Western Europe as a System of Competing States

Imperial expansion was driven not only by features widely shared throughout western Europe but also by the region's deep divisions. Europe was fragmented into states, each of which felt insecure because it was embedded in a larger system of units much like itself. Each state claimed sovereignty, the legal and moral authority to steer its own course. Yet the system guaranteed continual threats and limits to sovereignty. Not even the most powerful state was sufficiently dominant to be confident that it would not be invaded or blockaded by some combination of its neighbors. Alliances forged with other states in the past could not be counted upon in future crises, when the alignment of international forces and interests might be changed. The interstate system was fluid and anarchic. It lacked overarching institutions to ensure that the regional status quo would be maintained or that disputes among member states would be peacefully adjudicated.

Insecurity caused by the dispersal of political power within a single economic and cultural system generated enormous amounts of nervous energy. Much of this energy was recycled within the region. Preparing for defensive or offensive war against a nearby foe, waging war, recovering from it, and financing its unexpectedly heavy costs—these have historically been the principal challenges facing European rulers. Indeed, state building was more likely driven by the need to counter external threats than by rulers' desires to repress or coopt domestic challengers. By one estimate, during the past seven centuries between 70 and 90 percent of European states' financial resources were deployed to prevent or fight wars among themselves. At first glance these expensive, destructive efforts to cope with the region's problems seem at odds with initiatives elsewhere. In several respects, however, Europe's political disunity was conducive to imperialism. First, the security problems all states faced gave them strong incentives to adopt new military technologies. From the medieval period to the present a steady stream of innovations profoundly altered the way defensive and offensive warfare was waged.
tion of new weapons and ways of organizing armed forces was the rapid diffusion of these innovations throughout Europe. Innovation gave the first user a military advantage. Diffusion had the opposite effect, tending to equalize armies' capacity to withstand each other's attacks. As Europeans traveled overseas they brought weapons employed in intra-European wars, including ones developed by other states. Empire builders from several countries thus enjoyed a marked military advantage, one they did not hesitate to put to use. The very process that tended to equalize armies within the region increased the military gap between soldiers from that region and soldiers outside it.

As Europeans became more aware of distant lands, overseas aggression became attractive as a way of easing, though never ultimately resolving, a metropole's security dilemma. The cost of surviving as a state within the European system increased dramatically over time as rulers felt obliged to replace small ad hoc forces with large standing armies equipped with the most advanced weapons. If revenue a colony generated for a metropole's government exceeded the cost of setting up and maintaining a colonial administration, the net gain could help finance wars fought on European soil. Moreover, revenue from overseas sources reduced pressures to extract funds internally. Rulers knew that increases in domestic taxes might trigger unrest or outright revolt among their subjects. Repressing these challenges was politically risky, both in its own right and because it diverted resources from defense. The revenue-raising imperative, driven by military insecurity, encouraged European rulers to seek lucrative possessions abroad.

The same factors led them to articulate mercantilist doctrines justifying empire. The model in this respect was phase 1 Spain, whose Habsburg rulers used New World bullion to finance numerous wars throughout western Europe. The search for a comparable source of readily accessible wealth lay behind exploration and settlement by Spain's rivals. The Jamestown settlement (1607), for example, was sponsored by the Virginia Company of London, whose shareholders "had invested their capital in the hope that the English could duplicate the remarkable success of the Spanish and Portuguese in Mexico, Peru, and Brazil." Profits accruing to Portugal from the Indian Ocean and Spice Islands encouraged the Dutch to become involved. The influential tract by Hugo Grotius entitled The Freedom of the Seas (1608), though phrased in the universalistic language of natural law, was in fact an argument for Holland's interests against Portugal's monopolistic claims. The essay's subtitle spells out the jurist's purposes: "The Right Which Belongs to the Dutch to Take Part in the East Indian Trade."

Interstate competition also stimulated imperialism by increasing the stakes of engaging in conquest. When one state advanced an overseas claim it typically did not know whether the gains it expected or desired would be realized. But whatever they
might turn out to be, they were in effect doubled by the fact that the state's rivals were deprived of access to them. Conversely, if a state did not act when rivals were making overseas claims it risked a double loss: deprivation of potentially valuable resources and the expense of funding off a rival strengthened by access to them. Empire building was a competitive process driven as much by anxiety over loss as by hope of gain. Referring to inter-European rivalries in Asia in 1914, David Fieldhouse notes that "fear of exclusion generated aggression which ambition might not have done." A similar dynamic was at work in phase 3 when Cecil Rhodes lobbied to place the Tswana under British South Africa Company protection to forestall direct territorial links between Germany's colony in South West Africa and the independent Boer republics.7

Interstate competition accelerated the pace of overseas activity, leading at times to scrambles for territory whose dynamics resemble a spiraling arms race. If state A has no rival it may take its time deciding whether to expand. But if A fears that a rival, B, also covets overseas territory, A is likely to give the issue higher priority and treat it with greater urgency. The presence of additional rivals C, D, and E only increases pressure to act quickly to preempt similarly preemptive action by others. The existence of many states in Europe explains why expansion proceeded in spurts, several empires growing simultaneously as each metropole responded to the real or imagined overseas initiatives of rival neighbors.

