

Some aspects of French and British colonialism

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Historically, French, and British colonialism emerged almost simultaneously, developed in a single algorithm of military and political expansionism, competed with each other, and fought wars both in the vastness of the planet and directly on the European continent. In fact, it was the colonial policies of these two powers that shaped their current image, cultural and civilizational content, and secured their place among the geopolitical actors of our times.

It is noteworthy that these two powers have actually retained their “colonialist” status, which, depending on the point of view, is considered either an advantage or a flaw in the modern world. Spanish, Belgian, Dutch, and Portuguese colonialism has long since outlived itself as a form of geopolitical ambition, leaving behind a handful of island possessions of these countries scattered around the planet as reminders of the era of overseas domination of these once great European powers.

This is not the case for Britain and France. After the collapse of the vast colonial possessions of European countries in the middle of the 20th century, London and Paris managed to retain a number of territories in key regions of the world, which remained under the subordination of these metropolises in the form of various political-administrative entities. The total area of British overseas possessions is 18,131 sq km. In addition, London claims a part of Antarctica with an area of 1,700,400 sq km, but at the moment, according to the International Antarctic Treaty, territorial claims on this continent are frozen. France, on the other hand, owns colonial possessions in the world numbering 13 administrative territories with a total area of almost 560,655 sq km. Paris' claims to the French Adelle Land in Antarctica are also frozen by the UN.

The loss of political sovereignty over the former vast colonies and dominions in the 20th century forced Great Britain and France to seek forms of interaction with them in order to preserve their influence in the former subordinate territories. Thus, Great Britain created the “*Commonwealth of Nations*”, which included all the territories and states (Canada, Australia, India, etc.) that had ever been under the British Crown. France, for its part, organized the “*Francophonie*”, which includes both the current French overseas departments and the states that broke away from the European metropolis during the period of active decolonization of the last century.

As for the overseas territories still under the full authority of London and Paris, the metropolises use similar methods of administration. Basically, they have established two statuses for these colonies: a) self-governing territories, and b) possessions directly subordinated to the metropolises. It should be emphasized that the French Republic is more liberal in this respect than the United Kingdom since Paris has a form of direct subordination only in French Polynesia. And this liberalization tends to increase. For example, Paris did not prevent three (!) referendums in New Caledonia in the last 6 years, in which the population of this colony voted against sovereignty and separation from the

¹ The Russian original was posted on our website on 24.08.2024.

metropolis. Meanwhile, the vast majority of the British overseas territories, including Gibraltar, lack self-government, let alone the legal mechanisms to achieve full independence.

Modern trends demand that both London and Paris finally turn the page on their colonialism. In February 2020, UN Secretary-General António Guterres, on the eve of the 47th anniversary of the organization, addressing the preparatory meeting of the Special Committee on Decolonization, said that the process of the final dismantling of colonialism in the world is irreversible. According to him, when the UN was founded in the middle of the last century, 750 mln people on the planet lived in colonies and were, in fact, slaves of several countries. Thanks to the efforts of the UN, which were reflected in the resolutions of 1946, 1960, 1962, these peoples got rid of the imperialist oppression and gained independence. At the moment, the number of colonized people has been reduced to less than 2 mln, and there are only 17 territories left in the status of total subjugation by the metropolises. However, according to Guterres, they must also be “*liberated*” or, at least, become self-governing. It should be emphasized that of the 17 non-self-governing colonies, only 2 belong to France (New Caledonia and French Polynesia), while the other 15 belong to Great Britain, the United States and New Zealand. Moreover, as mentioned above, Paris has repeatedly authorized the referendum on independence in New Caledonia and is ready to accept any of its results, up to the independence of this Pacific archipelago. As for the other 15 countries (10 of which belong to Great Britain), which could be called “*splinters of Anglo-Saxon colonialism*”, there is no talk at this stage of democratic processes that would allow their separation from the metropolis.

From the point of view of international law, it is France that has the most liberal and humane approach to the problem mentioned by A. Guterres, and it is France that the UN should have the least questions about in the context of the final resolution of the “Colonial question”. And if the international community does not want to hold France up as an example to the United Kingdom for the least obstruction of the decolonization process, it should at least be objective and not devalue the “French progress”.

