The European Expansion

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Dear reader,

This is a first draft of the last chapter of the textbook on the history of international relations that I’m working on — history of international relations, that is, from a non-European point of view. The chapter tells the story of “the European expansion,” of how the Europeans eventually came to dominate the world and how its model of an international system became the universal norm.

The book will be published by Open Book Publishers, Cambridge. It will be freely downloadable as a pdf but you can also buy it as a regular book. All the material I have written so far is available on-line at http://www.irhistory.info/


Comments very much welcome.

yours,

Erik
Introduction

A study of comparative international systems is by definition a historical study. There are no separate international systems to compare anymore. There is only one system -- the system which first made its appearance in Europe in the late Renaissance and which later came to spread to every corner of the globe. But "spread" is not the right word. This was not a matter of a process of passive diffusion. Rather, the eventual victory of the European international system was a result of the way the Europeans first came to "discover," and later to occupy and take possession of, much of the rest of the world. This is a story of imperialism and colonialism. In this, the final chapter of the book, we will tell the story of how Europe for a while at the turn of the twentieth century came to rule the world. As always, we can only sketch an outline and highlight a few aspects, but given that this is a story which involves Europe, you might already be familiar with it. In any case, it is far better to know a little than to know nothing at all.

For most of its history Europe was quite a peripheral part of the world. It was an international system turned in on itself, confident in its own culture, and uninterested in what was going on outside its perimeters. Moreover, outsiders made only occasional forays into Europe -- like the Berber kingdoms in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and the Mongols in the thirteenth century. What these outsiders found were a few impressive cathedrals, the occasional castle, but also a lot of desperately poor people, serfs without food and without education. Before the year 1500 no European city was a match for the splendors of Baghdad, Xian, Kyoto, Tenochtitlan or Timbuktu.

Yet Europe eventually did become rich, powerful and important, and it came to have a profound impact on the rest of the world. In the early part of the fifteenth-century Europeans began to embark on sea voyages which took them down the western coast of Africa, to the Canary Islands, and eventually far, far further afield. They discovered a number of precious
commodities -- spices, silk, tea, gold and so on -- which found a ready market in Europe. Soon the Europeans began trading on a regular basis with the rest of the world. This trade transformed Europe's economy but it also led to a number of innovations in methods of finance and enormously strengthened the European state. It was now that the Europeans established their first permanent colonies overseas. In some areas, such as in the Americas, Europeans settled permanently, but in Asia they only managed to establish small trading posts.

With a beginning at the end of the eighteenth-century, the development of an industrial economy, based on mechanical production in factories, radically changed European societies, making them "modern." Modernization entailed changes in next to all aspects of social, economic and political life — often analyzed as a question of "urbanization," "industrialization," or "democratization." As far as the rest of the world was concerned, the new European economy had a number of far-reaching consequences. The Europeans needed raw material for the goods they were producing and often these resources could be found outside of Europe itself. The Europeans also needed export markets for their products. The hope was that these consumers could be found in India, for example, or in China. As people outside of Europe were to discover, the industrial revolution had also given the Europeans access to far more lethal weapons than ever previously. Armed with these new incentives, and these new guns, the Europeans set out to conquer the world.

A sea route to India

Europe's isolation from the rest of the world came to an end in the thirteenth-century when the first sustained contacts were established with East Asia. During the so called Pax mongolica, the "Mongol peace," European merchants and the occasional missionary traveled as far eastward as to China. The Europeans were amazed at the wealth of the countries they discovered here, the power of the rulers, and all the amazing objects which no one in Europe knew anything about. Returning home they would tell the tales of their adventures, but often
it all seemed too incredible to be true. The many exotic objects they brought with them from
the East -- spices, tea, precious stones, china, silk, and so on -- embodied these mysteries and
for that reason alone they were highly sought after by the Europeans. This was not least the
case for members of the elite who derived power and prestige from buying and displaying
these various objects of eastern provenance. There was, European merchants discovered, a lot
of money to be made for those who could satisfy this market. It was the Italians who took the
lead in this trade -- Venetians and Genovese in particular. Marco Polo, the most famous
European traveler who went to China, was a Venetian. [Read more: Did Marco Polo go to China?]

Yet trade with the East was a perilous business. Goods traveled slowly on camel-back across
the caravan routes of Central Asia and there were a number of things that could go wrong --
robbers could attack, officials could interfere, and then there was the inclement weather and
the turn of the seasons. As long as the Mongol Empire lasted it was still possible to deal with
these challenges and the profits remained high. The Mongol khanates had not always been at
peace with each other, but they understood the value of commerce and they did what they
could to encourage it. With the end of the Pax mongolica in the fourteenth-century, however,
both the risks and the costs associated with the trade rose dramatically. The new rulers who
appeared about half-way between Europe and East Asia wanted their cut of the profits. Both
the Ottomans and Mamluk Egypt put up customs and tariffs and this made it impossible for the
overland trade to continue.

In response, the Europeans began looking for alternative ways to get to East Asia. They tried
their luck by ship. One idea was to go down the west-coast of Africa and to find a passage to
India that way. Once these attempts proved successful, trade moved away from the
Mediterranean, and away from Italy, and to the countries along Europe's Atlantic coast. Here
Portugal took the lead and it was soon followed by Spain, although the Spanish, at least to
begin with, continued to rely on the services of Italian sea-captains. The most famous of these,
Cristoforo Colombo, "Christopher Columbus," had the idea that it should be possible to travel to India by going westward, straight into the Atlantic Ocean. He did not find India this way, but he found a new world -- a *Novus mundus* -- of which no one in the old world had had any knowledge. Eventually the new world came to be known as "America," named after Amerigo Vespucci, yet another Italian sea-captain.

