



THE UNCOMFORTABLE OXFORD PODCAST
A VERY BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE BRITISH EMPIRE

Episode 5 - Thursday, June 4th, 2020

Conquest in Asia

*With Paula Larsson (P), Olivia Durand (O),
Waqas Mirza (W), and Urvi Khaitan (U)*

P: Hello and Welcome to the Podcast a Very Brief Introduction to the British Empire. This podcast is run by *Uncomfortable Oxford*, a student led social enterprise that runs walking tours in the city of Oxford. My name is Paula Larsson, I'm a doctoral student in the History of Medicine at the University of Oxford and Co-director and co-founder of Uncomfortable Oxford

O: My name is Olivia Durand, and I'm also a co-founder and director of *Uncomfortable Oxford*.

W: Hi, I'm Waqas Mirza and I'm the Executive Secretary of Uncomfortable Oxford. So today's speaker is Urvi Khaitan, and Urvi will be giving the first lecture of our new module on Conquest in Asia.

P: Welcome Urvi!

U: Hi everyone, my name is Urvi Khaitan and I'm a DPhil student at the History Faculty here at Oxford. My research looks at gender and labour in Colonial South Asia, and I'm from a former colony - India - myself. And the city that I was born and raised in was the capital of the British Empire at one point of time: Calcutta/Kolkata.

Today I'm going to be talking to you about the British Empire in the 19th century and its conquest of some of the most densely populated and resource rich nations of today.

With a brief survey of India and the British Raj, Burma, Siam or modern-day Thailand, Malaya, I'm going to look at China and the opening of Japan, and also briefly at Central Asia and Britain's competition with Russia over this region.

Empire is really a word that is thrown around a lot in Britain and it's honestly just such a small word that summarizes so many huge and complex things. For so many of the British actors that were involved in this the Empire started as a gap year project that never really ended and at its height you can see what happened. The Imperial Project went way beyond the political and the economic to fundamentally alter society, culture, religion, education, legal systems, architecture, landscapes, concepts of time, concepts of history, marriage, really everything.



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It also had a major impact in Britain. Think of fashion, the clothes, you guys are wearing, the furniture you're sitting on, and the buildings you walked by. Where would industrial Britain be without cotton and indigo from India, teak and timber from Burma, silk, tea, and porcelain from China and rubber from Malaya and that relevance in contemporary life often gets lost and especially because today I'm gonna be talking about a lot of wars.

And trust me, there's one thing the British Empire liked to do which is wage wars. But I also want to encourage you to think about all of these events that I talk about today, not simply a single-standing, isolated, incidents. They were also experiences for the millions of people who lived through them and they had long-term consequences for everybody sitting in this room here today.

To explain to you just how interconnected the world was at the beginning of the 20th century and how Empire created many of those connections, let me begin with the first world war which is the cut off point for this lecture.

How many of you have family or know somebody who fought in the first world and do you know where they fought?

P: I mean, my family always talks about my mother's grandfather. He was one of the first Canadian soldiers that was in the Mustard Attacks on the Somme and he fought at Vimy Ridge which is considered the defining battle in Canadian nationality.

O: My own grandfather - because we had weird genealogical lines in my family - did fight in the first World War; he was French and she was in the medical units, but we have his war journals and he testifies of a lot of the people he met by while he was taking care of them and also of the diversity of the people he met going back from the trenches.

W: I was born in Geneva in Switzerland and our lost and only battle was in 1600 and I think it was in the middle of the night with yeah people fighting with socks and in pajamas.

O: Yeah Switzerland is out of this story basically.

U: Good intervention.Yeah. So both Olivia and Paula have family members who were involved in the first world war and Paula's great grandfather traveled all the way from Canada to France which is a huge movement to think about in those times.

P: Yeah definitely.

U: So here's my little fun story, which I only found out this summer, which is the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire light infantry, which was involved in the Mesopotamian campaign, which



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was an extremely important campaign in the first World War.

P: Mesopotamia being modern-day Iraq.

U: Exactly. Now my great grandfather was born in modern day Bangladesh and had never traveled out of the country before and probably never did after, enlisted in the Indian medical services and he was sent to Mesopotamia where he treated the injured soldiers of the Oxfordshire regiment and I think that really just goes to show how people who otherwise wouldn't have had anything to do with other groups and communities were able to do so because of the connections that were fostered by the Raj.

P: That's an amazing local connection here.

U: Yeah exactly and you know after he returns to India, after that he works at a university that is named after the Prince of Wales and which still exists today, so there's clearly a lasting legacy there as well.

So of course dominions like Canada, New Zealand, and Australia which are self-governing nations of the British Commonwealth contribute 1.3 million men to the first world war effort, but India alone contributes 1.5 million. That is a lot and thinking about how many of these people would have never left India themselves because crossing the oceans were seen as losing one's cast, so this is really a monumental movement for Indian people.

P: Sorry, could you explain what that means?

U: So there was this idea in well, I guess what could be called Hinduism at the time that if you crossed the oceans or if you crossed the seas, you would lose your cast the second you made contact with the water yeah - you're bound to the land essentially.

P: That's actually crazy - were most soldiers, I guess voluntary soldiers?