In such a situation it is not enough for A's citizens to exercise informal influence overseas, for example, through trade or missionary work in an area unclaimed by an outside power. Influence A's citizens exert there must be translated into formal power by A's government lest takeover of the area by B lead to replacement of A's traders and missionaries by those from B. Referring to the late nineteenth-century scramble, William Langer notes that Britain's needs for new markets and investment opportunities "had been met in the past without any corresponding expansion of territory. It was the embarkation of France, Germany, and other countries in the course of empire that brought the British to the conviction that only political control could adequately safeguard markets."8

A scramble may prompt prominent actors in A's private profit and religious sectors who have been operating overseas on their own to change their tune, calling upon the home government to guarantee their future operations by advancing imperial claims.9 When externally generated competition for territory activates domestically based sectoral actors to become pressure groups for expansion, A's government is pushed in an aggressive direction from within its borders as well as outside them.

Once a scramble gets under way it can take on a life of its own, driven by the growing sense of insecurity each party feels should it fail to assert itself as vigorously and quickly as possible. Decision makers adopt a zero-sum mentality, reasoning that
if their country does not win today it will be counted tomorrow among the losers. This view was well expressed by Premier Jules Ferry, the architect of French imperialism in the late phase of scramble. In a speech to the Chambre des Députés in 1885 Ferry declaimed,

In the contemporary reality of Europe, in this competition among so many rivals that we see ever-intensifying around us ... a policy of introversion or abstention is nothing more nor less than the road to decadence! Nations in our time only become great by the activity which they generate.

To radiate influence without acting, without involving oneself in the world's affairs, staying aloof from all the various European [diplomatic] combinations, seeing as a trap or misguided adventure all expansion into Africa or the Orient—to live in this manner for a great nation, I tell you, is to give up, and in less time than you would think possible it is to fall from being a first-rate power to the third or fourth rank.  

The premier warned, “If the French flag should be withdrawn ... from Tonkin, Germany or Spain would replace us within the hour.”

Rulers may enter the fray out of resentment at rivals’ efforts to keep them out of a rapidly globalizing competitive arena. Francis I of France is said to have reacted to the Spanish-Portuguese Treaty of Tordesillas by remarking wryly, “I should very much like to see the clause in Adam’s will that excludes me from a share of the world.” As the pace of overseas acquisitions accelerates, so does the tendency of competing parties to extend the scope of their activities. Suddenly it seems sensible to include areas previously considered unimportant. A frontier once deemed safe now needs to be protected by another frontier, which in turn has to be protected by a third. The admonition to “Grab now; check later to see if what you took was worth grabbing” rings ever louder in the ears of harried decision makers.

States in a territorial scramble engage in “defensively aggressive” behavior. Actions from the victims’ perspective look unmistakably like aggression are driven from the aggressors’ perspective by the opposite motivation: desire for protection against threats to key interests. Objectively powerful actors exert themselves to counteract a subjectively feared loss of power and prestige.

This point suggests a more general one. Competition among states in the same system leads each unit continually to compare itself to its rivals. Its sense of self-worth depends greatly on where it believes it is ranked relative to the other units. Imperial expansion can be driven by desire to reflect the high standing a state thinks it possesses: Spain, for example, in the sixteenth century, Britain in the nineteenth. But expansion can also be driven by desire to compensate for a real or perceived decline in status. A phase 1 example of compensatory imperialism was the arrival in
the East Indian islands of well-armed Dutch ships as a result of Spain’s decision in the
1590s to exclude Dutch merchants from the Lisbon spice market. Perhaps the
closest phase 3 example was France’s burst of activism in Africa and Southeast Asia
following defeat in its war with Prussia. Gains in the Sahara or Tonkin might make
up for—and momentarily deflect public attention from—the humiliating loss of
Alsace and Lorraine. Paul Leroy-Beaulieu, one of France’s most ardent imperialists,
and wrote an article in 1881 urging annexation of Tunisia. Referring to the lost territories,
he admitted that “all hopes of forceful revenge are vain dreams in the face of a
Germany of 55,000,000 inhabitants.” In contrast, “Africa is open.” Britain’s success
at excluding France from Egypt in 1879–82 only fueled the desire of French policy
makers to stake ambitious claims elsewhere.

But Britain itself offers a pertinent illustration. Its economic preeminence at
the outset of phase 3 permitted it to break with mercantilist doctrine and concentrate
on exerting informal influence. Why, then, did it revert later in the nineteenth
century to the traditional pattern of claiming territory? A clue is provided by com-
paring its manufacturing output to the combined total of that of France and Ger-
many (or Germany’s predecessor states). The ratio rises dramatically from .28 in 1750
to 1.09 in 1830 to 3.55 in 1860. But after that point it declines—to 1.4 in 1880 and .93 in
1900. The Berlin Conference took place when Britain equaled France + Germany
and was starting to fall behind them. Britain’s participation in the scramble suggests
that its rulers considered formal empire necessary to protect an economic hegemony
that its major continental rivals were swiftly undermining.

