



EDITORIAL NOTE:

In this essay, Roderick Moore writes as if libertarianism is inseparable from the cause of upholding the sovereign independence of the British state and nation. Whether this is so is controversial among British libertarians, and even more so among libertarians in general.

In the next few years, the debate about Britain's membership of the European Union is likely to intensify, as Euroscepticism gradually grows in strength and the Eurofanatics start getting desperate. It would be wise for us to anticipate the kind of arguments that the Eurofanatics are likely to use against us, and prepare our defences. Their main propaganda tactic will probably be to attempt to destroy our morale by persuading us that Britain is not worth fighting for, because we have got nothing to be proud of in our history and everything to be ashamed of — in other words, they will step up the smear campaign against Britain which the *Guardian*-reading intellectual elite have already been waging for the last forty years.

As Oliver Cromwell once said, a good soldier should know what he is fighting for and love what he knows. That also applies to the war of ideas. Before we can regain our national independence, we have to regain our national pride, and before we can regain our national pride, we have to rescue our history from the smears and distortions of the socialist intellectual establishment. This essay is intended to be a small step towards that goal. In it, I propose to examine some of the most important events in British history and attempt to vindicate our reputation as a nation.

THE BRITISH EMPIRE

“Perhaps the noblest task of the popular historian should be to make us ashamed of our forefathers ... now that the hilarious residue of the White Man's Burden has been chased out of the reading books of schoolboys.”

(Dennis Potter, 1967. Quoted in James 1994, p. 602)

Dennis Potter was one of the few men in Britain who could use more words than Neil Kinnock to say even less, but just for once he was succinct. His comment sums up exactly what millions of people now believe about the British Empire, thanks to all the years of communist propaganda during the Cold War. Even

though other Marxist doctrines have been discredited by the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellites, it is still part of the conventional wisdom that we made money out of the Empire by “exploiting” the colonies. This is actually the opposite of the truth. Most of the Empire did not make money for Britain; it cost us money, because of the expense of administering and defending it. As Thomas Sowell puts it in *Conquests and Cultures*:

“Counting the costs of conquest and administration, for example, against the profits and taxes extracted from the colonies, together with other economic pluses and minuses, Britain as a whole did not benefit economically from the colonies. Individual investors might make fortunes (Cecil Rhodes being the classic example) but the British taxpayers bore the heavy costs of maintaining the empire. Military defence was an especially heavy drain, leading to the world's largest burden of military expenditures per capita on the British people.” (Sowell, 1998, p. 85)

This idea may seem surprising, but it is by no means new. Even in the 19th Century, when the Empire was at its zenith, classical liberals like Richard Cobden and John Bright always argued that it was a liability to Britain rather than an asset, because of the defence costs which it imposed on us. They were partly right, but not entirely, because they did not foresee that one day thousands of Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders and South Africans would volunteer to fight for Britain in the World Wars. Some parts of the Empire were much more valuable to Britain than others, and the most valuable parts by far were the Old Commonwealth countries, which were settled by our own kith and kin. However, these are not the parts which we are supposed to have “exploited”.

It is true that some colonies were annexed for economic reasons, but that does not mean that the aim was to deprive the native inhabitants of their property. The usual purpose was to gain access to mineral resources which the natives did not know how to use, or in some cases, resources which they did not even know existed. As Sowell has explained:

“Even economically motivated imperialism — and economic motives have by no means been the sole motives for conquest — has not always sought to acquire existing wealth, but often, especially in modern times, to acquire resources that would produce wealth with the technology of the conqueror, even if these same resources had not made their current owners wealthy. Thus gold in South Africa and oil in the Middle East brought on the conquest of people whose own developed wealth and standards of living were modest at best.” (Sowell, 1998, p. 331)

If Britain did not benefit economically from most of the colonies, the colonies definitely did benefit economically from Britain. In dozens of countries all over the world, Britain built roads, railways, bridges, harbours, dams, irrigation canals, schools, colleges, clinics and hospitals. These were not the only things that the colonies gained. British rule brought law and order, which brought prosperity to the native peoples, because their property was secure against tribal warfare, banditry, piracy and confiscation by despotic native rulers. For example, there were some parts of Africa where fertile land could not be farmed before the British annexation, because of the threat of an attack by an enemy tribe (see Sowell 1998, pp. 85 and 116-117). Of course, the benefits were not merely economic, because law and order protected more than just property. In places like West Africa, New Zealand, New Guinea and Fiji, it meant the end of human sacrifice and cannibalism.

