the Crimean War (1853–1856), a reckless invasion of Russia designed to further British imperial interests

in the Mediterranean.[73] "[T]he English nation has had its energies perverted to war purposes more than any other peoples."[74]

Cobden wanted the British Empire transformed into a free confederation to lessen the burden on the British nation and on oppressed peoples. Devoted to classical liberalism, Britain would become a champion of free trade and non-interventionism on the world stage. Of course, Britain would maintain a sizable navy to defend its home territories and its commerce on the high seas. Without the empire, however, there would be less chance of international conflict.

The empire's apologists tend to dismiss the Manchester School's vision as utopian. Most of Cobden's British contemporaries were more charitable, but were nevertheless still committed to the imperialist mindset. The Liberal Party, founded in 1859 to coordinate liberal forces in Britain's emerging political democracy, was primarily interventionist.[75] Only a small minority were

[73] J. A. Hobson, *Richard Cobden: The International Man* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1919), 90.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Martin George Holmes, "Explaining the Interventionist Trend of British Liberalism in the Late Nineteenth and Early

classical liberals, of whom just one, John Bright, was an influential cabinet minister. Their number shrank over time. Most members of the Liberal Party – known as "Liberals" with a capital letter – voiced support for small government but believed that the empire could be a vehicle of social justice abroad.

Especially in the early years, the Manchester School's influence restrained this wayward majority somewhat. In 1859, deteriorating relations with France sparked rumors of invasion and a surge of British militarism. Cobden and Bright argued that militarism only made matters worse, and that a free trade treaty offered a tangible means by which to defuse tensions. The result was the landmark Cobden-Chevalier Treaty of 1860.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, various pressures led the interventionist majority to abandon even this lukewarm support for classical liberalism. The most important international development was the burden of defending the empire against rivals, such as the newly unified German Empire, that resented

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Britain's power. Agitation against these perceived threats provoked cataclysmic wars, undermined constitutional liberties, and eventually broke the back of the British Empire.

Commerce without Empire

The ideas of the Manchester School, if put into practice, could have forged a more peaceful and enduring alternative to imperial expansion. The claim that the British Empire was needed to spread commerce and Western civilization lacks historical support. New Zealand, colonized in the nineteenth century, illustrates the fruitfulness of relations between Europeans and indigenous outside the bounds of empire. British people began frequenting this far-flung land in the late eighteenth century. Britain had begun colonizing nearby Australia, and many people became interested in New Zealand for reasons of commerce, settlement, or missionary work.

New Zealand boasted a sizable population of Māori, who were organized into tribes. There were occasional violent encounters between Māori and the first British visitors, usually because of cultural misunderstandings. However, relations were mostly peaceful, because there was mutual benefit in free

trade, and because neither side had the physical force entirely to subjugate the other. By the 1830s, remarkable bonds had been formed, and Europeans had an acknowledged place in the islands. In the 1830s, for example, a leading trader, Phillip Tapsell, negotiated for a significant parcel of land.[76] Recognizing that Māori understandings of property rights were less individualist and clearly defined than that of Western Europeans, he waited patiently while they discussed who owned what, as well as the concept of permanently selling land to someone else. Tapsell got his land, and became close to local Māori. Indeed, throughout the islands, Māori proved themselves astute workers and merchants in New Zealand's developing capitalist economy. Missionaries also engaged constructively with Māori. By the 1830s, they had purchased property from Māori tribes, and Christianity was spreading like wildfire, often being transmitted by Māori converts.

All these achievements took place before Britain, paranoid about French designs on the region, annexed New Zealand in 1840. The logic of empire

[76] Paul Moon, *Fatal Frontiers: A New History of New Zealand in the Decade before the Treaty* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2006), 62–63.

had pushed for annexation for years. Some traders pushed for imperial expansion because Britain's protectionist laws tightly regulated commerce from regions and businesses situated outside the empire. Some unscrupulous settlers, for their part, wanted Māori out of the way and knew that imperial power could help them achieve this goal.

