

Episode 8 - Wednesday, Dec. 16, 2020

The Inter-War Period

With Paula Larsson (P), Olivia Durand (O),

Waqas Mirza (W) and Jan Tattenberg (J)

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, and other public engagement educational events. My name is Paula Larsson. I'm co-founder and co-director of Uncomfortable Oxford.

W: Hello, my name is Waqas Mirza. I am the Executive Secretary of Uncomfortable Oxford.

O: And my name is Olivia Durand, also co-director of Uncomfortable Oxford and I'm very happy to introduce today for our lecture on the interior period, doctoral student in history Jan Tattenberg, who is currently completing his PhD at the University of Oxford. Jan studies military history in the 20th century with a special focus on Germany after the Second World War. Jan, the floor is yours.

J: Thank you. Yes, you guys have set me up nicely to follow a really excellent last lecture and podcast by Dr Jack Doyle on the British Empire in the first World War.

What Jack did really well I thought, was to characterize a kind of narrative of the First World War, which I think most people in Britain are familiar with. And in engage with that narrative. Jack really outlined things such as his discomfort with the poppy and the two minute silence, which I certainly noticed when I first came to Britain just under 10 years ago.

And I'm not, as you have no doubt guessed, American, but German. And while Germany and Britain have their own distinct interpretation and national stories about the First World War, I think in the interwar period, which is what I'll be talking about today, the stories are structurally quite similar. In Germany, what looms over the First World War and the interwar period is Fascism.

It's difficult to take into account the contingencies of the period between 1919 and 1933 when Hitler came to power, because everyone knows how that story ends. It ends in war and

genocide. And in Britain, I think there is a similar determinacy, not with regards to fascism but with regards to the end of empire.

The First World War is often seen as the moment the colonies and dominions were mobilized for a global war, leading irresistibly to their future independence. But of course, what Jack outlined in the last lecture was that the First World War was a global conflict of empires, resulting after all in the Russian, Ottoman, Austrian, Hungarian, and German Empires, the British Empire emerged relatively unscathed. But even that sentence I want to qualify by commenting on the emergence of global American power, which, of course, we do see but at this moment by which it was not certain would prevail. And, of course, in that particular way that moment is much like our own: Is global American power about to fade? Is China ascendant?

Perhaps, in 50 years historians will claim it has already faded, begun to fade perhaps with the election of Ronald Reagan, but the point here is that our stories of the past are always shaped by the events that follow. We know the global power of the British Empire will fade away and the United States emerge and so we look for cracks.

And today while I want to focus on some of those cracks, I also hope to see that the other result of intense struggles often accompanied by brutal violence over the future of the empire.

P: So what you're saying then is that in hindsight we kind of characterize this period as one of inevitability that independence will come to most nations within the empire but what you're saying is that that's something we find when we look back from where we are today, but if you look at this time period, there's actually quite a lot of like tension around that concept of independence and even at this time. I'd say Britain consider itself to be quite strong actually after the first world war.

J:

Yes, I do think I do think you're right. It's easier to see the points at which things will come apart when you look back. For people living through that moment, of course, it's not at all that clear that things will break that things will come to pass as we know they will and they view their own struggles with you know, the appropriate amount of intensity that you expect because they don't know if they're going to succeed or fail.

And so there is that kind of I think determinacy when we look back and when we, you know assess this period and I want to basically say today that it's not at all clear that the British Empire is strong and people think it's strong but it's also a lot of fear.

There's a fear that it will fall apart. There's a fear that it will slide into you know repeated, episodes of really incredibly brutal violence even on the part of people in Britain.

O:

So I have a question as a way to maybe make a transition between the previous podcast/lecture and this one. Did some network of resistance among the British colonies kind of come into contacts through the First World War and how did it unfold in the aftermath and during this into our period?

O:

That is an excellent question. Of course there is that sense as there is after the Second World War that colonial armies are being mobilized to fight for a cause which they don't necessarily understand as this their own.

There is that sense which brings with it the question of what did the Empire do for us, right? We've all seen the Monty Python, *Life of Brian* scene, with the question: What have the Romans ever done for us, right? What've the British ever done for us is the question that certainly some people ask themselves in this moment. And there are these really powerful imperial linkages that don't go by the center, you know, that originate and focus on the periphery. Yeah, absolutely.

