

# Rivalry and Empire: How Competition among European States Shaped Imperialism

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## ABSTRACT

For centuries, European history was characterized by a fundamental asymmetry. While interpolity relations on the continent were often relatively balanced — without any dominant power being able to permanently establish a hierarchical relationship to the other major powers — the relations between European states and polities in other world regions were generally hierarchical and exploitative, as manifested in colonialism and imperialism. How can we explain this difference? I argue that the symmetrical character of relationships among major European powers, particularly in the form of sustained and intense military and economic competition, was partly *constitutive* of the hierarchical relationships between those same powers and other parts of the world. Specifically, three mechanisms connect sustained rivalries to imperialism: (1) political elites' desire to improve their relative status/prestige through territorial gains, (2) pressure from public budget deficits that incentivized colonial exploitation, and (3) the creation of powerful interest groups in the form of navies and armies that favored imperialism. Moreover, when territorial conflict over colonies escalated, imperial expansion could ultimately feed back into interpolity competition in Europe. I demonstrate these dynamics through systematic analyses of the rivalries between England and France (1689–1815) and between Imperial Germany and Great Britain (1871/1897–1918).

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*Keywords:* Interstate rivalry; war; imperialism; colonialism; European state system

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## Introduction and Literature Review

European history is characterized by a fundamental asymmetry. For centuries, the *internal* relationships of the European state system<sup>1</sup> — especially among its major powers — were relatively balanced, which manifested itself in sustained military and economic rivalries (Artzrouni and Komlos, 1996; Black, 2002b; Copeland, 2000; Gennaioli and Voth, 2015; Kennedy, 1988; Kissinger, 1994; Mann, 1986; Simms, 2013; Spruyt, 1996; Thompson, 1999; Tilly, 1990; Voigtländer and Voth, 2013).<sup>2</sup> But many *external* relationships of those states with polities in other world regions were hierarchical and exploitative (Abernethy, 2000; Buzan and Lawson, 2015; Galtung, 1971; Münkler, 2007; Scammell, 1981; Wallerstein, 2011; Wendt, 2016; Wesseling, 2004). Is there a link between these different kinds of relationships? How did Europe's great power rivalries affect relations with polities on other continents?

The main goal of my article is to answer these questions by developing a novel theory that explains how sustained and intense interpolity rivalries in Europe led to imperialism.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, I build and refine my theoretical framework in a series of steps. First, I outline the conditions that led to the persistence of European interstate competition. Then I develop three core causal mechanisms linking these rivalries to imperialism. In this part, I focus on the central logic of each of the three mechanisms, combining psychological/prestige-based arguments with explanations based on material benefits. As this article represents the first step in building a broader theory of this kind, it is desirable to subsequently refine said mechanisms and to explore how they manifested themselves in real-world cases. Therefore, I conduct two qualitative-descriptive case studies of major interstate rivalries. These case studies provide detailed evidence of how all three mechanisms applied in practice, which allows for a more detailed understanding of possible operationalizations. In short, this article is an attempt at building a novel

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<sup>1</sup>Note that the term “European state system” represents a simplification insofar as the state only became the dominant form of political organization over time (Osiander, 2007; Spruyt, 1996; Tilly, 1990). Thus, I frequently use the broader term “polity” to refer to all kinds of political entities, including city-states, tribes, kingdoms, empires, and other forms of social organization. Additionally, for an analysis of hierarchical relationships in the international system (with a substantive focus on recent decades), see also Lake (2011).

<sup>2</sup>Competitive relations among one set of European polities do not preclude other types of relations. Some aspects of intra-European relations were noncompetitive (Abernethy, 2000, chap. 8). I discuss related issues in the Online Appendix. Also, for an overview of rivalries after 1816, see Colaresi *et al.* (2008).

<sup>3</sup>I define “imperialism” as a strictly hierarchical relationship between polities that is at least partly (often mostly) based on coercion and that typically involves some form of economic exchange or exploitation. Imperialism can manifest itself differently and ranges from asymmetrical trade and informal rule to the unmediated and complete administrative subjugation of colonial territories through an imperial center.

theory. The initial account of the mechanisms and their subsequent refinement through two case studies are both essential aspects of this endeavor.

My central argument is that the intensity and long-term persistence of military and economic rivalries within the European state system created strong incentives for those states to engage in imperialism. Moreover, as an auxiliary argument to my main framework, I posit that imperial expansion episodically fed back into intra-European rivalries.

I suggest that three main mechanisms account for the effect of intra-European competition on extra-European expansion. First, in the persistent struggle of rulers (and elites<sup>4</sup>) for relative prestige<sup>5</sup> through territorial expansion, the initiation of military conquest in Europe was frequently associated with high uncertainty and substantial economic costs. Due to the much more asymmetrical distribution of military capacities in comparison with polities in other world regions, expansion to the rest of the world often represented a more “economic” way to increase political elites’ prestige through territorial gains.<sup>6</sup> Second, the high levels of expenditure associated with recurring arms races and open warfare among European states created massive pressure on public budgets, usually in the form of persistent deficits. Imperial expansion aimed at the rampant exploitation of peoples in other world regions was then undertaken to alleviate these budget pressures. (Importantly, however, while imperialism was generally *perceived* to be lucrative, its actual profitability varied widely.<sup>7</sup>) Third, the creation of large armies and navies eventually also gave rise to powerful *interest groups*.<sup>8</sup> Like bureaucracies,<sup>9</sup> these gained an interest in finding a permanent (peacetime) purpose. Protecting colonies and imperial expansion — enduring tasks to legitimize military status and access to public resources — became key preferences of these powerful groups.

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<sup>4</sup>I define “rulers” as the primary holders of executive power and “(political) elites” as the group that influences polities’ fundamental goals. These groups’ composition and relative power vary from case to case.

<sup>5</sup>I define “prestige” as the respect or admiration enjoyed by a polity’s ruler or ruling elites due to their achievements, successes, or influence. Also, I use the terms “status” and “prestige” interchangeably.

<sup>6</sup>Dynastic successional practices and marriage were alternatives to the military conquest of territory, and also contributed to states’ territorial consolidation (Gorski and Sharma, 2017; Sharma, 2015, 2017).

<sup>7</sup>The net gains from imperialism have been debated (Ferguson, 2003; Kennedy, 1989; O’Brien, 1988).

<sup>8</sup>I define “interest groups” as organized collectives of individuals who share some common goals and have the ability to mobilize and channel resources in pursuit of these goals.

<sup>9</sup>By building large bureaucratic organizations, governments also often create powerful interest groups (of public administrators) that, partly due to the common nontransferability of their skills to the private sector, subsequently lobby to maintain the public organization for which they work (Vogler, 2019b, pp. 43–44).

Moreover, imperialism had significant potential to feed back into Europe's interstate rivalries. As discussed above, control of colonies was a key aspect of political elites' overall prestige and many territories had economic value. Thus, sometimes great powers had incentives to escalate colonial conflict to interstate wars in order to gain more valuable territory and market access,<sup>10</sup> which would be indicative of a historical feedback loop.

My analysis speaks to contributions in the fields of comparative and international political economy (CPE and IPE). The lasting influence of imperial rule on societies has long been established by a prominent CPE literature strand (De Juan and Pierskalla, 2017). Among others, scholars have analyzed the distinct impacts of settler versus nonsettler colonies (Acemoglu *et al.*, 2001, 2002; Easterly and Levine, 2016), the effects of imposed legal systems (La Porta *et al.*, 1997), the importance of colonial legislatures (Gailmard, 2022; Opalo, 2022; Paine, 2019), the consequences of slavery (Nunn, 2008), the legacies of bureaucracies and state building (Kantorowicz, 2022; Matsuzaki, 2019; Mattingly, 2017; Vogler, 2019a),<sup>11</sup> exposure to centralized authority (Pierskalla *et al.*, 2017), the outcomes of colonial investments (Ricart-Huguet, 2021), the results of asymmetric economic relationships (Bruhn and Gallego, 2012; Kuipers, 2022), and the presence of missionaries (Lankina and Getachew, 2012).<sup>12</sup> But, although this literature has uncovered key legacies, it has not fully examined the possible *link* of imperialism to interpolity rivalries in Europe.

In addition to the discourse on the long-term consequences of imperial rule, there is a second set of contributions to CPE that concentrates on the *internal* dynamics of Europe's state system. For instance, researchers have investigated war's impact on the size of countries (Alesina and Spolaore, 2005), its effects on state (capacity) development (Karaman and Pamuk, 2013; Tilly, 1990), and the complex interactions of military conflict with other historical trends (Voigtländer and Voth, 2013). But none of these contributions has sufficiently explored the possible *connections* between internal dynamics and imperialism.

Although CPE has largely neglected the connections between the internal developments and the external behavior of European states, some contributions to IPE have considered them. Specifically, Marxist theorists argue that the

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<sup>10</sup>Of course, there were also incentives against waging war, such as high costs and uncertain outcomes. For this reason, colonial conflicts generally did not escalate to major interstate war.

<sup>11</sup>Also, Cornell and Svensson (2022) find little evidence for a "reverse" influence of the Indian colonial bureaucracy on the bureaucracy of the imperial center (Britain).

