

# The Great War: a View from Asia

## 11 November Lecture 2017 by Pankaj Mishra

“Today on the Western Front,” Max Weber wrote in September 1917, there “stands a dross of African and Asiatic savages and all the world’s rabble of thieves and lumpens.” Weber was referring to the millions of Indian, African, Arab, Chinese, Vietnamese soldiers and laborers, who were then embattled on the Western Front, as well as in several ancillary theaters of the First World War. In *Storm of Steel*, the German writer Ernst Jünger describes his startling realization that the men he has shot and wounded are Indians—total strangers “who had travelled thousands of miles across the sea, only to give themselves a bloody nose” and who beg for help in voices like “the noise that frogs make in the grass after a rainstorm.”

Faced with manpower shortages, British imperialists had recruited up to 1.4 million Indian soldiers. France enlisted nearly 500,000 troops from its colonies in Africa and Indochina. Nearly 400,000 African Americans were also inducted into American forces. Ho Chi Minh, who spent much of the war in Europe, denounced such gang-pressing of subordinate peoples, who he wrote, were “nothing but dirty Negroes” before being turned into “human fodder” for Europe’s slaughter machines. Many other anti-imperialists, such as Mohandas Gandhi and W.E.B. Du Bois, vigorously supported the war aims of their white overlords, hoping to secure dignity for their compatriots in the aftermath.

Little did they realize how many Europeans came to fear and hate physical proximity to their “new-caught sullen peoples”, as Kipling called colonized Asians and Africans in his 1898 poem *The White Man’s Burden*. All Western powers then upheld a global racial hierarchy built around a shared project of territorial expansion. The US president Woodrow Wilson baldly stated his intention in a cabinet meeting in 1917 “to keep the white race strong against the yellow” and to preserve “white civilization and its domination of the planet”. Eugenacist ideas of racial selection were everywhere in the mainstream, and the *Daily Mail*’s anxiety about white women being exposed “to natives who are worse than brutes when their passions are aroused” was widely shared across the West. Anti-miscegenation laws existed in most American states. In the years leading up to 1914, prohibitions on sexual relations between European women and black men (though not between European men and African women) were enforced across European colonies in Africa. The presence of the ‘dirty Negroes’ in Europe after 1914 seemed to be breaking a firm taboo.

The publication in the *Daily Mail* in May 1915 of a photograph of a British nurse standing behind a wounded Indian soldier caused a scandal. Army officials tried to withdraw white nurses from hospitals treating Indians, and disbarred the latter from leaving the hospital

premises without a white male companion. The outrage when France deployed soldiers from Africa (a majority of them from the Maghreb) in its postwar occupation of Germany was particularly intense and more widespread. Germany had also fielded thousands of African soldiers while trying to hold on to its colonies in East Africa, but it had not used them in Europe, or indulged in what the German foreign minister (and former governor of Samoa), Wilhelm Solf, called “racially shameful use of coloureds.” “These savages are a terrible danger” a joint declaration of the German national assembly warned in 1920, to “German women”. Writing *Mein Kampf* in the 1920s Adolf Hitler would describe African soldiers on German soil as a Jewish conspiracy aimed to topple white people “from their cultural and political heights”. The Nazis, who were inspired by American innovations in racial hygiene, would in 1937 forcibly sterilize hundreds of children fathered by African soldiers. Fear and hatred of armed ‘niggers’ (as Weber called them) on German soil was not confined to Germany, or the political right. The Pope and the British Labour Party protested against their presence. An editorial in the British socialist newspaper *Daily Herald* in 1920 was titled *Black Scourge in Europe*.

Today, as racism and xenophobia explode across the West, and white supremacists feverishly build transnational alliances, it becomes imperative to ask, as Du Bois did in 1910, “What is whiteness that one should so desire it?” and to examine the first global war, in the years of its centenary, in the context of a cross-Western project of global domination—one that transcends the obvious antagonisms of the war. Only with this broader analytical framework can we grasp our tormented present, where the terminal weakening of white civilization’s domination of the planet, and the assertiveness of previously sullen peoples, has released long-suppressed political tendencies and traits in the West.