Another effect of interstate competition is imperial inertia. Once a colony has
been established the metropole comes to value it for more than the economic benef-
ts it confers. If in fact the only consideration driving imperialism were narrow cost-
benefit calculations, one would expect a metropole to shed possessions whose costs,
contrary to expectation or hope at the moment of acquisition, turned out to exceed
benefits. Virtually all Germany’s colonies fit this description. But governments do
not voluntarily abdicate power at home or abroad even if it makes eminent economic
sense to do so. At some point colonies become important as symbols of international
status. To abandon even one unviable colony might signal to competitors a declining
capacity or will to behave assertively and thereby weaken the metropole’s interna-
tional position.

Inertia played a role in late phase 3 expansion into North Africa. British forces
invaded Egypt in 1882 at the invitation of its ruler, Khedive Tawfiq, who at the time
faced serious domestic threats to his authority. Tawfiq expected the British to depart
after they had imposed order, and the London government itself initially assumed it
was carrying out a brief rescue and retire mission. But once in place as de facto rulers
the British refused to leave even though they repeatedly assured others they would.
France was particularly upset at Britain's refusal to leave a country—and a canal—in which substantial French funds had been invested. The Marchand expedition that reached Fashoda in 1898 deliberately challenged British control of the Upper Nile. London's determination to stand firm, coupled with some embarrassment over its unwillingness to honor its promises to leave, led to the Anglo-French Entente of 1904. In exchange for French recognition of British primacy in Egypt, Britain supported France's plans to intervene in Moroccan affairs. Imperial inertia in one territory thus contributed to imperial advance in another.

Interstate competition assumed its most dramatic form when two or more states scrambled for new lands, as in the following examples from phases 1 and 3:

- in the late fifteenth century, when Spain countered Portugal's steady advance around Africa toward India by supporting Columbus's proposal to reach Asia by an alternative route. Rival claims of Portugal and Spain following Columbus's first voyage were only temporarily resolved by the Tordesillas Treaty of 1494 dividing the non-European world between them;
- in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when England and Holland challenged the Iberian powers and each other, producing new settlements in North and South America, South Africa, and Java;
- in the eighteenth century, when England and France penetrated the interiors of North America and India in a duel for global hegemony;
- in the late nineteenth century, when newly formed states joined the original phase 1 metropoles in occupying territory in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Oceania.

Sometimes a scramble was triggered by a state's entry into the imperial game: Spain in the first example, England and Holland in the second, Germany in the fourth. The assertive newcomer's presence elicited defensively aggressive responses by others. Sometimes competition was played out far from the area where it began. The Tordesillas line, though initially drawn with the New World and Africa in mind, girdled the earth, leading Spain and Portugal to vie in the early sixteenth century for spice-rich islands off Asia's southeast coast close to where the line supposedly passed.

In the first and fourth examples the scramble proceeded with little or no violence among metropoles. Indeed, the papal bulls preceding Tordesillas and the Berlin Conference some four centuries later can be seen as efforts to create an overarching framework for interstate conflict resolution. By contrast, in the second and third examples warfare was the order of the day both in Europe and overseas. But the underlying competitive dynamic was similar in all four examples, whether or not it took the form of war.

After the Protestant Reformation created a permanent schism in Europe—Christianity, rivalry between two states on grounds unrelated to religion assumed greater intensity if one was officially Protestant and the other officially Catholic. This
factor, was operative when England and Holland encountered Spain in the New World in phase 1. Dutch-Spanish rivalry was especially fierce because of the eighty years' war the Dutch fought to rid themselves of Habsburg rule. Dutch leaders were products of the Reformation; Habsburg rulers took the lead in the Counter Reformation. Religious rivalry played a more muted but not insignificant role in British-French struggles during the eighteenth century and in their phase 3 contest for preeminence in Madagascar and Uganda. In these instances forces fragmenting Europe along religious as well as political lines were at work. When domestic mobilization of support for expansion involved two sectors, it enhanced institutional capacity in both sectors and ensured more intense popular support for a metropole's foreign policy.

Europe's interstate system was unlike that in the Islamic world and in East Asia. The close proximity of many units within a small, self-contained area is the geographical basis both for the system's unifying features and for its disunity. By contrast, Islamic states established by Arabs and other peoples stretched for thousands of miles along an east-west axis from Morocco through the East Indies. Physical dispersion did not permit a dense network of continuous interaction, either cooperative or hostile, among polities sharing the same faith.

For most of the past two millennia the Chinese have not experienced the tension between cultural unity and political fragmentation that was such a distinctive feature of Europe. Rather, culture and politics reinforced each other to create a unit, the Middle Kingdom, considered the epicenter of civilized life. Polities around it, including Japan, were deemed inferior. Devising regular diplomatic interactions among neighbors on the basis of the sovereignty each possessed was not an option because the very idea assumed an equality of status rejected by the reigning ideology. The Chinese emperor was not just another ruler but the Son of Heaven, the link between humans and the cosmos.

Had China been fragmented into two or more states during the past five centuries, as was the case earlier, it is conceivable that these units would have come to accept competition among themselves and other neighbor states as the norm. They might have vented shared insecurities by launching rival overseas expeditions. But this was not to be. Following Cheng Ho's voyages the Ming and then Ch'ing imperial dynasties adopted a far less activist course in foreign policy. The court valued occasions when envoys of other polities arrived, bearing tribute and acknowledging inferior status by kowtowing. The ideal relationship was one in which the world outside the Middle Kingdom made its respectful way to the imperial capital. To reverse the procedure by dispatching emissaries abroad on a mission to change the rest of the world would be unseemly and undignified.