So everybody, you know knows about the Great Depression, it's the financial crisis that in the late 1920s really throws Europe and the world into turmoil and from which emerge right fascist regimes in Italy and Germany, and I think the images that really stick with people are the ones of the ones of Germans, you know, picking up their wages by the bucket in notes that have since breakfast lost, you know, certain percentage of their of their value.

So hyperinflation is I think the enduring kind of thing we think about when we think about the Great Depression but that is something I think a lot of people are familiar with right notes and over or used as wallpaper because they've lost so much of their value and that's the story that I think is important but not one that I necessarily wanted to focus on today.

So instead what I want to do is I want to look for some of these struggles for independence, they're not always necessarily struggles for independence. They are often national struggles sometimes struggles for independence, sometimes they are struggles for rather than full independence, greater independence, and I want to look for them really in a lot of different places and I'm going to start by looking at New Guinea and Naru I'm going to go to Ireland, India, Palestine and Iraq and Egypt.

And I hope that covers all the bases and then we return to Britain at the very end.

W:

Grand tour of the world then!

J:

I am going to I'm going to try and because the thing that's really struck me when I started researching this is that when we think or talk about the history of the British Empire or any empire we tend to think in maps, so you go on wikipedia and you search for the British Empire and you find a map with all the countries colored and red and if you go and you search for the corresponding map with the Spanish Empire, it's usually in yellow, the Portuguese Empire in green, sometimes the Ottomans are in green, the Germans usually in black. French obviously always in blue. And I wanted to think a little bit more about the kind of statements these maps make because for instance, when you look at a map of the British Empire when you go to Wikipedia now and you look at the map of the Empire in 1921 Wikipedia tells you that this is the British Empire at its territorial peak territorial peak.

And then you take Ireland for instance which is colored in red in that map all of Ireland, but that's of course at best misleading because in July 1921, the Irish war independence came to an end Ireland was partitioned. And Australia, Canada, Newfoundland, New Zealand and South Africa also appear in bright red on this map on Wikipedia, but they of course had by this point become semi sovereign dominions. British India on the other hand, often called the British Raj, was ruled directly by the Crown.

And I think that already starts to point at some of the ways in which, these maps are inadequate because they don't allow for these kind of constitutional or legal nuances or nuances in status really and I think something really interesting happens when we zoom in a little bit because when we take for instance the northern half of Papua New Guinea in the Pacific and we look at its history we see that since the 1880s it had been a German colony which was occupied by a small Australian expeditionary force in 1914, and from 1923 was a League of Nations mandate administered by Australia.

Nauru which is today, unfortunately best known as Australia's offshore detention center, has a similar history. It too was a German colony, which was occupied and later administered by Australia. And before you ask yourself what on earth a mandate is? Mandates were a special category of territory which had been established by the covenant of the League of Nations the United Nations predecessor organization basically in 1919, and these were territories ruled over by states other than their previous sovereign so for example in the cases of northern Papua New Guinea and Nauru these were now administered by Australia rather than ruled by Germany and there were three classes of mandates and each of these classes corresponded to what was believed to be the level of development achieved by the population of the mandate.

So territories of the Ottoman Empire for instance such as Syria Lebanon or Palestine were deemed to be close to the stage of development where they could be allowed to be independent but until that point administrative advice and assistance would be rendered by France in the case of Syrian Lebanon and Britain in the case of Palestine. New Guinea and Nauru, however, were in a different category, they were so-called Class C mandates, meaning that their populations were deemed to have achieved so little development that they could not possibly hope to govern themselves anytime soon.

And I think what we see here under the guise of the benevolent administration of former colonies because it was intended to be benevolent, it was intended to aid the development of various territories, but it really turned out to be a device to uphold white supremacy and the mandate system was a device to uphold the global power of the surviving European empires.

W:

So what was the perspective of these colonies: were they resisting, was there any outrage?

J:

I'm glad you asked yes there was and in the case of Iraq and Egypt, I'll talk about these a little bit later. So maybe I will reserve the rest of that answer if that's alright.

W:

Of course, of course! You lead the show here

P:

Um, I am curious about the different classes so you said there was class C but was there an A and a B then what were you know, the Middle Eastern countries considered class A? What's class B.