U: Quite a few did sign up because it meant quicker promotion so they were definitely given incentives to join but I think for most of the soldiers who would have joined a lot of it was through recruitment drives very well promised, you know, a uniform, food, some sort of regular stipend which was obviously not something that everybody could count on.

W: So why was your great grandfather in Mesopotamia at the time?

U: That is because of the British Raj. The British Raj was a powerful machine and that was formerly born in 1858 with a transfer of power from the East India Company to the Crown. Before this, the East India Company, which is a commercial enterprise, was consolidating its rule in Bengal through its victory in several battles in the 18th century. Now this combined



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with Queen Victoria's Proclamation as Empress of India in two decades mark the evolution of a colony ruled by a commercial enterprise with political powers to direct rule by the government.

O: Merchants were rulers.

U: Merchants were rulers, and I think it's also important to realise that a lot of working class men also moved to India and to other colonies at this point, because they wouldn't have the same restrictions on access to power that they would have had in Britain. So you know, they go to India, they are waited on hand and foot, they have several servants, several houses. People to do everything for them. People make millions out of this.

P: Geez. So the empire contributed a number of opportunities to individuals who wouldn't have had them in Britain?

U: Yeah, and what do you think pays for the country houses?

P: Like the ones all over England today you mean?

U: Okay, yeah, so does anyone know what prompted the establishment of the Raj?

O: Is it the repression of the Sepoy mutiny?

U: Exactly, it was the repression of the Sepoy mutiny in 1857 except I never knew it as a mutiny until I came to England because I grew up hearing it as lots of things.

So at some point it was a revolt, it was a civil rebellion, there's a feudal uprising but perhaps the most obvious was that in India it was seen as the first war of independence and was framed like that by nationalists. It got so confusing that when I was taught about this at university, we just called it 1857. What is sure is that it did start as a mutiny in the Bengal native army, there were three hundred and eleventh thousand native soldiers at this point. And remember this is the East India Company and not a government that is looking after these soldiers.

And as it is often with these kinds of events, there were several courses exacerbated, especially by rumor and gossip. And one such really powerful rumor was that the British army was issuing new cartridges to use with the Enfield rifle. Now these cartridges were greased and based on who you heard it from it was either pork fat or beef fat, each of which is problematic for Muslims and Hindu. Now this became a symbol around which several sepoys who were disappointed and really annoyed with British intervention in their social, religious, cultural, and spiritual lives began to rally. And so in April 29 year old Mangal Pandey who is a junior sepoy in a regiment near Calcutta decides to resist his commanders and attempts to shoot them.



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When his commanders ask his superior to arrest Pandey his superior refuses. Pandey is eventually court martialled and his hanged in a couple of days, but so is his superior and Pandey's entire regiment is disbanded. The support in the Bengal native army thinks that this is extremely brutal and harsh treatment.

And slowly, but surely cases of arson begin to be reported across North India. The most significant moment perhaps. It is when a cantonment from North India starts moving towards Delhi which is where the powerless Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar is residing.

P: Sorry, when you say powerless?

U: Yeah, the Mughals had effectively been living without any significant amount of power for the last century and a half.

They've been deposed by a variety of successive states that had evolved after the Mughals gradually became weaker and weaker and when the East India Company came and defeated their Nawabs, so their subsidiaries, the fate of the Mughal Empire had basically been sealed.

P: Okay, so they were like a local ruling Empire before the East India Company.

U: Yeah so the Mughals had controlled most of North India, going into a little bit of South India, and they just maintained the emperor is like a figurehead basically. Yeah, so the Emperor had just been around as a figurehead and had no credible authority anymore. The Mughals were also Muslim rulers, and I think it is very significant to that the sepoys choose to crown him as the emperor of India as that is somehow seen as giving legitimacy to this movement.

So this ruler who has effectively no power is seen as a credible unifying force in Indian politics even at this point in time.

O: So you mean in India in itself there were lot of other rulers as well.

U: Yes, but this figure is still somehow seen because of the legacy of 400 or so years of rule in the past, is seen as being able to lead the force, even though he was aged and not doing very well. He was a figurehead that the rebels could use.

So 54 of the 74 infantry regiments mutiny and every single one of the artillery regiments mutines as well.

P: Gosh that's a huge number.

U: It is a huge number but the important thing about the revolt of 1857, which is why it's not simply a Sepoy mutiny is that it is also a civil rebellion. But the British Empire, well the



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machinery never considered it a civil rebellion and tried very hard to convince the public that it was simply a small insurrection.

P: When you say like a civil rebellion?

U: So a civil rebellion is essentially that you have to realize that these Sepoys were themselves peasants in uniform. So when they were revolting they were revolting in the same way that peasants traditionally expressed insurgency in parts of India.

So when they revolted their families back home, their villages also found a commonality of interests in expressing their disappointment and their disaffection with East India Company rule. What happened also is that once the mutiny struck the administration and law and order began to collapse. And a lot of different groups saw it as an opportunity to express discontent.

So now there are all of these stories and we don't know if they're true but people carried bread and lotus flowers from village to village signaling that okay the rebellion is going to spread till you now and here's what you need to do.