Māori rights were supposed to have been protected by the Treaty of Waitangi. However, the translations disagreed: only the English version proclaimed the British Crown fully sovereign over the islands. Imperial-minded Britons, backed by the empire, treated the English translation as normative. They now had less willingness and need to compromise. From 1843 to 1872, a cataclysmic series of Land Wars raged as many Māori tribes defended their territories against the British Army, the Royal Navy, and colonial militias. The empire won the wars and seized vast tracts of land. As waves of British immigrants arrived seeking farms, subsequent governments alienated even more Māori territory.[77] When Māori resisted, they could be brutally suppressed by armed police. Even the pacifist

[77] Holmes, "Explaining," 89.

settlement of Parihaka experienced violent invasion in 1881.

The case of New Zealand shows the absurdity of the claim that classical liberal principles were unworkable in the nineteenth century, and that imperial might was essential for the spread of Western commerce and settlement across the world.

Conflict and Conscription

British leaders did not seem to see the irony of endorsing despotism in the name of freedom. They viewed the empire as a force for humanitarianism, and so were zealous in their efforts to defend and expand it. Every one of its wars goaded the government to become ever more interventionist. In addition to harming indigenous peoples such as the New Zealand Māori, this attitude eroded the rights of the British themselves. The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792–1815) are a case in point. There is no doubt that the French republic, and later Napoleon I's empire, were aggressive. However, this attitude tended to be a response against the old regimes that fought to restore the absolutist Bourbon monarchy. As Cobden once said about British involvement, "[N]othing is clearer than that the whole of the war

… was of our own seeking, that it was in fact a war of kings and oligarchs to put down democratic opinions."[78]

Britain was the lynchpin of the seven coalitions against France, since it had the military strength and economic might to bankroll its allies. This explains why Napoleon spent so much time thundering against the island kingdom. The British portrayed the struggle as one of British liberalism versus French tyranny, yet both were despotic – the British probably more so.[79] The British government aggressively promoted the war at home, suspending habeas corpus and outlawing so-called seditious publications and meetings. It maintained the strength of the armed forces through conscription, the most famous strategy of which involved press gangs kidnapping unfortunate men for naval service. These measures provoked numerous riots, which the government crushed without mercy. Because the war was righteous, Britain justified all manner of underhand military operations, such as the invasion of neutral Denmark in 1807 for fear

[78] Hobson, *Richard Cobden*, 89.
[79] For details, albeit from a pro-British perspective, see James Davey, *In Nelson's Wake: The Navy and the Napoleonic Wars* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press and National Maritime Museum, 2015).

that it might aid Napoleon. A naval bombardment blanketed Copenhagen; a third of the city was destroyed. Britain took Denmark's fleet for itself. Following Britain's victory at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, Britain became the premier naval power, and treated the world's oceans as a fiefdom.[80]

The apologists' trump card, the Royal Navy's suppression of the Transatlantic Slave Trade during the nineteenth century, reflected the same trend. The Transatlantic Slave Trade was, of course, a moral atrocity that liberals opposed then, and should continue to condemn today. The British, however, approached the issue with an imperial mindset. Most of the British sailors on anti-slavery service were themselves unfree, having been pressed into service, and many died horrible deaths in the tropics.[81] Because many Africans were involved in the trade, the British interfered in the politics of African peoples, and in so doing annexed areas along the African coastline. Often, local resistance

[80] For a comprehensive overview of British naval imperialism, see Julius von Pflugk-Harttung, *Der Kampf um die Freiheit der Meere: Trafalgar, Skagerrak* (Berlin: R. Eisenschmidt, 1917).
[81] W. E. F. Ward, *The Royal Navy and the Slavers: The Suppression of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969), 22.

had to be crushed with force. These invasions of Africa, like the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, were a millstone around the neck of the British taxpayer and an affront to invaded peoples.

The growth of liberal ideas occasionally prevented isolated acts of imperialism. The Cobden-Chevalier Treaty, which helped maintain peace with France, is a good example. Often, Liberal politicians at home were less willing to intervene than their more jingoistic subjects on the imperial frontiers. However, the lack of firm commitment to classical liberalism meant that even self-proclaimed Liberal governments endorsed imperialism. William Ewart Gladstone, the most enduring Liberal leader in the nineteenth century, is a case in point.[82] He endorsed the Crimean War, ostensibly to preserve the balance of power. As prime minister during the 1880s, he bowed to pressure to invade Egypt, and later Sudan, to protect British interests there. This Egyptian interlude caused John Bright, the only classical liberal in the cabinet, to tender his resignation.

