
Why Did Europe Conquer The World?

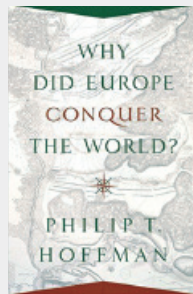
By Philip T. Hoffman

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As its name suggests, this is a book that attempts to answer one of the greatest historical puzzles of all times: Why did a couple of Western European states conquer the world? It is indeed a stunning fact that Western Europe, which was an unenviable backwater of the world in the early Middle Ages, ended up gaining “control of 84 percent of the globe” (p. 2). Judging by Figure 1.1 in this book, Turkey, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan, China and Thailand may be the only countries in the world that were never under direct European control, if we take into account the British-French takeover of the remaining Arab regions after World War 1 and the American occupation of Japan and Korea after World War 2 (p. 2). Hoffman provides a comprehensive and critical overview of the most popular alternative answers given to this fascinating puzzle, while offering his own explanation as to why Western Europeans ultimately conquered the world.

Hoffman argues that popular alternative explanations based on industrialization, diseases, and geography cannot explain the Western European conquests. For example, Western Europeans began to conquer the world in the late 15th and early 16th century, in any case long before the 19th century when industrialization took off, first in Britain and later in the rest of Western Europe, so industrialization cannot be the cause of the outcome that had begun in earnest two centu-



ries before. Moreover, as repeated several times throughout the book, “wages in much of western Europe even in 1800 were no higher than in wealthy parts of Asia” (p. 103). Thus, income levels or sheer wealth cannot possibly explain the military prowess of Western European polities even in the early 19th century, let alone in the 16th century, when the conquest began. Likewise, Western Europe is not more mountainous than China, as some argued (pp. 109-110), nor did the peninsulas in Europe determine the pattern of state-building and political consolidation as others have proposed (p. 113). Thus, Europe’s geographical peculiarities cannot explain its political trajectory either.

Hoffman’s answer is a very specific and nuanced version of an already popular argument about the Western European states’ military technological advantage: Western Europe far outpaced all other regions in the world in terms of military innovation, not because of higher GDP per capita or industrialization, but due to what he defines as the ‘tournament model’ of (military) competition, which began as early as the late Middle Ages (14th century onwards). Throughout the book, Hoffman explains why Western Europe had the combination of four specific factors that enabled very high levels of military innovation, whereas China, Japan, India, the Ottoman Empire, and Russia lacked these factors, and hence did not have the tourna-

ment model of fierce competition that could drive military innovation: “Western Europe was thus unusual in meeting all four conditions required for advancing the gunpowder technology, and it did so without interruption, from 1400 on. No other part of Eurasia could make such a claim” (p. 94). These four essential conditions are separately necessary and together sufficient for the tournament model of competitive military innovation to take place, and they uniquely coexisted in Western Europe from the early 14th century until at least the early 20th century: First, there must be frequent war among states that are similar in size geographically or economically. Second, “rulers must also lavish huge sums” on waging war; that is, military expenditures have to be exceptionally high. Third, rulers “must use the gunpowder technology heavily.” Fourth, rulers “must face few obstacles to adopting military innovations” (p. 48). Most importantly, Hoffman argues that “incessant war, even with gunpowder weapons, is *not* enough to advance gunpowder technology,” which actually “is [Paul] Kennedy’s and [Jared] Diamond’s explanation for what singled out Western Europe” (p. 85). This is an important point because Hoffman’s argument is apparently similar to Kennedy’s and Diamond’s already very popular arguments, but, as he emphasizes, there is also a significant difference that makes Hoffman’s argument more convincing, which becomes most obvious in his discussion of India. In sum, I think Hoffman’s arguments are more convincing than the alternatives, despite several shortcomings (that will be mentioned below) in what he identifies as the ultimate causes of Western Europe’s prowess.

Western Europe had these four conditions for almost six centuries, whereas China, India, Japan, the Ottoman Empire, and Russia, the other five regional case studies discussed

throughout the book, either never had these four conditions together, or had them for exceptionally short periods of time. Despite relatively short periods of internal disarray, civil war, and regional competition, China, Japan, the Ottoman Empire, and Russia were asymmetrically powerful regional hegemony, and thus the “incessant war” between states of similar size, which is the very first essential condition motivating competitive military innovation according to Hoffman, did not exist in their geopolitical environment. Moreover, China, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire were also battling nomads, an enemy against which gunpowder is not very effective. Thus, they had to allocate part of their military expenditures to old technologies necessary to battle nomads, and could only partially concentrate on developing gunpowder.

India appears to be the critical case that distinguishes Hoffman’s argument from the similar arguments of Kennedy and Diamond. Among the five Eurasian case studies, India alone resembled Western Europe with its incessant wars between states of similar size using gunpowder weapons, yet it failed to advance gunpowder technology. The reason for the failure of the Indian states, Hoffman argues, is their lack of high spending on the military. The reason for the Indian states’ low military spending, in turn, is their “higher variable cost of mobilizing military resources” compared to the East India Company, which was a foreign (Western European) provider of security.

