Imperialistic Thrive Of European Nations: Empire

Over the centuries, England, a European kingdom sitting almost alone in the far northwest corner of the continent, started a slow but relentless process of expansion through different means- whether annexation, unions, conquest or through different forms of imperialism depending on the moment- which peaked in the 19th century. The process started with Wales, Scotland and Ireland, the neighbouring kingdoms and spread to the newly found America and also Asia. During the 19th century, expansion reached Africa and so what had once been the Kingdom of England was now Empire, one of the greatest in the world. With the change of monarch after Victoria died and the turn of the century, the empire started a process of disintegration, heightened by the breakout of the Great War. However, for many, like myself, the idea of empire has always been inextricably linked to England. Empire is one of the notions I mentioned in our very first lesson which I associate with England, although the reason for such connection was not quite clear to me. After having taken this course, I believe the association was not far-fetched, and that it has been reinforced by everything I have read. It is the purpose of my essay to briefly develop the journey from the English Kingdom to Empire and to the current United Kingdom, with an emphasis on the colonial processes that India, China and Africa underwent and an overview of the Victorian Era when the Empire peaked.

In the late 19th century, Britain, as well as other countries in Europe, had an imperialist thrive based on a strong belief in Western superiority, which drew these countries to all the corners of the Earth, though their presence was felt, mainly, in Africa and Asia. This wave of Imperial expansion was more far-reaching than any other before and shaped the modern world along with the Industrial Revolution and the rise of nation-states while shifting the balance of power of European nations and creating rivalries. The Suez Canal, in Egypt, was also important in this process because it opened up an easier way to Asia, eliminating geographical barriers. These new colonies offered precious raw materials necessary for industrial development and were, at the same time, potential markets for manufacture. The idea of Western superiority mentioned before justified occupation of these lands to take progress and the benefits of Western civilization, like social reforms, technological developments, greater infrastructure, there; these arguments, however, were questioned by certain sectors of society, mainly with a socialist approach, based on the notions of democracy, consent and the status of the colonized people.

Imperialism can take many forms: by direct rule annexing territories and subjugating the people there, like in the case of Africa; through indirect rule, by reaching agreements with the local authorities and governed through them, as was the case in India; and by informal imperialism, less visible than the others, where the states were allowed to maintain their relative independence while reducing their sovereignty and granting privileges to the countries exerting power on them, as was the case in China. I will now briefly explore these cases.

English presence in India began in the 17th century with the establishment of the East India Company. The Company was, originally, a commercial enterprise, but it was granted the right to collect taxes from the inhabitants and it ruled directly in certain areas, with its own military force, and through alliances in others. Through the Company, England started interfering in the running of the Indian subcontinent. This situation continued into the 18th century with continual territorial expansion from Crown and the East India Company as well, and with a process of

‘westernization’ carried out by the English governors, which involved major changes in Indian traditional lifestyle, such as the suppression of certain religious rituals, the introduction of education in English and the development of roads, canals and coal and iron mines. These actions undermined the power and authority of the Indian princes and the ancient caste system of the Hindu society, shaping Indian culture and way of life to English standards. Another important action was carried out by governors in favour of the Crown: the annexation of those states which had ‘unfit’ (to English standards) rulers or with no heirs to succeed them. This situation had not been agreed with the Indian princes and so, when they had a chance in 1857, they organized a mutiny in the garrisons of Central India where Indian soldiers killed officers and an old Prince was instated as ruler. However, because the mutiny was not supported by the rest of the territory, it was put down after a few months only. This episode created discord between the two peoples for several years, and changed their relation drastically; after the mutiny, the East India Company was abolished and all the political power transferred to the Crown, and the rebellion was crushed to the extent that no resistance was put up for nearly a century. The Mutiny episode marked the beginning of ‘official’ Crown rule of India, its most important colonial territory which functioned as a passageway and point of effective control of the rest of Asia, in the form of Raj, where Princes ruled counseled by advisors. This situation went on until the revolution led by Mahatma Gandhi after World War II and the disintegration of Empire.

