

1984

The Tools of Empire Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century

George W. Baer

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Baer, George W. (1984) "The Tools of Empire Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 37 : No. 1 , Article 16.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol37/iss1/16>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

presents a well-researched and intelligently written account of the Arab states' handling of the issue of Palestine from the end of the nineteenth century through the war of 1948. Rubin also treats the unsuccessful attempts of Jordan's King Abdullah to reach a rapprochement with the nascent state of Israel, attempts which abruptly ended when Abdullah was assassinated in 1951.

In an important sense, the struggle for Palestine was not a struggle against the Jewish settlers of the Yishuv, but was a struggle between and within the Arab states. Rubin clearly establishes that Arab decision-making regarding Palestine was fundamentally skewed on two levels. Within the Arab states, the emotive appeal of the issue of the fate of a mandatory Palestine was so keen, that even those Arab politicians inclined to compromise were forced to adopt tough positions. At the level of state-to-state relations, Arab leaders were so suspicious (with some cause) of the intentions of other Arab states, that they often adopted intransigent positions in order to prevent Palestine from falling under the control of their rivals.

The Arab States and the Palestine Conflict is a story of missed opportunities, flawed policy coordination and—as the results of the 1948 war indicate—an overly optimistic evaluation of Arab military capability and competence by the Arab states. Only on 17 April 1948, were the Arabs ready to accept a compromise solution taking account of Zionist aspirations and capabilities. But, by that

time the opportunity was past and events continued on the “slippery road to war.”

AUGUSTUS R. NORTON
Major, US Army
US Military Academy

Headrick, Daniel R. *The Tools of Empire. Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century.* New York, Oxford University Press, 1981. 221pp. \$17.95

The great theories of modern imperialism are well known. Putative political and economic motives, the search for capital investment, national grandeur or outposts of defense, the ideology of national competition and social Darwinism, anxiety that the world was closing, local interests and the political weaknesses of indigenous population—all these “causes” are much debated. Far too little attention is paid to the question of how technology shaped the development of empire. With this study Headrick puts its role at the center of the stage. It is a fine introduction to the subject; a reliable, informative interpretation and his lucidity makes his book a pleasure to read.

The history of imperialism is the history of warfare, and Headrick confirms the truth of Belloc's lines that, “Whatever happens we have got the Maxim gun, and they have not.” In an astonishing opening chapter Headrick shows how, in the early years of nineteenth century expansion, the East India Company, collaborating with pioneers of British industrialization—against the

advice and high-seas focus of the sail-driven Royal Navy—secretly commissioned shallow draft steam gunboats to win command of the coast of China and the rivers of Asia. Such foresight into the power of iron and steam led to victories in the Opium War, and the wars against Burma and Vietnam, opening inland Asia to European influence. In instances where there was a favorable arms gap and river steamers could penetrate, the European derived decisive benefit from their technical superiority. In situations less advantageous, such as in Algeria and India, and where the Europeans had to fight on more or less equal footing on land without riverine support and in the midst of enemy territory, conquest was long in coming, costly, and difficult—an important distinction Headrick is careful to draw.

There was a paradox to imperial warfare and its lessons were misunderstood at home. It was not realized that the new weapons were in essence defensive. The offensive strategy and defensive tactics that brought victory over poorly armed foes in, say, Africa, would not apply to warfare in Europe. The effect of modern infantry weapons on industrialized armies was the opposite of what it had been overseas. The first world war showed that the offensive could become suicidal as the new firearms, highly effective defensively, made rapid victory impossible.

Yet imperialism was more than war and the tools of empire were more than arms. Europeans had to

live safely in tropical regions. West Africa was impenetrable until the use of quinine ended the devastation wrought by malaria. Only then could steamers and gunboats be sent up the Niger; only then could the advantages of rapid firing arms come into their own. As technology interacted with politics, so too was there an inner logic to the use of the new inventions.

Empire was more than conquest. The colonies had to be administered, and tied to the metropolises. A maritime empire required secure lines of communication. A modern overseas empire was impossible without the revolution in communications, the technological wonders of steam transportation on sea and on land, and the swift information transfers made possible by the submarine cable. In a valuable commentary Headrick shows how these innovations lowered the cost, in both financial and human terms, of penetrating, conquering, and exploiting the new territories. It was this very capacity of the new technologies to permit an empire “on the cheap” that made imperialism acceptable to the peoples and governments of Europe.

More than just governments participated. Steam driven shipping made it easy, and progressively less expensive, to transport bulk goods from the ends of the earth. Technology, economics, politics, and naval strength were constantly intertwined. The opening of the Red Sea route to steam traffic, and then the Suez Canal, gave the British presence a new position in Asia, and

hence thrust it into true world power. The origins and purpose of modern sea-land lanes of communication, and the significance of protecting navies, are established in these times—for Americans as well as Europeans.

Through these networks were established new global thalassocracies. Imperialism gave birth to the modern world, a new era in world history. It laid the foundation of a new global civilization based on Western technology. Today it is that *technology*, not the ideas of capitalism, Christianity, or liberalism, that is the legacy of the European conquests.

GEORGE W. BAER
Naval War College

Holm, Jeanne. *Women in the Military: The Unfinished Revolution*. Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1982. 398 pp. \$16.95.

As the subtitle of this book makes clear, General Jeanne Holm has spent her thirty-three years in the Air Force fighting more than one battle. An unflagging champion of the rights of women in the military, General Holm traces the contributions of women to the Armed Services from the legendary "Molly Pitcher" to the present. *Women in the Military* examines the role of women in post-World War II strategy, the relationship between the All Volunteer Army (AVA) and women, the effect of the ERA on the military, and the role of the different branches of government in shaping military policy on this controversial subject. It sympathetically catalogs the prob-

lems faced by women, in particular: promotions, admission to the service academies, and family policy.

Although the book is informative on these and many other issues, I do not find Holm's argument compelling. This is largely because, having made up her mind about the justice of her cause, she avoids serious discussion of the complex questions involved. Let me give four examples. Although she acknowledges that the military is not a democratic institution, she seems not to have reflected upon the limits of the military to enshrine democratic values. She makes no distinction between the fight for women's rights in the civilian and military spheres; nor does she distinguish between the claims made on behalf of black male soldiers and women soldiers. Both seem to be legitimate *civil* rights issues for her. Thus she dismisses without comment her opponents' objections that the military is not the proper institution for carrying out controversial social policy.

Similarly, she attacks the "mind set" and "deep hang ups" of those who maintain that "war is a man's business" without considering whether this "cult of masculinity" might play a useful role in battle. It is true that much of military life has nothing to do with battle, but it seems equally true that the virtues necessary to victory in battle are not those we wish to encourage in our civilian lives. General Holm seems oblivious to this tension. She acknowledges only those instances where the presence of women does