That the west European pattern of intense competition among polities com-
prising a single economic and cultural system was not replicated in either the Arab/Islamic or Chinese cases supports the proposition that interstate rivalry played a key role in the formation of European empires.

**SPECIFIC METROPOLES**

Reframing the zoom lens on units smaller than an entire region, namely, countries that became metropoles, one sees that each had a distinctive profile. This was a composite of its location, size, population, ethnic and religious mix, natural resources, level and rate of economic development, social structure, political institutions, key historical events, and so forth. Each metropole's empire was also unique, unlike others in the timing and circumstances of its formation, its duration, size, number and location of colonies, roles played by settlers, and so on. A metropole's special characteristics shaped the kind of empire it governed. But because I am interested not in any one empire but in the process of parallel empire building by several states, the question is how features marking one metropole off from others shed light on the larger phenomenon of European dominance. One answer is that innovative or unusual activities on the part of one metropole were noted and then emulated by rivals. Europe was in effect a learning laboratory in which a variety of experiments in techniques of overseas domination was performed, with results diffused throughout the region.

**Portugal**

Portugal's most distinctive feature was its role as precedent setter. Indeed, in the three-quarters of a century between the conquest of Ceuta and the Spanish monarchs' sponsorship of Columbus's voyage, Portugal was the only European country whose rulers were serious about long-distance maritime initiatives. Its location—close to Africa and the Mediterranean basin, yet with a coastline facing westward—gave it a head start. Its explorers showed how Europeans could reach the fabled lands of Asia and profit from direct access to its spices, precious stones, and textiles. Portugal pioneered in demonstrating the military potential of highly mobile sailing ships armed with guns. Projection of Portuguese power into the Indian Ocean basin was marked by strong anti-Muslim sentiments, doubtless influenced by centuries of struggle to expel Muslim rulers from the home country. Portugal's early successes showed what can happen when political and commercial motives are reinforced by religious ones. The first empire builder taught others the synergistic effects of the triple assault.

Within a century of the conquest of Ceuta, Portugal had enclaves in the New World as well as in Africa and Asia. A European country became, with surprising ease and speed, literally a world power. That a small, relatively weak polity was able to
accomplish so much virtually invited more powerful European states to emulate it, in the reasonable expectation that deploying more resources would produce even more spectacular results. Had a major state set the imperial precedent, smaller states might not have joined in. Because a small state took the lead, the system in which it was embedded ensured that larger states would follow suit.

Portugal offers the first instance of compensatory imperialism. Overseas expansion bolstered its otherwise marginal position within Europe, enhanced national identity and pride, and imbued a tiny country with a spirit of global mission. But the impressively wide range of Portugal’s holdings could not hide the reality of military and economic weakness, dramatized by its inability to avoid being incorporated into Spain from 1580 to 1640. That period aside, Portuguese rulers tried to protect a vulnerable independence by forming an alliance with England. As the phase 3 scramble for Africa accelerated, the British were willing to support Portuguese claims to the interior of Angola and Mozambique provided their own Cape-to-Cairo ambitions were not thwarted. Portugal remained an imperial actor longer than might have been expected by playing the game of European balance-of-power politics. Indeed, in some respects it became a client of the regional system’s most powerful member. Portugal showed how, through diplomacy, a state could operate within the region to effect gains outside it.

Spain

Spain’s first great contribution to the European imperial project was, of course, sponsorship of the epic voyage that made the Old World aware of the New. Spain enjoyed the advantage over Portugal of direct access to both the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. Having extensive political responsibilities in Italy, Spain’s rulers were ideally placed to facilitate transfers of Mediterranean knowledge and technology to the wider world of the Atlantic. Columbus’s life dramatically illustrates this lateral transfer. The Spanish capitalized on the Genoese explorer’s findings by concentrating on the Americas. Their pioneering work led other metropoles to focus attention on the New World during phase 1.

A second accomplishment was to demonstrate that a small number of highly disciplined European soldiers mounted on horses and armed with guns could defeat vastly larger Amerindian forces. Conquest of the Aztec and Inca empires by troops led by Cortés and Pizarro ranks among the decisive events in world history. Yet these triumphs were also among history’s more improbable events. Had the first Spanish invaders been defeated it is by no means clear that Europeans of any nationality could have dominated New World hinterlands as rapidly and decisively as they did. To understand the conquistadors’ success one must turn to Spain’s history. Owing in part to the prolonged struggle against the Moors that culminated in the defeat of
Granada in 1492, many men were trained in the arts of combat. They expected material gain and enhanced social status from daring military accomplishments. The Americas were a vast arena in which to distinguish themselves for those ends.

Spain showed that colonies could enrich a metropole in the versatile, fungible form of gold and silver. Abundant early evidence from the mines of New Spain and Peru that colonies can pay stimulated other countries to seek new possessions. A motivator in some instances—for example, Sir Walter Raleigh’s expedition up the Orinoco River in 1595 and the Jamestown settlement in Virginia—was hope that unexplored lands would likewise yield precious metals. That this expectation usually proved illusory did nothing to undermine its centrality as an incentive driving early expansion. Spanish settlers further demonstrated the economic value of colonies by setting up sugar plantations and cattle ranches, mass producing for export plants and animals initially imported from the Old World. That overseas possessions might profitably produce commodities not native to them was a lesson widely learned.