Medieval Europeans did not have much interest in the world outside of their continent, we said, with two exceptions. First of all there were the Vikings of Scandinavia. The Vikings traveled far and wide and divided the world between them. Vikings from what today is Sweden traveled eastward along the large rivers of Russia until they came into contact with the Byzantine empire and the Abbasid caliphate. [Read more: A Viking funeral on the Volga] The Byzantine capital of Constantinople — today's Istanbul — was known as *Miklagården* to the Vikings, and the Byzantine emperor had a lifeguard made up of Scandinavian warriors. Meanwhile Vikings from what today is Denmark and Norway traveled westward, exploring first Iceland, then Greenland and finally what they called *Vineland*, North America. In 1960, remnants of a Viking settlement were discovered on the northern tip of Newfoundland. Columbus was not the first European to visit North America, the Vikings were.

The second exception concerns the military campaigns, known as the "Crusades," undertaken in order to capture the land in today's Israel which the Europeans in the Middle Ages regarded as "holy." To some Europeans -- notably a few militant popes -- it was unacceptable that land mentioned in their religious scriptures, and which before the Arab expansion had been predominantly Christian, now were being held by Muslims. The idea was to equip a pan-European army which could win it back. Altogether seven major crusades were organized between 1096 and 1254 CE, in which hundreds of thousands of Europeans took part. For a while the Crusaders were quite successful. They conquered Jerusalem in 1099 and managed to establish small kingdoms throughout the eastern Mediterranean. At the battle of Hattin in
1187, however, they were defeated by the armies of the Fatimid caliphate led by the famous general Salah ad-Din, known to the Europeans as “Saladin.” Salah ad-Din reconquered Jerusalem and proceeded to establish a vast kingdom which controlled much of the Middle East. Although the Europeans gathered for more crusades, they were never as militarily successful. The Fourth Crusade is particularly notorious, but above for its attack on fellow Christians. In 1204, an army of Crusaders descended on Constantinople and proceeded to loot and burn the city. Between 1204–1261, Hagia Sophia, the city’s main cathedral, was turned into a Roman Catholic Church. The devastation wrought by the Catholic forces has long been remembered among Orthodox Christians.

Wars on behalf of the Christian religion continued on the fringes of Europe, both in Eastern Europe and in Spain. Lithuania was converted to Christianity in 1386 by means of armies consisting of the so called "Teutonic knights," a military but also a religious order. In Spain, a project -- the Reconquista -- was undertaken to take al-Andalus from its Muslim rulers. The Muslims had come across from Africa in 711 CE and established an economically thriving and culturally flourishing caliphate in the souther Spanish city of Córdoba. [Read more: The Arabs in Spain] In 1212, the Christian coalition won an important battle at Las Navas de Tolosa, yet it would take another 250 years before the Iberian peninsula was fully under Christian control. The last Muslim ruler -- Muhammad XII of Granada, known by the Spaniards as "Boabdil" -- was expelled only in 1492 — the same year in which Christopher Colombo made his first journey across the Atlantic. The Reconquista severed the links between Spain and the centers of civilization in the East, and forced both Muslims and Jews to convert to Christianity at the pain of death or expulsion.

The European occupation of the "New World"

For many Spaniards -- the soldiers known as conquistadors -- the wars in the Americas were simply an extension of the wars which they already had fought in Spain itself. They often
confused the natives of the Americas with Muslims and sights they saw in the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan or the Inca capital of Cuzco often reminded them of Muslim Spain. Yet, conditions in the Americas were of course entirely different. Despite their awesome power, both the Aztec and the Inca empires were easily conquered. In both cases the Spaniards took control by means of only a few hundred men. In order to explain this curious fact, we need to remember that what the Europeans referred to as “empires” in both cases were loosely integrated federations which included plenty of locals who greeted the Europeans as liberators and were delighted with the military support they received. Both empires were also far too dependent on the individual qualities of their leaders. Once the Aztec king and the Sapa Inca were gone, both empires lost their sense of direction and their ability to defend themselves. Although a military resistance eventually was organized, it was far too little, too late. The last indigenous stronghold fell to the Spanish in 1572.

This is when the Europeans for the first time divided the world between themselves. Or rather, when it was divided by the Pope in Rome and given to Portugal and Spain, the first European colonizers. At the Treaty of Tordesillas, 1494, two separate spheres of interest were created. The Portuguese were given what amounted to the center of the world, as portrayed on the new European world maps, and the Spaniards were given the margins. Thus Africa, the Indian Ocean and Brazil fell to the Portuguese, whereas Spain received the rest of the Americas but also, for example, the Philippines. This is why people to this day speak Portuguese in Brazil but Spanish in Mexico and Peru. [Read more: Treaty of Tordesillas]

What the Europeans more than anything were looking for in the New World was gold. Columbus' descriptions of what he had discovered in the New World contained endless references to how much gold the new continent contained. This, he knew, was the best way to get European kings to invest in more voyages of exploration. And soon the Europeans began dreaming dreams of “Eldorado” — a country where everything was made from gold and even
the poorest conquistador could become enormously wealthy. Although the Europeans did find gold, they found even more silver. In fact, there was a mountain -- Potosí in Peru -- which was said to be entirely made of silver. Although this was an exaggeration, the mine the Europeans established here were the main source of supply of silver for the entire world. The only problem was that it was located high up in the Andes and it was impossible to get people to willingly work in the mine. Instead the Spaniards forced the locals to work as slaves, under atrocious conditions, and hundreds of thousands of people died. [Read more: A mountain made of silver]

Similar repressive measures were employed by the Spanish conquistadors wherever they went, and the results were devastating. In the end, the European occupation of the Americas resulted in genocide. Some indigenous people were killed in military confrontations, many were worked to death in mines or on plantations, but the vast majority of people died as a result of exposure to European diseases like smallpox and measles. These illnesses had long existed in Europe, and the Europeans had adapted themselves to them, but to the people of the Americas they were deadly. It is estimated that perhaps 90 percent of the indigenous population of South, Central and North America died. Although the numbers are uncertain, this equals tens of millions of people. The impact on the population of the Americas was far worse than the impact which the Black plague had in Asia and Europe in the fourteenth century. [Read more: The Black death]

One consequence of the genocide was that there was not enough people to work for the Europeans. The new continent was full of resources that could be exploited and turned into commercial products, but there were not enough indigenous people who could carry out the actual physical labor involved. In response, the Europeans began importing slaves from Africa, often sold to them by West African kingdoms such as the Asante and Benin [Read more: The slave trade]. From the sixteenth-century to the nineteenth some 12 millions Africans slaves
were forcibly transported across the Atlantic. Although the international slave trade was abolished in the 1830s, slavery was abolished in Brazil only in 1888.