Conventional views of the Great War’s origins focus on rigid alliances, military timetables, imperialist rivalries, arms races and German militarism. The war, we are repeatedly told, was the seminal calamity of the 20th century—Europe’s original sin that enabled even bigger eruptions of savagery, such as the Second World War and the Shoah. An extensive literature on the war, literally tens of thousands of books and scholarly articles, largely dwells on Western Front and impact of the mutual butchery on Britain, France, and Germany—significantly, the metropolitan cores of these imperial powers rather than their peripheries. In this orthodox narrative, which is punctuated by the Russian Revolution and the Balfour Declaration, the war begins with the ‘guns of August’ in 1914, and exultantly patriotic crowds across Europe send soldiers off to fight. Peace arrives with the Armistice of 11 November 1918, only to be tragically compromised by the Treaty of Versailles in 1919.

With over eight million dead, and over twenty-one million wounded, the war was the bloodiest in European history until a second conflagration on the continent ended in 1945. War memorials in Europe’s remotest villages as well as the cemeteries of Verdun, the Marne, Passchendaele, and the Somme enshrine a heartbreakingly extensive experience of bereavement. But it seems increasingly inadequate, if not narcissistic, to see the war as a great rupture in modern Western civilization, an inexplicable catastrophe that European powers sleepwalked into after the ‘long peace’ of the 19th century, and whose unresolved issues caused another calamitous conflict between liberal democracy and authoritarianism before the former returned to its European home.



In this dominant view, popularized since the Cold War, the world wars together with Fascism and Communism are a monstrous aberration in the universal advance of democracy and freedom. But, in many ways, it is the decades after 1945, when Europe, deprived of its colonies, emerged from the ruins of two wars, that constitute an exceptional period. Amid a general exhaustion with militant ideologies in Western Europe, the virtues of democracy—above all, the respect for individual liberties—seemed clear; the practical advantages of a reworked social contract, and a welfare state, were also obvious. But neither these decades of relative stability, nor the collapse of communist regimes in 1989, were a reason to assume that human rights and democracy were ineradicably rooted in European soil.

As Hannah Arendt pointed out in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) it was Europeans who jointly reordered “humanity into master and slave races” during their conquest and exploitation of much of Asia, Africa, and America and the establishment of white settler colonies around the world. This debasing hierarchy became necessary because the promise of equality and liberty required imperial expansion abroad in order to be even partially fulfilled at home. We tend to forget that imperialism, with its promise of land, food, and raw materials, was widely seen in the late 19th century as crucial to national progress and prosperity. Racism was—and is—more than an ugly prejudice, something to be eradicated through legal and social proscription. It involved real attempts, whether in Australia or the United States, to solve, through exclusion and degradation, the problems of establishing political order in societies roiled by rapid social and economic change.

The future of any ruling class depended on its ability to forge a successful alliance between, in Arendt’s words, “capital and mob”, “between the much-too-rich and the much-too-poor”. Social Darwinism, by the early 20th century, defined most worldviews, creating a consensus that nations are biological organisms, doomed to become extinct or degenerate if they fail to expel or impede alien bodies and achieve living space for their citizens. Whiteness became “the new religion,” as Du Bois wrote, offering security amid disorientating economic and technological shifts, and a promise of power and authority over a majority of the human population. Its resurgence today in the West, and the related stigmatization of entire populations as, if not fundamentally violent or biologically inferior, then culturally incompatible with Western nations, suggests that the First World War was not a profound historical rupture. Rather it was, as Liang Qichao, China’s foremost modern intellectual, was already insisting in 1918, a “mediating passage that connects the past and the future”. Our complex task during the centenary of the war is to identify the ways in which the grim past to which it belongs has infiltrated our present, and threatens to shape the future.

Most accounts of the war—whether of its origins or its political and cultural ramifications, such as fascism and modernism—uphold it as an essentially European affair: one in which the continent’s long peace is shattered by four years of carnage, and a long tradition of western rationalism is perverted. Nearly a century after First World War ended, the experiences and perspectives of its non-European actors and observers still remain largely obscure. Relatively little is known about how the war accelerated political struggles across Asia and Africa; how Arab and Turkish nationalists, Indian and Vietnamese anti-colonial activists found new opportunities in it; or, how while destroying old empires in Europe, the war turned Japan into a menacing imperialist power in Asia.