What is also extremely interesting is that this is not a nationalist movement. Despite efforts to frame it as one, there were several layers to it everybody was not fighting a common enemy. So peasants were resisting landlords and exploitative tax regimes in many cases these were native landlords. Though some muslims who were resisting certain kinds of religious leadership and of course, the Sepoys had a very clear agenda so several grievances coalesced into 1857.

What's interesting also is that the princely states which are not technically part of British India also get involved in this movement. The company had instituted something called a Doctrine of Lapse. So if a ruler of a princely state died without leaving a male heir the kingdom would be transferred to company ownership

P: And so Princely States are just like parts of India that would later join into the Raj?

U: So they were never fully integrated into the Raj, at least not all of them. They maintained some degree of autonomy, but in reality they were I guess what you would call protectorates of the Raj, but that was never formal control in a lot of them.

Now one such prominent figure was the Rani of Jhansi whose adopted son was not recognized as a ruler and so this image of this woman warrior is a very pervasive image of the revolt and is still used today in a recent Bollywood film when also testified how important her legacy.

And just to tell you how important the role women played in this revolt there were. The British press started reporting several incidents of both real and imagined attacks on the virtue of



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British and Anglo Indian women Indians. Indians were presented as rapacious savages who were attacking innocent women and this image of a damsel in distress was used to justify a brutal and militaristic retaliation on the rebels.

There's an etching of a Mrs Wheeler who is able to fend off three of her attackers and bravely wheels the pistols so that really runs counter to the sort of image that the British were trying to use to justify the brutal repression that followed.

The British were initially slow to strike back at first. This was because it took time for the troops to move to India, so they moved all the way from where they were fighting the Crimean War and were on route to China. Now both sides, the rebels and the British committed all sorts of atrocities and this is not an effort to whitewash many of the violent acts that were committed by the rebels.

But the punishments were also extremely creative and cruel. Hindus and Muslims were forced to eat beef and pork respectively, which was again one of the things that had started off the revolt in the first place. They were forced to lick bloody buildings.

P: What?

U: Yeah, it's just bizarre.

P: Wow, that's just like that nothing to do with punishment is just degradation.

U: Exactly. A lot of British men also participated in sexual violence against Indian women. And there is another painting which is quite famous which shows mutineers about to be blown from cannons and this was a popular South Asian method of punishment that is co-opted by the East India Company.

After the mutineers finally surrendered in June in 1858, so this lasts well over a year the British and the East India companies rule over India and also the Mughal Empire they send off Bahadur Shah Zafar to Burma where he lives in exile and with the coming of the Raj there is a British governor general or a viceroy who rules India and he is turn reporting to a secretary of state for India who has a permanent position in the Prime Minister's cabinet in Britain.

No prizes for guessing most of these governor Generals were from Oxford. No prizes for guessing they were from Christ Church mostly. There were a few from Balliol but each governor general, has in turn, his own impact on Indian politics over the next several decades.

What is important is in 1885 the Indian National Congress is formed and that marks the rise of an anglophone elite educated nationalism that is constitutional and works on prayers and petitions definitely not the kind of agitation that we are going to see in the 20th century.



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In 1892, the Imperial Legislative Council is open to Indians as franchises gradually extended but perhaps one of the most significant acts of the Raj is in 1905, the partition of Bengal which really heralds the rise of radical nationalism.

So this simplistically was an effort to divide the province of Bengal into a Hindu and a Muslim. So Bengal comprises modern-day Bangladesh and West Bengal but it also borders Burma.

So this this this division this attempted division is finally repealed in 1911 sees the rise of a more radical kind of nationalism and you have Hindus and Muslims tying bands of friendship on each other's hands there's also the promotion of something because Swadeshi, which is promoting the consumption of indigenous produced goods rather than British commercial manufacturers. But in 1909 which is a momentous moment and also where I'll stop is when the Morley-Minto reforms established separate electorates for Muslims.

Now this means that in the legislative council separate seats were reserved for Muslims and only Muslims could vote for Muslim representatives and that is an extremely significant moment in Indian politics and really sets the tone for several moves that we're going to see later including the rise of Hindu majoritarianism that is troubling India today.

O: So what you mean is that the British rule increased separation and maybe hostility between Hindu and Muslim communities

U: Yes. I think turning the native population against each other was seen as a very useful way to continue to exercise authority so I think this was called the policy of *Divide and Rule*.

So to sum up the British Raj was established in 1858 after the revolt of 1857 or the Sepoy mutiny based on who says what and Queen Victoria is crowned the empress of India 1876 further signaling and extension of control over a huge subcontinent and India's own fate was very closely connected to its neighbors, which I will now move to such as Burma.

----- Part 2 -----

U: Now Burma neighbors Bengal, so modern day Bangladesh has a border with Burma now and Bengal is also the most important province of the Empire in its early days. The ruling monarchy in Burma had been weakened by several succession struggles and faced a lot of territorial disputes with the British over Bengal and over Arakan which is the site of the modern day Rohingya crisis which one would know about

P: I feel like there's a lot of modern problems that are coming from former conflicts it seems.