Spain was the first European power to dispatch large numbers of people to live in its colonies. The settlers’ ability to adjust to new environments and in some cases to prosper probably encouraged other phase 1 metropoles to deploy settlers as an integral part of their own New World strategies. The settlers’ insistent demand for land and inexpensive non-European labor proved enormously disruptive to indigenous societies. Through the settlers’ example, the Spanish empire was the first to demonstrate the will and capacity to transform the economic, social, and demographic environment of other continents.

Spreading the Roman Catholic faith was an integral part of Spain’s imperial project and a primary justification for it. Spain’s monarchs worked to link state structures with the hierarchy of the Catholic Church at home and abroad. The resulting cross-sector coalition was one reason for their success at undermining indigenous resistance in many areas. Not until the rise of evangelical Protestantism in Britain during phases 2 and 3 did commitment to religious activism figure so prominently in a metropole’s overseas agenda.\[19\]

**France**

France, by virtue of its location in the heart of western Europe, centralized public sector, and sizeable standing army, was the most powerful force on the mainland from the seventeenth through the mid-nineteenth centuries. Given the nature of the interstate system, France’s very prominence presented it with an acute security dilemma. But its location and military resources also offered excellent opportunities for overland expansion in several directions. This ambiguous situation led the country’s rulers at times to adopt a defensive military posture and at others to attack their neighbors. An understandable preoccupation with diplomatic and military
developments in the European region made it unlikely that France's rulers would take the lead in sponsoring overseas ventures. But once the Iberian countries set precedents in this respect and showed that empire could generate material and status benefits, France was fully prepared to follow suit.

In phase 1 the French concentrated on thinly populated North American areas largely neglected by other metropoles. To some extent this resulted from the private actions of fishermen and trappers rather than deliberate state policy. Still, focusing on what became Eastern Canada might be termed an instance of emulation by avoidance. Likewise, France acquired enormous chunks of Saharan and Sahelian West Africa during the phase 3 scramble, knowing that much of this desolate land was not desired by its major rivals, Britain and Germany. The tendency to claim large, underpopulated areas not highly valued by other metropoles reflected a certain ambivalence about overseas empire. On the one hand, France wanted possessions whose cumulative size signaled its great-power status. There was also a certain appeal in expanding holdings abroad to compensate for military defeat at home. This factor influenced policy making after Alsace and Lorraine were lost to Germany in 1871. On the other hand, the security problems France faced on its borders prevented it from committing substantial resources to acquire distant holdings. The effect of this ambivalence was that many parts of the world that from a European perspective appeared economically or strategically marginal were acquired by a decidedly non-marginal state. France thus contributed substantially to the globalization of Europe's impact.

Following the French Revolution the country's leaders pioneered the appeal to and manipulation of public opinion for expansionist purposes. An early instance was Napoleon Bonaparte's effort to advance his political ambitions by leading the ill-fated invasion of Egypt in 1798. In 1830 the restored Bourbon monarch, Charles X, facing growing popular opposition, ordered the occupation of Algiers that commenced French rule in North Africa. This initiative, notes Raphael Danziger, "was largely the product of domestic political considerations, primarily the calculation that a spectacular expedition would give the declining Bourbon monarchy enough prestige to defeat the opposition and win the coming election." In the 1880s Premier Ferry tried to rally popular as well as parliamentary support for expansion in Indochina.

Efforts to link popular nationalism with specific imperial goals were not all that successful. At most they produced a temporary surge of interest and pride in the nation's overseas accomplishments. But France demonstrated that democratization was quite compatible with imperialism, a lesson not lost on politicians in other countries like Benjamin Disraeli, Otto von Bismarck, and Joseph Chamberlain. The populist dimension in phase 3 imperialism made leaders of Europe's metropoles
ers would entries set and status

Holland's population was traditionally oriented to waterborne trade. Several rivers flow into the North Sea in Holland, and it is close to the British Isles and the passage to the Baltic Sea. During the first half of the seventeenth century the Netherlands, having large numbers of technically advanced, skillfully manned ships at its disposal, played a critically important role as integrator of the world economy. "The Dutch maritime zone," writes Jonathan Israel, "moved to the top of the global hierarchy of exchanges, emerging as the hub of what was now definitely a 'mono-nuclear' system, the first and, for most of early modern times, the only true world entrepôt." This achievement was all the more impressive considering the territory's small size and population and the fact that for much of the period its people were fighting for independence from Habsburg Spain. The unusually efficient institutions the Dutch developed in the private profit sector enabled them to mobilize and gainfully invest resources from other parts of Europe as well as from their own society. The Dutch state, controlled by urban interests specializing in production and international exchange of a wide array of consumer goods, was far less inhibited by the agrarian feudal structures of medieval Europe than Portugal, Spain, and France. The Reformed Protestant faith of Holland's elites sanctioned unabashedly acquisitive behavior. Dutch actions and motivations in phase 1 prefigured those of leading participants in phase 3, when capitalist-led economic growth became a dominant motif in European life.