Not only germs and human beings were exchanged, but a long range of plants, fruits and animals too. [Read more: The Columbian exchange] Since life on the America continent had evolved independently from the rest of the world, it had a long range of unique species, and there were also many species that existed elsewhere in the world but not here. Through the global trading networks these plants, fruits and animals soon spread far and wide. This is how the rest of the world came to learn about cocoa, chilies, potatoes and tomatoes, and how the people of America came to import horses, cows, goats, wheat and other cereals. It is strange to imagine that Indian curries were made with black pepper, not chilies, before 1492, or that the native peoples on the prairies of North America had no access to horses. But this was indeed the case. [Read more: Chocolate and chilies]

As far as North America is concerned, it was originally settled by the Dutch, the English and the French, but eventually it was English settlers who came to dominate. To begin with a substantial proportion of the settlers were members of religious minorities — the so called "Puritans" — who after the English Civil War, 1642–1651 CE, took refuge in what came to be known as "New England." [Read more: Settlers in New England] Further to the south — in what was to become "Virginia" and the "Carolinas" -- English settlers established plantations where they grew tobacco, sugarcane and cotton. They relied heavily on slave labor imported from Africa.

In North America too European germs wiped out entire populations. To the European settlers, the land looked empty and unoccupied. They would subsequently come to refer to it as terra nullius, Latin for "no one's land." Land which did not belong to any one, they argued, was there for the taking -- at least as long as you left equal and enough for others. And take the land is what the Europeans did. In fact, they argued, they had an obligation to occupy it. Although the
Christian God had given the earth to all of mankind to share equally, he had not intended to
give it to the indolent and the wasteful. It was obvious to the Europeans that they could make
more productive use of the land than the indigenous population. It was God's will, they
concluded, that they should take charge of the New World. And take charge they did.

A commercial world economy

In a sense the European discovery of the Americas was something of a distraction. After all, it
was to India, China and the islands of Southeast Asia that the Europeans wanted to go. From
this perspective the year 1498 is more important than 1492. It was in 1498 that the Portuguese
sea-captain Vasco da Gama rounded the Cape of Good Hope, on the southern-most tip of
Africa, and started making his way up Africa's eastern coast. Here the Europeans met traders
from Oman, Yemen and Gujarat, and if they only had arrived half a century earlier they would
have met Chinese traders too. The Chinese traded with East Africa in beginning of the
fifteenth-century, importing giraffes and other exotic goods. [Read more: A giraffe in Beijing]

Benefiting from the monsoon winds, da Gama arrived in Kerala in southern India in May 1498,
and from here Portuguese ships would soon start exploring all the ports around the Indian
Ocean. This is how the Europeans came into contact with the "spice islands," the vast
archipelago of today's Malaysia and Indonesia where assorted exotic spices were grown. The
Europeans soon developed a taste for nutmeg, cloves, cardamom, black pepper and mace —
bringing flavor to the notoriously bland European diet. Before long European ships had
continued into the Pacific Ocean, traveling northward to China and Japan. The Portuguese
established trading depots — not colonies, only ports where they could trade with the locals,
store goods and repair their ships — in places like Goa in India, 1510, Malacca in Malaysia, 1511,
and in Macau in China, 1557.
The Portuguese were soon followed by the Spanish. In 1565, conquistadors from Mexico made it to the Philippines where they established a colony known as the "Spanish East Indies," with Manila as its capital. The Spanish visited Taiwan too, and southern China. Although the Spanish economy was far from productive, and lagged behind the rest of Europe, the country was rich thanks to the silver they had discovered in the Americas. This allowed them to go on something of a shopping spree. And once they had paid their debts to their creditors in Europe, other Europeans had the money to join in. The problem until now had been that while the Europeans were interested in buying any number of Asian products, there was little that people in Asia wanted in return. For example: the main export from England in the sixteenth century was wool, a commodity for which there was no demand in India. Once silver started flowing from the Americas, however, the problem of trade imbalances was readily solved. The Europeans could suddenly buy anything they wanted. This infusion of ready means of payment caused a boom in international trade. It was now that Mughal India became the richest country in the world. Before long the Spanish did not even bother to send the silver to Europe first but sent it instead directly across the Pacific Ocean, straight to their creditors in Asia.

More than the Spanish, however, it was the Dutch who came to copy the Portuguese, and who become their greatest rivals as international merchants. The Dutch lived in a republic, and official at least they had no imperial ambitions, but they were very keen on trade. It was in Holland, in 1602, that the first truly multinational company – the Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie, the Dutch East India Company, was established. [Read more: The East India companies] They developed the markets for the products which the Portuguese had discovered and connected all parts of the world into one global market-place. And there were indeed great profits to be made. The goods the Europeans were most interested in – spices, tea, silk, hardwood, porcelain, jewellery – were all light-weight and easy to store and transport. The journey to the East and back was very long of course – taking more than a year – and there
were plenty of both natural and man-made perils along the way, but a ship which made it back to Europe with a hull full of spices would still be able to make fabulous profits.

All over Europe similar trading companies were established. The English East India Company, founded in 1600, actually preceded the VOC by two years; Østindisk Kompagni was established in Denmark in 1616; Compagnie française pour le commerce des Indes orientales, in France in 1664, Ostindiska Kompaniet in Sweden in 1731, and so on.