As an example of the consequences of British rule, take India, where two-thirds of the population of the British Empire lived. Today it is the biggest democracy in the world, but its democratic institutions were all created by Britain. The Mogul emperors and local princes who ruled the country before the British conquest were all despots who did not know the first thing about democracy, constitutional government or the rule of law. A few of them were benevolent despots, like the Emperor Akbar, but most of

A **Historical Notes No. 39** **A**
 ISSN 0267-7105 ISBN 1 85637 523 4
 An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,
 25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN
 www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk
 © 2000: Libertarian Alliance; Roderick Moore.
 Roderick Moore is an information scientist. He has a BA in Geography from Newcastle University, and a postgraduate diploma in Information and Library Studies from Liverpool Polytechnic.
 The views expressed in this publication are those of its author, and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.
 Director: Dr Chris R. Tame Editorial Director: Brian Micklethwait
 Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb
FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

them would cut off your head if they did not like your face. Shortly after the East India Company founded its first trading post, at Surat, the local Mogul governor invited some British officials to a party, and they were shocked to discover that when he was not satisfied with the dancing girls' performance, he had them executed on the spot. Under British rule, no one could be sentenced to death or any other punishment without a fair trial. Barbaric customs such as suttee, infanticide and child marriage were banned, and the Thugs and other cults which practised human sacrifice were suppressed. To this day, Indian law is still based on the uniform penal code which was written in the 1830s by a commission under the chairmanship of Lord Macaulay.

India also illustrates how the Empire became a burden to Britain. It was said to be the jewel in the crown of the British Empire, but jewels are an expensive luxury. To protect our lines of communication with India, we had to control a chain of colonies which stretched five thousand miles, from Cyprus to Cape Town. For example, take Kenya. It is not immediately obvious what a colony in East Africa had to do with Indian security, but that was why we annexed it. Because of India, we had to control the Suez Canal. Because of the Suez Canal, we had to control Egypt. Because of Egypt, we had to control the headwaters of the Nile. Because of the headwaters of the Nile, we had to control Uganda. Because of Uganda, we had to control Kenya. It was as complicated as that.

On balance, then, the British Empire did far more good than harm, and there is no reason why we should apologise for it. There is no reason why we should regret its loss either. The idea of ruling distant, exotic lands all over the world was all very glamorous and romantic, but it was also very expensive. In fact, the Empire could not have survived, because it had its own self-destruction mechanism built into it right from the start. The doctrine that Rudyard Kipling called the White Man's Burden meant that we offered a Western education to the subject peoples in the colonies. This enabled them to become familiar with Western political ideas. As soon as a certain number of them started thinking along Western lines, it was inevitable that they would demand the same rights as white men, including the right of national self-determination. If we had tried to hold onto the Empire by force, it would have cost so much that it would not have been worth it. The Portuguese tried it with their colonies, and by the time they finally threw in the towel, in the 1970s, they were spending 40% of their budget on overseas wars.

The best summary of the effect of the British Empire on the world is the final passage in Lawrence James's book *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire*. James quotes a statement by Nelson Mandela praising his British education, and concludes with the comment:

"Few empires have equipped their subjects with the intellectual wherewithal to overthrow their rulers. None has been survived by so much affection and moral respect."