The ‘higher variable cost of mobilizing military resources’ reappears in the discussion of most of the Eurasian case studies. For example, the Ottoman Empire apparently had a higher variable cost of mobilizing military resources, which is an economist’s way of saying that the Ottoman state did not collect nearly

as much revenue in taxes as Western European polities; per capita taxation was much lower. It is somewhat functionalist to assume that whenever and wherever a state has a lower rate of taxation, then it must be because it cannot collect any more. The assumption is that states would always want to and try to collect more taxes than less. "Higher taxation," more than all the other variables, may be the ultimate cause of the Western European states' successful conquest of the rest of the world in Hoffman's narrative, especially given the critical role played by the "variable cost of mobilizing military resources," not just in the paradigmatic case of India, but in a number of the other Eurasian cases such as the Ottoman Empire.

One of the characteristic features of the book, which I consider a virtue, although some non-academic readers might not enjoy, is the repetition of its argument and the four constituent factors of the argument in the discussion of each and every case in every chapter. Such 'incessant' (pun intended) repetition provides a parallel demonstration of Hoffman's argument across cases, and thus allows the reader to determine exactly which factor or factors necessary for military technological innovation were missing in each non-Western polity.

If and once one accepts Hoffman's argument, which is based on four factors that are separately necessary and jointly sufficient to cause military innovation, one may inquire further about the causes of those causes. This is the task Hoffman tackles in chapter four, appropriately titled "Ultimate Causes." Most importantly, "why was Europe fragmented into small warring states?" (p. 105). Hoffman rejects explanations based on mountainous terrain, peninsular coastline, and kinship ties (blood kinship) between the monarchs of the European states, which some other scholars have

argued to be the cause(s) of enduring political fragmentation in Europe compared to other geopolitical areas of significance around the world. Instead, he argues that "cultural evolution" primarily, (pp. 120-132), and Western Christianity secondarily (pp. 132-134) played a role in sustaining Western Europe's political fragmentation over centuries. For example, qualitative historical accounts of the warlike, brutal, and violent reputation that the Franks and the Normans deliberately perpetuated are provided as evidence to support these claims. Western Christianity, rather than a truly independent variable, appears as an "intervening variable;" Hoffman argues that "the popes took advantage of Europe's political fragmentation but then accentuated it" (p. 132). Thus, that very political fragmentation still appears to be causally (and chronologically) prior to any role the Papacy may have played, and hence in need of further explanation.

There is at least one 'exogenous' condition that helped perpetuate Europe's political fragmentation, which Hoffman surprisingly never discusses among the potential ultimate causes. Namely, the incessant interventions of the Ottoman Empire in late medieval and early modern European politics, precisely to prevent the emergence of a hegemon, are not discussed as a potential cause. For example, Hoffman acknowledges that the "emperor Charles V, whose empire stretched from central Europe to the Americas, nearly conquered Western Europe, but he spared his major enemy, the French king Francis I, after his generals captured him in Italy in 1525" (pp. 117-118). However, Hoffman does not recognize that the Ottoman sultan Süleyman the Magnificent (1520-1566) formed an alliance with Francis I of France precisely to thwart Charles V's bid for hegemony. This is very well-known among the Turkish public even today, including probably many read-

ers of *Insight Turkey*, due to the famous letter Süleyman wrote to Francis in response to the latter's request for help after being captured by Charles V, as Hoffman pointed out. The Ottomans launched the first siege of Vienna in 1529, and organized many successful campaigns in Central and Western Europe against the Habsburgs, in order to defeat the Habsburg bid for hegemony. As Murat İyigün, whom Hoffman cites, has argued, the Ottoman Empire's continuous warfare against the Habsburgs played a critical role in the successful growth of Protestantism in its struggle against Catholic oppression. Some recent works (e.g., Jerry Brotton, *The Sultan and the Queen*) also emphasize the Ottoman-English alliance under Queen Elizabeth I, which was meant to break the Habsburg-led Catholic encirclement from which Protestant England suffered. Moreover, as I argued in the pages of *Insight Turkey* back in 2012 (Vol. 14, No. 1, "September 11, 1683: Myth of a Christian Europe and the Massacre in Norway"), the famous second siege of Vienna by the Ottomans in 1683 was motivated by the Protestant Hungarian king Imre Thököly's call for help against the Habsburg-Catholic oppression. Depending on the specific geopolitical balance at the time, the Ottomans joined forces with French, English, Hungarian or Polish

allies to prevent the rise of a regional hegemon in Europe. In sum, the potential external causes of Western Europe's political fragmentation are not discussed much in Hoffman's narrative.

Despite the shortcomings mentioned above, Hoffman's book provides a very clear argument ('tournament model') based on the concatenation of four separately necessary and jointly sufficient causes for the unprecedented military innovations in gunpowder technology that occurred in Western Europe starting in the late medieval period. The fast pace of innovation in gunpowder technology, in turn, explains why a number of relatively small Western European polities such as Portugal, Spain, and England ended up conquering and controlling more than four-fifths of the world by the turn of the 20th century. Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers* and Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel* probably provided the two most famous arguments regarding the ultimate causes behind the rise of the West against the non-West. Philip Hoffman's *Why Did Europe Conquer the World* is certainly an intriguing and compelling contribution to the riveting debate on the causes of European hegemony in the world over the last five hundred years.