<sup>12</sup>These are just some of the *many* prominent studies that show the depth and breadth of the long-term political-economic consequences of exploitation through European empires. For comprehensive overviews of the broader historical persistence literature, see Abad and Maurer (2021) and Cirone and Pepinsky (2022).

capitalist mode of production ultimately *required* colonization to access cheap raw materials and new export markets. Without colonial expansion, capitalism might have imploded (Lenin, 2010 [1917]; Luxemburg, 2003; Noonan, 2017; Patnaik and Patnaik, 2021; Wallerstein, 1984, 2011).<sup>13</sup> Thus, they suggest that the internal *economic* dynamics of the European state system led to colonialism.<sup>14</sup>

Some parallels exist between the Marxist view and my own perspective. But Marxism is much more heavily centered on *private* market actors, both in terms of the core dynamic of capital accumulation and the interests derived from it. My argument is more centered on the interests of *ruling elites* and *public* budgets. Specifically, my theory focuses on (a) (political) prestige instead of capital accumulation, (b) pressures on public budgets instead of producers' profit calculations, and (c) the interests of military actors rather than those of capital owners (with the possible exception of arms producers). At the same time, my argument and Marxist perspectives are likely complementary.<sup>15</sup>

I should briefly acknowledge another Marxist argument here, as it speaks to an auxiliary aspect of my framework: Lenin (2010 [1917], esp. chaps. 6–7, 9) claimed that after the accumulation of capital led to imperialism, conflicts over the division of the world among Europe's major powers would make war inevitable.<sup>16</sup> Thus, from Lenin's perspective, imperialism ultimately caused war in Europe. While I do not entirely disagree with this "reverse" logic, I put more emphasis on how European rivalries led to imperialism (and not the other way around). I also acknowledge feedback effects similar to Lenin's

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<sup>13</sup>Additionally, the work by Hobson (2005 [1902]) on the origins of imperialism is closely related to these Marxist perspectives (Hobson also suggests a primarily economic motive for imperialism). For a general overview of economic arguments regarding the incentives for imperialism, see Porter (1994, chap. 3).

<sup>14</sup>In addition to the Marxist theory stream of IPE, the framework that I propose has similarities to the theories of liberalism (Moravcsik, 2008) and neoclassical realism (Rose, 1998). These two theory traditions highlight the joint importance of domestic and international factors for the foreign policy goals of polities. Moreover, the possible relevance of commercial liberalism, capitalist peace theory, and interdependence theory for shaping the dynamics that are at the core of my framework (Copeland, 2014; Gartzke, 2007; Keohane and Nye Jr., 1977; Schneider, 2014, 2017) is briefly discussed in the Online Appendix.

<sup>15</sup>This complementarity is most relevant with respect to private (East India) companies (or "company-states") that were key to (asymmetrical) trade with South and Southeast Asia, especially in the earlier phases of imperialism (Sharman and Phillips, 2020; Wendt, 2016, chap. 4). Although these companies typically represented state-granted monopolies, they were partly driven by private economic interest. The Netherlands and England were best known to use such entities (Mann, 1986, p. 481; Sharman and Phillips, 2020). With respect to these dynamics, Marxism might provide a complementary explanation to my own framework.

<sup>16</sup>An important contribution connecting to Lenin's theory is made by Baran and Sweezy (1966).

expectations, but I attribute less importance to them — they represent only one part of my theory, not the core.<sup>17</sup>

What are the scope conditions of my theory? The framework generally applies to interpolity systems that have the potential to exhibit sustained and intense military and economic rivalries among their members. For this reason, it is essential to first verify if any given interpolity system indeed exhibits this potential. As I show in the next section, sustained and intense interpolity rivalries can be observed among Europe's major powers throughout the (early) modern period, from circa 1450 to 1950. In addition to the potential of such rivalries, a second scope condition is that the participating polities must possess the oceanic transportation and navigation technology required to engage in overseas imperialism. Such technology was acquired by Europeans in the fifteenth century (Abernethy, 2000, pp. 177–79; Kennedy, 1988, pp. 23–26).<sup>18</sup> Importantly, as shown below, I suggest that my theory applies to both the preindustrial and the industrial eras. But imperial expansion manifested itself in different forms in those two periods. To summarize, in light of these scope conditions, my theory empirically applies to the interactions of major powers in the European state system that had access to long-distance naval technology in the approximate period of 1450–1950.

In the empirical section, I examine two historical rivalries between European powers and discuss how they affected imperialism: (1) the French–English rivalry from circa 1689 to 1815 (with earlier origins), and (2) the British–German rivalry from 1871/1897 to 1918. The first rivalry led to major imperial expansion, especially in North America; the second amplified the partition of Africa and Germany's acquisition of colonies in the Asia–Pacific region.

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<sup>17</sup>Of course, Lenin's perspective on this issue was heavily influenced by his political ideology. Moreover, there are two other theories of interstate relations that should be mentioned briefly: (1) hegemonic stability theory (HST), and (2) neorealism. My view and those theories have crucial differences. HST puts significantly more emphasis on the existence of one disproportionately powerful hegemonic state that has achieved dominance in military and economic domains (e.g., Ikenberry, 2019; Krasner, 1976), whereas my study emphasizes the more balanced character of sustained rivalries. While I acknowledge that one state may have held the upper hand during such rivalries, I put more emphasis on symmetrical (intra-European) relations. Moreover, contrary to HST, neorealism assumes functional equality among states. All states are part of an anarchic international order and, while differences derive from varying levels of capability/power, ultimately the world is characterized by competitive rather than hierarchical relations between states (e.g., Grieco, 1988; Waltz, 1979). My contribution differs in that it puts emphasis on the *parallel* existence of (1) competitive relations among functional equals (inside Europe's state system), and (2) highly exploitative and hierarchical relationships to political entities outside Europe.

<sup>18</sup>This also implies that the theory is limited in scope to polities that possessed such naval technology — which generally excludes landlocked states and polities without significant naval forces, among others.

## The Historical Origins of Rivalry in Europe: Climate, Geography, and Politics

For centuries, sustained and intense military and economic competition among polities, especially among major powers, was an essential aspect of European history (Kennedy, 1988; Tilly, 1990). Initially, a mix of different entities existed, including city-states, city leagues, and principalities. But the nation-state gradually displaced all other entities as the predominant form of political organization (Spruyt, 1996; Tilly, 1990). Centuries of rivalry eventually culminated in industrialized warfare (Black, 2014). What were the reasons for the long-term persistence of such interpolity competition in Europe?<sup>19</sup>

First, it is essential to acknowledge that all political entities are led by humans: rulers and, more broadly, political elites. Though this may seem trivial, it means that — besides analyzing the climatic, geographic, and political conditions — we must also understand the *psychological* reasons for ruling elites to seek to improve their position vis-à-vis the elites of other polities.<sup>20</sup> In this respect, social psychology suggests that humans are deeply concerned about their *relative* position, especially when measured against people seen as being in a *relevant comparison category*. Simply put, if one's position is high or improving with respect to individuals in one's primary comparison category, this leads to satisfaction; a low or declining position brings dissatisfaction. Such concern about relative position derives from social comparison processes (Festinger, 1954; Guimond, 2006; Suls and Miller, 1977).

Thus, political elites<sup>21</sup> are concerned about their relative status not only with respect to their inferiors, but also (and especially) with respect to *other rulers and elites* as an adequate category of comparison (cf. Lebow, 2008; Markey, 1999; Wohlforth, 2009; Wood, 2013).<sup>22</sup> The key constituent parts of status and prestige in comparison with other elites are context-dependent; in medieval and early modern Europe, ruling elites' prestige largely derived from their relative military power and wealth.<sup>23</sup> In this respect, conquest of territory

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<sup>19</sup>As I discuss in the Online Appendix, these competitive relations among major powers did not preclude the parallel existence of hierarchies (e.g., Becker *et al.*, 2016; Vogler, 2019a). However, the *dominant* logic of Europe's state system was one of competition.

<sup>20</sup>As an alternative to a psychological argument, one can also make the case that ruling elites generally need to legitimize their leading positions within a polity/society, which could have comparable effects.

<sup>21</sup>I discuss heterogeneity in elite interests (cf. Paniagua and Vogler, 2022; Vall-Prat, 2022) in the Online Appendix.

<sup>22</sup>As indicated previously, I use the terms "status" and "prestige" interchangeably. On the persistent role of leaders' reputation in world politics, see Yarhi-Milo (2018). Also, on the relationship of nations, national identity, and prestige, see Wood (2014). Finally, for a critical perspective on prestige in international politics, see Mercer (2017).

