

Colonialism and its Impact on Global Naval History:

While colonialism and naval history may, at first, seem to be completely isolated from each other, they are, as I will attempt to argue in this essay, intrinsically linked to each other. As wide a topic as both the subjects are, there are many times and many ways that they intersect and connect with each other, more so than many more obvious disciplines, and in some cases, more surprising ways. In this essay, I will attempt to cover the Ottoman and Portuguese fleets during the beginning years of African and Asian colonization by the Portuguese and Spanish powers, the Russian fleet at the time of the Russo-Japanese war, during the heydays of European colonialism, and the British fleet during the Second World War, during a time where some of the most powerful blows on European colonial power fell. While they may seem to be disconnected at first, there is a major connective strand connecting them all together - colonization.

Finding somewhere to begin this essay proved to be a difficult choice. Do you start with the Ancient Roman fleets, fighting against the Carthaginian forces in the Mediterranean, or the Ancient Greek fleet? I have chosen to start mine with one of the most significant naval powers in human history, the Ottoman Fleets at the time that Portuguese and Spanish powers began the exploration and colonization of the African and Asian continents. Being such a massive force at their prime, the Ottoman refusal to sell spice at a cheaper price to the European powers under Suleiman the Magnificent led to a great increase in the expansion of Portuguese exploration and trade around Africa, eventually leading to the discovery of the Cape of Good Hope by Vasco da Gama, and the establishment of a nearly permanent European presence, in some form or the other, on the South African coast for the next 500+ years. While this was by no means the main proponent for instigating European exploration and colonization, it cannot be underestimated as to how impactful it was on Portuguese and Spanish military leaders and politicians. One of the interesting main characteristics about the Ottoman fleet, beyond what I've already covered in this essay, was how ethnically diverse the crews of the fleet were compared with their main European and Mediterranean rivals in the Portuguese and Spanish. There's no doubt that the Ottoman Empire in the 15th and 16th Century would not be considered a colonial power, with holdings in Egypt, mainland Europe, and the Caucasus mountains in central Asia. The above list doesn't cover the holdings that Ottoman power had East of Iraq, or their position in the Arabian Sea and Arabian Peninsula. Hopefully the extensive list of Ottoman holdings should have established that they should be viewed as a very early example of a "successful" colonial power, but with some main distinctions to the other global and regional powers of the time - most notably, a lack of military discrimination. Within the navy, unlike most of the other powers featured in this essay, was a crew that was "overwhelmingly

Mediterranean in origin". This description of the fleets crew composition shouldn't come as a surprise, with the understanding of the importance of naval power within the Mediterranean, and the emphasis placed onto the establishment of every major power that ever held land or influence within the theater, as late as the modern military alliances that dominate the world, an example of that being the global response to the rise in piracy along the Somali and Eritrean coasts, prompting a response from powers all over the world due to the importance of trade within the Mediterranean. Even during the times of Ottoman control over the Eastern regions of the Mediterranean, the ethnic composition of fleets was something remarkably unique for any nation at that time. "Mediterranean" afterall, can apply to more than people from France and Spain, for example. Are the regions of Egypt and Greece not also on the Mediterranean coast? What about those of Palestine and Libya? Given the previous explanations of Ottoman military forces and their lack of general discrimination, the conclusion is that the crews of the Ottoman navy would be more diverse and would feature more people with darker skin than those of the Portuguese fleets, even 400 years later, and something that was an incredibly rare occurrence within the navies of almost every other colonial power.

In a perhaps unsurprising contrast to the Ottoman fleets' diversity and multiculturalism, is that of the Imperial Russian fleets around the time of the Russo-Japanese war. However, this is not to say that there was no diversity, or manpower from colonization of another kind. One of the reasons why the Russian performance in the Russo-Japanese war was so below that of the Japanese was the use of conscripts from Siberia, a part of the world the size of which is hard to comprehend, by the Russian Kingdoms since the time of Peter the Great in the early 1680's. These were men who had never seen the ocean, much less ever been on a boat, and that showed in the performance of the naval forces brought to bear during the war. Widely viewed as one of the most poorly performing fleets in human history, the composition and training of the crew cannot be understated enough, as they were from a part of the Russian Empire that had been deliberately and constantly underdeveloped, with most of the higher education required for naval service being spent in the areas of Ukraine, Crimea, St. Petersburg and the far East of the country, in places like Vladivostok and Manchuria. It would also be difficult to understate the impact of the losses sustained in the Russo-Japanese war would have on Russian power in both East Asia and the Pacific, with the consequences reaching far into the mid 21st Century. For example, the strength and ability of the Japanese when it came to naval combat, and their utilization of underhanded tactics to surprise their enemy was something that both the British and American governments neglected to study, inadvertently leading to the destructive strikes on Pearl Harbour and numerous British and Commonwealth holdings in the Pacific, and even further afield. The Japanese repetition of tactics is also widely believed to be a direct connective line towards their belief in achieving total victory against a superior enemy, a direct result of

