The Colonial Empires

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A Comparative Survey from the
Eighteenth Century

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Maps by Design Practitioners

Preface

The character of the first edition of this book, published in German in 1965 and in English in 1966, was largely dictated by the fact that it was commissioned as one volume of an integrated series of histories, the Fischer *Weltgeschichte*. Other volumes were to deal with most countries which were at one time or another European colonies on a national or regional basis: for example, two volumes on Latin America, one each on the United States, India, South-east Asia, Africa, Modern Asia, and so on. My book had thus to fill a precise gap: to describe modern imperialism from the end of the seventeenth century, when the first colonial systems were well established, to 1945 when decolonization was about to begin; and to treat these empires as a specifically European phenomenon rather than as part of the history of particular non-European areas. I had, moreover, to do this very briefly.

I therefore decided to concentrate rather narrowly on three questions which seemed basic to all European colonial systems: why these were established; how they were run; and what advantages they provided. By the criteria of modern area studies this implied a one-sided approach because it largely ignored the indigenous history of the countries which became European colonies. Yet I believed, and still believe, that the process by which one country imposes and sustains control over another is a valid historical study and that the history of imperialism is distinct from that of particular imperial possessions. I also thought that European imperial history had a

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basic unity, so that to study one empire in isolation was likely to lead to distortion: hence the subtitle 'a comparative survey'.

The result was a highly condensed book in which I attempted to distil what seemed to me the essential features of modern European imperialism. Its value, as I thought, was that for the first time, so far as I know, it brought most of the imperial systems into a single focus, even though through a long-distance lens. Since 1965 imperial history has developed immensely and area studies have affected the way historians approach it. My original bibliography became badly out of date and my own ideas on some matters changed: for example, my interpretation of the 'new imperialism' of the period 1870–1914. Yet no other single book has yet covered quite the same subject-matter; and, since I am happy to stand by almost all that I wrote originally, it has been decided to issue a second edition, making only four significant changes. Some minor inaccuracies in the text have been corrected. The illustrations, interesting but very expensive to reproduce, have been omitted. I have extended the last chapter on decolonization to take account of events between 1965 and 1981, making some tentative generalizations concerning the early effects of the end of empire on its one-time dependencies. Finally, I have revised and considerably extended the bibliography, cutting out books which are no longer the best in their field and adding a selection from the vast number published since 1965. I hope that in its new form the book may provide a first foothold for students as they start work on any aspect of modern imperial history.

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