J:

Yes, the Middle Eastern mandate, the former Ottoman colonies were generally regarded as class A so they were deemed to be quite close to the level of development necessary to become independent. And a lot of former African colonies were in class B and then class C were the former pacific colonies.

O:

There's the system of mandate but it also looks like some of the colonies which have achieved a semi-independent status are now the ones acquiring new colonies are acquiring sovereignty over new territories like Australia in this example.

J:

Yes, I think that's right and that that is a further inadequacy of this map, because on Wikipedia Australia is red. And so are the various territories which now become mandates governed by Australia, so there's absolutely no distinction made here even though as you say Australia is not strictly speaking the same kind of colony. There is that kind of legal distinction, a constitutional distinction.

And of course, it is the former white settler colonies, which have gained dominion status. Because basically the point that I want to make is that grouping all these territories right from Ireland from Nauru as simply someone belonging to the British Empire is given the patchwork nature of that Empire, the different sovereignties at play at the targets for liberation raging in the

wake of the first world war far too easy away to go about telling the history of the British Empire.

And while this is a point that Jack made also I think it bears repeating because the InterWar period is really the moment where we start to see things come apart at the scenes, we see anti-imperial struggles everywhere from Dublin to Belfast, from Bagdad and Jafar to Amritzar but rebellion is not reserved to the world outside of Britain. From the Southampton mutiny to the Luton Peace Day riots, the Battle of George Square and Glasgow at the 1926 general strike, these are all examples that not just the periphery, the far away colonies are dominions as it were but the imperial centre when crisis.

And this too, is something that Jack said last time because Jack made the point about the ending of the first World War that when the guns on the western front fell silent on the 11th of November 1918, they did not indeed fall silent in other parts of the world were indeed many parts of the British Empire.

And I think their reasons for which we do not associate the British Empire in the interior period with the kinds of violence which we see in Germany or in Poland, Czechoslovakia, the Baltics, Ukraine, Russia, Turkey, or Greece for instance.

And that has to do with the fact that we think of Britain as having been on the winning side. Rebellion and revolution, I think in our minds are largely associated with those who ended up on the losing side. But that is not even true in Europe and Finland for instance, which had been neutral throughout the war, an incredibly brutal civil war raged in 1918.

P:

Okay, so if you want to tell a story of the Rebellions against British Empire or Imperial Powers, where would you start?

J:

I think in this period. You almost have to start at Amritzar, because eight days after the first anniversary of the Armistice which ended the war in Europe on the 19th of November 1918 Brigadier General Reginald Dyer testifies before a committee investigating his actions and those of his troops.

On the 13th of April that same year Dyer ordered his troops to fire into a crowd of unarmed civilians in India who'd gathered in the journey on Walla Barge in Amritsar. Casualty figures vary but the figures which are most often recited in relation to the massacre other dies men killed at least 379 civilians firing 1,650 rounds in just 10 minutes. But with the focus on the day often obscures is the reality that massacre was the result of fear of another mutiny in India, which unlike the one which had taken place in 1857, British authorities were unsure they would be able to quell.

The protests which had previously taken place and which Dyer had been so afraid of when

opposition to further limitations of civil liberties in India. In fact, most of the Punjab in the north of India was by the time Dyer's men fired into the crowd and the martial law for fear of rebellion.

And this meant that the province was effectively cut off from the rest of British India, the flow of news was restricted, and hundreds were imprisoned without charge. Only in the aftermath was martial law lifted and while Indian nationalists soon launched their own unofficial investigation martial law proved to be a turning point needing the Indian National Congress to withdraw its support for proposed reforms to British rule with Gandhi launching the non-cooperation movement by the summer of 1920.

Conservative Anglo-Indians meanwhile believed that Dyer had saved the Raj from rebellion. And during questioning in front of that committee Dyr was asked if he'd considered that his actions that day may have done a great disservice to the ranch. Dyer simply responded that "he would be doing a jolly lot of good" and that they would realize that they were not to be wicked.

And what's perhaps telling is that an eve of the massacre Dyer told his own son that Muslims and Hindus had united he had he said been expecting thus. In the eyes of the senior British military officer in other words the greatest threat to the continuing stability of the empire was the unity of its very subject peoples.