The Dutch copioneered with the English the classic institutional link between public and private profit sectors: the officially chartered company. The United East India Company (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, or VOC), established by the Estates General in 1602, was intended to function as a trading enterprise and, if necessary or convenient, as a government. In dealings with Japan the VOC was strictly confined by the Tokugawa rulers to trade. But in the East Indies economic transactions went hand in hand with political control backed by force. Jan Pieterszoon Coen, considered the founder of the East Indies empire, wrote in 1614 to the board of directors that trade "must be conducted and maintained under protection and favor of your own weapons and ... the weapons must be supplied from the profits enjoyed by the trade, so that trade cannot be maintained without war or war without trade." Appointed governor-general three years later, Coen put his philosophy into practice. Inhabitants of the nutmeg-producing Banda Islands were almost wiped out and the islands resettled by others willing to sell their crops solely to VOC agents. A company
monopoly in cloves was obtained by launching violent attacks on producers in the Moluccas and against all ships serving rival clove traders.25 The Dutch consolidated political power slowly on Java. But by the end of phase 1 they were recognized as direct or indirect rulers of much of the island.

As these examples illustrate, an important advantage of the chartered company was its tactical flexibility. When faced with effective resistance to its political ambitions, the VOC defined itself as a trading firm and was content to exert informal influence. Externally imposed constraints did not humiliate the Dutch state, for the state was only indirectly involved, its presence buffered by the corporate front it had set up. If indigenous resistance was ineffective, however, the company could proceed to assert control. Areas it governed were transferred to the Dutch state after the VOC was abolished in the war years of phase 2. In large part because of the flexibility it offered, the chartered company model was adopted by other European states. Chartered companies were especially active during the middle years of phase 1 and the latter half of phase 3.26

The VOC was widely regarded in its heyday as a cost-conscious, efficient, carefully managed company. But even this paragon of a profit-driven institution was unwilling to rely solely upon market forces. Its founding charter officially designated the VOC a monopoly, the goal being to eliminate competition among Dutch traders in Asia. The idea of negotiating prices with willing sellers was anathema. The belief that market share could be increased and assured by forcibly asserting political control over the market made eminent sense to VOC entrepreneurs. It made sense to the Dutch in phase 3 as well. By ensuring order at the cost of crushing local uprisings, the colonial state helped an efficient plantation system run by Dutch private interests to prosper. The Schumpeterian notion that capitalists are inherently peaceable did not apply to the Dutch in distant lands, where the perils and uncertainties of operating in what seemed like a Hobbesian “war of each against all” were self-evident. If western Europe’s most efficient private profit sector relied so heavily upon soldiers and administrators to ensure overseas profits, it is all the more understandable why private entrepreneurs in other European metropoles pressed their governments to take up the imperial cause. The Dutch experience illustrates more clearly than any other the symbiotic relationship between private profit and public sectors in European expansion. Capitalist institutions were driven not by free market ideology but by a persistent tendency to act politically and to call upon state institutions for assistance.

Britain

Britain was inescapably oriented to the sea and hence exceptionally well positioned to enlarge its colonial holdings once the Tudor monarchs had consolidated political control at home. Whereas the military strategies of mainland countries re-
quired heavy spending on armies. Britain's best means of defense was to expand and modernize its navy. Once in place a strong navy was far better suited than a large European-based army to claim and defend overseas colonies and to expand trade ties with them. Given the importance of ships for commercial as well as military ends, the British had strong incentives to increase the speed, maneuverability, carrying capacity, safety, and firing range of their vessels. A striking consequence of their numerous technological breakthroughs in the hundred years following the Industrial Revolution's takeoff was a capacity, unrivaled until the 1890s, to rule the waves. A head start in producing ships powered by steam and constructed of iron and steel helped Britain become the preeminent metropole in phase 3. Its mainland neighbors readily adopted Britain's advances in maritime (and overland) transport, giving western Europe as a whole the dramatic technological edge over other regions noted in chapter 5.

A corollary of Britain's position as the world's leading sea power was the tendency of its rulers to feel threatened by—and to want to challenge—the leading land-based power of the day. France held the title during the eighteenth century and Napoleon's reign. Its successor was Russia, which rapidly extended its hold over central and eastern Asia in phase 1. The assertion of British power in the Indian subcontinent can be interpreted in geostrategic terms as a sustained effort to counter advances by these adversaries: the French in phase 1, the Russians in phase 3. Britain's comparative advantage on the high seas was insufficient in and of itself. Land claims in many parts of the world were needed both to ensure naval supremacy and to compensate for its limits.

Millions more people left the British Isles to take permanent residence in a more dispersed set of territories, over a longer period of time, than residents of any other metropole. English-speaking settlers brought with them the institutions and values of representative government that they enjoyed at home. Strongly disposed to political and religious self-rule, they constituted fragments of the metropole with a high potential to break away from it. Over the long run, settlers' insistence on transferring key features of Britain's political system to the colonies undermined metropolitan control. In the short run, however, the restless, almost insatiable demand by settlers for new land was a powerful expansionist force in its own right. Settlers extended imperial frontiers in BNA during phase 1 and in Australia, New Zealand, and Southern Rhodesia during phase 3.