U: What a surprise! So the Burmese are basically sort of sandwiched between French and



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British advances and what is interesting here is that because the British Empire equates land with power and it creates the demarcation of borders with sovereignty, this tends to go directly against Burmese conceptions of what constitutes authority and government so there is the first anglo-burmese war in 1824 to 26 which arises over one such a dispute and 14,000 men have to be sent to fight the burmese 15 000 of them die because of malaria and like diarrhea.

P: That was 40,000 British men sent to the first war in the 1820s and we have another war? That's just the first one wow!

U: And but well this ends quite well because the British obviously win and they win several important territories including our Arakan in 1852 war breaks out again, and this is because British traders want to bring the rich Hinterland of Burma which has a lot of rich teak forests into the Empire.

P: Teak! Need some more of that wood!

U: Lots of furniture in Oxford is from Burma teak. But Burma also provides an important route to southern China which obviously has a huge market yeah, were gonna see more of that relevance later.

So negotiations to annex this territory fail and so war breaks out but the British unilaterally annex lower Burma and there's another war in three years time. Within a year Burma is defeated and annexed and is treated like a province of India. However, there is a lot of local resistance and thirty thousand troops have to be sent to Burma and stay there till 1890 trying to quell unrest.

O: So was Calcutta maybe used as a base to go further in the region?

U: Yes, because it's also close to Burma and Rangoon so it was the administrator of the capital until 1911 when the capital was shifted to Delhi. Calcutta is also city that is entirely built by the British so they could build its architecture to mirror those goals so there's a lot of classical regular Roman architecture.

P: Classic British Empire, all the greek stuff.

U: And it's all painted maroon. But just to tell you a little bit about the ecological impact that the British Empire had. So because of the relentless extraction of teak and rubber from Burma there are massive changes to its ecological system. Mangroves are cleared away. Burma also produce extremely vast quantities of rags so clearing land for rice production changes the population distribution of the entire country because Indian laborers come in and will work for lower wages. The agricultural economy in Burma is destabilized completely and because there's a lot of social dysfunction I think we can also think about questions like the trauma that



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is attached to colonization for many of the peoples who are going through things like this.

Transport was also revolutionized so we have images from the third anglo-Burmese war which show Burmese people on elephants crossing rivers and these elephants are replaced by steamboats a few short years later and railways also now begin to be built in many parts of Burma so again, there's also a big change landscape wise.

P: On the topic of railways, because they're constantly part of the rhetoric when it comes to the history of British Empire in India, everybody says "well we may have done all these like three wars, forty thousand people every time dying, changing the economy, and all the people's beliefs, but we built railways!" What were the effects of the railways?

U: That it is a very definitely a very important part of a lot of the debates in defense of the Empire, is that we connected all of these people and places that wouldn't have been connected. But they also go through forests that have extremely rich natural resources and that have been home to several indigenous communities and tribes for centuries and it's taken away from them just like that and of course does a lot of damage to wildlife in the region, especially to elephants. It does provide a lot of employment, but if they hadn't been there in the first place these people would have been working anyway, so, and doing their own thing.

P: I guess even if they gave employment too, employment is a system of finance that was introduced by the British, I assume, in a very specific way to most of these regional areas in which you just live off the land and locally.

U: Exactly absolutely so the introduction of paid and waged work, and also at extremely low wages. I think wages in India were amongst the lowest in the empire.

O: You can still see this today if you think about the low wages of people working in factories in India, Bangladesh, other parts of South and East Asia, so it's very much a continuation of practices that have been implemented from the 19th century onwards.

U: Yeah, exactly and the railways especially foster a lot of demand for coal which is mined for the lowest wages in the subcontinent and with tens of thousands of women, which is my personal area of interest.

P: Wait, women were mining the coal?

U: Yes, they were an extremely important part of the coal mining process. And also if anyone's looking for something to read, George Orwell who was an Oxfordshire man wrote *Burmese Days* about his experiences as a civil servant in Burma.

P: Really?



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U: Yeah, it's a collection of interesting short stories.

P: That's so interesting! He also wrote of course the dystopian classics so maybe he thought he had some dystopian like experiences whilst there.

U: Just to move on, and just do a very quick survey of what happens in Siam, which is right next to Burma, and is modern-day Thailand. And this is essentially a cushion between French Indochina and British India, and somehow the ruler of Siam, Mongkut, manages to negotiate a treaty and avoids formal colonization by the British. So he reduces tariffs on British imports and allows for them to have certain territorial concessions and abandons his claims to Cambodia. Which means that both the French and the British are okay with letting Siam exist more or less independently. But of course there's a price to pay, because our European traders dominate the Siamese economy and really end up suppressing indigenous enterprise to a great degree

And because I don't think this would be complete without looking at Malaya as well, which is modern-day Malaysia. In 1824, the English and the Dutch negotiated a treaty to split between British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies, and in 1874 the Bangor Treaty lays the foundation for the residential system. Again, this is definitely motivated by the need for resources like tin and you see the massive transformation of the Malayan landscape and for rubber with another huge influx of Indian labourers, who are ready to work for low wages.

At this stage I'd like to do a discussion activity. So as we've just seen the equation of land with power and the demarcation of territorial frontiers clashes with indigenous understandings of authority and government. And because of what's also happening in Britain now, I want to encourage you guys to think about borders and whether there are other ways to define a nation.