(James, 1994, p. 629)

SLAVERY

The worst thing that ever happened under the British Empire was the slave trade. Without denying the terrible suffering which this inflicted on millions of people, it is important to keep it in its proper perspective. Contrary to what the race relations commissars want us to believe, Britain did not invent slavery. It is a very ancient institution which existed long before the British Empire had even been thought of. There are records of its existence in the world's first civilisations, in Egypt, Mesopotamia, India and China, thousands of years before the birth of Christ. Britain was not even responsible for introducing it into Africa, because it was already there when we arrived. Most of the slaves who were shipped to the Americas were not captured in the middle of the bush like Kunta Kinte in *Roots*. They were already slaves when they lived in Africa, and the black chiefs who owned them were only too willing to sell them to white traders. The most important

thing about slavery in our history is that we abolished it, and we led the world in abolishing it. We took the first step in 1772 when the Chief Justice, the Earl of Mansfield, declared slavery illegal in England under common law — the first time slavery had been abolished in any territory in the world. His judgment did not apply to the colonies, which were under their own statute laws, but it still set fourteen thousand people free. The anti-slavery movement went on to achieve the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and the institution of slavery in 1833, and as British rule expanded in Africa and Asia, slavery was abolished in every country we annexed.

According to one school of thought, Britain only abolished slavery because it was in our economic interests to do so, and it was the profits from slavery which made the Industrial Revolution possible. This idea originated with a book called *Capitalism and Slavery*, written in 1944 by a Trinidadian economist called Eric Williams, who was under the influence of Marxism. However, as Thomas Sowell has explained in *Race and Culture*, all the profits earned on the slave trade amounted to less than 2% of the money which was invested in British industry before the abolition of slavery, and even this figure does not allow for the fact that most plantation owners spent their income on ostentatious living instead of investing it in manufacturing (see Sowell 1994, Ch. 7). Sowell also points out that the cost of Britain's naval and military campaigns against slavery in Africa and Asia was as great as all the profits we had previously made from slavery.

Another idea which sometimes crops up is that Britain should pay compensation to the descendants of slaves. (Of course, no one ever suggests that the descendants of the African chiefs who owned slaves should pay compensation.) This idea is based on the assumption that these people are worse off than they would have been if their ancestors had never left Africa. However, the evidence shows that this is not in fact the case. Britain used to have four colonies in West Africa and twelve in the Caribbean region. According to the latest figures, their gross domestic products per head of population are as follows:

Gross Domestic Product Per Capita in US Dollars

Caribbean countries

Bahamas	\$16,705
Barbados	\$12,001
Antigua	\$9,692
St Kitts	\$8,017
Trinidad	\$6,840
St Lucia	\$5,437
Grenada	\$4,864
Dominica	\$4,320
Belize (formerly British Honduras)	\$4,300
St Vincent	\$4,250
Jamaica	\$3,440
Guyana (formerly British Guiana)	\$3,210

West African countries

Ghana (formerly Gold Coast)	\$1,640
Gambia	\$1,470
Nigeria	\$920
Sierra Leone	\$410

Source: *The Statesman's Yearbook 2001*

If these figures are anything to go by, then it looks as if the West Indians should be paying Britain compensation for their higher living standards. This would obviously be absurd, but no more absurd than the idea that we should pay them compensation. Of course, the slaves themselves were no better off as a result of being shipped across the Atlantic, although they were not necessarily worse off either, since at least Britain never used slaves for human sacrifice, unlike some of the native states of West Africa, such as Dahomey and the Ashanti kingdom. However, we cannot compensate the slaves, since they all died long ago. Their descendants have a right to fair and equal treatment, but no more than that.

THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The First World War was the most destructive war in Britain's history, and the loss of life was so appalling that many people are convinced that it cannot possibly have been worthwhile. Apart from that, many people believe that our forces were incompetently led and thousands of men died unnecessarily — in other words, that the British army consisted of “lions led by donkeys”, as the saying goes. In actual fact, public opinion about the war consists very largely of misconceptions. My own experience is probably typical of millions of people. When I was at school, I absorbed the conventional wisdom about the war by reading Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen in English lessons. I grew up believing that all the stories about German atrocities in Belgium in 1914 were myths, and it was not until I was in my thirties that I came across a book which told me that the Germans really did shoot more than five thousand Belgian civilians without trial, even though they did not stab babies to death with bayonets. Now that I know more about the war, I am in a better position to analyse Britain's role in it.