And yet it is France that has become the target of an anti-colonial information campaign in the world media. Of course, we are not talking about the direct involvement of the UN and the leading countries of this international organization in the process of devaluing the international prestige of the Fifth Republic. However, the extent of the anti-French propaganda campaign and the practical activities conducted in connection with it to undermine French positions on the international stage leave no doubt that there are a number of forces interested in this. Considering the more than modest capabilities of Azerbaijan, which found itself in the spearhead of the anti-French propaganda campaign, as well as the fact that it is by no means in the leading position in the rating of democratic countries; there are speculations about the interest of third forces in Baku's actions. This is first of all indicated by the total absence of any mention of Britain and “*Anglo-Saxon world imperialism in general*” in the rhetoric of the “*Anti-colonial movement*” born in Azerbaijan. Moreover, the rhetoric of the Baku platform contains constant references and historical excursions to the “*bloody colonial past of France*”, while the similar British experience is

much more saturated with brutal events and examples of inhuman exploitation of colonized peoples.

In general, the comparative analysis of the colonial history of France and Great Britain deserves special attention. Over the past centuries, solid documentary resources has been accumulated, the study of which, according to experts, shows that despite the similarity of the main stages of conquest and integration of the colonies into the empire, the methodologies of their management and exploitation by London and Paris were not identical. In particular, France, while participating in the general tendency of European colonialism to exterminate and exploit the peoples of the conquered lands, maintained a more tolerant attitude toward the native population. The main reason for this was, on the one hand, the active participation of the Catholic missionary movement in colonial expeditions and, on the other hand, the birth of the Enlightenment in France, of which humanism was considered to be one of the cornerstones. Of course, the concept of “*humanism*” in the 18th century differed in practice from the similar term used today, but even then, the understanding of the need to renounce violence as a natural way of behaving in the “*new, enlightened world*” was ingrained in the consciousness of the French society. The French Catholicism, for its part, consistently defended the belief that it was better for a Christian power to convert colonized natives to the “*true faith*” than to destroy this human resource by appealing to their “*savagery*”. The French missionary community, although it had not yet developed a systematic attitude to the issue of “*skin color*”, was already generating ideas about the inadmissibility of the slave trade because of its contradiction with the fundamental values of the Christian doctrine. One of the proofs of this is the activity of the famous French missionary Jean-Baptiste Du Tertre, to whom is attributed the authorship of the term “*shameful trade*” in reference to the “*Black slave trade*”.

Of course, the positive influence of the Enlightenment and Catholic missionaries did not transform France from an invading power into a bearer of peace and prosperity for the Indigenous peoples of the colonies, but it did significantly reduce the level of cruelty in its overseas territories compared to the Spanish and British. Events in the French Caribbean possessions in the mid-17th century, when colonists massacred Indians who refused to submit, illustrate this. However, the outbreak of violence that began in 1640 was extinguished 20 years later thanks to a compromise between the parties in which the Natives pledged to recognize the authority of the French Crown and the colonists promised not to bring European settlers to Martinique, Guadeloupe, and other islands. This practice of action by Paris was evident everywhere. Bloodshed was not considered the best way to establish dominance, which certainly put the French one step ahead of the Spanish, for example, who almost completely destroyed the Aztecs, Incas, and other peoples. For the French, it was important not to “*cleanse*” the conquered territories of the Natives, but to make the best use of their resources, including human resources, for the benefit of the metropolis. This vision was incorporated into the doctrine of the French colonial policy in the era of Louis XIV's influential minister, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, and was called “*colonial mercantilism*”. It was this doctrine that in many ways saved the lives of millions of inhabitants and an entire nation under the oppression of the French colonialism.

It is quite remarkable that the British Empire, for its part, was able to fully combine in its colonial doctrine both the French principle of “*mercantilism*” and the Spanish method of total destruction of subject peoples who did not agree to the conditions of the British domination. Thus, the British colonialism can be typically described as “*uncompromising*”, which most accurately characterizes the brutal methods of administration and total exploitation of the conquered territories. The most striking example of this is India, where the British East India Company spent two centuries destroying the local economy and dismantling the entire system of social order, putting this civilization exclusively at the service of the British treasury and aristocracy. The total plundering of India's resources and its simultaneous transformation into a vast market for British products through the monopolization of industries brought this ancient country to the brink of social and civilizational catastrophe.

An example of the British management of a colony is the epochal Cheshire Salt Scam, in which Britain imported salt into India at three times the cost of the local sea salt. London passed a special penal law forbidding all caste Hindus from even lifting natural deposits of sea salt from the earth. The “*Salt scam*” is just one in a series of hundreds of absurd initiatives implemented by the British colonists around the world that reveal the methods and extent of exploitation of the enslaved peoples.