P: That's a tough question what defines the nation truly.

O: So, what is the nation? How do we understand by nation, is it a single language, can a nation be with several languages? For instance Canada is a nation.

P: Yeah. Canada defined itself as a multicultural nation. Therefore we can have multiculturalism, multiple languages, but our nationhood is defined by the geographic boundaries. I guess of what we've created over a longer period of time, for instance Newfoundland didn't even join us until after the Second World War as well, but what makes it a nation?

W: The notion of government maybe?

P: Unified under government?



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W: Unified under officials, a ruling body?

P: But even still, I mean the Queen is our head of state in Canada. I mean, it's technically every crime that is committed, is committed against the Queen of England alone, but not the government of Canada. So that kind of national identity is still very tied to a different country's head of state.

O: How does it apply to Switzerland? It has been in the same sort of boundaries for quite a long time

P: Obviously it's chocolate.

W: Chocolate, watches, and banks! Really the golden trio.

P: So, some sort of like core values more or less, the very important core values of the Swiss.

W: They're never gonna take me back.

O: I guess in France this shows that national values are endlessly being questioned. The values of liberty, equality, and fraternity are like the core values around which the modern French nation would - the post, multiple revolutions French nation - has been built. Obviously there are lots of problems in the way those values are being dealt with.

P: Could you say something like "well I believe in equality, liberty and fraternity so therefore I'm French, because I'm French now, I've decided."

W: I mean, I guess the other question is how far back this notion of nation actually goes, right? So I'm guessing it's also very 19th-century focused, and related to the idea of an identity so a national identity, to people referring to themselves as being part of a group of individuals and reinforced by all these wars and fights. So these people are all connected in a way.

P: Yeah, I feel like the nation concept, especially in Canada, the discussion always goes back to that first world war. Vimy Ridge, that one battle, was supposed to be like the birth of the whole nation, because the Canadians worked together as their own force for the first time. Something about that unifying moment, and the same in French history going back to the Revolution.

O: So shared historical moments in which people show a lot of commonality. But then the idea of the nation is very often still used today as a pretext, trying to find the nation in like more ancient historical times. Ancient history or even just early modern history to find traces of a nation, when it was a concept they didn't even exist at the time.



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P: So I guess these are all very strange historical ties and yet you can still be part of a nation today without having lived through them. I mean, none of us did for instance.

O: When you get citizenship to a country, so, when you get a new nationality how it does mean that you tie into or you feel that your life ties into a lot of the events or what is happening in the country in which you want to have the nationality.

W: And I guess in the case of the countries that you've been talking about in this specific context the declaration of independence as well as part of the way to define yourself as a sovereign nation.

U: Well a lot of the countries I've been talking about never really existed as units before the empire. So India really wasn't India until you know these people came along and decided to draw lines on maps and say okay, this is exactly what the territory of India is and what the territory of Pakistan is, which is what happens in 1947. And lines are drawn right through villages and lines are drawn right through extremely important routes of transit and you know that you can't get away from that sort of trauma. A lot of these countries were existing fairly comfortably without these specific borders.

I'm not saying that that was necessarily better. But I do think that there are other ways of looking at what constitutes a nation. And it was really great to have you guys talk about what you personally feel, so thanks for that great discussion activity.

P: Yeah no worries, happy to discuss the French and the Swiss chocolate, and Canada - always talking about Canada!

W: So before we had this discussion activity you were talking about Siam and if I get this right Siam was basically sandwiched between the French and the British, am I right?

U: Exactly, and in so doing manages to escape formal colonization only to succumb to more informal empire.

W: Okay yeah that makes sense.

P: What does informal empire mean?

U: informal empire is I guess that while there were not any formal instruments of control such as the police or administrative control, that there was a certain degree to which Siamese people were sidelined and things like business and enterprise.



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P: Okay, so not officially controlled by the French or the English but like, because they're bordered by the French and the English they're more or less controlled by them.

U: Yeah essentially. So it's basically what had happened in India before the start of British Raj, when you had like a trading company controlling many aspects.

U: I wouldn't go so far as to say it was like East India company rule because they still had an armed forces, they still had an army and they were still exercising a lot of control over the daily aspects of people's lives. But here it's more loose, soft power rather than specific expressions of control.

O: It's good to know the difference.

U: And thank you for that summary and now we're going to jump to another part of Asia that has very important links with both India and Britain. And you know, when I first came to Britain there were lots of things that were culture shocks, but there was one thing that wasn't, and that was the fact that Indians and the British share a very deep and profound love for a certain beverage...

W: Tea!

U: Exactly, Tea, Chai! And that is where China comes in. So the British had been importing tea along with silk and porcelain from China, and England held the monopoly for the supply of tea to the whole of Europe, so this is an extremely important trade, and also Britain is obviously importing a lot of tea. So in 1830, that's 13 Million pounds worth of tea.

P: Yes, Brits love tea.