And Dyer's words also reveal the kind of paranoia fear of supposedly constantly scheming and wicked natives must be brought into line by the use of force. The historian Kim Wagner has written a really great book on Amritsar and he has argued that the mask is best understood as a kind of last gasp of an imperialist ideology, which is kind of mired in 19th century notions of racialized and exemplary violence and one which was ill suited for the changing world of the 20th century.

Because it was after all exemplary violence like that committed at Amritsar which had entered the mutiny of 1857 and the exemplary violence committed in the name of saving the Empire in India, Iraq and Palestine but also elsewhere. In fact alienated local populations with victims turned into martyrs of nationalist movements. And in the wake of the massacre Dyer resigned when he returned to Britain by disembarking at Portsmouth in May 1920, he told a reporter of the Daily Mail that he had shot to save the British Raj to preserve India for the empire and to protect Englishmen and English women.

But others including the Labour politician and retired military officer JC Wedgewood believed that whenever we put forward the humanitarian view, we shall have this tale thrown into our teeth.

W:

Well, I've got I think two questions but which might go together as one. So it's so what you're saying is that there's there's a strong awareness of the British Empire relying upon this strategy of divide and conquer, divided and rule that we've talked about quite a few times in the previous

episode as well, but that they're fearing that this is disappearing or the unity is a threat to their own control. So but I think we we know that division occurs again afterwards.

So maybe you can explain exactly how or or a few words on how that unity didn't actually succeed.

J:

I think you're right and that is something that was not mentioned that the British Empire one of the principal means by which the empire rules is by dividing local populations and kind of playing them off one against the other.

But there are sometimes moments where there is unity and that is I think something that you can see in this kind of paranoia. This particular moment they are afraid that they are too weak for the Empire, they are aware that they can't react everywhere all at the same time and there is that kind of fear, you know, "what if what if they rise up what if all together" you know, what if across the Empire because it by this point you have Indian young Indian diaspora that that ranges across the Empire. They're worried because also Indian troops are facing.

Having to put down rebellions and revolutions elsewhere they are worried what if what if it doesn't work, you know, what if they what if they don't do it? What if they don't follow orders, if they rise up.

And in a way it doesn't that in a way as far as we know, I think that danger is low in this particular moment in time but I think it's something that comes with this kind of awareness of weakness.

There is that fear there is that paranoia and the result is brutal.

O: There's brutality and there's violence of British martial law. Do you think it also resonates or it is a kind of connected to other resistance moments that are happening exactly at the same time or have just happened in other parts of the British Empire and I'm thinking for instance that's what was happening in Ireland just a few years before that massacre and yes, how can we maybe connect those different events and and I'm ensuring violence

J:

We don't have to work terribly hard fortunately, because there is a cartoon that was published in the Daily News in 1919 by David Lowe, I think his name is. And in it a British colonial officer standing over two men or two figures crawling on the ground and they are India and Ireland. And it says, you know, it says something like "The progress to liberty Amritsar style" and when British troops opened fire on civilians doing a Gaelic Football match at Crook park in November 1920, the press refers to it as the Irish Amritsar are it's they're very aware they make these connections. They're aware that Colonial rule works the same everywhere and that everywhere

Colonial Rule means brutal violence.

P:

So at the height of the territorial power of Britain also comes the height of the fear of loss that comes forward with British officials being terrified that by how much they grabbed they've also created a significant force of potential rebellions and enemies there's this I guess it's fear that develops that the more you have the more you can lose.

J:

Absolutely and that's kind of best exemplified by a quote I have from Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson who was the chief of the Imperial General staff who said literally, "In no single theatre are we strong enough not on Ireland, nor England, not on the right, not in Constantinople, nor the tomb, nor Egypt, nor Palestine, nor Mesopotamia, nor Persia, nor India". I mean that they they're aware of it, it's their resources are stretched real thin.

Britain is not as powerful a country after the first world war as it is before. One of the things that I want to go into later is Britain is ravaged by economic crisis, unemployment is 15 percent in 1920 or 21 and that's getting close to where it is at the height of the Great Depression.

I mean, it is serious.

J:

What does Britain do next?

J:

Well even as Wilson is kind of bemoaning a lack of strength of the British Empire and its armed forces. Britain's control might have reached its end in territorial terms. And this is maybe a good moment to kind of shift from one rebellion to another because Hindu nationalists, of course were not the only ones who began to take advantage in particular with the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East left broken with greater territorial control, but many political liabilities in the region. And Arab nationalists and Jewish zionists in particular, proved troublesome to British interests.

