

Today's History

The Allies may be regarded as the 'good guys' of the Second World War, but the hypocrisy apparent in their treatment of colonial peoples drove many subjects into the arms of their enemies, as **Mihir Bose** explains.

The Two Faces of Empire



A Second World War poster offers an idealised vision of unity among Britain's imperial forces.

The Second World War is well established as the classic fight between good and evil. We all know who the goodies were, yet the war saw many people choose to favour the baddies. They argued that they had to do so as the goodies had skeletons in their cupboards that made them not much better than the baddies and sometimes worse. These choices were made largely in Asia by leaders of countries fighting to be free of Western colonial rule. Given the mountain of material the war has inspired, you would expect historians to tackle this subject with some frequency. Yet it has merited little attention, particularly in the West.

George Orwell was an exception. With the prescience that made him one of the greatest writers of the 20th century, he wrote on this issue just as the war was about to begin, with an article, published in *Adelphi* magazine in July 1939, entitled, 'Not Counting Niggers.' Seventy years later it remains a classic. Orwell's essay was provoked by a much-discussed book published in the same year, *Union Now*, by an American writer Clarence K. Streit, who argued that the only way to combat the dictators was for the world's democracies to form a bloc, a United States of Democratic Countries. They would share a common government, currency and completely free internal trade. Such a bloc would so unnerve the dictators that they would crumble before a shot was fired. Streit's 15 democracies included the US, France, Britain, the self-governing dominions of the British Empire and the smaller European democracies. All 15 were 'white' countries with dependencies full of colonial peoples, including the US which then ruled the Philippines.

Streit was not bothered about freedom for non-whites. Despite the fact that India had a greater population than the 15 democracies put together, Streit dismissed it in a page and a half, saying it was not fit for self-government. His view was that India was full of 'politically inexperienced millions', who could not be given the same status as the people in the Western democracies and should be treated 'much the same as we treat politically our own immature sons and

Race and Empire

'One gets some idea of the real relationship of England and India when one reflects that the per capita income in England is something over £80 and in India about £7'

George Orwell, from his 1939 essay



daughters'. It was this that made Orwell conclude the Streit scheme had a 'smell':

Look again at his list of sheep and goats. No need to boggle at the goats (Germany, Italy and Japan), they are goats right enough, and billies at that. But look at the sheep! Perhaps the USA will pass inspection if one does not look too closely but what about France? What about England? What about even Belgium and Holland? Like everyone else of his school of thought Mr Streit has coolly lumped the huge British and French empires – in essence nothing but mechanisms for exploiting cheap coloured labour – under the heading of democracies! ... The unspoken clause is always 'not counting Niggers'. For how can we make a 'firm stand' against Hitler if we are simultaneously weakening ourselves at home? In other words, how can we 'fight Fascism' except by bolstering up a far vaster injustice? For of course it is vaster. What we always forget is the overwhelming bulk of the British proletariat does not live in Britain, but in Asia and Africa. It is not in Hitler's power, for instance, to make a penny an hour a normal industrial wage, it is perfectly normal in India, and we are at great pains to keep it so. One gets some idea of the real relationship of England and India when one reflects that the per capita income in England is something over £80 and in India about £7. It is quite common for an Indian coolie's legs to be thinner than the average Englishman's arms. And there is nothing racial in this, for well-fed members of the same race are of normal physique; it is due to simple starvation. This is the system we all live on and which we denounce when there seems to be no danger of it being altered. Of late, however, it has become the first duty of a 'good anti-Fascist' to lie about it and to help to keep it in being. What real settlement of the slightest value can there be along these lines? What meaning would there be, even if it were successful, in bringing down Hitler's system in order to stabilise something that is far bigger and in its different way just as bad?

The contradictions Orwell highlighted stretched back almost a century. The 19th century, especially for Victorian Britain, had been one of Western moralistic intervention in many parts of the world: the anti-slavery campaign, opposition to Belgium's dreadful colonial rule in the Congo and agitation against the Ottoman Empire's treatment of its subject races. Byron led the Greek fight for freedom, Gladstone was aroused by Turkish atrocities against the Bulgarians. But as the American historian Gary Bass points out in his book *Freedom's Battle: The Origins of Humanitarian Intervention* (Knopf, 2008), this was richly ironic:

The British largely missed the irony of carrying on their debates about Greeks suffering while simultaneously discussing how to deal with an Indian mutiny and festering Catholic grievances in Ireland. After Indians massacred Britons in Delhi and Kanpur in the summer of 1857, the British sadistically slaughtered Indians by the hundreds, burning old women and children alive, and smearing Muslims with pig fat before killing them. Carnarvon, Disraeli's colonial secretary, spoke inside the cabinet for the Bulgarians, just a few years before he launched widespread brutal reprisals against the Zulus in 1879.

The First World War, 'the war to end all wars' and fought to bring liberty, democracy and national self-government to a wider world, should have addressed this issue but it soon turned out that these ideals related to European nations emerging as a result of the breakup of the Russian, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires, not to non-Europeans ruled by European powers. The League of Nations even failed to agree a racial equality clause. This Japanese proposal was vehemently opposed by some delegates of the British Empire, in particular the Australians, who feared it would destroy the country's 'White Australia' policy, and New Zealand. At the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 the Japanese secured a majority but US President Woodrow Wilson, a southerner who did not believe in equality for US blacks, argued strongly against it and scuppered the vote (see 'Paris Peace Discord', *History Today*, July 2009).