To facilitate the trade a number of financial and institutional innovations were made, and again the Dutch took the lead. In the Beurs – the stock exchange – of Amsterdam it was possible to invest in shares in a long range of different trading companies, to exchange currency, buy bills of exchange, to take up a loan, or to buy maritime insurance. The Amsterdam Beurs was a one-stop-shop for financial services and a good place to gather information and connect with business partners. Late in the seventeenth-century many of these practices were copied by English merchants.

In general, the European kings benefited greatly from the trade with the East. This was a time — in the seventeenth century — when European rulers increasingly came to call themselves "sovereign," meaning that they alone had the right to govern their countries. A sovereign ruler had a monopoly on the right to make laws, impose justice, and legitimately to exercise violence. However, in order to back up these rather fanciful claims, the sovereign kings needed resources, and this is what the trade with East Asia provided. For one thing, each trading company had a monopoly on the trade with a particular part of the world. These monopolies were sold by the kings and thus a good source of revenue. The kings would also borrow money from the companies. They had surplus cash, after all, which they needed to invest. The East India companies were happy to oblige, although some kings, like the French, were notorious for defaulting on their loans. The English kings were less extravagant and the financial institutions
established in London — after the Dutch model — were more robust. Eventually the City of London became the center of global finance.

The monopolies held by the large trading companies were later much reviled by the likes of Adam Smith, who advocated freedom of trade and an end to all monopolies. Yet by Smith's time — in the latter part of the eighteenth-century — this trade was already well established. This was not the case hundred and fifty years earlier. At the beginning of the seventeenth-century, monopolies served to make investments more secure and thereby to help establish markets which until that point in time had not existed. The revenue derived from the colonial trade, and from the commercialization of the world economy, made it possible for European states to establish and militarily defend their independence.

The development of global trading networks had a profound impact on the world economy and it was to have political implications too — involving European countries in colonization and empire building. But in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries Europe was still only a marginal player in Asian affairs. From the point of view of an East Asian ruler of the time, the Europeans were nothing but small contingents of traders who docked at a few ports, conducted their trade, and then left. And yet, the Portuguese and later the Dutch would soon come to develop a dominant position in inter-Asian trade, above all across the Indian Ocean.

In Asia, in other words, Europe's position was nothing like Europe's position in the Americas. The Dutch established a colony, Batavia, in Indonesia, and the Spanish occupied the Philippines, but there was no way the Europeans successfully could make war on the many powerful kingdoms of the East. China, India, Japan, Siam, the Mughal empire, Persia and the Ottomans were far too rich and powerful, their armies too strong, and the Europeans were few in number and militarily clueless. Instead, and much as in the Middle Ages, the Europeans continued to be awestruck by all the "wonders" they discovered in these faraway lands – the power of the rulers, the wealth of the people, the many sophisticated arts and cultural traditions. The
Europeans often felt distinctly inferior, and for good reason. [Read more: Dancing Dutchmen in Japan]

Independence for settler societies

The Seven Years War, 1756-1763, is the world war few people have heard about. It was fought in Europe, between two grand coalitions of states — one led by Great Britain, the other by France — but the war spread to all five continents of the world. The conflict was particularly fierce in North America where both Britain and France had established communities of settlers and also strong commercial interests — the British had plantations in the American south; the French a thriving fur trade in Canada. The Seven Years War was fiercely fought in India too where the settlers were fewer but the commercial interests at least as strong. The conflict concluded with victories for Britain. The large territories which the French had settled between Quebec in the north and Louisiana in the south were taken over by the British. In this part of the United States various place names still tell the story of their French heritage — Illinois, Notre Dame, St Louis, Des Moins, and many others. In Louisiana some seven percent of the population still speaks or understand French.

One long-term consequence of the Seven Years War was that the European colonizers came to make themselves more independent of their home governments. These relations had not always been amicable. Latin America is a case in point. Spain tried to keep some order in the empire, and stop the worst atrocities committed against the native population, but the conquistadors were often scornful of such policies and they resented Madrid meddling in their affairs. Gradually they came to think of themselves as a community with its own identity, separate from the mother country. When Spain itself was occupied during the Napoleonic Wars, 1808-1814, they saw an opportunity to assert themselves. None of them felt any loyalty to Spain's new ruler — Napoleon's own brother, installed as king José I — but they were at the same time influenced by many ideas of the French Revolution and when absolutist rule
returned to Spain after the fall of Napoleon, the settlers in the Americas rebelled. Colombia declared independence in 1810, Venezuela in 1811, Argentina in 1816, Peru in 1821, Bolivia in 1825, and so on. Brazil is a special case. In order to avoid Napoleon, the Portuguese royal house decamped to Brazil, making Rio de Janeiro their new capital. When then king returned to Portugal, his son stayed on, in 1822 declaring himself independent of his father.

Something similar happened in North America. In the southern parts of the North American continent the British had established large plantations where they grew tobacco, sugar and cotton and for export. In the eighteenth-century these products proved extraordinarily successful. People everywhere around the world started smoking, eating sweets and dressing in cotton fabrics. Since the native population largely had been wiped out by European diseases, the settlers began importing slaves from Africa. In total around 300,000 slaves were imported into territories which today are parts of the United States. Slavery itself was abolished only in 1865, in the wake of the American Civil War. Today some 13 percent of the population of the United States — around 40 million people — identify themselves as "African-American."