In December 1917 when general Edmund Allenby made his carefully staged entry into the city of Jerusalem which had surrendered to British troops just days earlier it was to be a slow proclaimed a Christmas present for the British nation. Among those who entered alongside Allenby was Georges Picot joint author with British diplomat Sykes for the Sykes-Picot

agreement effectively a plan for the partition of the Ottoman Empire's Arab provinces, which set a framework for the boundaries of modern-day, Syria, Jordan, Israel, Iraq, and Lebanon.

This framework, of course has distinct resonances in contemporary politics in 2014, for instance, the so-called Islamic State portrayed itself as a liberating force. Literally obliterating the remnants of the Sykes-Picot agreement by bulldozing the border between Syria and Iraq.

On the 31st of October 1918, the first world war in the Middle East ended. But just a few weeks later the killing of New Zealand soldier in Palestine in mid December 1918 said of a retaliatory massacre by his comrades of our villagers near the city of Ramla, which went unpunished by Alan B who in the face of a conspiracy of silence of the men involved resorted to simply ordering their demobilization rougher in Egypt as planned. But before they could depart Egypt was engulfed by rebellion. In late 1918 the British High Commissioner Sir Reginald Wingate had rejected out of hand the right of an Egyptian delegation to present a case for Egyptian independence at the Paris peace conference, deporting the delegation including its leaders after the repeated protestations to Malta in March of 1919. It was this deportation which helped spark the Egyptian revolution that same month. The protests which ensued were of such magnitude they ultimately led to the British recognition of Egyptian independence in 1922.

P:

A similar mirroring story here in Oxford's past with the figure of T.E. Lawrence or Lawrence of Arabia as he's called and that he was a British diplomat or originally an archaeologist but he went out and promised to on behalf of Britain to support independence for Arabic states and fairer big tribes after the world first world war and at the Paris Pete's conference that didn't happen, of course and those those promises that he made he knew during his time in the first World War wouldn't be honored by the British although he did try to bring them to conclusion that Paris peace conference but he made false promises and he wrote my letters in his in his own journals of the time about the you know, the frustration was as if official knowing that Britain would never honor these these promises they're making and now he had to give them anyway.

J:

Yes, that's absolutely right and I think you know, there are always multiple ways of telling the same story. And I, hesitate to focus on him because he is the one who people are most likely to be familiar with people might be you know familiar with him. Or through film or his memoirs which were incredibly popular but it can give the impression that various people were not fighting for their own independence, but they were and when that wasn't granted they rebelled and they didn't need his help necessarily that's not to say that you know, he did not play a part in mediating wartime alliances between various arab factions in the British empire but that is to say that I think we you know, we like to see names we recognize.

And that often leads us to tell I think stories which are perhaps easier than they might be

P:

Absolutely the image of a British hero, you know fighting for independence abroad, I think is the way that these type of stories are often romanticized and misremembered and in a very problematic form so when we think about you know, Arabic independence is not the story of T E Lawrence and yet that's the one that still continuously told and no matter what like how positive his intention were towards the different Arab nations he was working with in a way with the Sykes- Picot agreement, the fate of a vast part of the Middle East was kind of already sealed even before the end of the conflict and the kind of determination the Ottoman Empire.

I guess Sykes-Pictor is one of the famous agreements that we know of but the other name that's quite prominent is the name of Balfour, of the Balfour declaration could you tell us a little bit more about that?

J:

Yeah, of course so from in the late 1910s you get a lot of Jewish immigration encouraged by foreign secretary Balfour's declaration that Britain supported a national home for the Jewish people and it accelerates between 1882 and 1914 the number of Jews in Palestine increased from about 23,000 to about 85,000 and about 50,000 more Jews had entered Palestine in this period, but did not stay and many moved on to the United States instead.

An additional 18 and a half thousand or so Jewish immigrants came to Palestine between 1919 and 1921 alone so we can really see that the numbers started up. And while the Jewish community and Palestine was far from united in its political or social aims it increasingly became clear that what they often called the Arab question could hardly be ignored.