Britain relied on the chartered company mechanism more widely and over a longer time than did Holland. The Virginia Company of London was short-lived (1606–24). But this joint venture of merchant capital and royal authority succeeded in founding, at Jamestown, the New World's first permanent English-speaking settlement. The English East India Company operated as a quasi government over
ever-larger areas of India from the 1730s until 1858, when the British government assumed direct control in the aftermath of the Great Mutiny. The Hudson’s Bay Company, chartered in 1670, controlled vast tracts of land in Canada until 1867. Late phase 3 expansion in the Niger Valley, along the East African coast, and in what became Southern and Northern Rhodesia was directed by royally chartered companies. Britain is the prime example of sustained collaboration between public and private profit sectors, with the benefits of tactical flexibility and synergistic energy this arrangement yielded. Generous representation of property interests in the two houses of Parliament lent itself to the creation and sustenance of a cross-sector coalition.

Britain pioneered mass production of inexpensive, machine-made consumer goods. Its leadership in the first Industrial Revolution had mixed effects, varying over time, on the will of influential economic actors to enlarge the empire. From the early nineteenth century onward British prosperity depended not only on assured access to imported primary products but also on exported manufactures. Hence factory owners joined mercantile and shipping interests in paying close attention to overseas markets. During the early decades of phase 3 British manufactures enjoyed such a competitive edge everywhere that it did not seem necessary for government to provide backup support through territorial claims. Indeed, many in the private profit sector opposed using public funds to acquire new colonies because this would entail higher taxes. But by the 1870s diffusion of industrial technologies to the European mainland and the United States undercut Britain’s competitive edge. And the cumulative capacity of all the industrial powers to generate consumer and capital goods began to exceed world demand. Under these more threatening conditions Britain’s private profit sector looked more favorably on imperialism. Colonies were valued as ensuring the dual access to raw materials and markets required by an industrial economy. 29

The British case suggests that while industrialization per se need not generate imperial expansion, rivalry among several simultaneously industrializing countries can easily take the form of a colonial scramble. The world’s first overproduction crisis, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, gave powerful economic impetus to interstate rivalries for new possessions.

Britishers have had unusually diverse religious affiliations. An official Church of England was established in the 1530s in a dramatic break with Rome, yet substantial numbers remained Catholic. A variety of dissenting Protestant sects flourished. The small Jewish population was not persecuted. Religious pluralism significantly influenced British imperial expansion, albeit in varying ways depending on the time period. In phase 1 the government permitted non-Anglicans to found colonies overseas and practice their faith there, provided they acknowledge the authority of
Crown and Parliament. This policy encouraged religious minorities to seek a better life for themselves abroad, in the course of which they extended the frontiers of British power. The role of Puritans, Baptists, Quakers, and Catholics in the formation of Britain’s North American colonies is well known.

The faiths most early settlers brought to the New World fostered a sense of separation from—and superiority over—indigenous peoples. Only tangentially were Anglicans, Congregationalists, Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians interested in converting Amerindians to Christianity. If anything there were persuasive reasons not to do so because converts might have to be treated with the respect due fellow believers. The early settlers wanted a frontier of exclusion, not of inclusion. Unconverted Indians fit the stereotype of the savage and, as such, were candidates for extermination and expulsion from land the settlers coveted. John Winthrop expressed a widely held view when he rejoiced that “God hath consumed the natives with a miraculous plague, whereby the greater part of the country is left void of inhabitants.”

In this respect early English Protestantism differed from the strong conversionist ethic of the Roman Catholic Church, whose missionary orders were active from the outset in Portuguese, Spanish, and French colonies.

By phase 3, however, British Protestants had become at least as interested in missionary work as western Europe’s Catholics. The new orientation was a product of the evangelical movement that began in the late eighteenth century and crested in the late nineteenth. The movement’s ambitious initial aims included abolishing the transatlantic slave trade, then slavery throughout the British empire. After Parliament approved these measures, reformers set an even more far-reaching goal: to transform non-European societies. Of particular interest were sub-Saharan Africa, south Asia, and Oceania, deemed malleable because many of their inhabitants adhered to animist religions, were nonliterate, and employed simple technologies. Their societies were to be transfigured by a civilizing package: conversion to Christianity, formal instruction in European learning, abolition of domestic slavery, encouragement of cash-crop production, and adoption of a Victorian-era lifestyle. British Catholics likewise offered the world’s benighted souls not just a religion but a religion encased in a way of life. The task was daunting, not least because many of the societies to which missionaries were attracted lay outside the pale of colonial authority.

The work of conversion can proceed on its own. The work of civilizing others, at least as phase 3 British missionaries defined the task, is another matter. Close links between Christianity and commerce—or, in a widely used phrase, between “the Bible and the Plough”—meant that European trading companies were needed to exchange peasant-grown cash crops for imported manufactured goods. Abolishing
domestic slavery required the use of force against recalcitrant slaveholders and introduction of a new legal code. This typically meant replacing indigenous rulers with European ones. The sheer scope of the missionaries’ transformative agenda led them, in short, to press other sectors to help launch a triple assault.