The ethos and lifestyle of the southern plantation owners were really quite different from that of the Puritan settlers in New England, and both of these groups had little in common with the inhabitants of cities such as New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Boston. What they all had shared, however, was a resentment of British meddling in what they regarded as their own affairs. The settlers insisted that London had no right to tax them as long as they were not represented in the British parliament, and they wanted to be able to conduct international trade on other than British-registered ships. Another bone of contention concerned relations between the settlers and the remnants of the indigenous population. The British authorities sought to limit the expansion westward in order to protect the native Americans from abuse. This the settlers regarded as unacceptable. The settler colonies in North America declared themselves independent from Great Britain in 1776.
This is how European imperialism by the 1820s largely had come to seem a thing of the past. People in Britain would look back wistfully on the days when they had had an empire. There was still Canada, to be sure, but this territory was mainly a concern for merchants involved in the fur trade; there was India too, but British India was ruled by the East India Company, not by the British state. There were some Brits in Australia, but the continent was still commonly referred to as "New Holland." The same goes for France. As a result of the Seven Years' War, the French had lost many of their commercial outposts. The Portuguese had lost Brazil, even though they retained their trading posts in Africa and Asia. There were Dutch colonizers in South Africa, but all in all the Dutch presence in the rest of the world was motivated by commercial requirements not by a policy of imperial aggression.

And yet, one hundred years later, at the time of the First World War, next to all of Africa and most of Asia were in European hands. By now Great Britain had created the largest empire the world had ever seen — although the Mongol empire of the thirteenth-century still is the largest empire in history with an interconnected landmass. In the British empire, the saying went, "the sun never sets." By the time of the First World War, the French too had taken possession of vast territories in Africa and in Southeast Asia. Even the Germans and the Italians — newly united as nation-states — sought to establish themselves as colonial powers. In order to understand this rather surprising turn of events, we must understand the changes that were taking place in Europe itself. This is more than anything the story of the “industrial revolution.”

An industrial world economy

At the end of the eighteenth-century, new ways of manufacturing goods were invented in Europe which made use of machines powered by steam, later by electricity, and which relied on large-scale production in factories. As a result of the industrial revolution, it was suddenly possible for the Europeans to produce many more goods and to do it far more efficiently than ever previously. Before long cheap, mass-produced, products were flooding European markets
and soon the Europeans began looking for new markets overseas. They needed more natural resources for their factories too — resources which in many cases only could be found in other continents. These economic imperatives meant that the Europeans took a renewed interest in the world. The eventual result was a second wave of imperial expansion and the creation of an international system completely dominated by European countries and European examples.

This time it was the British who took the lead. It was in Britain that the industrial revolution had started and the trading stations and colonial outposts which remained from the first wave of imperial expansion provided them with a head-start. The British also had a navy which was second to none. Throughout the nineteenth-century, the British government was heavily dominated by free-traders; by politicians, that is, who wanted customs and tariffs to come down and British merchants to be able to access any foreign markets they wanted. It was easy for the British to be in favor of free trade, after all, since they, in the first part of the nineteenth-century, had an industrial capacity which was second to none. The rest of Europe, and the United States too, were still agricultural societies.

The strategy the Europeans pursued was always the same — and again the British took the lead. They approached the rulers of a non-European country and insisted that they, the Europeans, should be granted access to its markets. If the country in question agreed, the Europeans would establish themselves there and start buying and selling. But if the country refused, the Europeans would threaten military action. In some cases the recalcitrant foreigners eventually gave in and signed a commercial treaty, often referred to as an "unequal treaty" due to the favorable terms granted to the Europeans. In other cases, the recalcitrant foreigners stood their ground, and the result would be a war and a European invasion.

This is how Britain, step by step, came to establish its world-wide dominance. The British historian John Robert Seeley once argued that Britain acquired its empire "in a fit of absent-mindedness." This is an exaggeration to be sure, but it points to the fact that the British had no
grand master-plan to take over the world. Rather, one step led to another, and they were all
guided by what was regarded as economic imperatives: foreign markets needed to be opened
up; trading posts to be defended; British merchants wanted protection; British investments
abroad had to be made secure. The political domination happened while British merchants
were keeping their eyes on their profit margins.

The country which Seeley most obviously had in mind was India. Here the East India Company
had engaged in trade since the early seventeenth-century. Here too the British had at first only
established small trading posts, but little by little they were sucked into the struggles for
power which characterized politics in the Mughal empire during its eighteenth-century decline.
The East India Company made alliances with powerful Indian princes. The carrot which they
dangled before them was the fact that they could provide unprecedented access to
international markets for various Indian products; the stick which they at the same time
wielded was the army which they had brought with them. At the battle of Palashi, 1757, the
East India Company defeated the ruler of Bengal and his French allies, and the British suddenly
found itself the main power-broker in the sub-continent. One by one they gobbled up the
remaining independent kingdoms.

At the same time it would be a mistake to exaggerate Europe’s superiority — at least as far as
the first half of the nineteenth-century goes. Many locals defended themselves well, and often
they had access to military technology which was no worse than that of the Europeans. They
had superior knowledge of the local terrain, of course, and the Europeans were always
hampered by the long supply-lines and the enormous distances they had to travel to get to
their colonies in the first place. It was obvious quite early on that the Europeans had
overextended themselves. Thus, even as their colonial empires spread, there were constant
reversals. The British lost wars in Burma, in Afghanistan, against the Asante and the people of
Benin. [Read more: The First Anglo-Afghan War] And in 1857 — during the Indian Uprising,
which had united Muslims and Hindus against the British — they came very close to being thrown out of India. The British empire was enormous to be sure, but Britain itself was tiny. The empire was like an oak tree planted in a flower pot. The root system could not support such vast branches.

Meanwhile the French began their colonial conquests in North Africa. Parts of Algeria were occupied in the 1830s and eventually incorporated into the French state. French people who wanted to go overseas did not have to go to America, they could go to Africa instead. But here too the Europeans met with ferocious resistance and it took the French more than ten years to conquer all of Algeria. Since they often were unable to defeat their enemies outright, the French employed what they proudly described as barbarian tactics — killing women and children, and destroying crops, fruit-trees and animals. This is more than anything the general pattern of European colonial warfare in the nineteenth-century. Since the European armies often were far smaller than those of the locals, the locals could not be defeated in a regular war. Instead the Europeans staged military confrontations designed to spread terror. The idea was to strike once and strike hard, and thereby to convince the local to give up all resistance. This is what the French did in North Africa and the British in India. After the uprising of 1857, the leaders of the Indian rebellion were tied to the mouths of cannons and their bodies shot right through with cannon balls.