So tensions between Arabs and the Jewish settlers mounted in the new arrivals did not help matters many did not speak the local languages and this combined with the Zionist fervor, their desire to establish a Jewish state in Palestine often led to deteriorating relations with Arab communities, but also tensions with Jews who would arrived in its prior and who would still live under Ottoman rule?

Rioting for instance in Jerusalem in April 1920 left many dead and hundreds injured even worse riots broke out in Jaffa, which is a part of Tel Aviv in the wake of May Day 1921, when fighting between Jewish Communists and Zionists escalated when it was misreported as a Jewish attack on Arabs, which led to reprisals.

The Communists had called for the establishment of a Soviet Palestine and the overthrow of British rule. The British High Commissioner for Palestine Herbert Samuel in language, which is really strikingly reminiscent of contemporary and immigration campaigns, as a result declared that Jewish immigration was to be curbed in order not to burden local Arab communities and the economy.

But support for Jewish immigration to Palestine was on the part of the British government a pragmatic endeavor. For instance, the historian Eugene Rogan in his really excellent *History of the fall of the Ottoman Empire* has suggested that British support for the Zionist movement was in part means to the creation of a friendly political force in Palestine, which would help secure the Suez canal because after all during the war the canal had been threatened by Ottoman offensive launched from Palestine.

P:

There's clearly a lot of modern tensions that are developed from all these different conflicts and the integration of the Ottoman colonies into the British Empire.

J:

Yeah, I think that's right and one case that would be more interesting to say more about would be Iraq because in Iraq they're really great hopes for political self-determination because there's a joint declaration by Britain and France assuring that they would support Iraqi independence, but these hopes were dashed at a conference held in San Remo in April 1920 where Iraq was allocated a mandate under British administration.

Rebellion followed in Iraq in June 1920 with a well-organized insurgency threatening Basra Baghdad and Mosul. About October 1920, the 60,000 yet to be demobilized British troops were joined by over 40,000 troops from elsewhere in the Empire and principally from India. By the end of October these forces had killed over 8,000 Iraqis launched by means of aerial bombardment in the use of heavy artillery and suffered losses of over 2,200 men.

And in the same period British forces also suppressed multiple Kurdish revolts in the north of Iraq and British victories over the Kurds prevented as the Empire did elsewhere, the formation of the national state in the wake of the fall of the Ottoman Empire. In the multinational empire then was replaced by a number of different states under French and British domination which significantly shaped the borders and systems of government of most states and the systems of the regions at least for the time being. Notable exceptions, of course are Turkey with the Turkish war independence taking place between 1919 and 1923, Iran where there is a military coup which deposes the Qajar dynasty and then the Pahlavi dynasty comes to power in 1925 and Saudi Arabia becomes a state after the House of Saud conquers the Hijab.

And still the borders imposed as part of the post-war settlement proved remarkably resilient in spite of all of these, you know, contentions. And the Iraq rebellion led to the plans for the British mandate from Mesopotamia as it was to be called to be abandoned and instead as a result of the 1921 Cairo conference the British government installed the Hashemite Brothers Abdullah

and Faisal as Kings of Jordan or Transjordan as it was then known into Iraq respectively.

And there was a result of the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1922, Britain gained control over the New Kingdom's military economic and political affairs yet even in Britain at this point in time support for such ventures was low in particular as is perhaps no surprise the high costs of British involvement in Iraq were point of attack in the press the conservatives campaigned in the 1922 general election for the comparatively isolationist platform.

The nation's first need, they argued, is to get on with its own work with the minimal disturbance abroad and Henry Dobbs, the British High Commissioner in Iraq from 1923 was one of many British officials, was sent to Iraq from India. His brief was to help install the government there that when Iraq's independence came would be friendly to British interests.

In a 1932 Iraq did become the only Middle Eastern country to emerge from mandate status to independence before the second world war. And at the same time then across the Middle East the British Empire saw itself confronted a Zionism as well as Arab and Kurdish nationalism and of course to a certain extent while all these forces threatened to unmake the control of the Empire the Empire in turn tried to accommodate these various movements in the hope of being able to play one off against the other.

W:

It sounds like it really sounds like you describe exactly what Paula was raising earlier on. It's just too big to fail but it's also too big to handle?

