

COLONIAL *and* IMPERIALIST EXPANSION: *A Marxist Analysis*

III.—The Climax of Mercantilism.

WE have seen how the early colonial expansion was the result of the growth of Merchant Capital, requiring monopoly of markets for its trade. Colonies specially “regulated” and “protected” supplied these monopolised markets. We have seen that it was because the Stuart kings inclined to the interests of landed property, and did not sufficiently aid this commercial expansion, that the Stuart monarchy was overthrown, and William III. installed by the Whig Revolution of 1689, to rule, not absolutely, but subject to Parliament. We have seen that although the landed aristocracy had almost the entire representation in Parliament in the 18th century, yet a section of the aristocracy had interests in commerce, and furthered commercial expansion. Therefore, in fact, during the 18th century the State was the instrument of merchant capital.

Consequently the 18th century saw a succession of wars having their main roots in commercial rivalry, and undertaken to secure our commercial monopoly from the intrusion of our new trade rival, France. “We have seen that our rivals in world dominion were first Spain and then Holland. . . . The 18th century saw the beginning of a Hundred Years’ War with France . . . the struggle was for colonial power.”¹ Armies of the State were sent to wrest Canada from the French, and thereby to further the expansion inland of the North American colonies. Our Navy made valuable conquests for commercial enterprise in the West Indies. Our armies fought in India to secure the monopoly of the East India Company against the French. Seeley says:—

¹ Townsend Warner, *Landmarks in English Industrial History*, p. 245.

The expansion of England in the New World and in Asia is the formula which sums up for England the history of the 18th century. . . . The whole period stands out as an age of gigantic rivalry between England and France, a kind of second Hundred Years' War.¹

The 18th century, in fact, is the time when Mercantilism most closely resembles modern capitalist Imperialism. "No thought of territorial dominion appears in the policy of the Company till the 18th century. To secure liberties to trade . . . to protect the Company against 'interlopers' . . . to pay good dividends to the shareholders, these are the early objects of the (merchant) Company."² Now, however, "the State had taken over from private enterprise the business of acquiring territory." But whereas modern Imperialism demands the conquest of new countries, in order to subject the native civilisation and impose on it capitalist civilisation, with its concomitant, a propertyless proletariat, these conquests of the 18th century were the result merely of the rivalry of France and England, each trying to safeguard and enlarge its colonial monopoly. In India the wars with Indian rulers arose merely because the French had adopted the policy of alliances with Indian princes against the English; and "war in India was merely a part of the all-pervading war with France."³ In fact, towards the end of the century in the Act renewing the East India Company's charter it was expressly stated that "schemes of conquest and extension of dominion in India are measures repugnant alike to the wish, the honour, and the policy" of the British nation.⁴

But the wars of the 18th century, like the present-day imperialist wars, were products of rivalry between economic interests of countries struggling for colonial monopoly. The War of the Spanish Succession arose because Louis XIV. tried to unite the thrones of France and Spain and thereby add the trade of the Spanish Netherlands and the wealth of Spanish America to France. The Peace of Utrecht in 1713, which concluded the war, had as its result that "England had got practical control of the Mediterranean, and made a beginning of wresting from France her possessions in the New World."⁵ "Merchants made the peace—as the Tories found when next year they tried to negotiate a Commercial Treaty with France, of which the merchants did not approve."⁶ "The war which (nearly?) broke out with Spain in 1727 was partly caused by Spain's recognition of the Ostend Company, a dangerous rival of our own and Dutch trade in the East."⁷ In 1839 during the Ministry of the Whig Walpole, the great champion of the interests of merchant capital, the War of Jenkins' Ear broke out with Spain. Says Egerton, "The trivial matter of Jenkins' ear served as a cloak to its real purpose, the command of the trade of the West Indies."⁸ It was called the War of Jenkins' Ear, because a Captain Jenkins stumped the country stirring up popular passion by displaying an ear which he said had been cut off by the Spaniards. Then as now the emotional "stunt" was a good way of camouflaging for the people the real naked facts of capitalist wars!

¹ Seeley, *Expansion of England*.

² Townsend Warner, *Landmarks in English Industrial History*, p. 204.

³ Jose, *The Growth of the Empire*, p. 186.

⁴ Quoted by Jose, *loc. cit.*, p. 180.

⁵ Myers, *General History*, p. 617.

⁶ Jose, *loc. cit.*, p. 66.

⁷ Townsend Warner, *loc. cit.*, p. 250.

⁸ Egerton, *Short History of British Colonial Policy*, p. 144.

The object of the Seven Years' War was in Pitt's phrase "to conquer America in Europe." After the Treaty of Paris, which ended the war, in 1763 England was "left without a rival in America; while in India, though Pondicherry was restored to the French, their power was shattered and the ultimate spread of English influence over the peninsula assured. . . . This treaty marks the high-water mark of English colonial power in the 18th century . . . By 1815 . . . England had risen from the position of one of many rivals for colonial territory, to be the one great colonial Power of the world." ¹ Truly, merchant capital had used the State well to serve its own interests. But as the miseries, the degradation and the hideous oppression of the working class in the industrial shambles of the new factories in the first half of the 19th century showed, the working class had little to gain by all this "glorious greatness."

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Next month: "The Decline of Mercantilism."