<sup>23</sup>Markey (1999, pp. 157–58) highlights the inherent relativity of prestige. The concept has meaning only if some have it and others do not. As such, it is the "ultimate relative (or positional) good."

made it possible to prove and increase military strength (Barnhart, 2016, p. 394; Wood, 2013, pp. 395–398) and to acquire economically valuable land (and control over militarily valuable people) (Lebow, 2010, esp. p. 152). As most economies in this time period were agricultural, territorial gains typically improved a ruler's resource base and potential for taxation (Buzan and Lawson, 2015, p. 241; Rogers, 2018, esp. p. 715). Accordingly, rulers engaged in conflict and occupied territory not just to balance against threats, but also simply to “aggrandize themselves” (Osiander, 2001, p. 260) or improve their relative status (Black, 2002a, pp. 54–55; Dincecco, 2015, p. 903; Lebow, 2008, 2010; Onea, 2014; Renshon, 2017).<sup>24</sup> In short, the desire for territorial gains was inherent to the ambitions of ruling elites in medieval and early modern Europe.<sup>25</sup>

But why did this desire of ruling elites to improve their relative position not result in a single polity gradually defeating all others and expanding its territory over the entire European continent? An analysis of Europe's climate, geography, and politics helps to explain the continent's persistently high level of political fragmentation. Specifically, the following combination of features made it difficult for any single political entity to rule Europe in its entirety (Kennedy, 1988, chap. 1; Scheidel, 2019, chap. 8)<sup>26</sup>:

1. Europe exhibits a significant variety of climatic conditions. The north has a cold, subarctic climate, with long winters. Central Europe's climate is milder, with varying temperatures throughout the year. And the south has a warmer, Mediterranean climate with dry, hot summers and shorter, milder winters. As detailed below, this variation makes military aggression significantly more difficult.
2. Europe has many natural barriers that represent effective stopping points for military aggression: numerous large rivers, low mountain ranges scattered across the continent, and, crucially, the Alps at its geographic center. There are also several mountain ranges on the flanks, including the Pyrenees in the territory of present-day Spain, the Ural Mountains in present-day Russia, and the Carpathians in present-day Romania. These

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<sup>24</sup>On ruling elites' “quest for prestige” through military success in early modern Europe, see also Black (2002b, p. 7). On the broad issue of status/prestige in international relations, see also Dafoe *et al.* (2014), Lindemann and Ringmar (2014), MacDonald and Parent (2021), Paul *et al.* (2014), and Volgy *et al.* (2011).

<sup>25</sup>As a result, borders frequently shifted in Europe. For further discussion, see Braun and Kienitz (2022).

<sup>26</sup>The following points are all mainly based on Kennedy (1988, chap. 1). For further discussion of how European geography influenced interpolity competition, see also Diamond (1998), who emphasizes the relevance of “fractured land”; Scheidel (2019, chap. 8), who emphasizes distance from the Eurasian steppe and the absence of a large agricultural core region; and Ko *et al.* (2018), who emphasize how European geography led to many smaller external threats as compared to a major, unidirectional threat.

natural barriers, especially the Alps at the midpoint, make it extremely difficult to control the continent from one political-military center (cf. Jones, 2003, pp. 106–7).

3. Continental Europe also contains a number of peninsulas and is surrounded by multiple islands and land formations. The British Isles may be the most important land formation separate from — yet culturally connected to — continental Europe. Moreover, the Iberian Peninsula (present-day Spain and Portugal), the Italian Peninsula, and the Scandinavian Peninsula only allow access through relatively narrow corridors.

This wide variation in geography and climate is important from a military perspective. Typically, it would be impossible to train an entire army to function effectively under all the aforementioned conditions, and this limits the number of armed forces that a strong central power can mobilize in any single theater of war. The situation is aggravated by the difficulties associated with occupying islands and peninsulas — a military goal that often requires an external aggressor to muster a combination of land and sea power.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, defenders accustomed to the local climate and topography often have an informational advantage against armies from other regions (cf. Vogler, 2022). Similarly, land expansion became more difficult when increasing distances to a state's administrative center led to a steep rise in the transaction costs of governing and defending new territories (Artzrouni and Komlos, 1996).

These features of Europe thus make it easier for local rulers to defend their polity against military forces from other parts of the continent, or elsewhere. Even when powers from other regions were able to gain short-term superiority through new technologies or improved tactics, the continent's climate and geography often slowed them down, giving defenders the time to copy technologies or develop counter-strategies. The speedy development of counter-strategies would reduce any advantage gained by aggressors in the medium term, often returning conflict to a more symmetrical form.

Europe's natural and climatic barriers also created challenges for the *supply* of armies. Long, complex supply lines often represented a military weak spot (Rogers, 2018, pp. 719–20). If defenders successfully interrupted attackers' supplies, the attacking armies needed to draw resources from occupied lands (e.g., Collins, 2009, p. 204). This further hindered rapid occupation, because it “put upper limits on size, mobility, and deployment patterns such that no one state could overwhelm other front-rank or large states with numbers or velocity of movement. . . . Europe would remain a multistate system, playing . . . an endless zero-sum game” (Mann, 1986, pp. 455–56). Moreover, as empires were

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<sup>27</sup>Alternatively, a hostile power could invade by sea. But this would make occupation more difficult, because the invading power would need to mobilize a sufficiently large army and fleet.

often built on self-funded conquest, the abandonment of slavery in most of Europe — which prevented financing conquest through slave-taking — also made it harder to establish a unified European empire (Rogers, 2018).

Despite its geographic diversity, Europe is relatively small when compared to Asia, Africa, or the Americas. That smallness, plus the fact that it is surrounded by water, enabled speedy (sea) travel and frequent economic exchange, which led to dense interaction and the dissemination of knowledge (Mokyr, 2016; Scheidel, 2019, chap. 10). These circumstances constituted a true “system” of polities, in which entities were economically and culturally connected,<sup>28</sup> including through the shared religion of Christianity (Abernethy, 2000, pp. 197–200, 212–13; Jones, 2003, pp. 110–19, 123–26; Mann, 1986, pp. 379–390; Møller, 2021). Partly for these reasons, European states tended to recognize one another as *legitimate* competitors, following certain “rules of the game,” and information about the prestige gains of others traveled quickly, amplifying elite-level social comparison processes. Thus, the *combination* of geographic proximity and diversity represented ideal conditions for sustained rivalries.

Societal actors that constrained monarchs also helped prevent a unified European empire (Blaydes and Chaney, 2013; Møller, 2014; Scheidel, 2019; Stasavage, 2020).<sup>29</sup> A similar contribution came from the parallel existence of multiple sources of political and spiritual legitimacy. In addition to Europe’s monarchs (who often fought one another), the pope had an interest in the persistence of multiple kingdoms, as it meant that no single ruler could decisively challenge his authority. Thus, the powerful Catholic Church sought to prevent Europe’s unification (Grzymala-Busse, 2020; Kissinger, 1994, p. 57; Møller, 2014, p. 664; Møller, 2021; Scheidel, 2019, pp. 171–72). Power was further decentralized when the Reformation led to a split between Catholicism and Protestantism, as a single spiritual center of legitimacy no longer existed (Kennedy, 1988, p. 21; Kissinger, 1994, pp. 57–58).

Moreover, a political dynamic inherent to Europe’s great power politics created yet another barrier to a single state ruling the continent: *military balancing processes*. When any power or coalition became too strong, another coalition often formed (or states switched sides) to balance against it (Dehio, 1962; Kennedy, 1988; Kissinger, 1994; Simms, 2008, 2013; Waltz, 1979). These balancing processes did not function at all times (Levy and Thompson, 2005, 2010; Scheidel, 2019, chap. 6; Schroeder, 1994a), but they made an important contribution to preventing a single permanent power center in Europe.

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<sup>28</sup>By contrast, in part due to lower population density and the absence of territorial state formation, polities on the African continent were less connected to one another (Herbst, 2014). Similarly, the combined factors of geography and dispersed populations (with distinct regional identities) made sustained and intense rivalries (including wars) much more difficult in South America (Centeno, 2002, esp. pp. 163–64, 269).

<sup>29</sup>On the historical origins of checks on ruling elites, see also Ahmed and Stasavage (2020) and Gingerich and Vogler (2021).

Finally, frequent technological innovation was a byproduct of enduring military rivalries. It provided short-term military advantages and was often quickly emulated by others. Ultimately, such innovation led to a stark asymmetry between Europeans’ military capacities and those of the rest of the world (Abernethy, 2000, pp. 206–7; Black, 1991; Buzan and Lawson, 2015, chap. 6; Ferguson, 2011, chap. 1; Headrick, 1981; Hoffman, 2015; Kennedy, 1988, chap. 1; McNeill, 1982; Parker, 1996; Roberts, 2018).<sup>30</sup> As I argue below, this asymmetry also played a key role in imperial expansion.

In sum, I argue that ruling elites in medieval and early modern Europe sought to improve their status through territorial gains, which signified military strength and often provided material benefits. Yet the continent’s political unification in a single polity was prevented by a distinct combination of geographic, climatic, and political conditions that created the basis for long-term rivalries. Figure 1 illustrates these claims.

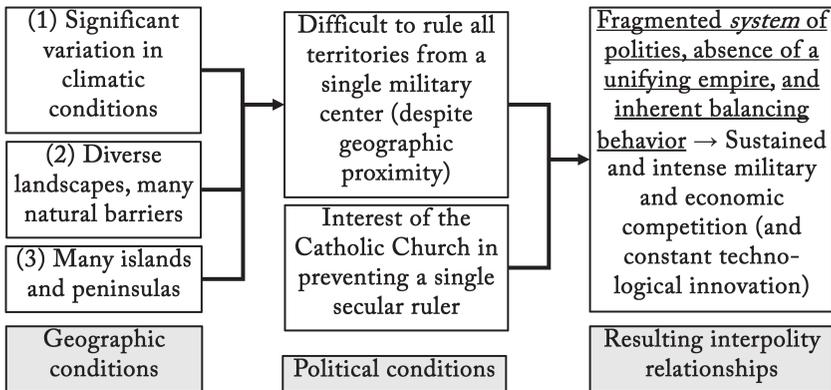


Figure 1: The origins of rivalry in Europe.