As other great powers developed economically in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the

[82] Holmes, "Explaining," 83–84.

British felt their empire under threat. They became determined, at all costs, to maintain supremacy at sea and control of existing territories. There was also a desire to expand territorial influence to shield the most important areas: Britain itself; the settler societies; and India, the so-called jewel of empire. Britain and the settler societies became potently militaristic. In New Zealand, for example, the self-proclaimed Liberal government introduced peacetime conscription in 1909 and pushed for numerous annexations to create a thick ring of buffer colonies: Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, Hawaii, New Caledonia, the Society Islands, Niue, and the Cook Islands.[83] It had annexed the last two, and instituted a large peacetime army, by 1914. This desire to transform the Pacific into a British lake was not an isolated incident. Shortly after the First World War, the British were intervening militarily in the Caucasus – on the very fringes of Europe – to protect Iran, which was deemed necessary to protect Afghanistan, which was seen as essential to shelter British India.

The non-white parts of the empire were dragooned into playing their part, despite the fact that they

[83] Holmes, "Explaining," 90.

lacked full political rights. Indians paid enormous taxes to fund the British Indian Army, the purpose of which was to keep the Indian peoples in check – the blood-soaked 1857 First War of Independence was still fresh in British minds – and expand the frontiers to defend against foreign powers. It was also deployed to shore up the empire elsewhere, such as the invasions of Egypt and Sudan. By 1922, overseas military operations alone accounted for an appalling 64% of Indian government expenditure.[84]

This surge of militarism fueled the geopolitical tensions that led to the First World War in 1914. Popular opinion holds that the Germans under Wilhelm II, like the French under Napoleon I, were untrammeled warmongers who wanted to conquer the world. It is said that they built a strong navy and acquired overseas colonies to rival, and eventually to overpower, Britain. In reality, Imperial Germany wanted a navy strong enough only to protect its commerce and colonies. Of course, the German Empire was, like all empires, an affront to liberalism. Yet, Britain's interference with Germany's limited ambitions exacerbated imperialist feeling in Germany and paved the way

[84] Shashi Tharoor, *Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India* (London: C. Hurst, 2017), 21.

for global conflict. During the Second Boer War (1899–1902), for instance, the British interned German merchant vessels that local officials suspected – without evidence – of assisting the Boers.[85] German diplomatic overtures were scorned. There was also popular prejudice: on the London docks, jingoistic British sailors assaulted their German counterparts.[86]

The Germans responded by expanding their navy to deter British aggressiveness. Even a brief glance at the primary sources shows the Germans' frustration.[87] Shortly before the war, for example, Captain Max Looff requested an African naval posting because he wanted to uphold the freedom of the seas against Britain. Yet even he was astonished when, significantly before war had even been

[85] John W. Coogan, *The End of Neutrality: The United States, Britain, and Maritime Rights, 1899–1915* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1981), 31–40.
[86] Jonathan Steinberg, *Yesterday's Deterrent: Tirpitz and the Birth of the German Battle Fleet* (London: Macdonald, 1965), 87.
[87] Pflugk-Harttung, *Der Kampf*, 99; Hermann Kirchhoff, ed., *Maximilian Graf von Spee, Der Sieger von Coronel: Das Lebensbild und die Erinnergungen eines deutschen Seemans* (Berlin: Marinedank-Verlag, 1915), 242; Reinhard Scheer, *Vom Segelschiff zum U-Boot* (Leipzig: Quelle & Meyer, 1925), vi.

declared, he found his vessel, SMS *Königsberg*, shadowed and harassed on the high seas by three British cruisers.[88] German residents overseas could find themselves in terrifying situations. Most notably, relations became strained between Britain and Germany in 1911, owing to the Second Moroccan Crisis. In faraway German Samoa, a virtually undefended colony, a British warship sneaked into the main harbor at night to invade in case war was declared.[89] The Germans had no choice but to flee into the interior.