The big prize for British merchants was China. The country had some 350 million people -- "a third of mankind" -- and they were all, the British convinced themselves, eager to buy British-made products. The only problem was that the Chinese authorities only allowed trade in the one city of Guangzhou, "Canton," in the south, and only for part of the year. This, to the British, was not nearly good enough. In particular, the British wanted to be able to sell opium. Opium was the solution to perennial problem of what to offer the Chinese in exchange for all the products the Europeans wanted to buy from them. Opium was grown in British-held India, and
before long the exports to China were booming. The only problem was that opium was illegal in China, and when the Chinese authorities tried to stop the trade, the British went to war – the First Opium War, 1839-42, and the Second Opium War, 1856-1860. China lost both wars and was eventually forced to open all its ports to foreign trade. The traditional international system of East Asia, which had had China at its center, was no more. From being the “Middle Kingdom” and the country responsible for keeping heaven and earth in harmony with each other, China came to be dominated by foreigners and turned into a peripheral player in an international system controlled by Europe.

The Japanese market was pried open in much the same fashion, although here threats were enough, and it was the Americans who took the lead. Japan had since the early seventeenth-century had very limited intercourse with the rest of the world, and all official trade was restricted to one city, Nagasaki, in the far south. [Read more: A Japanese international system?]

However, in the summer of 1853 the American Matthew Perry, known as Commodore Perry, appeared in Edo harbor on-board a steam-driven gunboat, demanding access to Japanese markets. He presented his demands to the Japanese authorities, left for Hong Kong, but came back after half a year, this time with a fleet of ten ships and well over a thousand men. Initially at a loss for what to do, the Japanese began making concessions, and eventually their policy of seclusion unraveled. An important force behind the change in policy were the assorted daimyo, the local rulers, especially the ones in the south of the country — who often, clandestinely, had carried on a successful trade with China, Korea and the Ryukyu islands. [Read more: The Ryukyus islands as the center of the world] The changes set in motion led to an overthrow of the Tokugawa government in 1868, and the restoration of the emperor — long hidden away in the city of Kyoto and more or less forgotten.
The apotheosis of colonialism

As a result of the industrial revolution, and the relentless pace of economic development, the Europeans gained a new sense of self-confidence. This radically changed their view of the rest of the world, and of Asia in particular. From the first faltering contacts in the Middle Ages to the end of the eighteenth-century, Asia had been admired and looked up to; this was the exotic East of immense wealth, with rulers of unlimited power and societies of unsurpassed cultural sophistication. However, in the first part of the nineteenth-century, Asia suddenly became an object of scorn. The problem, the Europeans decided, was that Asia had failed to develop in the European fashion. A country like China, the Europeans now decided, was "stagnant," "stuck in the past"; it made no progress and "had no history." A truly odd conclusions. Whatever you say about China, a lack of history is not one of its problems.

In order to give the semblance of scientific validity to such claims, many Europeans made references to biology. Misreading and misunderstanding Charles Darwin's *The Origin of the Species*, 1859, they decided that the different "races" of the world were locked in an inescapable struggle. The Europeans had proven themselves superior, they decided, and thus deserved to rule the world. Other, "inferior races" were to be their servants, and the least developed people of all would inevitably come to be destroyed. This, the Europeans decided, was implied by the logic of human history. To help history along, they carried out genocides against the people of Tasmania, Tierra del Fuego, the Herero people of Namibia, and many others. [*Read more: The Herero genocide*]

The nineteenth-century had, as far as European history goes, been quite peaceful — at least once the Napoleonic wars finally were over in 1815. There were some wars to be sure, but nothing like the wholesale destruction that was to take place in the twentieth-century. In the last couple of decades of the nineteenth-century, however, the mood changed. A new, more aggressive, form of nationalism spread throughout Europe, and one country after another
began looking for ways to assert itself. The disparate states that existed on the Apennine peninsula were united into one Italian state in 1861, and the many small German states united into one Germany empire in 1871. Both nation-states, Germany in particular, were on the rise and they both wanted a bigger place, and a bigger say, in international politics.

The new, assertive, nationalism can be traced back to the economic changes. Economic historians sometimes talk about "the second industrial revolution." This was the rapid transformation of the world economy which took place in the last three decades of the nineteenth-century. New inventions and discoveries — electricity, chemical processes, steel and petroleum production — allowed factories to spew out many more products and on a far bigger scale than ever before. Meanwhile, the new railroads and far cheaper transcontinental shipping created vastly larger markets for the goods that were produced. Local markets were connected to form national markets and national markets connected to form international markets. Soon the whole world, with some marginal exceptions, was a part of the same world market. The second industrial revolution led to a renewed demand for natural resources and export markets. The self-assertive nationalism, moreover, was expressed as a search for colonies. Colonial possessions became a symbol of great-power status, and the new European nation-states often proved themselves to be very aggressive colonizers.

It was now that Africa for the first time came into focus as a continent to explore and exploit. The Europeans had been trading with Africa since the fifteenth-century but much as in Asia, their presence had been limited to small trading ports along the coast -- in today's Ghana, for example, at the time known as the "Gold Coast," or in today's Cote d'Ivoire, the "Ivory Coast." The only exception was the southern-most part of the continent where Dutch farmers had settled. Meanwhile the Europeans know nothing about the inner parts of the African continent. This changed in the course of the nineteenth-century as European adventurers and missionaries went on voyages through the jungles "discovering" this mountain or that river,
often supported by "national geographical societies" in their respective home countries. The search for the "sources of the Nile" attracted particular attention.