### The Consequences of Competition: Imperialism as a Result of Intra-European Struggles

Here, I argue that three main mechanisms connect sustained, intense interpolity rivalries to imperialism. I also discuss feedback mechanisms from imperialism to interstate war.

<sup>30</sup>Black (1991) disagrees with Parker (1996) and Roberts (2018) about the timing of the “Military Revolution” and is more critical of this term. Also, for critical perspectives on whether political fragmentation benefited military innovation and the technological superiority and economic development of European states, see Sharman (2019) and Rosenthal and Wong (2011).

### *Mechanism I: The Struggle for Prestige and the Relative Costs of Territorial Gains*

I previously established that territorial gains usually increased the prestige of ruling elites because they indicated military strength and enlarged a polity's sphere of influence. Moreover, the occupation of territory often (1) had strategic benefits, even if it just meant additional buffer zones, and (2) frequently came with more agricultural land, access to resources, or taxable population centers, potentially providing economic advantages.

For the same reason that territorial conquest was seen to improve the status of ruling elites, it came at a high price. Whoever was in control of valuable territory with agricultural resources or taxable population centers had strong incentives to defend those lands against military aggression. Considering that European climate and geography typically gave local rulers defensive advantages, military victory often required the attacker to mobilize overwhelming force based on massive expenditures. Although technological superiority was a possible substitute for the use of overwhelming force, the high interconnectedness among European polities meant that information about new technologies and tactics spread quickly, allowing defenders to copy them or adjust their defensive capacities and behavior.

Given these circumstances, it was often considered easier to acquire territory in other world regions (Scheidel, 2019, pp. 340–41, 449). While many territories also have natural barriers or inhospitable climates, European militaries typically did not face enemies with comparable technology or tactics on other continents (Abernethy, 2000, pp. 206–7; Cipolla, 1965; Headrick, 1981).<sup>31</sup> This asymmetry had resulted from intense warfare in Europe (Hoffman, 2015; Parker, 1996; Roberts, 2018) — with industrialization further increasing Europe's superiority (Findlay and O'Rourke, 2009, pp. 387–88; Headrick, 1981; Kennedy, 1988, p. 150) — and is visible in colonial battles where imperial armies had only minimal losses and indigenous populations suffered high casualties.<sup>32</sup> The Spanish conquest of South America is one example, partially explained by such military asymmetry — and amplified by disease outbreaks among the indigenous population (Guilmartin, 2018, pp. 308–13). It cost Spain much less than similar territorial gains would have required in Europe.

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<sup>31</sup>However, the Ottoman Empire remained a military threat to Europe for a long time (Ágoston, 2005). Also, for an analysis of potential Ottoman imperial legacies, see Popescu and Popa (2022).

<sup>32</sup>At the same time, it must be emphasized that, (1) in some colonial wars, indigenous populations were able to mount significant resistance against Europeans, leading to major losses on the part of the invading imperial forces; and (2) technological superiority was typically not the only reason for the military successes of European powers (Kennedy, 1988, p. 26; Sharman, 2019; Vandervort, 1998).

Because imperialism allowed for major territorial acquisitions against less significant resistance, it was seen as a more economic means of enlarging a ruling elite's sphere of influence. The associated improvements in relative prestige — or “glory” (Kennedy, 1988, p. 29) — were likely a key motivating factor (Abernethy, 2000, pp. 209–10; Barnhart, 2016; Kissinger, 1994, p. 67; Lebow, 2010, p. 175; Luh, 2011; Markey, 1999; Münkler, 2007, pp. 28–34; Sharman, 2019, esp. p. 7; Wood, 2013). Such desire for quick prestige gains was particularly strong for the rulers and elites of newly formed states, who needed to establish themselves within the international community (cf. Barnhart, 2016; Renshon, 2017, pp. 196–97). Imperial expansion by new states, in turn, could also incentivize established powers to expand their colonial empires.

My argument here builds upon previous works that have made similar claims relating the drive for imperial gains to the desire for prestige (Porter, 1994, pp. 18–20). Also, contrary to economic theories of imperialism, Schumpeter (1966 [1919]) argued that gaining colonies was *an end in itself*, with European states often claiming areas that offered no obvious material benefits<sup>33</sup> (which contradicts economic explanations for imperialism).<sup>34</sup>

### ***Mechanism II: Pressures on Public Budgets from Sustained, Intense Military Competition***

Sustained and intense military rivalries can be very costly, especially if they lead to open warfare. What makes military confrontations so expensive is that victory is typically based on *relative* superiority, meaning that both sides can repeatedly escalate their investments in an attempt to achieve a decisive disparity in military power.

The need to maintain high levels of military expenditure over long periods also intensifies economic competition. Financing the creation and maintenance of military forces represented the *expenditure* side of public budgets; revenue derived from taxation (and the exploitation of occupied territories) was the *income* side. Accordingly, public budgets were the institutional reflection of the interdependence of military and economic rivalry.

Even for states with large or prosperous economies, military rivalries and the maintenance of armed forces often put pressure on public budgets (Hintze, 1975, esp. p. 201; Kennedy, 1988, esp. pp. 70–72, 76–86; Mann, 1993, chaps. 11–12; Tilly, 1990). For instance, it was partly due to high war-related expenditures that France struggled with tax collection and several government

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<sup>33</sup>A potential alternative explanation for such behavior is the hope of finding valuable resources in the claimed territories at some point in the future. Rival powers are then excluded from benefiting.

<sup>34</sup>Several German colonies acquired in the late nineteenth century are good examples of this phenomenon, as they generally did not deliver the expected economic benefits (Frederick, 1999, p. 310; Ganz, 1977, pp. 36–37).

bankruptcies during the early modern period (Collins, 2009; Sasaki, 2021, p. 261). Also, Prussia is a good example for how fiscal pressures from war could build up even faster in states with fragile economic bases, especially before 1800 (see Kiser and Schneider, 1994, esp. pp. 187, 192). The country was mostly agricultural, and despite its efficient tax system (Kiser and Schneider, 1994), wars regularly led to financial difficulties (Kennedy, 1988, pp. 91–92).<sup>35</sup>

Therefore, rulers constantly sought new sources of tax revenue.<sup>36</sup> Given the expected benefits of imperialism (Abernethy, 2000, pp. 197, 207), including (1) the extraction of valuable materials, (2) the taxation of new populations, and (3) the creation of export markets (Buzan and Lawson, 2015; Kohli, 2019; Jones, 2003, chap. 4), it was seen as a means to alleviate budget pressures from military rivalries (Sharman and Phillips, 2020, pp. 10, 30–33).

### *Mechanism III: The Creation of Powerful Interest Groups*

Even when interpolity rivalry is restricted to arms races and does not result in direct conflict, militaries must be maintained to pose a credible threat to possible enemies. From one perspective, such (standing) military forces are important *tools* for ruling elites. But from another perspective, these forces — and especially their leaderships — can turn into powerful interest groups that seek to influence politics based on their own agendas.

Similar to other state institutions, like bureaucracies, the leaders of military forces have an interest in finding a *long-term peacetime purpose* that legitimizes their existence, status, and access to public resources (cf. Vogler, 2019b, pp. 43–44). When armed forces, particularly navies, became massive during times of intense warfare, the clearest next use for them — once conflict had ended — was to establish and defend colonies.<sup>37</sup>

As previously indicated, the character of competition among European states alternated between phases of military rivalry and phases of economic competition. Significant imperial expansion was especially likely when such *alternation* occurred: Massive military capacities were created during periods of direct military confrontations, but once the wars had ended, militaries needed to identify new purposes for themselves — to maintain their status and ability to draw on state resources. Thus, military leaderships had a strong incentive to lobby for sustained imperial expansion as a permanent source of legitimacy.

In such lobbying efforts, military leaderships enjoyed direct access to high-ranking government officials. This gave them recurring opportunities

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<sup>35</sup>On Prussian military and financial development, see also Hintze (1975).

<sup>36</sup>Accordingly, early state institutions mainly existed to extract taxes (Fischer and Lundgreen, 1975, p. 458).

<sup>37</sup>Some navies were also explicitly created/expanded for imperialism. The same mechanism applies here. For a theoretical perspective on sea power, see Koyama *et al.* (2021).

to influence policies, which, combined with the advantage of domain-specific expertise, made them especially powerful interest groups within the state apparatus (cf. Gailmard and Patty, 2012).

Considering mechanisms II and III together, it was the *combination* of (1) the need to finance previous war-related expenditures and (2) the presence of powerful military forces with an interest in finding a new purpose that greatly amplified imperial expansion.<sup>38</sup>

Importantly, the dynamics outlined here might explain differences in the *primary form* of imperialism between land and sea powers. Specifically, major sea powers with large navies, such as England, were more likely to engage in overseas imperialism (because powerful navies were more likely to lobby for this kind of expansion). On the other hand, major land powers that put more emphasis on the strength of their armies, such as Austria, were more inclined to occupy adjacent territory in Europe and integrate it into their empires (because powerful armies were more likely to lobby for this kind of expansion).<sup>39</sup> However, as elaborated previously, land empires would — at some point — reach the limits of this strategy due to Europe's geographic, climatic, and political conditions.