J:

That's right, you know you do see what what Wilson said they're facing rebellion everywhere and everywhere and they only barely save it off. And often they do so really in ways that assert control for the time being but undermine it the long term whether that means accommodating various interests in one territory or whether that means, you know, agreeing to some sort of timeline for independence greater autonomy. There are lots of different ways the Empire maintains control. But, But you but you're right it's we do see everywhere these kind of you know movements come to power.

P:

And in particular, you see the the active decision to stoke conflict within in order to take the pressure off from British forces and British control as well. So the the beginnings of these tensions with all these as you mentioned the nationalist forces and even before that in the British Raj with the Hindu-Muslim divides that are created through British policy, you see like a targeted decision by British policymakers to create a division within so that they don't have a unified front to fight in the end.

J:

I think you're right there is that sense that they tried to take advantage of division wherever they can sow it and wherever they can. And but it's important to know and that's kind of the last thing I want to say that even returning to Britain when you want to think about the aftermath of the war in the state of you know economy and society at the center of the empire we often think about the 1920s and two ways we either think of the roaring twenties, we think of Gatsby and spectacle all we think of it as a time of hyperinflation and global economic catastrophe and I think sometimes we forget that not just the losers of the first world war ended up in economic dire straits Britain too suffered from a depression in the early 1920s with unemployment leaping from two to three percent in 1919 and 1920 to over eleven percent in 1921, hovering around 10 percent for the next few years during the height of the Great Depression and the late 1920s and early 1930s unemployment would reach around 15 percent and today it's projected the second wave of the pandemic could lead to around 15 percent unemployment as well.

But even before this surge of unemployment, there was this content towards immediate post-war priorities and late January for instance 1919 workers in and around Glasgow went on strike for 40-hour workweek, so that more jobs will become available for those now unemployed following demobilization. And in Luton in July 1919 soldiers rioted and set the town hall on fire due to their dissatisfaction with the amount of money to be spent on London's peace parade the money they believed would be better spent on reintegrating veterans.

And as a result of economic demobilization total economic output fell by around 25 percent between 1918 and 1921 and that's incredibly significant numbers. Meanwhile recovery appear to be on the horizon in 1925 so another significant slowdown while they were of course a number of factors which led to such continuously catastrophic economic prospects the single most important one was Britain's return to the gold standard at pre-war parity meaning that the pound was once again effectively tied to the price of gold at the same price at which it had been tied to gold prior to first World War which was a widely used system, but largely abandoned during WW1.

Most economists endorsed this plan, although John Keynes whose ideas would exert so profound an influence on economic policy in the period after 1945 opposed it. The higher value of the pound which was a result of the return to the gold standard hurt British exports and increased the real value of debt. And so the economic downtime and a desire to maintain profits on the part of employers hidden miners, particularly hard, which is of course something that will also see again in the 1980s. And the conservative government understandably bold win in the 1920s, sought to mediate between workers and their employers introducing a wage subsidy.

In a report by Royal Commission led by Herbert Samuel, we encountered earlier as high commissioner for Palestine, recommended that the subsidy be withdrawn and that in addition wages be cut. And when further negotiations broke down a state of emergency was declared and by early May 1926 the Trades Union Congress, the TUC, called for a general strike in support of miners on the fourth of May 1926 over one and a half million workers joined the strike. And under the emergency power sack, the government mobilized thousands of militias

and strike breakers, even it turns out fine young men of the University of Oxford were equipped with heavy wooden sticks to better beat striking workers with and the TUC ultimately agreed to end the strike even without assurances that there would be no retaliation against striking workers.

Mine workers ultimately had to accept long hours and lower wages and the trade dispute & trade unions act of 1927 further diminished Labour power by limiting solidarity actions and mass picketing. And between the reintroduction of the gold standard and the accompanying economic instability, it's worth noting that politically too, as these examples begin to show I think. Britain had become far more unstable or unpredictable than it had previously been because the franchise was extended of course no longer to just a property owning men, but at least by 1928 to all men and women over the age of 21 and so the political landscape shifted, had to shift ,the old authoritarian states across Europe had been swept away in the aftermath of the war and the compromised solutions which had existed for instance with Britain's limited suffrage gave way to more modern and recognizably liberal democratic states.

O:

So your talk kind of illustrates how the empire in the interwar period sometimes was used as a pressure relief valve for what was happening within Britain as well as it provided new opportunities for growth with the division of territories of the of the different parts that were on the losing side of the first world war, how did this anticolonial movement gain strength during the interwar period?