In the footsteps of the adventurers and the missionaries came agents of large trading companies, European soldiers, settler and colonizers. The Europeans found gold and ivory, but also diamonds and copper, palm oil, cocoa, bananas and other "colonial produce." It was clear there was money to be made. Little by little Africa was divided up by the Europeans, and although the African kingdoms often defended themselves successfully, the Europeans always returned with larger and larger armies. It was in order to regulate this "scramble for Africa" that the various countries with colonial designs on Africa met in Berlin Conference in 1884. [Read more: The Berlin Conference]  The conference was a very civilized affair. The Europeans met around a large map of Africa and divided the various territories between themselves. No people from Africa were invited to attend. That people in Africa might have had a view on how their continent was divided never crossed the mind of any European. As a result of this agreement, the British colonized much of western, eastern and southern Africa and the French much of West Africa. Germany got Tanzania, Italy got Libya and Somalia, and Leopold, the Belgian king, got Congo as his personal possession.

Elsewhere in the world the French added Indochina to its growing empire and Britain occupied Burma and Malaya. Meanwhile the Russians pushed into Central Asia and the United States pushed westward across the great North American plains towards the Pacific Ocean. This is how it happened that, by the time of the First World War, most parts of the world were in European hands. There were some scattered exceptions to this rule — China, Japan, Siam, Persia, but also Ethiopia and Nepal — but in these ostensibly independent countries too the Europeans had a very strong presence. [Read more: Countries that never were colonized]

When we today think of the colonial era, it is generally this second burst of colonial expansion that we have in mind. In the last decades of the nineteenth-century the Europeans — and the
Americans too, actually — really did come to rule next to all of the rest of the world. Their methods were ruthless, exploitative and degrading. There were many wars and the occasional genocide. The atrocities were backed up by ideas of European superiority based in the alleged science of race biology. At the same time we should remember that the apogee of colonialism only lasted for about fifty years. In terms of world history, this is a short parenthesis. Already in 1914, by the time of the First World War, the Europeans found themselves busy with other matters, and in 1945, by the end of the Second World War, colonial empires were an anachronism. Europe was devastated by the two world war and colonies had become an expensive luxury. Things were once again about to change.

**Decolonization**

Independence, statehood, and membership in the international community are most conveniently measured in terms of membership in the United Nations. The United Nations has today well over 190 member states. This number is to be contrasted with the 57 independent states who had joined before the year 1950. Something has happened, that is, since the time of the founding of the organization — the number of independent states in the world has increased four-fold. This is the story of decolonization: the story of how the former colonies, ruled by European states, made themselves independent.

By 1945, we said, colonialism had become an anomaly. The European colonizers were too devastated by war to afford the luxury of an empire. Colonies, that is, were a drain on the resources of the European countries and colonialism had little public support. Although there no doubt were individual business interests which gained considerably from colonial exploits, the European countries as a whole did not, at least not by the 1950s. This was particularly the case where there was determined, local, resistance to colonial rule. Facing a local enemy bent on a war of national liberation, the Europeans would sooner or later always lose. They were far away, after all, while the locals were fighting on their home turf. Maintaining an empire under
such circumstances would have required a commitment which simply did not exist. Starting in
the late 1950s, and accelerating in the 1960s, one former colony after another made itself
independent. By 1970 there were few colonies left. After a revolution in Portugal in 1974
which toppled the dictatorship, the Portuguese colonies in Angola and Mozambique too
declared independence. The last British colony — Hong Kong — was returned to China in 1997.
Today the Malvinas islands in the South Atlantic is a British possession, but the locals are
adamant that it should stay that way. Much the same goes for the islands of Martinique and
Guadeloupe in the West Indies which are counted as parts of France, not as colonies. In the
Pacific, an independence movement has fought the French in Nouvelle-Calédonie, but the
island remains for now a French possession.

The process of decolonization began in an unlikely place — the island of Saint-Domingue in the
West Indies, the country we today know as Haiti. Inspired by the French Revolution, and fed up
with being exploited for their labor, a vast rebellion broke out here in 1791 among the slaves
who were working on the French-held plantations. In 1804, the country declared itself
independent from France. A similar independence struggle began in India in 1857, during the
Indian Rebellion, or what the British liked to refer to as the “Indian mutiny.” [Read more: The
Indian Rebellion] British rule in India was heavily dependent on the collaboration of local elites
and the loyalty of indigenous soldiers. When Muslims and Hindu soldiers joined forces and
rallied behind the institution of the Mughal emperor, the British found themselves in a
hopeless position. For a while, before military reinforcements arrived from Britain itself, it
really looked like the British would be expelled. This legacy of resistance was invoked at the
time of the founding of the Indian National Congress in 1885. The second generation of its
leaders included men like Mahatma Gandhi, Mohammed Ali Jinnah and Jawaharlal Nehru, who
all were to play roles as statesmen in countries of their own. India and Pakistan both declared
its independence from Britain in 1947.
This is not to say that the struggle for independence was an easy process or that the Europeans gave up without a fight. Well into the 1950s, the French believed it could defend its possessions in Indochina against the local independence movement led by the charismatic Ho Chi Minh. However, at the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the French were decisively defeated. From this time onward, the United States step by step came to take over responsibility for what in the 1960s was known as “the Vietnam War.” Yet the United States too was decisively defeated by the Vietnamese and its armies had to leave Indochina in 1975. The total number of people killed in the war has been estimated at four million. Another bloody conflict fought by the French took place in Algeria. Here a sizable group of European settlers, counting well over one million people, had considered Algeria their home for several generations and Algeria was officially regarded as a part of France itself. An armed rebellion began in 1954 which ended with independence for the country in 1962. By this time some 300,000 Algerians had died and all of the settlers returned to France. The British, meanwhile, were fighting guerrilla movements in both Kenya and Malaya. In Kenya, the Mau Mau rebellion was brutally repressed and in Malaya the British fought a dirty war against a Communist insurgency. Malaya became independent as Malaysia in 1957 and Kenya independent in 1963.