The war itself exacerbated the destruction of Britain's liberal heritage. Britain instituted draconian regulations during the war to maintain the strength of the armed forces, stifle criticism, and micromanage the economy. Those who refused to fight were jeered at in the streets, subject to conscription, and horribly abused if they resisted. One tactic was to drag pacifists to the Western Front and hang them on crosses in No Man's Land. Britain stooped lower than ever before in its attempts to win. Most disturbingly, it instituted a

[88] Max Looff, *Tufani: Sturm über Deutsch-Ostafrika*, 3rd ed. (Berlin: Verlag Bernard & Graefe, 1941), 24–25.
[89] Hermann Joseph Hiery, *The Neglected War: The German South Pacific and the Influence of World War I* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995), 12.

naval blockade that prevented food from reaching the civilian populations of Germany and Austria-Hungary – a blockade that remained in force even after the Armistice. This blockade killed just under one million civilians.[90] It also provoked the Germans into launching their own immoral strategy of unrestricted submarine warfare.

The First World War broke the back of the British Empire by bankrupting the economy and draining manpower resources. The rise of Marxism and Woodrow Wilson's rhetoric of self-determination also dented support for traditional European empires. Nevertheless, on the whole, the British remained committed to the imperial vision, many still believing in its humanitarianism, and others paying it lip service to justify exploitation. Britain used its power within the League of Nations, the forerunner of the modern-day United Nations, to become steward of many German colonial territories, ostensibly for indigenous benefit. In practice, however, tyranny reigned. New Zealand's heavy-handed treatment of Samoa, which involved suppressing native resistance, robbing Chinese

[90] Alexander B. Downes, *Targeting Civilians in War* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008), 87.

migrant workers, and exploiting natural resources, illustrates this point.

Britain also denied independence to oppressed peoples within the empire. It tried to hold onto the whole of Ireland during the Irish War of Independence (1918–1919). The yearning for liberty was too strong, so Britain compromised by allowing most of Ireland self-government within the British Empire, and then helped this so-called Irish Free State win the Civil War (1922–1923) against hardline republican forces that wanted full independence. It also denied India this right, and regularly tortured independence activists with methods that included beatings and gang rape. Even the strafing of crowds with fighter planes was permitted.[91]

The Second World War undermined these attempts to preserve the empire. Although Britain emerged as a victor, it had driven itself even deeper into bankruptcy, and it had depleted its manpower and military resources. Key leaders tried to maintain the empire to the bitter end, for they recognized that without it, Britain's influence in the world would shrink dramatically. Thus, it retreated from some

[91] Tharoor, *Inglorious Empire*, 168.

areas, such as India, but fought against independence movements in other places. From 1939 to 1960, Britain conscripted its young men to maintain the military at home and in colonial struggles such as the Aden Emergency (1963–1967). The dominions also instituted conscription.

Within a few short years, however, most peoples within the empire had achieved independence. Only a few small territories remained under Britain's control. In 1982, when it fought a costly war with Argentina to keep the Falkland Islands, its political and military weakness was evident, as was the disinclination to seek a peaceful solution. This war betrayed the nostalgia of many Britons for the days when they ruled the waves and could crush other nations at will. Cobden's criticism of British warmongering, uttered over a hundred years earlier, had not yet been heeded.

Conclusion

This article has argued that empires are incompatible with classical liberalism, and that the British Empire proves this fact. Despite its reputation as a vehicle for liberal ideas and institutions, the British Empire brutalized its own

population to maintain its armed forces and oppressed hundreds of millions of colonized peoples. Its aura of self-righteousness made it more prone to expansion, so as to "help" more people, and to attack rival powers that might threaten this altruistic urge. Hence Britain's relentless involvement in wars throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and its key role in starting the First World War, one of the most devastating conflicts in human history, which in turn provoked the Second World War a generation later.

Classical liberals must oppose all attempts to associate the British Empire with the cause of liberty. They should instead commemorate, and seek to revive, Britain's authentic liberal tradition – that of the Manchester School.

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