U: So obviously there's a huge trade deficit because Britain doesn't have a lot to give back. So they need to find a way to pay for all of these massive amounts of tea, that's traveling the world. And so what they decide to do is something quite intelligent actually. So now India had been sending woven cotton which they would manufacture and then process, now with the industrial revolution, a lot of factory owners started petitioning for protectionist policies, and they said we'll process the raw yarn that we get from India and we'll make the manufactures and send them back. So that's exactly what happens: India starts sending completely raw yarn, sends it to Britain where it is then turned into commercial products and is sent back to India where it's sold at an enormous profit. And that allows for silver which is then used to pay China. However it isn't nearly enough, because there's more tea than there is a profit from the sale of cotton manufactures. So, towards the end of the 18th century, the British come up with another commodity: opium. Opium was cultivated in Bengal and there are these very striking images of huge factories with literally hundreds of thousands of pounds of opium in these little chests that you can find, and this becomes a massive industry. And initially, while the opium



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trade takes off a little slowly, by the 19th century there are about ten thousands chests of opium and each chest holds about a hundred and thirty three pounds that are going to China. By 1838, it's forty thousand chests of opium per year and this contributes in making the balance of trade unfavourable. Opium becomes an extremely important part of Chinese society. There all of these images of even children smoking opium pipes, there's a popular painting titled "Two Wealthy Chinese Opium Smokers" and it shows two prosperous looking men who are filling their pipes with opium and then it's followed by another panel which is titled "Two Poor Chinese Opium Smokers" which shows them balding, and wrinkled, and decrepit showing the effects of opium on Chinese society.

O: So the images kind of show the effects of the health of the Chinese society, but that's all the wealth of China as a whole.

U: Exactly and official records estimate that there are some 10 million addicts in China by the 1830s, which is a huge number.

W: So this means it was not consumed in India?

U: It was also consumed in India, but it wasn't as widespread.

P: Well I guess if India is not producing tea, then there's less incentive for the British to try and sell opium because they can use that as the payment for basically.

O: They regulate it more because that's what they want to sell to China.

U: Exactly, and you know there was also a wide variety of other intoxicants in India, so you know opium was really not the only one. No it was like Paula said the incentive to promote its use wasn't as widespread. Though, there are tea plantations that are established in India with Chinese plants.

P: That's interesting so they started to expand; this is really a big shift in ecology, it really shows how that starts at this point.

U: Yeah, so now initially it's the East India Company, which is directly involved in the opium trade, but in the 1800s, the British government abolished this monopoly and opens up the economy to private traders. And this intensifies opium smuggling levels hugely.

And people in China again try to start cultivating their own poppy fields so that they can get opium for cheaper naturally.

O: So you meant the opium is smuggled into China?



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U: It's smuggled and traded, and because China's also huge so it's difficult to access the interior parts of China by British traders. Because at this time again, and this is an issue that will come up is that they don't have enough access to, you know, through China to transit routes where they have to pay huge amounts in taxes, so smuggling does become a big thing. Yeah, so then there is a huge drain on the Chinese resources of silver. And the situation that is created in the 18th century when England has a trade deficit is now reversed because China now has a huge deficit. And this creates a fiscal crisis in the monetary system, so the Chinese Imperial government - China is ruled then by the Manchus - appoints a high commissioner to look into the opium trade. And he confines about 350 foreigners in return for 22,000 chests of opium which he then publicly destroys. Shortly after, in July 1839, there is a dispute over whether the Chinese can exercise criminal jurisdiction over British subjects and hostilities break out.

So in 1839, we see the outbreak of the First Opium War and that lasts three years until 1842. This is obviously again resulting in defeat for the Chinese and they are forced to assign the Treaty of Nanking which imposes a huge indemnity on them, it also allows the British to begin trading at several more ports in China.

This gives the British something called 'Most Favored Nation' status, so any concessions that they give to any other foreign country must apply to Britain as well. However of course they always want more so in 1844 the British start petitioning for the legalization of the Opium Trade and they're also still refused access to meet the emperor, they can't enter several parts of China and then there is another incident with sets of the Second Opium War in 1856.

And this is the Lorcha Arrow Incident so there's a Chinese ship which is called a Lorcha and it's named The Arrow and has several British passengers because the Chinese are afraid that one of them is a pirate that confines everybody on that ship. The British obviously demand an apology but nothing is forthcoming and the Second Opium War begins.

Again, the Chinese are defeated and this is followed by the signing of another treaty which opens up even more ports and opens western powers' access to the interior parts of China. So it reduces and basically nearly removes all of the transit duties that they would initially have paid Russia also gets involved and is able to take a lot of the territory in the northern part of China.

P: Wait Russia came out of nowhere?

O: It's a pretty good deal for Russia, I think. They didn't do much but they got huge bits of the North of China.

P: They come in at the end when China have been defeated by the British and say, hey, this is my section?



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U: Yeah pretty much I mean, they let the British do a lot of work.

O: I can't remember if you mentioned it, but didn't the Island of Hong Kong become British at the end of the First Opium War?

U: And I think it is the second treaty that also gives the British the island that is just opposite Hong Kong as well, so they really have a fairly secure base in the region.

O: And we can see the ramifications of that still today.

P: Gosh modern day conflicts continue again

U: What the second treaty also allows for is that missionaries have the right to present it as in China and that is again quite an important moment for Chinese history because it feeds into what will be several instances of local resistance.