In the timeworn story of the war's aftermath, Woodrow Wilson, who planned to "make the world safe for democracy" through his military and diplomatic interventions, appears a valiant liberal internationalist cruelly let down by isolationist Americans. It is still poorly understood how Wilsonian liberalism was exposed as a cover for white supremacy at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, where claims for self-determination by Asian and African anti-colonialists were contemptuously denied, and even Japan, an ally of Britain and the United States, found its appeal for racial equality rejected.

Recent commemorations have made greater space for non-European soldiers and battlefields of the First World War: the facts that altogether over four million non-white men were mobilized into the European and American armies, and fighting took place in places very remote from Europe—from Siberia and East Asia to the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, and even the South Pacific islands. In Mesopotamia, Indian soldiers formed a majority of Allied manpower throughout the war. Neither the British occupation of Mesopotamia nor Britain's successful campaign in Palestine would have occurred without Indian assistance. Sikh soldiers even helped the Japanese to evict Germans from their Chinese colony of Qingdao.

Scholars have started to pay more attention to the nearly 140,000 Chinese and Vietnamese contract labourers hired by the British and French governments to maintain the war's infrastructure. We know more about how interwar Europe became host to a multitude of anticolonial movements; the East Asian expatriate community in Paris at one point included Zhou Enlai as well as Ho Chi Minh. Cruel mistreatment, in the form of segregation and slave labor, was the fate of many of these Asians and Africans in Europe. Deng Xiaoping, who arrived in France after the war, later recalled "the humiliations" inflicted upon fellow Chinese by "the running dogs of capitalists".

The activists who had hoped, riskily, that their white masters would grow lenient after using black and brown peoples as human fodder also felt dishonored. Black men, Du Bois wrote after the end of the war, were "asking in clearer and clearer accents 'Where do we come in?'" The answer came in the form of a tidal wave of mob attacks on blacks across the United States. (Wilson himself worried that the "American Negro returning from abroad" was prone to smuggle Bolshevism into America). In 1919, British troops massacred hundreds of unarmed Indian protestors in Amritsar, helping turn Gandhi from the British Empire's collaborator to its antagonist. The following year, British imperialists crushed a revolt in Iraq with the first sustained aerial bombing campaign in history.

Rabindranath Tagore spoke of the cruel disabusing of liberal Asians and Africans when he wrote to Romain Rolland in 1921 that "Europe has completely lost her former moral prestige" and is seen "as an upholder of Western race supremacy." The appeal of Woodrow Wilson's liberalism, briefly incandescent in Cairo, Beijing, and Tehran, was also quickly extinguished as the Virginia-born President's reflexive tenderness for the Ku Klux Klan manifested itself in a postwar bonanza for the war's imperialist victors. Embittered by Western skullduggery in Paris, China started on its uncompromising quest for a strong nation-state that would dominate rather than be dominated. Ideologies like revolutionary communism and Islamic fundamentalism became more potent with their promise to break cleanly with the illusions of a collaborationist generation of leaders.

A broad account of the Great War that is attentive to political conflicts outside as well as inside Europe can clarify the hyper-nationalism today of many Asian and African ruling



elites—most conspicuously, the Chinese regime, which presents itself as avengers of China’s century-long humiliation by the West. To grasp the homecoming of white supremacy in the West, however, we need a deeper history—one that shows how whiteness was the assurance of individual identity and dignity as well as the basis of military and diplomatic alliances.

In this history, Europe’s long peace is revealed as a time of unlimited wars in Asia, Africa and the Americas, and its colonies emerge as the crucible where the premises of Europe’s civil wars—racist theories, forced population transfers, and contempt for human life—were forged. Contemporary historians of German colonialism (an expanding field of study) try to trace the Holocaust back to the mini-genocides Germans committed in their African colonies in the 1900s, where some key ideologies, such as Lebensraum, were also nurtured. But it is too easy to conclude, especially from an Anglo-American perspective, that Germany broke from the norms of civilization to set a new standard of barbarity, strong-arming the rest of the world into the age of extremes. For there were deep continuities in the imperialist practices and racial assumptions of European and American powers.