### *Phases of Imperialism: Preindustrial and Industrial*

European imperialism can be divided into multiple phases. For this study, I choose a simple (and imperfect) distinction between *preindustrial* and *industrial* imperialism.<sup>40</sup> Here, I briefly describe how this differentiation is relevant to the dynamics outlined in my theory.

During the preindustrial phase, European empires were restricted by available technology. Without quick, reliable transportation and communication (cf. Artzrouni and Komlos, 1996; Vries, 2002, p. 105), the effective rule of overseas territories was limited (Banks, 2002). Often, Europeans only controlled coasts, cities, and narrow geographic corridors (see Benton, 2009; Sharman, 2019). Thus, imperial exploitation was frequently carried out by company-states (Sharman and Phillips, 2020), focused on (asymmetrical) trade, and *indirect* rule was common. (There are important exceptions, however, such as Spanish rule in South America, Irigoien and Grafe, 2008.) Indirect rule meant that territories nominally belonged to an empire, but the imperial center could not achieve a monopoly on violence, or that territories were not fully integrated

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<sup>38</sup>Connecting to Marxist theories, another possible interest group that gains strength through armed conflict — and may subsequently lobby for imperialism — are arms producers (as they likely profit economically from the continued use of military power in the form of imperialism) (cf. Mann, 1993, chaps. 12, 14, 21).

<sup>39</sup>On different types of empires/imperial expansion, see also Münkler (2007, chap. 3).

<sup>40</sup>From a present-day perspective, we may add a third phase of *postindustrial* imperialism. And for an alternative periodization of imperialism into several phases, see Abernethy (2000, chaps. 3–7).

into the empire's political-administrative structures. Instead, political tasks were often delegated to local rulers/elites (sometimes loosely connected to imperial representatives) who mainly provided economic benefits to the empire (Crooks and Parsons, 2016, pp. 23–24; Gerring *et al.*, 2011; Greene, 2016; Wendt, 2016, pp. 158–61).

The nineteenth century marks the beginning of *industrial* imperialism. Industrialization brought new transportation and communication technologies, and after the Congress of Vienna (1814/1815), European great powers maintained a relatively stable international balance of power (Kennedy, 1988, chap. 4; Kissinger, 1994, chap. 4; Schroeder, 1986, 1994b). As a result, military rivalries remained muted during much of this phase and great power wars were generally avoided. (The Crimean War and the Wars of German Unification are important exceptions.) This relative absence of great power wars allowed for economic rivalries to proliferate. Such rivalries also fueled imperialism because rapid industrialization massively increased the need for raw materials and export markets. Thus, along with technological improvements in transportation, incentives for the *direct* occupation (and exploitation) of colonies also grew, leading to more widespread unmediated rule (Baranowski, 2011, p. 31; Buzan and Lawson, 2015, esp. pp. 130–31, chap. 6; Cain and Hopkins, 2016, p. 99; Crooks and Parsons, 2016, pp. 21–22; Findlay and O'Rourke, 2009, chaps. 6–7; Headrick, 1981; Hobsbawm, 1989; Hynes, 1979; Rosenthal and Wong, 2011, p. 220).<sup>41</sup>

In short, after circa 1815, European powers' economic incentives, political context, and technological capacities changed due to industrialization and the Congress of Vienna. As a result, economic rivalries became more pronounced and direct colonial rule more common.

### ***Feedback Mechanisms from Imperialism to Interstate Rivalry***

Was the causal relationship between interstate warfare and imperialism one-directional? Many arguments favor the perspective that it was not. While I emphasize one causal pathway (from interstate competition to imperial expansion), for three main reasons imperialism could also feed back into European rivalries. Indeed, the parallel existence of multiple overseas empires that often shared long borders with one another created notable potential for conflict and conflict escalation.

First, rivalry for colonial territories could simply spill over and increase tensions — or even breed military conflict — among the imperial centers.

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<sup>41</sup>The intensification of interstate rivalries also led to the decline of company-states beginning in the late eighteenth century (Sharman and Phillips, 2020, chap. 3). On the related topic of the size of states, see Lake and O'Mahony (2004). Finally, as mentioned previously, for the reasons discussed here, my theory is largely compatible with Marxist theories of imperialism.

For instance, if initially minor or spatially limited conflicts outside Europe could not be resolved, they could escalate and eventually lead to a great power war.<sup>42</sup> Second, the wealth generated by imperial exploitation and coercive trade practices (Buzan and Lawson, 2015; Findlay and O'Rourke, 2009; Pomeranz, 2021) could fund further investments into military capacity (Abernethy, 2000, p. 207; Simms, 2013). As a result, ruling elites may have perceived that their chances of defeating other (major) powers and occupying their lands had improved. Third, frequent victories in colonial warfare could (sometimes erroneously) increase elites' confidence in the strength of their armed forces, which may lead to more militarily aggressive behavior on the European continent (possibly resulting in conflict escalation).

**Summary: How Interstate Rivalries Shaped Imperialism**

Three mechanisms connect intra-European rivalries to imperialism. First, it was often less difficult to occupy territory outside Europe than within Europe, which incentivized rulers to engage in colonialism. Second, sustained military competition created pressures on public budgets that states sought to alleviate through the unchecked exploitation of other world regions. Third, the creation of permanent navies and armies constituted powerful interest groups that found a “natural” source of legitimacy in the acquisition and defense of colonies. Finally, for various reasons, colonial conflicts had the potential to intensify rivalries and escalate them. These mechanisms are visually summarized in Figure 2.

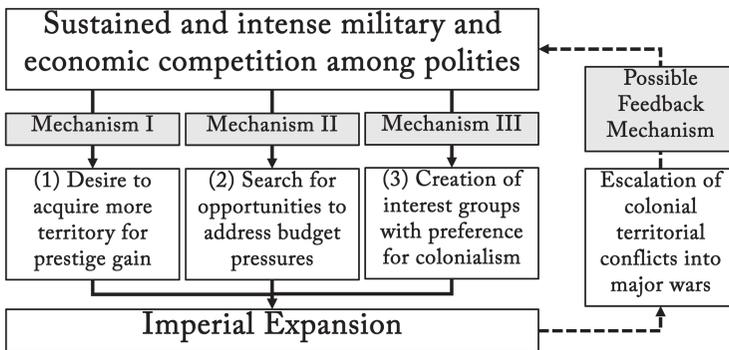


Figure 2: The consequences of rivalry in Europe.

<sup>42</sup>A good example of this is the Seven Years' War (1753–1763), which is part of the first case study below.

## Qualitative Case Studies of Two Interstate Rivalries

Over a period of several centuries, dozens of interstate rivalries raged among Europe's major powers (Thompson, 1999). To empirically illustrate and refine the suggested theoretical mechanisms, I have selected two rivalries for in-depth qualitative case studies:

1. The rivalry between England/Britain and France (circa 1689–1815, with earlier origins)
2. The rivalry between Imperial Germany and Britain/UK (circa 1871/1897–1918)<sup>43</sup>

The case selection rationale was as follows: First, a key goal of the case studies is to refine the more abstract theoretical mechanisms by providing concrete empirical illustrations. This refinement and illustration is essential to (1) further develop the broader theoretical framework and (2) operationalize key aspects of it. For these reasons, my case studies should primarily be seen as “qualitative-descriptive.” Importantly, other than most-similar or most-different case study designs, which typically seek evidence for causality, qualitative-descriptive case studies (especially of representative cases) are often used to further detail and explore a theoretical framework's mechanisms (Gerring, 2006), which is also my goal.

Second, given the theory's scope conditions and mechanisms, as outlined in the introduction, my focus is on sustained and intense rivalries that took place after circa 1450 because, prior to this time, the naval technology needed to establish and sustain overseas colonies was not available (Abernethy, 2000, pp. 177–79; Kennedy, 1988, pp. 23–26). I chose the two aforementioned rivalries because they are prominent cases after 1450 that meet the theory's essential criteria of being *sustained* and *intense*. Specifically, the length of these rivalries allows us to classify them as “sustained” and the fact that both involved direct military confrontation allows us to classify them as “intense.”<sup>44</sup> At the same time, these cases also differ substantially. Most importantly, the first rivalry occurred in the *preindustrial* era and the second in the *industrial* age, which gives me the opportunity to check if my predictions hold during these two periods. Moreover, while the first rivalry led to several direct military conflicts, the second was initially only characterized by rapid changes in the balance of power and an arms race. Toward its end, it then included a military conflict in the form of World War I (though this rivalry was not the only factor).

Finally, European rivalries were often highly complex, including the frequent switching of military alliances by some states, which could complicate a case

<sup>43</sup>While this rivalry is the focus of my analysis, the examined period had many other interstate rivalries.

<sup>44</sup>On possible classifications of international rivalries, see also Thompson (1995, 2001).

study. But in the two cases I chose, changes in alliance affiliation do not interfere with the analysis.<sup>45</sup>

For each of these cases, I systematically examine (1) the two rivals' main characteristics; (2) key aspects of the rivalry, including military conflicts and/or arms races; (3) whether and how the three theoretical mechanisms about the connection of interstate rivalry and imperialism apply; and (4) if colonial expansion manifested itself as a consequence.