their victory against the Russian Empire in 1901. While I've covered the military applications and impacts of the presence of an untrained crew formed of colonial subjects, the geo-political implications are, arguably, much greater. It was because of the Japanese victory that she pursued a greater ambition for Empire in the Pacific, and more notoriously, in China and Asia, an act that would lead to the Second Sino-Japanese War, which has remained one of the bloodiest and most destructive conflicts in human history, and is considered by some to be the actual start of the Second World War as a whole. The implications of the Second Sino-Japanese War are huge in their own way, with the rise of a super-power in China and a major communist power on the world stage, but are also connected tightly to that of the Russo-Japanese War as well. It would have been impossible for China, Russia and Japan to develop as they have without the colonization of Siberia, with the connections that I have drawn in this part of my report. That isn't to say that there were no other factors, the United States of America played a large part in forcing militarisation and industrialisation in Japan in the wake of Commodore Matthew Perry's visit to Japan, forcing them to open up to the rest of the world and trade with the Western Powers, an act that can irrefutably be described as indirect colonialism, or economic colonialism. In this paragraph, I have attempted to demonstrate that a relatively small factor within colonialism can have massive, long reaching effects, over many decades. If the crews of the Russian ships had been manned by professional, or trained in any way, sailors, then the outcome of the Russo-Japanese War could have been very different, and as a result, Japanese foreign policy and military planning would have progressed down a very different path to the one that it did.

In this paragraph, I will attempt to demonstrate and display the ways in which the largest navy at the start of the Second World War attempted to maintain a so-called "color ban" against members of the British Commonwealth from the colonies, or of other non-white descent within the Home Islands. I also want to highlight the hypocrisy, and political implications, of refusing to modernize and liberalize the hiring and crewing procedures of the Royal Navy during, and after, the Second World War. To begin, the armed forces of the British Empire had remained mostly segregated under a "color ban" nominally since colonialism under British rule began. However, there is fundamental evidence proving the diversity and ethnic grouping within the armed forces of the British Empire, was by no means all-white. As far back as the Sepoys in the British East India company, and the Punitive Expedition into Benin City, black and brown people have been used as foot soldiers, couriers, translators, traders and middle-men by the British Army and other armed services - something that has stuck throughout the history of the British Armed Forces, even to the modern day, is the utilization of local guides to assist British military operations, sometimes to the detriment of their own country-folk. However, with the end of the First World War, more strict laws on segregation and

“professionalization”, for lack of a better word, of the Army, Air Force, Navy and other armed services within the British Empire, had come into effect. In the lead up to the Second World War, there were few, if any, attempts to repeal these laws. It was only upon the declaration of War by Britain in 1939 that the need for huge manpower reserves became an issue for the British government, a need that would prove a powerful political and colonial tool as well. The British government in 1939 repealed the “color ban” on the Armed Forces, allowing for people of other ethnicities than white to enlist, and serve in the Army, Navy and Air Force. In theory that is, since in reality there was massive push-back within, primarily, the Navy, who wanted to keep the Navy isolated from the colonies which they were protecting. The main driving forces behind why the British government lifted the ban on the armed forces, was primarily the need to field a huge reserve of manpower in case of an extended conflict, but also to provide a stark contrast to the ethnically cleansed armed forces of the German Reich and her allies. It can be considered a fairly consequential insult to the British Sailors and Airmen from across the Empire that they were considered “below quality” when compared to people of another color skin, when fighting an enemy who believed the exact same thing. In fact, one of the main reasons that the reform of the laws became such a large issue in the navy was that being seen to oppose the removal of such a colonial-era law would seem to be too radical, but would also be a political move, something that the Admiralty under a Prime Minister like Churchill or Chamberlain could barely focus on, given the monumental task facing the country at the time. It was, nevertheless, a huge step forwards for the armed forces of the British Empire, in reforming and overcoming the systemic and characteristic biases of the whole institution that they were built on, that being the British Empire itself. The largest contingent of black, brown and non-white sailors within the British forces at the time though, was within the Merchant Marine, braving the deadly waters of the Atlantic, Pacific, Mediterranean, and every other sea on the face of the earth for the continuation of the whole war. The bravery and camaraderie of the Merchant Seamen, especially those who are non-white, is something that is continually and unfairly overlooked, especially given the massive sacrifices and risks that they faced on a daily basis, fighting for an entity that would afford them very little respect, even at the start of the war.

To conclude what may have seemed, at points, to be a very disconnected series of events and topics, I want to bring all my points together into a digestible finale. I hope that I have been able to convey the ways in which colonialism, on something as easy to overlook as the naval history of the world, impacts and affects the world in unpredictable and volatile ways. The hate and bias against those who have been colonized was, as shown in the British Empire’s “color ban”, and in the Russian Empire’s crews in the Russo-Japanese War, has a direct effect on the ability of those fighting and sacrificing to fight on a fair and level field, especially when dealing with the institutional prejudice and

racism that colonialism is built on. I hope that a clear opposition has been provided with the inclusion of the Ottoman Empire, and the ethnic composition of their fleets, compared with those of the aforementioned British and Russian Empire's, and the impacts that that has had on the development of global history. In short, the impact of colonialism in the navy, and the recruitment and expansion of the fleets of colonial powers, is, in the words of the Rolling Stones: "You Can't Always Get What You Want". The Russian Empire and her respective Navy wanted an assured victory against the Japanese, but not a loss of her trained and well equipped sailors, the British Empire wanted a purely white crew for her ships, something that they were stopped from doing, lest they seem too similar to the German forces they were fighting. I will again make reference to the Rolling Stones song, which I find to be very powerful when used against Colonial Powers, not the subject: "You Can't Always Get What You Want".

Authors Note:

I've found the research and education of both this topic in particular, and the module as a whole to be incredibly informative and entertaining, and I wanted to leave a thank you note that might take a while to find here again, because I really honestly enjoyed this module more than I have any other. So to Anne or Andy, thank you so much for putting in all the work you did towards making this module as informative and entertaining as you have.

Jaime.

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