So you mentioned a few massacres which probably really contributed to kind of fostering anger against the British colonial rule but how did kind of anti colonial thinking really develop, and became more theorized as well in the interwar period? And how did this movement become less. They used to be led by small groups of activists and how did they become more widespread across the different societies in the different colonies?

J:

I think that's a really good question and it comes back to what we talked about earlier which has to do with the reality that, not just in Britain but across the Empire millions of people were mobilized for war and not always just you know, in factories but for instance in the second world war the British Indian army has over two million men who are sent to fight across the empire.

And they are all of course in these kind of moments of you know, demands being made. Opportunities, not just to articulate demands in return but also to form networks and opportunities to really develop these kinds of narratives and that's something that you kind of often see right in different forms and so for instance. When you think about Ireland, not just in the 1960s 1970s, but also earlier, the best opportunity to become involved within the Independence movement within Ireland is to be imprisoned.

And to their network, you know with others who have a commitment to the cause and have been

imprisoned for that and then to articulate, you know new ways of thinking about it and that's not to say that you had to go to prison from India. But to say that you know, certain kinds of experiences really offer up opportunity to develop these kind of networks, and articulate ideas I think.

P:

From Papua New Guinea to the Middle East you have a widening empire and Britain's at a territorial height, but it's very politically unstable because of it. It also goes to large transitions after the first world war which results in I mean not having mobilizing a huge empire during the war but also dealing with the economic consequences of this after the war which leads to unrest at home and the changing political systems that are already in place with enfranchisement and labor unions taking giving more people across Britain a voice that they had never had before for instance.

So all around this is technically the height of Empire but realistically it's also the beginning of the decline of Empire.

J:

One thing that I've tried to show is that the Empire can seem weak. And it can seem strong right in certain places it seems strong because it manages to suppress rebellion.

But in other places it seems weak and also obviously it's weak when it fails to return to the gold standard and you know, there's a kind of it is, I didn't say this as clearly earlier, but it is really, the one decision that creates, if not a depression then certainly a recession in Britain.

I mean, it is the one decision that they make that has enormous consequence. And that really is born out of a belief of Britain's you know enduring economic power, which is by this point no longer the same kind of reality as it was prior to the War. America is now the global financial power, and will emerge, of course to be the military and political power as well.

Butere we kind of see you know, the reason the empire is weak is not because everyone is weak it's because the center of power has shifted.

I think just the very end it'd be good to step back and to take a look around because we have to look at the international system of which the British Empire was a part if we are to make sense of this period because we know what happens next.

And that really means that we have to take a moment to consider what the weakness of the British Empire really means in this period because it was the weakness of the British and French empires and isolationist tendencies in the United States, which opened up what a

historian has described as a 'strategic window of opportunity'. And we know what nightmarish forces would tear through that window. But Germany, Italy, and Japan were secondary movers. But the airs of Lennin were crashing the Soviet Union in the wake of these purges Stalin launched a brutal process of collectivization and industrialization.

And the lengths to which its opponents were willing to go to challenge the international order which had emerged since the first world war suggests how formidable it seemed to them and so what I want to end on is that even as I have sketched the waning power of the British Empire that's not to say that the existing world order was weak in absolute terms.

Germany, Italy and Japan would go to truly nightmarish lengths to challenge it and in the end they would still come up short. The strategic window of opportunity, they saw it opened up precisely only because of the relative weakness of Britain and France and the rising dominance of the United States and it is in that sense that we ought to see the cracks in the British Empire.

Certainly as signs of weakness, but this weakness was not their result but their cause.

O:

That's a great way to conclude a great and insightful lecture on the complex processes that kind of shape the evolution of the British Empire in the interwar period and especially in the 1920s, thank you very much.

J:

Thank you guys for having me.

W:

Thank you so much Jan for joining us on this podcast. And if you would like to have more information on this topic we have a further reading list on our website along with a full transcript on www.uncomfortableoxford.com where you will also find a number of other resources as well including a blog with many many different articles on different aspects of history

P:

And you can join some of our virtual tours or also some of our online & in person events that cover topics that are uncomfortable to discuss about empire inequality discrimination origins of modern conflict and many others topics.

And please tune in for the next lecture on the Second World War.