Streit's view of Indians flowed from the British Government's announcement in 1917 that its policy was to make 'responsible government in India ... [an] integral part of the British Empire'. No date was set and when the war cabinet meeting approved the plan, Lord Curzon, the former viceroy who had drafted the announcement, said India might be ready for 'responsible government' in about 500 years. (By 1943, probably as a result of wartime changes, Lord Linlithgow, then viceroy, estimated it would take 50 years, though even then he insisted India would need tutoring by millions of Britons, provided they could be persuaded to settle in the subcontinent.)

In 1939 the idea that all human beings should have the same rights was still a novel, untested notion. Not surprisingly, all the European democracies ruling over vast colonial empires went to war making it clear that the much-advertised fight for freedom from Nazi tyranny did not extend to their colonies. Churchill

exempted India from the freedom provisions of the Atlantic Charter and de Gaulle, leading the Free French, summed up the view of many of his compatriots when he said that the end of the war would see France resume, indeed strengthen, its prewar colonial rule. Things should have been different with the US. Anti-imperialism was part of its founding creed but it had a colony, the Philippines, and while it had promised freedom to that country's population, it had also brutally put down a Filipino freedom movement.

The war meant a US alliance with nationalist China, which had been fighting the Japanese for years. But this served merely to expose the racist immigration laws that kept Asians out of the US. The immigration policy adopted in 1917 had created an 'Asiatic barred zone', which covered a whole swathe of Asia and the Pacific and the Supreme Court had often upheld provisions barring Asians from becoming US citizens. After the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the US Congress praised China for its 'gallant resistance' against the Japanese, but the Chinese themselves were not welcome in the US, so much so that even Chinese seamen taking shore leave in the US were arrested for fear that they may settle in the country. Not only did the US and Britain not allow Chinese courts to try British and American citizens for crimes committed on Chinese soil, but between 1882 and 1913 no less than 15 laws or parts of US law had mentioned the Chinese as undesirable immigrants. No other country was so dishonoured by US lawmakers.

A nationwide debate arose around these racist laws, which lasted to the end of 1943 and resulted in some revision. The US allowed for a maximum of 105 Chinese eligible for naturalisation to emigrate to the US each year. Absurd as the figures may now seem, at the time the fact that some Chinese were being allowed to become US citizens was hugely symbolic. Even then Congress had to overcome protests from groups such as the American Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Federation of Labor. Alone among the Allied leaders, Roosevelt understood the hypocrisy that Orwell had written about. He overcame opposition from Churchill to make China part of the wartime 'Big Four', a position which would give China a permanent seat on the Security Council in the post-war United Nations.

But Roosevelt could not persuade Churchill to grant India independence. When he tried a bit too hard, Churchill threatened to resign as prime minister. The most curious moment came at the Tehran Conference in 1943 when Roosevelt proposed to Stalin that the way to get the British out of India was 'reform from the bottom, somewhat on the Soviet lines'. Stalin rebuked him, saying that the British Empire should be enlarged not reduced with the British given bases and strongholds throughout the world on the basis of trusteeships.

Interestingly, Stalin shared his admiration for the British Empire with Hitler. In 1942, as his forces ravaged the Soviet Union, Hitler told his Nazi henchmen that he saw the British Empire in India as a model for German rule over Russia:

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Our rule in Russia will be analogous to that of England in India ... The Russian space is our India. Like the English we shall rule the empire with a handful of men ... It should be possible for us to control this region to the east with 250,000 men plus a cadre of good administrators.

Japan's success against the West made him regret that German help was destroying 'the position of the white race in East Asia' and he talked of sending 20 divisions to help throw 'back the yellow men'.

Japan drew attention to racism in an attempt to recruit other Asians to fight European rule. It had after all attacked not free nations but colonial outposts of Western powers. And, if Roosevelt had coined the four freedoms of free speech, religion, freedom from want and from fear, the Japanese came up with the triple AAA movement: Japan the Leader of Asia, Japan the Protector of Asia, Japan the Light of Asia. All this was dramatised at the Greater East Asia Conference held in Tokyo in November 1943 where Burma's Ba Maw told the delegates: 'My Asiatic blood has always called to other Asiatics.' This, he said, was 'not the time to think with our minds', but 'the time to think with our blood'. Ba Maw was the leader of the so-called Free Burmese government, which the Japanese had set up and in which Aung San, father of today's Burmese democratic activist Aung San Suu Kyi, was the defence minister. Japan had also granted similar nominal independence to two other Western colonies, Indonesia and the Philippines.

The Japanese were no less hypocritical than the West, their own theory of the Japanese as the master race being not much different from that of the Nazis. In the end Ba Maw was disillusioned enough to attack Japanese 'brutality, arrogance and racial pretensions'. Indeed the Japanese dealt with their fellow Asians, particularly the Chinese, in a far more barbaric way than the Western powers. More Tamils died building the 'death railway' in Thailand than Europeans. Nevertheless, Japan's initial victories meant the myth of European supremacy had been exploded, as the French and the Dutch realised when they tried to restate the prewar colonial world after the war.

The Second World War changed the world as no other conflict but it was the changes it brought to the former Western colonies that were the most dramatic. It is a subject that has proved to be of surprisingly little interest to Western historians, though there have been honourable exceptions: Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper in *Forgotten Armies, The Fall of British Asia 1941-45* (Penguin, 2005) and in particular John W. Dower's *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (Random House, 1987), the only book to tackle the issue of race in that conflict. Today Orwell's use of the word 'nigger' may be politically incorrect but failure to follow his lead has effectively spawned two histories of the Second World War, a Western version and an Asian, one. Colonialism and the racism that went with it may have long gone but the historical divide is as great as ever.

Mihir Bose is the author of *Raj, Secrets and Revolution: A Life of Subhas Chandra Bose* (Grice Chapman, 2004) and *A History of Indian Cricket* (André Deutsch, 2004). For the full text of George Orwell's 1939 essay go to www.historytoday.com/orwell-essay