First of all, there is the question of how it all started. The Second World War started for the simple reason that Adolf Hitler was a power-crazed megalomaniac who wanted to conquer the world, but the causes of the First World War were rather more complicated. Basically, it was triggered off by two conflicts, one between Austria and Serbia over Bosnia, and one between France and Germany over Alsace-Lorraine, but the chain of events which led from these conflicts to a world war has been causing arguments among historians ever since.

It was Germany which turned a Balkan conflict into a global one by declaring war on France and Russia, but there is a school of thought which believes that the Germans were forced to do it because the French and the Russians were threatening them with a war on two fronts. This is one myth which can easily be dispelled. It was the Germans' own fault that they were threatened with a war on two fronts, because if it had not been for Alsace-Lorraine, there would have been no Dual Alliance. France and Russia were far from being natural allies, since France was a republic while Russia was a despotic monarchy.

The conflict over Alsace-Lorraine started with the Franco-Prussian War, more than forty years earlier. Bismarck provoked that war by diplomatic manoeuvring so that he could get rid of French influence in Baden, Wurttemberg and Bavaria and unite Germany under Prussian leadership. If he had lived up to his own reputation as the most astute statesman in Europe, he would have realised that it was a bad idea to annex Alsace-Lorraine as well, because it turned France into an enemy needlessly. In 1866 he went to war against Austria to establish that Prussia was top dog among the German states, but he did not annex any Austrian territory when he won, and thirteen years later Germany and Austria became allies. By 1894, when the Dual Alliance was signed, the Germans must have been well aware that the annexation had been a bad idea. If they had been serious about peace, they could have removed the cause of the conflict without any loss of face by offering to exchange Alsace-Lorraine for one of France's colonies, such as Madagascar or Indo-China. Britain set a precedent in 1890 by giving Germany the island of Heligoland, which we had occupied since the Napoleonic Wars, in exchange for Zanzibar. Germany could easily have followed our example.

In 1876, Bismarck said that the Eastern Question was not worth the bones of a single German soldier. If Kaiser Wilhelm II had held the same opinion in 1914, there would have been no First World War, only a local war in the Balkans between Austria and Russia, which would probably have ended with a Russian victory and the collapse of the Austrian Empire. This course of events might even have been to Germany's advantage, if the House of Habsburg had been discredited and overthrown, and the German-speaking rump of Austria had voted to become part of Germany. According to one school of thought, Wilhelm did not seriously believe that either Austria or Russia would actually go to war in

1914, and when Russia mobilised its army, he felt betrayed. According to another school of thought, he was looking for any excuse to throw his weight around. This theory is supported by the fact that since 1898 he had been building a navy to rival the Royal Navy, even though Germany did not need it for defensive purposes, since it had a much shorter coastline than Britain, very few colonies, and was much less dependent on maritime trade for vital food supplies. One way or another, he brought disaster on Europe.

Given that the First World War was mainly Germany's fault, should Britain have stayed neutral and left the Continental countries to fight it out? One school of thought believes that we should have stuck to our old policy of “splendid isolation”, but from a strategic point of view, this would have been very unwise. Before air power became important, a country which was separated from its enemies by sea could follow an isolationist policy if it had a strong enough navy. However, naval superiority depends on the economic resources which are available for shipbuilding. In September 1941, three months before Pearl Harbour, Franklin Roosevelt warned the Americans that isolationism could not guarantee their security, because if the Nazis conquered the whole of the Old World, they would have enough industrial capacity to out-build, outnumber and defeat the US Navy (see Richmond 1946, p. 279). What applied to America also applied to Britain. Under the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which Germany imposed on Russia in March 1918, Russia had to pay an indemnity of six billion marks and give up three hundred thousand square miles of territory, which contained 32% of its population and produced 73% of its iron and 89% of its coal (see Terraine 1980, p.224). If Britain had stayed out of the war, Germany would have defeated France as well as Russia and forced it to accept the same terms. With such an augmentation of Germany's resources, could Britain have maintained its lead in the naval arms race? It would have been difficult, to put it mildly. And could we have trusted a victorious Germany to keep the peace? Not if the Germans' treatment of Belgium is anything to go by. On the day of the invasion, the Chancellor, Theobald Von Bethmann-Hollweg, told the British Ambassador that the treaty which guaranteed Belgian neutrality was nothing but “a scrap of paper”. I have already mentioned the mass executions of civilians which followed. Taken together, Germany's naval expansion and its contempt for Belgian neutrality show clearly why Britain had to go to war. It was necessary for our own safety.