At the same time, the practice of total plunder was accompanied with periodic acts of genocide in the British colonial possessions. In India alone, the British exterminated from 100 to 165 mln people over 200 years, according to various estimates. Only in Bengal, between 1769 and 1770, due to the British at least 10 mln people perished, or one-third of the region's indigenous population. The total value of India's wealth and resources looted and appropriated by the British over two centuries is now estimated at \$45 trillion. However, even these figures, derived by experts, are very relative and incomplete for an exhaustive picture of the true extent of the negative role of the British colonialism in the fate of the enslaved peoples. The fact is that even the decolonization of its main dominions in the middle of the 20th century was conducted by London with the aim of creating a series of problems that could not be solved easily and quickly. It is a matter of deliberately drawing the borders of the former dominions in such a way as to create contradictions between neighbors and to maintain hotbeds of tension in the countries and regions left behind. Problems of suppression of the rights of national and religious minorities, territorial disputes between India and Pakistan, India and China, Bangladesh and Burma, Pakistan and Afghanistan, etc., are all political legacies of the British colonial era. And that is just one region of the planet. It is impossible to calculate the human losses, the economic losses, the political costs of London's arbitrary manipulation of the borders of its former sovereign dominions, because the centers of tension have been simmering for seven decades and there is no prospect of a future solution to these problems.

These examples are typical of the British neo-colonialism: to dismantle the old colonial system bloodlessly, but with a view to bloodshed and permanent destabilization in the long run. History shows that London gave up its possessions almost without war in the 20th century, while the opposite was true of Paris. In some cases, France chose to maintain its

dominance over emerging colonies that sought full independence. Thus, the independence of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia from France was preceded by the Indochina War (1946–1954), and Algeria became a sovereign state after the Franco-Algerian War (1954–1962). It should be noted, however, that the French colonialists did not leave behind “time bombs” after their “bloody” withdrawal, and the decolonization of certain countries and regions often became a reality not as a result of military defeat, but as a result of internal political processes and the growth of civilizational consciousness within French society itself. This was the case in Algeria, where Paris won a military victory, but the political will of the French authorities, led by de Gaulle, helped this Arab country achieve its long-awaited sovereignty. As a result of a national referendum held in April 1962, 91% of the French voted in favor of granting sovereignty to the former French North African colony.

This indicates that France had already begun to profess its belief in “*soft power*” and its ability to maintain influence and “friendly guardianship” over the separated dominions. It should be emphasized that France's cultural and civilizational expansion continued even after its colonies gained independent status. These states themselves did not oppose this expansion, and even contributed to it, as the only way to maintain dynamic relations with the progressive world and to be in the civilizational mainstream of the developing countries. This was the case with Algeria, Lebanon, and a number of African countries. And the main guarantee for France to maintain its influence and real presence in these countries was the history of its eternal internal struggle to curb colonial inhumanity and the repentance of generations of the French politicians and public figures for the excessive cruelty of the Empire. The result of these internal struggles was also a process of partially repaying the debt to the colonies and sharing France’s cultural and civilizational potential with them. One should not idealize the essentially imperialist image of this European state, but one cannot help noticing that France not only “*took*” benefits from the colonies, but at a certain stage began to “*bring*” a part of itself there.

This is exactly what was not observed in the behavior of the British colonialism. Even the current comparison of the state of affairs in the shards of the two states' colonial legacies is revealing. The French possessions are freer in terms of self-government and self-determination, while the British territories with indigenous populations are overwhelmingly left without such privileges. Moreover, about half of the British overseas territories are not, like the French, undisputed possessions of the metropolis. For example, the status of the Falkland Islands is up in the air thanks to Argentina. Or the status of the Cypriot towns of Akrotiri and Dekelia, whose British sovereignty is disputed by Nicosia.

The reliance on force, but not law, to maintain the British rule is evident. Britain's colonial legacy has retained many of the principles of the medieval colonial era, and the British seem in no hurry to abandon them, at least at this stage. One of the most striking proofs of this is the existence of the *King's Privy Council* and the Cabinet, which alone has the right to change the status of the dominions, crown lands, protectorates, etc. in any order without legislative initiative. This, in turn, means that London has secured for itself the right to determine their destiny at all times and under all circumstances, regardless of the international community and the will of the objects of its colonial policy.

Under these circumstances, it is nonsense that certain forces and the countries behind them are attacking France, the most liberal colonial power that ever was and still is. The Fifth Republic is being subjected to propaganda and political pressure that it does not deserve legally, much less morally. And it would be the height of naivety to assume that Azerbaijan itself, or even Turkey, is behind the riots in New Caledonia and the creation of a protest movement in other French possessions, organizing all kinds of forums for *“peoples – the victims of the French colonialism”*. This is an implausible version, just like the one that Baku has been infected with the idea of *“selflessly joining”* and even *“leading”* an anti-colonial movement in the world. After all, for some reason only France became the target of this initiative, which has already realized the decline of the World colonial era and is trying to turn the last page of its history in a bloodless and dignified manner. Obviously, its main competitors have other plans. After all, a peaceful solution to this problem by Paris would probably impose a similar obligation on them.