### *Case Study I: The Rivalry between England and France — and their Global Imperial Expansion (circa 1689–1815)*

The origins of the long military and economic rivalry between France and England (which, as of 1707, was a part of the Kingdom of Great Britain<sup>46</sup>) can be found as early as the eleventh century (Black, 1999, p. 255); and one of its most significant escalations was the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453). Despite these earlier events, I focus on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries for two reasons: First, as indicated above, the oceanic transportation and navigation technology to establish sustained exchange with overseas territories was not available prior to circa 1450. In light of this restriction, an analysis of the Hundred Years' War, for instance — although it already represented an intense military rivalry — would not make sense. Second, before 1648 (the end of the Thirty Years' War), multiple other conflicts overshadowed the French–English rivalry. This included: (1) the rivalry between Portugal and Spain (Wendt, 2016, chap. 3); (2) the Habsburgs' ambitions to become Europe's dominant military power (Asch, 1997; Kennedy, 1988, chap. 2; Kissinger, 1994, pp. 56–66); and (3) the rise of Holland and the associated conflict with England (Wendt, 2016, chap. 4).

Moreover, my analysis is not strictly limited to the previously mentioned dates. I provide the year 1688/89 as a *point of orientation* because it marks the beginning of a series of open military conflicts between the two powers, as shown in Table 1.<sup>47</sup> Alternatively, one could also begin the analysis earlier, such as around 1500 or 1600.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>On the inflexibility of alliance affiliation in the first case, see also Onea (2014, p. 144). Some deviations from this pattern will be mentioned in the case studies themselves.

<sup>46</sup>I use the terms “England” and “(Great) Britain” interchangeably for the period after 1707.

<sup>47</sup>This table originally gave the year 1738 as the beginning of the War of Austrian Succession, but that war started in 1740, and the confrontation between France and England only began in 1743. The table has been corrected accordingly. Also, Cain and Hopkins (2016) chose the year 1688 to begin their study of British imperialism, indicating its remarkable importance to British imperial history.

<sup>48</sup>Or we may think of the French–English rivalry as split into multiple distinct episodes. Colaresi (2001, pp. 580–81) suggests two episodes: one from 1494 to 1716 and another from 1731 to 1904. Alternatively, Black (1999, p. 255) suggests three episodes: the medieval period, the period 1530–1815, and the period 1815–1904. Yet even these periodizations show that it is a *long-term* rivalry with hardly any breaking points.

Table 1: Wars between England/Great Britain and France, 1689–1815.

War	Dates	Years
Nine Years' War	1689–97	9
War of Spanish Succession	1703–14	11
War of Austrian Succession	1740/43–47	5
Seven Years' War	1756–63	7
American Revolution	1774–83	10
Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars	1793–1815	22
Total		64

Source: Schultz and Weingast (2003, p. 17), with minor modifications as detailed in footnote 47.

Throughout most of the considered period, France was an absolute monarchy. The move toward this form of government had been finalized in the seventeenth century, and Louis XIV (1661–1715) was its most important ruler. Though the king was the prime center of authority in this system, historical research suggests that he was nonetheless subject to pressure from an array of stakeholders (e.g., Beik, 1985; Collins, 2009).<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, France's population of some 20 million around 1700 made it one of Europe's largest states. Its economy was twice the size of England's, giving it access to significant economic and population resources (Kennedy, 1988, pp. 88–90, 99; Schultz and Weingast, 2003, p. 17). This was reflected in military terms. In 1690, the French army and navy were the continent's largest, with 400,000 soldiers and 120 ships.<sup>50</sup> Yet the navy's strength dropped over time. By 1739, France had merely 50 ships left, and Britain had gained an advantage on the seas (Kennedy, 1988, p. 99) — with important implications for France's imperial pursuits.

From 1642 to 1651, England experienced a civil war. The political turmoil it caused did not conclusively end until the Glorious Revolution in 1688/89. A strong parliament emerged as a result, representing a much more effective check on the ruler's ability to exercise power and transforming England into a constitutional monarchy (North and Weingast, 1989; Schultz and Weingast, 2003, pp. 22–23; Wendt, 2016, p. 127).<sup>51</sup> In 1680, England's population was about 6.5 million (Wrigley, 2004, p. 57). Given these smaller population resources, the British army (with 70,000 soldiers in 1690) was considerably smaller than the French. But the natural barrier of the sea meant that this

<sup>49</sup>In the case of expansion in North America, this included mid-level colonial officials (Chapman, 2017).

<sup>50</sup>Importantly, dramatic naval losses by France in 1690–1692 were not immediately compensated for.

<sup>51</sup>On the historical development of parliamentary institutions more broadly, see Cirone (2020).

difference in land power did not immediately threaten England's position (Findlay and O'Rourke, 2009, p. 254). Moreover, the naval asymmetry was much less pronounced. By 1689, England was already a leading sea power, with 100 ships; by 1739, as indicated, the British navy (now 120 ships) overwhelmingly outnumbered that of the French, which had only 50 ships (Kennedy, 1988, p. 99). But France's navy still represented a persistent — and sometimes growing — challenge to England (Findlay and O'Rourke, 2009, p. 258; Kennedy, 1988, p. 118; McClellan and Regourd, 2011, p. 14).<sup>52</sup>

The year 1688/89 is important for the development of the rivalry, as not only did England regain the full ability to devote its economic and military capacities to *external* conflict, but also the new monarch, William III, made it his key strategic aim to contain France's ambitions. Thus, his ascension to the throne laid the rivalry's foundation (Kennedy, 1988, p. 97; Kissinger, 1994, p. 71). Shortly afterwards, the two powers clashed in the Nine Years' War (1689–1697), which included conflicts over colonial territory (Collins, 2009, pp. 153–157). And through most of the eighteenth century, England perceived France as a major threat (Abernethy, 2000, p. 219), which is a key reason why England's geopolitical strategy was centered on maintaining its military position vis-à-vis competitors in Europe (Simms, 2008). In total, the rivalry lasted for more than one hundred years and encompassed several wars, including the Seven Years' War (1756–1763) and the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792–1815). This shows that the rivalry was both sustained and intense, regularly escalating to military confrontation (Findlay and O'Rourke, 2009, pp. 247–62).

Having established the key characteristics of the two competing powers and verified that their rivalry can indeed be seen as sustained and intense, it is essential to check if the suggested theoretical mechanisms can be observed in this case.

The first mechanism is about the desire for relative status. For this analysis, it is important to consider colonial ambitions prior to 1689 as a basis for comparison. Importantly, some early commercial expeditions to the "New World" were already executed with the approval and support of the English and French rulers, who had a personal interest in their success. For instance, in the early seventeenth century, King James I of England personally chartered the *Virginia Company* with the goal of colonizing North America's eastern coast (Neill, 1869). This royal support made a crucial difference that led to the success of the Virginia Company compared to other early colonization attempts (Craven, 1993, p. 2).

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<sup>52</sup>France's key strategic problem was the need to maintain a large army *and* a large navy, while some other powers were able to focus on one military branch (Kennedy, 1988, pp. 88–90). Thus, when French naval power vis-à-vis England began to decline, it subcontracted out naval raids, thus extending the rivalry.

In general, even these early attempts at establishing colonies must be seen against the background of Europe's great power rivalries. Specifically, Andrews (1984, p. 8) suggests that the "English had to find their way in competition with entrenched interests and against the fierce hostility of the Iberian powers in their spheres of interest." At the same time, especially in early English imperialism (circa 1480–1630), private interests and companies played a key role (Sharman and Phillips, 2020; Wendt, 2016, chap. 4), while the Crown remained more heavily focused on great power rivalries in Europe, judging colonial enterprises to be of secondary importance (Andrews, 1984, pp. 10–13). In this sense, the intense and sustained rivalry with France can then be seen as triggering more comprehensive colonial ambitions.

With respect to France, too, colonization was thought to bring "glory" to its rulers, and the state was essential to the infrastructure of colonialism (McClellan and Regourd, 2011, p. 24; Miquelon, 1987, p. 10; Onea, 2014, pp. 141, 144). Louis XIV in particular was driven by a craving for honor and reputation, which to him derived from military victories and the size of his sphere of influence (Black, 2002a, pp. 54–55; Lebow, 2008, chap. 6; Lebow, 2010, pp. 172–74). This desire also shaped the king's foreign policy, as shown in the prehistory of the War of Spanish Succession:

Philip [Louis XIV's grandson] took over a vast empire: Spain ... and much of the New World. ... [Louis XIV] did not desire the vastness of the Spanish empire, *only a few of its pieces*. Yet Louis was a man of *overwhelming personal pride, with a powerful sense of his and his family's grandeur and honor*. Philip, his grandson, had legitimately inherited the Spanish empire. (Collins, 2009, p. 158, emphasis added)<sup>53</sup>

In part because of expected prestige gains, in the early seventeenth century, the French state already "quickly became involved in the effort to exploit the riches of the New World, Africa, and Asia" (Collins, 2009, p. 34). And yet France's state-run companies mostly failed to succeed against their English and Dutch rivals (Collins, 2009, p. 34).

Moreover, French engagement in and preparation for military confrontations after 1689 (in which England was a key opponent) also factored into imperialism. Many scholars, such as Eccles (1983, p. 130) and Miquelon (1987, chap. 1), consider Europe's intense rivalries to be an important reason for increased activity by the French in North America, among others (so as not to fall behind in the struggle for relative superiority) (Chapman, 2017, p. 82).