So while the opium wars have been going on, we also see the Taiping movement which lasts a decade and a half and is right in between the wars. This is an anti-imperialist movement, which has a largely peasant base when I say anti-imperialist I mean that they were against the Manchus and they saw the Manchus as foreign because a lot of Chinese people come from various different kinds of communities and regions and have their own cultural practices and so the Manchus were seen in many parts of China's as an alien government and that really caused a question what foreign can mean to different people so it wasn't just the western powers that were foreign it was also the government that was ruling China that was seen as being foreign.

While we look at this I think it's also worth wondering whether the term Opium War is correct at all. You know, whether it is Chinese, an Anglo Chinese war or whether it's an opium war because the Chinese themselves never refer to the war as an opium war and that's a term that is given by a British aristocrat.

W: So what do they refer to it as?

U: For them it is A Provocation. So obviously terminology is an extremely important part and an important political tool so I think what we can say is that opium definitely provides an occasion for the war but there are other economic and political layers to this conflict and a lot of it is about access and free trade.

O: In the Chinese official historiography isn't the first and second so-called Opium Wars the start of the Century of Humiliation?

U: Yes exactly and there is a lot of anti-western and anti-foreign sentiment. And we see



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expressions of resistance to the sort of humiliation later on in the century as well with the Boxer Rebellion which is very specifically anti-foreign and in many ways quite different from the Taiping because of that and of course well in 1911, there is the revolution which changes things quite massively as well

And in 1894, we have the first war between the Chinese and the Japanese which ends in a Japanese victory.

----- JAPAN -----

U: So what's been happening in Japan? Japan at this point is a very complex feudal society and it is held together by an emperor who is really just a symbolic head at this point. The main power rests in a family, which is called the Tokugawa Family and they live in the imperial city of Kyoto which some of you might have heard of.

Now the Tokugawa were basically in charge of a feudal regime that comprised of a number of feudal lords and each lord had control over their own territory or province. And while they had a certain amount of autonomy, they had to look to the Tokugawas for any kind of foreign policy or peacekeeping.

One of the efficient methods of control was something called the Sankin Kotai which is essentially a system by which each feudal lord would have to maintain a residence in the capital city and travel to that city every other year. And these huge processions of feudal lords with a retinue of servants and other subsidiaries creates a hugely efficient transport network and Japan which is not an accessible country turns into a market that is very ready for the taking in terms of how well-connected it now is.

The Tokugawa also have an extremely isolationist policy with regard to foreign trade so their policy's literally 'Shoot first, ask questions later'. And, In the 1800s, the Dutch King sends them a letter saying sorry but the world is really not like this anymore.

P: I feel like considering what we've heard about the other lords, that was a really good policy.

U: Yeah and it was a rude shock I'm sure because they have absolutely no idea what to do. And that's when Matthew Perry, (not the actor) who is an American, is told by the United States government that do whatever you want, use gunboats if you will but open Japan And we see the entry of the United States on the scene.

So Perry visits Japan for the first time in 1853 and he shows up with these ships and he fires 73 canons. And when he's asked why he's doing that he says, 'oh I'm celebrating Independence Day'. But the move is definitely meant to terrify and to impose upon the Japanese that they have to respond so he hands them a letter says 'I'm going to be back'. And



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in less than a year's time. He returns. And the convention of Kanagawa is signed. The convention of Kanagawa marks the first opening up of Japan to trade with Western powers.

It allows the US and later of Britain, France, and Russia, and several other countries that now also want a slice of the Asian pie, the right to stop and use their ports to refuel and also to establish consulates in Japan which is something that has never happened before. And historians have insisted that this is very much like the opium war settlements in China just without a single shot having been fired.

These treaties have several main conditions, but they open up several important ports to foreigners, they also reduce import duties to a very very low amount and it allows these western countries to establish extra territoriality in Japan which is essentially that they have certain powers such as opening schools and buying land in this foreign nation.

P: This again like an indirect foreign control imperialism.

U: No, I think like Japanese is especially good at maintaining its isolationism because it builds up its industry and as you know, things change dramatically in the 20th century for Japan. It defeated Russia in 1904 to 5.

O: And then it also goes on to create colonies in South Asia as well and in the Pacific.

U: So Japan is very much framed as the imperialist in Asia and there are lots of links between India and Japan during the Second World War as well because some people who are against the British try to ally with Japan in order to defeat the common British enemy.

O: Basically you have British, the French, you have the Japanese, a little bit of the Dutch, you like make allies with the lesser evil maybe?

U: So we know Russia's is obviously now very involved in this Imperial competition in Asia. The Russians were also facing off against the British in another part of Asia, Central Asia, which comprises the Ottoman Empire, modern day Turkey, and other parts of Persia or Iraq, modern day Afghanistan, and modern day Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, which was smaller khanates, were ruled by regional rulers at the time.

So this is called The Great Game and The Great Game is used to describe this 19th century contest between Britain and Russia. This contest could very well have been imagined, we don't know. But it did have very important consequences for the region. The term itself comes from Kipling's spine novel called Kim. Kim is a guy who is groomed for secret service work, he's from India, and is summoned to play the 'great game that never ceases, day and night throughout India'.