By the 1950s, the United States took an active part in many of these conflicts. As a result of the Second World War, the U.S. had emerged as the economically and militarily most powerful country in the world. There were U.S. troops on every continent and the country’s economy represented close to half of the worlds combined economic output. Yet it was not the case that the United States wanted to defend the European colonial powers. By the 1950s, the focus was instead on the rivalry with the Soviet Union. The revolution of 1917 had turned Russia into a socialist state and the Second World War had expanded its influence over much of Eastern Europe. Their position was nothing like that of the United States, but the Russians were defiant, had their own nuclear weapons program, and liked to talk about the coming of a “world revolution.” The question for the Americans was what would happen to the former
colonies as they made themselves independent from their European masters. The threat was that they would join the Soviet camp in the super-power competition, declare themselves enemies of the United States and close their doors to American companies. In one country after another this is also what happened, and for a while in the 1970s, the Soviet Union had a number of allies in Africa, Asia and even Latin America. The non-European world was no longer colonized, instead it was controlled by either one of the parties to this superpower competition.

This is how the European international system came to spread around the world. This is how the European way of organizing international politics became the universal norm and the European state the only viable political unit. This was a result of colonialism, yet colonialism itself is not to blame. After all, a colonized country is the very opposite of a sovereign state; the colonized peoples had no nation-states and enjoyed no self-determination. It was instead through the process of liberating themselves from the colonizers that the European models were copied. The Europeans would only grant sovereignty to states that were like their own; the only way to be an independent state was to become an independent state of the European kind. To create such a state was consequently the project in which all non-European political leaders engaged. Thus, once they had become independent, all new states had their respective territories and fortified borders; their own capitals, armies, foreign ministries, flags, national anthems and all the other paraphernalia of sovereign statehood.

In far too many cases, the newly independent states failed to live up to the European ideals. The political institutions were too weak, the economy was not developing, and often there were highly valued commodities — gold, diamond, oil — over which men with weapons were prepared to fight. And in next to no case was there the kind of “nation” which the development of a European-type state seemed to require. The new national leaders — often educated in the schools of the colonial powers and trusted by them as “one of theirs” — had no
nations to lead since there were no nations. Instead nations had to be “built,” but nation-building in many cases turned out to be an impossible task. The result were “failed states,” states which failed to live up to European standards. Whether it made sense for the newly independent states to try to live up to European ideals was never discussed. Whether there were alternative, non-European, ways of organizing a state and its foreign relations was never discussed either. As already Mahatma Gandhi had explained, a country which gains its independence on someone else’s terms is never going to be truly independent.

The future of the international system

The question is how to go on from here. The question is how the story will continue. At the time of decolonization the Europeans were convinced that their way of organizing international politics was the only alternative. They were also convinced that it constituted a great improvement on the international systems which previously had existed elsewhere in the world. The European version of an international system, they argued, allows for “sovereignty” and “self-determination,” and thereby democracy and liberal rights. All these are good things and unique achievements. However, learning about non-European alternatives to the European international system, we might decide to question that conclusion. Or, if nothing else, we can compare what we have today with what existed previously.

A fundamental problem with the European international system is that it has been so inherently, and devastatingly, violent. The idea of sovereign states who determine their own fates, and look after their own interests without regard for others, has been an unmitigated disaster. There are few years in Europe’s history of the last four centuries when there has not been a war in one place or another. In the twentieth-century alone some 80 million people died in wars between sovereign states, and tens of millions more perished in genocides which the principles of sovereignty and non-interference made possible. As long as the idea of sovereignty persists, it is difficult to see how these kinds of disasters can be avoided. By
contrast, several of the non-European international systems we have learned about in this book seem far less war-prone — although none of them can be described as peaceful. Moreover, although sovereignty has not been an official principle of a system anywhere except in Europe, there has in practice been a lot of scope for self-determination. It was the relative independence of the various rulers of East Asia in the Chinese international system, or of the emirs of Central Asia under the Abbasid caliphate, that accounted for relative peace, and great economic dynamism, of these parts of the world.

But perhaps the problems caused by sovereignty are about the go away. Today we are living in a world which is becoming increasingly globalized. Borders seem to matter less and less; walls are coming down all around us and bridges are being built between far-away cultures and societies. We are trading and exchanging with each other at an unprecedented rate -- swapping goods and services but also ideas and lifestyles. We are all becoming more and more civilized, we could perhaps say, while our respective cultures are becoming increasingly alike. As always, and never more than now, the spread of civilization goes together with widespread cultural destruction.

There are many who worry about such a world -- a fully globalized world without walls and cultures, and where sovereignty is a thing of the past. How can we make a life for ourselves, they wonder, if we belong to no place in particular and have no unique identity? People who worry about these things often argue that we must rebuild our walls, close our borders, and protect ourselves from what is coming towards us from the outside. The question is what the political, economic and social consequences will be of such a reaction. Will not higher walls lead to more misunderstandings, less trade and more wars? Will we not save our culture while losing our civilization? Will we not simply repeat the mistakes of the twentieth-century with its world wars and its genocides? No one, surely, will want to go through that experience again. Once was one time too many.
If this book has taught us anything, it is surely that this is a false choice. The choice is not between perfect sovereignty and no sovereignty whatsoever. It is not a choice between walls everywhere and no walls at all. Or between a distinct culture and a humanizing civilization. The choice only looks that way as long as we look at the world from the point of view of the European international system. Yet, and as we also have have learned, the European international system is actually quite extreme. Most other international systems have made compromises that are far more appealing. By learning about these other international systems we can learn how these solutions were achieved and what their consequences were. In this way we can perhaps come up with new and alternative ways in which to imagine our future.

So what is your favorite international system? Was there one part of the world, and one time, where the walls were just the right height but the bridges were sufficiently many? Where human beings had a strong sense of a home yet were perfectly open to the challenges that contacts with foreign cultures allow? A time when people were secure in their identities yet also prepared to question themselves and to change? Was there ever a time when self-determination could be combined with prosperity and peace? If you have not found your favorite international system yet perhaps you should read the book again.