Robert Gerwarth and Stefan Malinowski point to a shared archive of “knowledge on the treatment, exploitation, and extermination of ‘sub-humans’,” which had been “accumulated by the western powers over the course of colonial history.” Indeed, mentalities and worldviews converged to remarkable degree during the high noon of ‘whiteness’—what Du Bois, answering his own question about this highly desirable condition, defined as “the ownership of the earth forever and ever”. Even the argument—famously aired by Lenin in *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916)—that Western imperial powers competing for markets and resources rushed into war in 1914 underestimates the degree to which these apparent rivals co-operated: for instance, German colonization of southwest Africa, which was meant to solve the problem of overpopulation, was often assisted by the British, and all major Western powers amicably sliced and shared the Chinese melon in the late 19th century. Any tensions that arose between those dividing the booty of Asia and Africa were defused largely peacefully, if at the expense of Asians and Africans.

This is because colonies by the late 19th century had come to be widely seen indispensable relief-valves for domestic socio-economic pressures. Cecil Rhodes put the case for them with exemplary clarity in 1895 after an encounter with angry unemployed men in London’s East End: imperialism, he declared, was a “solution for the social problem i.e., in order to save the 40,000,000 inhabitants of the United Kingdom from a bloody civil war, we colonial statesmen must acquire new lands to settle the surplus population, to provide new markets for the goods produced in the factories and mines.” In Rhodes’ view, “if you want to avoid civil war, you must become imperialists.”

Rhodes’ scramble for Africa’s gold fields helped trigger the Second Boer War, where the British, interning Boer women and children, brought the words ‘concentration camps’ into ordinary parlance. By the end of the war in 1902, it had become a “commonplace of history,” J.A. Hobson wrote, that “governments use national animosities, foreign wars and the glamour of empire-making, in order to bemuse the popular mind and divert rising resentment against domestic abuses.” With imperialism opening up a “panorama of vulgar pride and crude sensationalism,” ruling classes everywhere tried harder to “imperialize the nation,” as Arendt wrote. This project to “organize the nation for the looting of foreign territories and the permanent degradation of alien peoples” was quickly advanced through the then newly invented tabloid press: the *Daily Mail* stoked, right from its inception in 1896,

vulgar pride in being white, British and superior to the horny natives. Not surprisingly, protégés of Dacre and Murdoch, and neo-imperialist raconteurs like Niall Ferguson, still try to forge the vital alliance between capital and mob.

Given how many Europeans came to feel proud of their empire, the much-remarked frenzy of jingoism amid which Europe plunged into a bloodbath in 1914 doesn't seem so remarkable. Nor does the Great War seem the first episode in liberal democracy's long 20th century struggle with authoritarianism. Italy actually joined Britain and France on the Allied side in 1915 in a fit of empire-mania (and promptly plunged into fascism after its lust for empire was frustrated). Italian writers and journalists as well as politicians and businessmen had craved imperial power and glory since the late 19th century. Italy had dutifully scrambled for Africa, only to be ignominiously routed by Ethiopia in 1896 (Mussolini would avenge the defeat in 1935 by dousing Ethiopians with poison gas). Nor had it failed to secure any division of the spoils in China. In 1911, it saw an opportunity to detach Libya from the Ottoman Empire; and, coming after previous setbacks, its assault on the country, greenlighted by both Britain and France, was vicious, and loudly cheered at home.

News of Italian atrocities, which included the first aerial bombing in history, radicalized many Muslims across Asia and Africa. Public opinion in Italy remained implacably behind the imperial gamble. The Italian Futurist Giuseppe Marinetti, who travelled to Libya as war correspondent, marvelled at the "sculpture wrought in the enemy's masses by our expert artillery". Yet the Italians struggled against the Libyans (Mustafa Kemal, later known as Atatürk, travelled to Libya disguised as a journalist to mobilize Arab volunteers). They escalated, bombing Beirut in February 1912, and occupying the islands of Rhodes, Cos, and Patmos. These largely forgotten attempts by Italy at imperial muscle-building were not a direct cause of the First World War. But they anticipated the outbreaks of patriotic deliriums and war crimes during 1914-1918.