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Now those people who do argue that there was in fact competition between the British and the Russians in this area say that the English were trying to replicate the conditions in the Near East that gave them the security that they themselves had in England separated by the English Channel. Now, India did have a channel separating it from the rest of Asia, but they needed to demarcate that border.

And so they were trying to have an extent of territory in the Ottoman Empire and Afghanistan and Persia for precisely that purpose. Now there were rumors that Russia was trying to do the same as it was trying to invade Afghanistan. There is a lot of debate over whether there was an actual planned invasion of Afghanistan or not and most people now hold that the Russian invasion planned or imagined was really not a massive threat to the British at all.

In fact, the greatest threat to the British rule in South Asia was internal disaffection and it was going to be from the native population rather than from a Russian enemy and Russian and British competition was intense only really in Europe.

P: Okay, so what you're saying is the British needed to make a buffer zone between itself and the Russian power, perceived around, perceived actually, a threat. Yeah, so they were, this is specifically all in the Middle Eastern areas.

U: Yeah, and I think that kind of rhetoric has also started to come back because obviously this area is seen as an extremely important area in the seventies and as we see now more recently as well.

But I think for me probably the lasting legacy of this is really just the fact that it's called The Great Game, that this is a game and there is no thought or reference to native agency or indigenous agency in any of these discussions. This was a game that established a system that was founded on inequality and on hierarchies and I think that really is the lasting legacy of Imperial conquest in Asia, is that it constructs an entire regime that is based on treating millions of people and ecologies as essentially dispensable and that is a pattern that is unfortunately repeated by several of the governments that now are run in these modern-day nations as well.

Just to end I wanted to ask you who didn't you hear about today because there are lots of groups of people and things I would have glossed over in this survey of wars and so I guess since we're on a mission to make history more representative and more interesting what kind of people or groups would you like to hear about?

O: Well we're talking very much about the British Empire but to realize what was happening to the British involvement is a region looking at the French involvement in the regions would probably be a good sequel lecture.



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P: We definitely didn't hear many of the voices of the indigenous populations here, you're right. So you hear a lot about I guess the single individuals who kind of spark rebellion and both the British Raj during the Sepoy revolts and then in the Opium Wars you hear about the specific one individual, but it's hard to hear the stories of all the other individuals who are part of that complex.

O: It's true that it is sometimes tempting to talk about one individual and what they have done, and it's quite often these individuals because of the archives, and the way the records work are men, except for the example of the Rani of Jhansi. Who's quite a well known figure of the Sepoy resistance.

P: Also Queen Victoria, too, despite being the ruler of all of this. She seems to be very absent from the story, other than getting a beautiful crown in, was it 1857?

U: It was 1857.

P: Oh, 1857, sorry!

U: Yeah there were these about Victoria and Abdul, her Indian servant. There was that movie.

W: If you think about the map of this area, in South East Asia, they're still a number of areas surrounding it. I can see Sri Lanka and Indonesia, which you haven't told us much about. Could you tell us a bit more about that maybe?

U: Yeah so Sri Lanka or Ceylon, as it was known then, was also part of the British Indian administration for most of this time. Sri Lanka was an extremely important economy again for the British, because of rice and rubber as well. So it was also facing a huge amount of migration from India as well, which disrupted Sri Lanka's own population make up. Most civil servants were Oxbridge educated, also Eaton and Harrow, so.

W: Yeah and we talk about this on our Empire tour don't we? Because after the establishment of the British Raj, the British civil service for India was also established in 1858 and that's extremely telling because out of the 255 candidates that were selected during the first decade or so about 51 came from Cambridge but a 161 came from Oxford so that really shows how strong the ties were between the University of Oxford and the British Empire.

P: And 103 of those from Balliol specifically yes, yeah.

U: Balliol was established, well I guess it was a training ground, yeah.

P: Balliol College, specifically, that is for the non-oxford listeners and of the probationers trained at Oxford for the forestry service only two of those were Indian Nationals themselves.



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U: So there are definitely lots of groups and parts of the world that you didn't hear about today and that is because they are in many cases underrepresented in the archives so indigenous groups who had primarily oral methods of preserving their history, women, different classes that didn't fit into this Anglophone and educated sphere also didn't have their records preserved in the same way but it is worth thinking about the.

Because, while obviously people at the very highest of political levels we're making all of these decisions and are responsible for the decisions that they make it's everyday women men and children who are working in fields and in factories in the colonies and in Britain, who are producing and consuming the goods that really facilitated this massive multinational economy and political unit that was the British empire.

P: Thank you Urvi. That concludes our fifth podcast on 'Conquest in Asia'. Thank you to Urvi Khaitan for her wonderful discussion provided today. If you want to learn more about the subject, there will be a reading list posted on our website so you're welcome to check that out as well as a full audio transcript.

As always, our website is www.uncomfortableoxford.com.

Although we're still not able to run walking tours in Oxford right now due to the covid pandemic. We are organizing a number of online events, so check our website to find out what's going on.

This podcast is probably supported by TORCH, the Oxford Research Center for Humanities. And our next podcast will be on 'Conquest in Africa'.

The music you're listening to is 'Wishful Thinking' by Dan Liebovitz. Thanks for listening.