The situation in China was different to that in India. The relationship established between China and Britain during the 19th century was one of informal imperialism, through the establishment of areas of sovereignty and privilege for Britain, like treaty ports, within Chinese territory to trade in luxury goods. At the beginning of the 19th century, Britain intended to improve its trading conditions in China, but friction over increasing demands for trading benefits, the treatment subjects occasionally got from Chinese authorities and the opium trade brought about conflict. Opium had been produced at a large scale since the 16th century in India where the East India Company sold it to many countries, including China, and bought Chinese goods with the earnings. This triangular trade was highly beneficial for Britain, since the areas in India where it was produced by labor-intensive workers was and the profits were high, because people all around the world consumed it; however, in China, its consumption had become problematic to the extent that the Emperor banned its import, production and consumption. This developed into a conflict in the 1830s, the Opium Wars, which were really about sovereignty and the belief of European countries that they had a right to trade freely and wanted to establish themselves in ‘zones of European residence’. The first Opium War, from 1839 to 1842, ended beneficially for Britain with the acquisition of trading privileges, five cities to reside in and the right to the port of Hong Kong in perpetuity- which ended just 22 years ago, in 1997- and the second war translated into the enlargement of these benefits, which paved the way for other European countries to make, and obtain, similar demands. These concessions were also obtained by Japan and the United States and China was left weakened and with internal conflicts and allowed Europeans countries to gain increasingly more direct control over trade in the region. At the beginning of the 20th century, an anti-imperialist rebellion, the Boxer Rebellion, which attacked and sieged foreign settlements, ports and railways, caused European powers to join forces to crush the rebellion and demand still more benefits.

Finally, we have Britain’s role in the ‘scramble for Africa’. At the Berlin Conference of 1884, the fate of the African continent was decided by the main European powers, among which was Britain, dividing it into ‘spheres of influence’ (thorn, ch 55 , p 520) for each of them. Africa was rich in raw materials necessary for the industrial development of European countries and for personal wealth of certain people; materials such as gold, diamonds, rubber, metals like basalt

and copper, sugar cane and cocoa beans. By the beginning of the 20th century, Africa was occupied almost entirely by European nations, something which caused, at times, frictions; Britain engaged in two episodes, the Boer Wars, with the neighbouring territory of the Transvaal, settled by the Dutch before the scramble. Iconically, there are two people who represent different approaches to imperialism in Africa: Cecil Rhodes and David Livingstone. Rhodes was the head of one of the companies established in southern Africa, whose expansionist drive was so grand that he dreamt of joining Egypt- under a different sort of rule- and south Africa by railway under rule, and was in charge when the Boer Wars broke out; his ambition and the news on the concentration camps established for women and children during the Boers made him a controversial figure in England. Livingstone, on the other hand, was a Scottish doctor, explorer and Christian missionary who moved inland exploring areas never seen before by Europeans. He was responsible for the discovery of several bodies of water which were instrumental for expansion inland, and for getting people in Britain interested in African expansion. He was also an abolitionist, denouncing in his letters the working conditions of virtual slaves and so, provided another point of view on the continent.

All of these imperialistic campaigns took place, mostly, during Victorian times, even if they had started before that time of if they continued after her death. Queen Victoria, who ruled Britain from 1837 to 1901 in the era of Imperialism, set about building a national identity which showcased the values she held as ‘civilized’ and which were meant to give cohesion to a growing empire which incorporated peoples from distant lands and cultures. During Victorian times, mindset focussed on the idea of tradition, a notion which accounted for their long history and their relative stability throughout, and which was paramount to face the changes happening in the world, especially in the era of mid-century revolutions; the centrality of Britain in relation to its colonies throughout the world; the idea of their innate superiority, derived from social Darwinism, which was closely related to the notion of expansionism and to racism- racism was an issue, mainly, in Africa- all of which amounted to the central notion of Imperialism. During this time, as well, there was the idea that education provided status, so Sunday schools were opened for the lower classes to attend, since working conditions in factories had improved slightly through the Factory Act of 1833, reducing the children’s working day, while the upper classes and some middle-class people went to public schools or were educated at home by governesses. In 1844, a second Factory Act mandated children attended some form of education, which paved the way for the development of a state educational system; girls, however, were not eligible for education and so were not included in this, they were home-trained and could, at best, aspire to become governesses. The final highlight of Victorian social aspects was the attitudes towards gender and sexuality. Victoria was concerned with propriety, a strict moral behaviour and etiquette codes. She and Prince Albert represented the ideal of marriage and Victoria embodied the idea of family, well constituted, at the core of society, an image which she herself conveyed raising a big family of nine children while ruling the greatest empire of the world, because she was the ‘mother of the Nation’. There were clearly distinguished ideas of femininity and masculinity, women being delicate, pure and naturally asexual, and men being virile and tough, though civilized; homosexuality was criminalized in this era.

By exploring the Imperialistic thrive of European nations, developing the history of colonization between Britain and India, China and Africa during the Victorian era, with the distinct mindset which was instrumental during the process of expansion, I believe I have examined and summarized nearly a century of history which I consider to be so notable and ground-breaking, since the most prominent outcome was the creation of the greatest empire in the world, which

started to disintegrate only after an unprecedented war which shook the foundations of all the great powers involved. This is why, although Empire was only a relatively short period in all of its history, I think the notion of empire is an inextricable part of identity to this day.