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<sup>53</sup>Given this relationship, Philip's colonial possessions also increased the prestige of Louis XIV's dynasty. Perhaps partly for this reason, Louis XIV exhibited more interest in European territories at the time.

The long war of Spanish Succession was followed by an even longer Thirty Years' Peace, which was marked by strenuous Anglo–French competition for political leadership in Europe and for supremacy in world markets, a supremacy that to a large extent depended upon the successful exploitation of colonies. (Miquelon, 1987, p. 2)

But, importantly, Chapman (2017), Pritchard (2004), and Miquelon (1987, esp. chaps. 1, 12) argue that, especially in the early eighteenth century, French settlers and colonial officials played a crucial role in expanding French activity in North America, and that there was no “grand imperial strategy” behind France’s activity in the region.<sup>54</sup> Rather, the country’s foreign policy interests remained primarily focused on Europe (Onea, 2014, p. 143). Yet, similar to the case of England, varying levels of support by the French crown were a key factor in shaping the chances of success for colonial enterprises that faced manifold technological, climatic, and natural challenges (McClellan and Regourd, 2011).

The second mechanism, regarding budget pressures, clearly applies to both France and Britain. The English had already seen military expenditures rise steeply in the seventeenth century due to their rivalry with Holland, which included three naval wars (Mann, 1986, p. 457). The military rivalry with France was also extremely costly, and it was difficult for both states to use their existing tax base to pay for all war-related expenditures (Collins, 2009; Findlay and O’Rourke, 2009, pp. 247–49; Kennedy, 1988, pp. 100–39). Thus, significant budget pressures emerged for them (Cain and Hopkins, 2016, pp. 83–85; Schultz and Weingast, 2003). France’s extremely poor monetary situation could also be seen in the enduring budget issues that intensified with the Seven Years’ War and later culminated in a major fiscal crisis and the French Revolution (Collins, 2009, esp. pp. 308–22; Kennedy, 1988, pp. 82–85, 115–19; Schultz and Weingast, 2003, pp. 18–21).

Although Britain refinanced its debt more easily (Schultz and Weingast, 2003), persistent financial difficulties created incentives for both states to acquire colonies with the goal of economic exploitation (Cain and Hopkins, 2016, pp. 85, 94–96, 101; Kennedy, 1988, pp. 115–16). Colonial trade did indeed generate massive tax revenue for Britain, as the state ensured that most goods imported to Europe had to pass through British harbors, which charged the traders tariffs (Cain and Hopkins, 2016, p. 93; Findlay and O’Rourke, 2009, pp. 256–57; Petley and McAleer, 2016, pp. 2–3; Spence, 2015, chap. 1, esp. p. 15). Besides this tax revenue stream, Britain’s economy benefited from the country’s ability to export goods and to import and trade cheap raw materials (Findlay and O’Rourke, 2009, esp. pp. 230–38, 259–61; Kennedy, 1988, pp. 96, 98).

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<sup>54</sup>For a similar argument regarding French imperial expansion in the 1660s and 1670s, see Greer (2022).

Similarly, the French state was interested in extracting wealth from colonial trade, obtaining raw materials, and gaining export markets (Collins, 2009, pp. 112–13; McClellan and Regourd, 2011, pp. 24–25; Miquelon, 1988; Miquelon, 1987, chaps. 1, 2, 5, 12).<sup>55</sup> In line with this interest, silver inflows during the War of Spanish Succession kept the French silver supply stable (Collins, 2009, p. 219), and colonial trade later had a “massive [economic] impact” (Collins, 2009, p. 241). McClellan and Regourd (2011, p. 14) also suggest that parts of France’s empire were “highly profitable.”<sup>56</sup> Yet Pritchard (2004, p. 421) argues that by 1730, “despite growing profits, colonial possessions were political and military rather than economic in character.” Regardless of these different views — which echo the debate on the profitability of empires — imperialism often generated massive economic benefits (Jones, 2003, esp. pp. 80–84) and at the time was thus likely *perceived* as lucrative by many contemporaries.<sup>57</sup>

The third mechanism is clearly visible with respect to the English Royal Navy. On one hand, the navy was an essential tool for British rulers to protect colonies and trade routes (Kennedy, 1988, p. 96). On the other hand, as it gained size and strength, the navy became a powerful actor in itself. Spence (2015, p. 3) describes it as “one of the most influential institutions not just in the history of Britain, but in the history of the modern world.” The navy’s development of genuine interests and ambitions<sup>58</sup> can be seen in the 1665 outbreak of war with the Netherlands. A “crucial factor behind this [war] was the influence that the navy and colonial traders enjoyed with those in power” (Spence, 2015, p. 15). Because the navy had been equipped with significant coercive and economic means, and because the acquisition and defense of colonies was a key task and legitimization for its ongoing access to wide-ranging public resources, it likely developed an interest in the continuation of imperialism (cf. Brewer, 2002; Petley and McAleer, 2016; Rodger, 2006).

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<sup>55</sup>On the relevance of French commercial and colonial interests in this period, see also Black (1999, p. 264).

<sup>56</sup>On the positive impact of colonial trade on the French economy, see also Collins (2009, pp. 292, 298, 341), Findlay and O’Rourke (2009, pp. 261–62), and McClellan and Regourd (2011, pp. 25, 303–6).

<sup>57</sup>On the general profitability of colonialism/colonial trade, see also Cain and Hopkins (2016, p. 93), Findlay and O’Rourke (2009, p. 257), and Spence (2015, chap. 1, esp. p. 15). However, also with respect to the British Empire, the fiscal profitability of some colonial enterprises may be questionable. Wealth extraction from colonies was subject to substantial frictions. For example, once the East India Company (EIC) began to directly control large territories, its expenditures for defense and administration rose dramatically (Sharman and Phillips, 2020, chap. 3, esp. p. 112, 137–42). And Britain’s attempt to extract more profits (via taxation) from its North American colonies in the eighteenth century triggered the American Revolution (Cain and Hopkins, 2016, pp. 96–97). For a recent study on these developments, see Napolio and Peterson (2021).

<sup>58</sup>Especially in the navy’s early history, military and economic interests were strongly connected.

Moreover, in line with my theory, the growth of France's navy and that of its "colonial machine" were closely aligned (McClellan and Regourd, 2011, pp. 25, 43–47, 52, 57–71). But France's less successful acquisition of overseas territories could be partly related to the lower importance of its navy compared to that of England. This was visible in (1) the French navy's decline in funding, which fell from as high as 23% of military expenditures to 5% in the late 1720s and 1730s; and (2) its decreased capacity to defend the colonies (Miquelon, 1987, esp. pp. 13–14, 66–67; Pritchard, 2004, pp. 402–03, 414, 420–21). This reorientation in military strategy and spending was related to France's dual challenge of being simultaneously a land *and* sea power; and it is also visible in the diverging sizes of both navies after 1700 (Kennedy, 1988, pp. 88–90, 99). Thus, the relative weakness of the French navy as a potential lobby group for imperialism — especially when compared to the English navy — may be considered a key reason for the French Empire's less successful expansion and its greater fragility (cf. Pritchard, 2004, chap. 9).<sup>59</sup>

As a consequence of all these dynamics, imperial expansion intensified throughout the longstanding rivalry between England and France from 1689 to 1815, especially in North America. During previous periods of interstate rivalry (with other powers), England had already gained several colonies in North America and France had already been in the process of acquiring land in present-day Canada, but both powers now became more *ambitious* in their use of these territories. For example, the French had at first been primarily interested in extracting resources from their North American colonies (through the fur trade, among other sources), but, beginning in the eighteenth century, they increasingly encouraged long-term settlements.<sup>60</sup> Additionally, as a result of the War of Austrian Succession, imperial activity further intensified. England generally had more success acquiring colonial territories (possibly in part due to its more powerful navy), including New Hampshire (1691), the Carolinas (1729), Georgia (1732/55), and Florida (1763). Finally, and importantly, in line with the previous discussion of preindustrial imperialism, both states experienced significant spatial and temporal variation in the extent to which they were able to (effectively) control territories in North America in this period (Desbarats and Greer, 2011, 2015; Gailmard, 2022; White, 1991; Witgen, 2011).<sup>61</sup>

Furthermore, with respect to potential feedback loops from colonial conflict, the Seven Years' War (1756–1763) can be seen as a prime example for how disagreements initially confined to colonial lands can escalate and contribute

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<sup>59</sup>France's limited commitment to its colonial empire is also visible in the analysis of Miquelon (2010).

<sup>60</sup>Despite this, the number of settlers in French Canada remained relatively small in subsequent decades.

<sup>61</sup>I discuss this issue and the implication that imperial centers did not always enjoy full control of their representatives in colonies (e.g., Förster, 1992; Gailmard, 2022) in more detail in the Online Appendix.

to major military confrontations in Europe. Specifically, as a precedent to the Seven Years' War, military clashes between Britain and France (due to territorial disputes) had already taken place in North America as early as 1754. In this struggle, known as the French and Indian War, both the French and the British colonies allied themselves with native tribes. The Seven Years' War represented a combination of this North American conflict with a territorial dispute between Austria and Prussia (Collins, 2009, pp. 305–7; Findlay and O'Rourke, 2009, pp. 252–54). Britain and France quickly became involved in the military conflict in Europe, too (Wendt, 2016, pp. 137–38), which shows that their enduring rivalry — including colonial disputes — was prone to military escalation and confrontation (Black, 1999, pp. 264–65).