British Protestants in phase 3 were extraordinarily effective lobbyists for empire. Their most famous missionary, David Livingstone, played a key role in this respect. Livingstone’s well-publicized travels greatly increased popular interest in previously unknown parts of the African interior, and his views took antislavery sentiment in a new direction. Whereas abolitionists had earlier attacked Britain and other European powers for complicity in an iniquitous trade, now they began to support Britain’s advance into the heart of Africa to end non-European complicity in the same trade. Livingstone did more than advocate an active diplomatic presence in central Africa. He acted on these beliefs, accepting appointment as British consul in Quelimane, Mozambique, in 1858. Protestant missionaries in Nyasaland, Nigeria, Uganda, and Bechuanaland—and the home-based mission societies sponsoring them—pressed vigorously for government intervention to facilitate the civilizing mission.26

Britain in the latter half of phase 3 provides the clearest instance of a coordinated triple assault on non-European peoples. That all three sectors were so actively involved may help explain why Britain emerged from the late nineteenth-century scramble as the premier imperial power. With officials facing insistent appeals from mercantile, financial, and missionary groups to act aggressively overseas, the empire continued to grow even when the home government lacked expansionist plans of its own. The Cambridge University historian J. R. Seeley overstated matters when claiming in 1883 that the British Empire grew “in a fit of absence of mind.” If politicians and bureaucrats were looking elsewhere, their absentmindedness was more than compensated for by the close attention nongovernmental actors paid to their country’s imperial role.

Belgium

Belgium represents the classic case of a determined ruler’s impact on foreign policy. King Leopold II (r.1865–1909) became obsessed with acquiring overseas territory. Lewis Gann and Peter Duignan write that the king “had a personal drive so compelling that it repelled Cecil Rhodes, who was not an overly squeamish man.”27 Through sponsorship of an international conference on the Congo in 1876 and skilful diplomacy at the Conference of Berlin, Leopold obtained in the bizarrely misnamed Congo Free State a land almost eighty times larger than Belgium. The Congo was considered the king’s personal property until atrocities committed in his name forced transfer of sovereignty in 1908 to Parliament.
Leopold II parlayed his country's small size and population into sources of strength by playing upon rivalries within the interstate system. France, Germany, and Britain were more willing to cede jurisdiction over an immense, strategically located territory to the Belgian ruler than to grant one another this privilege. By reducing great-power rivalry in the Congo basin Leopold assisted the rapid European takeover of Africa. Like Portugal and Holland before it, Belgium illustrates the role of compensatory imperialism—and the disproportionately large role small states played in projecting European power abroad.

Germany

Germany offers additional evidence that a leader's ability to utilize competitive features of the interstate system could have major impacts outside the system. Chancellor Bismarck's foreign policy focused principally on power relationships within Europe and only peripherally on the wider world. Bismarck aspired to serve as regional balancer while preventing formation of a coalition of other states to challenge the Second Reich's growing prominence. His interest in defusing and diverting French revanchiste sentiment following Germany's acquisition of Alsace and Lorraine led him to back French expansion abroad. His one brief foray into the imperial arena in 1884–85 was apparently influenced more by domestic and regional political considerations than by any analysis of global trends.

Whatever the motives may have been, the effect of German territorial claims in several parts of Africa in 1884 was to intensify and accelerate rivalry for control of Africa's coastal areas. Having raised the stakes of competition, Bismarck then took steps to regulate its form by convening the Berlin Conference. States attending this conclave not only not only devised a common set of rules for occupying large portions of Africa and Oceania, but also pledged to resolve disputes among themselves through diplomacy. The conference's routinization of the scramble for territory may be considered Germany's most important and distinctive imperial contribution.

Italy

The peninsula that eventually became the Italian state played diverse roles over time. As noted in the previous chapter, the Roman Empire created and diffused institutions, norms, and ideas that gave cultural coherence and unity to western Europe. It was an inspiration and role model for advocates of multicontinental empire in modern times.

That Italy did not become politically unified until the nineteenth century affected early European expansion in indirect but nonetheless important ways. Experienced mariners like Columbus, Vespucci, Cabot, and Verrazzano abandoned the tiny city-states of their birth and worked instead for rulers of far larger, more
powerful states fronting the Atlantic. The Roman Catholic Church was able to gain sway throughout western Europe, as both an actor within countries and a comparatively autonomous supranational institution. Had Italy been unified in phase 1, people elsewhere in Europe might have eyed the Roman Church with suspicion as an agent of the Italian state. Instead, the Church’s association with catholic (that is, universal) goals and its sponsorship of missionary orders operating throughout the world enabled the proselytizing element in Christianity to be harnessed to the political ambitions of several states, not just one.

When political unification did occur in the 1860s, the new state was able to play a direct role of its own. Last entrant in the competition for colonies, Italy was also the last European power to dispatch armies in search of colonial glory when Benito Mussolini launched the invasion of Abyssinia (Ethiopia) in 1935. The hostile reaction this invasion elicited from many quarters, including other metropoles, showed that actions widely supported by Europeans in phase 3 no longer had moral and emotional appeal by phase 4. Attempting to recreate the ethos of a bygone era, Abyssinia’s fascist conquerors played out the final act in the drama of European expansion.

Distinctive features of each metropole influenced the behavior of others through competition or emulation. To note the uniqueness of each imperial power does not undermine the argument that all the metropoles should be seen as constituents of a larger system. One reason for the system’s dynamism was a high level of interaction among units differing among themselves in important respects. These very differences enabled metropoles to learn from the successes and failures of their rivals’ experiments with long-distance rule.