Given that Britain had to fight, did we use the right tactics, and were our generals really incompetent? As John Terraine has pointed out in *The Smoke and the Fire*, the famous comment about “lions led by donkeys”, which is usually attributed to General Hoffmann, was actually made about the French during the Franco-Prussian War (see Terraine 1980, pp. 170-171). In fact, it was not until as recently as 1961 that it was wrongly attributed to Hoffmann by Alan Clark. If the British generals were incompetent, then judging by the casualty figures, their French and German counterparts must have been just as incompetent, if not more so. Britain lost nearly three-quarters of a million men in the First World War, but France and Germany each lost well over a million. This suggests that the high casualty rate was not caused by poor leadership, but by the state of military technology at the time. Basically, it was just lousy luck that the war happened to break out in 1914, when armies had machine-guns and barbed wire but not tanks. If it had started ten years later, tanks would have been perfected, and we would have avoided all the horrors of trench warfare. Many historians have criticised the British generals on the grounds that they were obsessed with using cavalry to break the deadlock, and they failed to use tanks soon enough and in large enough numbers. However, these historians forget how primitive First World War tanks were. For one thing, they had a top speed of five miles an hour, which is pretty slow compared to a cavalry charge. They also broke down rather a lot, and they were defenceless against artillery fire, because their armour was only thick enough to withstand machine-gun

bullets. Britain was actually much more innovative than Germany when it came to mechanisation, because Germany only built twenty tanks in the entire war, while Britain built more than two thousand.

There is a school of thought which believes that we could have defeated the Germans by a naval blockade alone. This tactic was effective against France and Spain in previous centuries, but only because they were much more dependent on overseas trade than Germany. They were vulnerable because they had large colonial empires which could be cut off from the mother country by naval operations. Germany did not. In the First World War, a blockade would have worked much too slowly to do Germany any real harm before it knocked France and Russia out of the war. Given that we had to fight the Germans on land, what we did was the best we could do in the circumstances. It was grim, but there was no alternative.

THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Britain's role in the Second World War is much less controversial than our role in the First World War, because it is difficult to deny that we were fighting in a just cause. The main reason why some people have reservations about it is that we found it necessary to join forces with one mass murderer to defeat another one. It is tempting to believe that if we had not gone to war, or if we had made peace somewhere along the line, Hitler and Stalin would somehow have destroyed each other, and we would have avoided the Cold War. However, if you consider what the most likely consequences would have been if we had acted differently, it is clear that our policy was absolutely right.

Suppose we had made peace in 1940, after the fall of France. Hitler would probably have defeated the Soviet Union. He came very close to doing so in 1941, because the invasion caught Stalin completely by surprise. If he had not had to divert resources to the Afrika Korps and the U-boat fleet, and if German industry had not been suffering from the activities of the RAF, he would almost certainly have succeeded. If he had defeated Russia, he would not have stopped at the Urals. He could not have tolerated an independent Russian state in Siberia, because it would have taken the same view of European Russia that France took of Alsace-Lorraine before the First World War. Sooner or later it would have launched a counter-attack. Hitler would have had to put Siberia either under direct German rule or under a Vichy-type puppet government. One way or another, there would have been a Nazi empire stretching halfway round the world, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from Bordeaux to Vladivostok. As Roosevelt pointed out, even the Americans would have had trouble defeating that. With all the resources of France, Germany and Russia at his disposal, Hitler would have been virtually invincible.