Germany's own behavior starts to seem less extraordinary when we consider that from the 1880s, many Germans in politics, business and academia, and such powerful lobby groups as the Pan-German League (Max Weber was briefly a member), had exhorted their rulers to achieve the imperial status of Britain and France. Moreover, all of Germany's military engagements from 1871 to 1914 occurred outside Europe. These included punitive expeditions in the African colonies and one very ambitious venture in 1900 in China, where Germany joined seven other European powers in a retaliatory expedition against young Chinese who had rebelled against Western domination of the Middle Kingdom. Dispatching German troops to their first major military venture outside Europe, the Kaiser presented their mission as racial vengeance: "give no pardon and take no prisoners" he said, urging the soldiers to make sure that "no Chinese will ever again even dare to look askance at a German." The crushing of the 'Yellow Peril' (a phrase coined in the 1890s) was more or less complete by the time the Germans arrived. Nevertheless, Between October 1900 and spring 1901 the Germans launched dozens of raids in the Chinese countryside that became notorious for their extreme brutality.

One of the volunteers for the disciplinary force was Lt. Gen. Lothar von Trotha, who had made his reputation in Africa by routinely executing natives and incinerating villages. He called his policy 'terrorism', adding that it "can only help". In China, he despoiled Ming graves, and presided over a few executions, but his real work lay ahead, in German



Southwest Africa (contemporary Namibia) where an anti-colonial uprising had broken out in January 1904. In October 1904, he ordered that members of the Herero community, including women and children, who had already been defeated militarily, were to be shot on sight and those escaping execution were to be driven into the Omaheke Desert where they would be left to die from exposure. An estimated 60,000-70,000 Herero people, out of a total of approximately 80,000, were eventually killed, and many died from starvation in the desert. A second anti-colonial revolt by the Nama people led to the demise, by 1908, of roughly half of their population.

Such proto-genocidal extermination of the brutes became commonplace during the last years of the long peace. Running the Congo Free State as his personal fief from 1885 to 1908, King Leopold II of Belgium reduced the population of the Congo by half, sending as many as 8 million Africans to early death. Belgian practices during his reign of terror included severing of hands (from living human beings as well as corpses). The American conquest of the Philippines between 1898 and 1902, to which Kipling dedicated *The White Man's Burden*, consumed the lives of 200,000 civilians. The death toll seems less shocking when one considers that twenty-six of the thirty U.S. generals in the Philippines had fought in wars of annihilation against Native Americans at home. One of them, Brigadier General Jacob H. Smith, explicitly stated in his order that "I want no prisoners. I wish you to kill and burn, the more you kill and burn the better it will please me." In a Senate hearing on the atrocities in the Philippines, General Arthur MacArthur (father of Douglas) referred to the "magnificent Aryan peoples" he belonged to, and the "unity of the race" he felt compelled to uphold.

Debarred from this Aryan-only club by the Treaty of Versailles, and stripped of its colonies, Germany was accused, entirely without irony, by the victorious imperial powers of ill-treating its natives in Africa. But such judgements, still made today to distinguish a 'benign' British and American imperialism from its German, French, and Belgian versions, suppress the fact the global racial order during the age of imperialism represented the natural order of things in which uncivilized peoples were to be exterminated, subdued, banished, or radically reengineered. In 1920, a year after condemning Germany for its crimes against non-Aryans, the British devised aerial bombing as routine policy in their new Iraqi possession—the forerunner of today's equally mundane decade-long bombing and drone campaigns in West and South Asia. "The Arab and Kurd," a 1924 report by a Royal Air Force officer put it, "now know what real bombing means ... they now know that within 45 minutes a full sized village ... can be practically wiped out and a third of its inhabitants killed or injured." This officer was Arthur 'Bomber' Harris, who in the Second World War unleashed the firestorms of Hamburg and Dresden, and whose work in Iraq helped German theorizing in the 1930s about *der totale krieg* (total war).

The modern history of violence is full of such discreet exchanges of murderous ideas between ostensible foes. To take only one instance, the American elite's ruthlessness with blacks and Native Americans greatly impressed the earliest generation of German liberal imperialists, decades before Hitler began to admire the US's unequivocally racist policies of nationality and immigration. The Nazis followed German colonizers in Africa in seeking inspiration from Jim Crow legislation in the American South, which makes Charlottesville, Virginia, a fitting recent venue for the unfurling of Swastika banners and chants of 'blood and soil'.

Scrutinized against this transcontinental racism of the past and present, the First World War neither seems a battle between liberal democracy and authoritarianism nor a seminal and wholly unexpected calamity. The Indian writer Aurobindo Ghose was among many anti-colonial thinkers to predict (in 1909) that the civilization of “vaunting, aggressive, dominant Europe” was under “a sentence of death”, awaiting “annihilation”. Liang Qichao of course denied as early as 1918 that the Great War represented any kind of rupture. Such shrewd assessments on the part of Liang, Ghose, Du Bois, Gandhi, Tagore, and Aime Cesaire are not an example of Oriental wisdom or African clairvoyance. As subordinate peoples, they simply realized, well before Arendt published *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1951, that peace in the Western metropole depended too much on outsourcing war to the colonies.

The experience of mass death and destruction, suffered by most Europeans only after 1914, was first widely known in Asia and Africa, where land and resources were forcefully usurped, economic and cultural infrastructure systematically destroyed, and entire populations decimated with the help of up-to-date bureaucracies and technologies. As it turned out, the continent’s equilibrium was parasitic too much and for too long on disequilibrium elsewhere.

In the end, Asia and Africa could not remain a safely remote venue for Europe’s wars of aggrandizement in the late 19th century and 20th century. The use of indiscriminate violence there unleashed uncontrollable forces that would eventually inflict on populations in Europe what Asians and Africans had long suffered. As Arendt warned, “violence administered for power’s (and not for law’s) sake turns into a destructive principle that will not stop until there is nothing left to violate.”

This ruinous logic of lawless violence has been demonstrated in our time by the heavily racialized war on terror. Presuming a sub-human enemy, who has to be ‘smoked out’ at home and abroad, it violated an age-old taboo on torture while normalizing extrajudicial execution of even citizens of Western nations. Its defeats and humiliations have resulted in an even greater dependence on violence, a proliferation of undeclared wars and battlefields, a relentless assault on civil rights at home, and an aggravated psychology of domination, presently manifest in Trump’s threats to North Korea and Iran.

That civilized nations can stay immune at home to the destruction of both international law and conventional morality in wars against barbarians abroad was always an illusion. It now lies shattered as ethnic-racial movements rise in the heart of the modern West, often applauded by the white supremacist in the White House, who is making sure that there is nothing left to violate. The ethno-racialists have junked the Wilsonian rhetoric of liberal internationalism, the preferred language of the Western political and media establishment for decades. Instead, they barefacedly proclaim the cultural unity of the white race against an existential threat posed by swarthy foreigners, whether these are citizens, immigrants, refugees, asylum-seekers or terrorists.

As in the early 20th century, whiteness has become a consoling religion at a time of economic and social uncertainty, amid Social Darwinist fears of losing out in the international struggle for power and wealth. With Trump in the White House, we can no longer discount the ‘terrible probability’ James Baldwin once outlined: that the winners of history “struggling to hold on to what they have stolen from their captives, and unable to look into their mirror, will precipitate a chaos throughout the world which, if it does not



bring life on this planet to an end, will bring about a racial war such as the world has never seen.”

Regaining imperial power and glory has already proven to be treacherous escapist fantasy – devastating large parts of Asia and Africa and bringing terrorism to the streets of Europe and America, it has most recently helped usher Britain into Brexit. No rousing racial-imperialist ventures abroad can mask the chasms of class and education, and divert the masses, at home. The global racial order that bestowed power, identity, security and status on its beneficiaries has finally broken down; and not even war with China and ethnic-racial cleansing in the West will restore ownership of the earth forever and ever. Consequently, the social problem appears more insoluble; and, as Brexit and Trump show, the capacity for self-harm has also grown alarmingly. Sane thinking would require, at the very least, honestly confronting the imperialist background of the Great War – a reckoning that Germany alone among European nations has attempted, and unsurprisingly benefited from. Certainly, the risk of ignoring this past is great – historians wondering, a century from now, why the West sleepwalked, after a long peace, into its biggest calamity yet.