Suppose we had stayed neutral in 1939, when Hitler invaded Poland. In that case, the Nazi empire would only have stretched from the Rhine to the Pacific, but the combination of German industry and Russian natural resources would still have been formidable. How long would Hitler have left Britain and France in peace? Would a man of his character ever have been satisfied with anything less than the whole world? Surely it is more likely that the more territory he conquered, the more it would have increased his appetite for more conquests.

Alternatively, suppose Russia had succeeded in defeating Germany against all the odds. In that case, all of Germany would have fallen into communist hands, instead of just a quarter of it. We would still have ended up with the Cold War, but the Red Army would have been on the Rhine instead of the Elbe, and the Warsaw Pact's economic resources would have been considerably greater.

Machiavelli once said: "If you have five enemies, defeat the strongest one by joining forces with the other four, then defeat the strongest one by joining forces with the other three, and so on until you have defeated all of them." At the time of the Second

World War, Germany was stronger than the Soviet Union. When they are up against totalitarian states, democracies sometimes have to be Machiavellian to survive.

In recent years, the only coherent attempt to argue that Britain should not have fought the Second World War has been John Charmley's book *Churchill's Grand Alliance* (1995). Charmley believes that we should have made peace with Hitler in 1940, and that our alliance with America was harmful to our national interests. His complaints against the Americans are that they forced us to abandon the protectionist policies which we adopted at the Ottawa Conference in 1932, and that they put pressure on us to abandon the British Empire and grant independence to the colonies sooner than we would otherwise have had to. As he says when referring to America's war aims:

"There would be a world fit for Americans to live in. There would be 'democracy', 'free trade' and an end to 'imperialism'. Because Churchill and the British supported the first of these things, they signed up for the other two, which did not necessarily suit them at all." (Charmley, 1995, p. 357)

In fact, these American actions did not damage Britain, but were blessings in disguise. It should not be necessary to explain the advantages of free trade to classical liberals and libertarians, and as for the Empire, it was a burden to us rather than an asset, as I have already explained. Charmley then goes on to question the value of defeating Germany. As he puts it:

"The British had fought two world wars to prevent Germany from dominating Europe, and they had still ended up in a German-dominated Europe." (Charmley 1995, p. 359)

However, this argument ignores the fact that Germany today is very different from what it would have been if it had won either of the World Wars. The Federal Republic of Germany under Gerhard Schroeder does not have much in common with the German Empire under Kaiser Wilhelm II, let alone the Thousand-Year Reich under Adolf Hitler. Germany has now been a stable democracy for more than half a century, and it is showing no sign of wishing to return to an aggressive foreign policy. In the general election of 1998, fascist candidates of all factions put together got a total of 3.2% of the vote. Admittedly that was more than the 0.1% which British fascists got in 1997, but it still does not mean we are going to see Panzer divisions coming through the Channel Tunnel tomorrow or the day after. Whatever the Germans are, they are not stupid, and they can learn from history. They have tried twice to take over Europe by military means, and they have suffered two disastrous defeats and seen their country devastated. Perhaps some of them still have ambitions about taking over Europe by economic means, but at least that does not involve killing anyone, and if we object to it, we can very easily escape from it by leaving the European Union.

That, of course, depends on whether we can win the war of ideas about British history.

REFERENCES

- John CHARMLEY, *Churchill's Grand Alliance*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1995.
- Lawrence JAMES, *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire*, Little Brown, London, 1994.
- Admiral Sir Herbert RICHMOND, *Statesmen and Sea Power*, Clarendon, Oxford, 1946.
- Thomas SOWELL, *Race and Culture*, Basic Books, New York, 1994.
- Thomas SOWELL, *Conquests and Cultures*, Basic Books, New York, 1998.
- The Statesman's Yearbook 2001*, 137th ed., Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2000.
- John TERRAINE, *The Smoke and the Fire*, Cooper, London, 1992 (first published 1980).

OTHER RECOMMENDED READING

- Brian BOND and Nigel CAVE (eds.), *Haig*, Cooper, London, 1999.
A fresh look at the man who is supposed to have been the chief "donkey" of the First World War.
- Philip MASON, *The Men Who Ruled India, Cape*, London, 1985.
A politically incorrect view of the British Raj.