Although France's defeat in North America as a result of the Seven Years War' effectively ended its imperial ambitions there, it simultaneously intensified the state's interest in colonial activity/exploitation in the Caribbean (especially in Saint-Domingue) (Collins, 2009, p. 307; McClellan and Regourd, 2011, p. 46).<sup>62</sup> Moreover, France also gradually expanded its activities in the Pacific (Wendt, 2016, pp. 142–45).<sup>63</sup> A key step in this regard was the dissolution of the (private) French East India Company in 1769, which was followed by France's direct administration of territories that had previously been under the company's control.

In sum, all three mechanisms are clearly visible in this case. In the persistent struggle for prestige among European rulers, colonial gains were seen as a means of improving relative status. This was underscored by the involvement of French and English monarchs in colonial enterprises, though their main focus tended to remain the great power rivalries in Europe. Moreover, war-related pressures on public budgets incentivized both states to find additional tax revenue sources, as shown in the extraction of tariffs from colonial trade among others. The English Royal Navy also became a powerful actor, with an interest in the continuation of imperialism. In the case of France, however, the navy was a lower financial priority, which reduced its potential to act as a strong interest group. Finally, this rivalry can also be used to illustrate feedback mechanisms from colonial disputes to interstate war.

***Case Study II: The Rivalry between Germany, a Great Power Latecomer, and Great Britain (circa 1871/1897–1918)***

In the “long nineteenth century” (1789–1914), imperialism reached its peak. Rapid industrialization not only amplified economic competition among the

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<sup>62</sup>Importantly, though, the French interest in the Caribbean sugar islands had already lasted for decades.

<sup>63</sup>However, a full pivot to the Asia–Pacific region only occurred in the early nineteenth century.

great powers, but also created incentives for the direct control of colonies. In this section, I focus on a rivalry from this period that (1) included a major arms race and (2) contributed to growing international tensions prior to World War I: the British–German rivalry from 1871/1897 to 1918.

After the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815), Britain became the world’s foremost economic and military power. In addition, its robust system of government had effective checks on the monarchy that prevented extreme abuses of power. With about 31 million people in 1871, Britain did not have the biggest population in Europe, but it had enough to maintain a large navy and army, and these armed forces had extensive colonial combat experience.<sup>64</sup> Although Britain had been the first country to start industrialization, it was an ongoing process that continued to shape society in the 1870s and subsequent decades. This led to a rise of nationalism (among others), which affected British foreign policy (Kennedy, 1980). But during the nineteenth century, Britain’s massive economic advantage gradually diminished (Kennedy, 1988, chaps. 4–5, esp. pp. 226–29).

When Germany was unified in 1871, the new country suddenly became much more significant as an economic and military power than Prussia had been in previous decades. The German Empire’s monarchical government had a weak legislature and was generally politically dominated by the interests of the nobility, with some influence from the middle classes (Frederick, 1999, p. 307; Vogler, 2019b, p. 52).<sup>65</sup> In line with this assessment, Sterkenburgh (2021) argues that even Emperor Wilhelm I<sup>66</sup> already aimed to establish the monarchy — and not the parliament — as the political center of gravity. With almost 60 million people, and some parts of the country rapidly industrializing, this new state had the population to draw from and it quickly developed the economic underbelly to become Britain’s primary competitor. The fact that the German share of global manufacturing output increased from 8.5% in 1880 to 14.8% in 1913, while the British share dropped from 22.9% to 13.6% makes these dynamics evident (Kennedy, 1988, pp. 202, 209–15).<sup>67</sup>

The exact onset of the rivalry can be debated. Certainly, the year 1871 played a role, as this was the year when a fundamental shift in great power

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<sup>64</sup>At that time, the English army was particularly experienced in colonial warfare (cf. Hintze, 1975, p. 213).

<sup>65</sup>Over time, however, Imperial Germany developed a national democratic culture and the political influence of other groups grew (see Anderson, 2000).

<sup>66</sup>The Emperor is sometimes referred to as “William I” in English-language sources.

<sup>67</sup>Prussia had previously derived its great power status not from its economic power — it was primarily agricultural, with a long history of exploitative labor practices (Gingerich and Vogler, 2021) — but rather from its military organization (Kennedy, 1988, pp. 91–92) and efficient tax system (Kiser and Schneider, 1994).

politics occurred through German unification. British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli made the following declaration:

This war represents the German Revolution, a greater political event than the French Revolution of the last century ... There is not a diplomatic tradition which has not been swept away. You have a new world, new influences at work, new and unknown objects and dangers with which to cope ... [B]ut what has really come to pass in Europe? The balance of power has been entirely destroyed, and *the country which suffers most, and feels the effects of this great change most, is England* (quoted in Fishman, 2011, p. 11, emphasis added). (Also quoted in Kissinger (1994, p. 134).)

Disraeli's words show that German unification in 1871 was seen as destroying the balance of power that had greatly benefited Britain.<sup>68</sup> Also, especially in the 1880s, rising nationalism and differential economic development contributed to slowly growing tensions between the two states (Kennedy, 1980).<sup>69</sup> When did this antagonism become an intense rivalry? Due to rapid increases in Germany's relative economic power, Frederick (1999) locates the rivalry's start in 1890. These rapid changes caused significant status concerns among British elites (Onea, 2014, pp. 146–49). Alternatively, Germany's decision to "alter the maritime balance of power after 1897" can be seen as decisive (Kennedy, 1980, p. 467). It was followed by a steep increase in German naval expenditures (Black, 1999, pp. 257–58; Frederick, 1999, p. 328; Kennedy, 1988, pp. 211–12, 250–52; Kissinger, 1994, pp. 185–89). Thus, although war only began in 1914, various prior developments indicate a sustained rivalry<sup>70</sup> that led to preparations for war in both countries, including massive naval armament (Copeland, 2000, chap. 3).<sup>71</sup>

Can the three mechanisms also be observed here? With respect to the first mechanism, there is clear evidence that both countries' political elites considered imperialism a matter of prestige. For instance, in 1872, Disraeli said the following:

The issue is not a mean one. It is whether you will be content to be a comfortable England, modeled and molded upon Continental

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<sup>68</sup>Importantly, though, Fishman (2011, p. 12) argues that, only in 1875, British elites started to see "the 'German Revolution' as hurtful to their interests." Similarly, Mulligan (2011) suggests that Disraeli's main concern was the weakening of France, which removed a check of Russian ambition. Despite this possible interpretation, Germany turned out to be a greater challenge to British power as the following decades would reveal.

<sup>69</sup>However, Kennedy (1980) suggests that there was not yet a *fundamental* clash of interests then.

<sup>70</sup>This rivalry's centrality to British foreign policy has been debated (see Geppert and Rose, 2011).

<sup>71</sup>On the broader issue of preparation for war before 1914, see also Van Evera (1984).

principles and meeting in due course an inevitable fate, or whether you will be a *great country* — an *Imperial country* — a country where your sons, when they rise, rise to paramount positions, and obtain not merely the esteem of their countrymen, but command the respect of the world (quoted in Kissinger, 1994, p. 150, emphasis added).

A comparable statement was made in 1897 by Joseph Chamberlain, the British minister for the colonies. His words make it clear that a power either had to be an *imperial* power or become subordinated to others (implying a dramatic loss of relative status):<sup>72</sup>

It seems to me that the tendency of the time is to throw all power into the hands of the greater empires, and the minor kingdoms — those which are non-progressive — seem to fall into a secondary and subordinate place... (quoted in Kennedy, 1988, p. 196)

Similarly, German Emperor Wilhelm II,<sup>73</sup> who ruled from 1888 to 1918, was driven by the desire for a colonial empire that would imply parity in status with Britain (Kennedy, 1980, pp. 418–19; Onea, 2014, p. 145; Renshon, 2017, pp. 189–96; Röhl, 2004, esp. pp. 152–53, 352–56).<sup>74</sup> This aspiration was shared by many in Germany’s political elite (Holmes, 2004, pp. 37–38; Kennedy, 1980, p. 360; Kennedy, 1988, pp. 211–13),<sup>75</sup> as reflected in an 1897 speech by foreign secretary (later chancellor) Bernhard von Bülow in which he demanded “a place ... in the sun” (quoted in Holmes, 2004, p. 27). German elites’ desire for recognition as a world power motivated not only colonialism, but also the creation of a powerful fleet and the initiation of diplomatic crises (Murray, 2010; Renshon, 2017, pp. 198–216).<sup>76</sup>

Thus, largely because other empires such as Britain already controlled vast parts of the world, German elites now sought to acquire colonies to achieve the status of an “imperial” power. Even Bismarck, who had been opposed to colonialism, factored Germany’s status into his imperial pursuits (Barnhart, 2016, pp. 410–14). Of course, occupying territory overseas was cheaper and less risky than expansion in Europe. While Prussia had previously acquired

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<sup>72</sup>On how the potential loss of status motivated British imperialism, see also Barnhart (2016, pp. 417–18).

<sup>73</sup>The Emperor is sometimes referred to as “William II” in English-language sources.

<sup>74</sup>Thus, his ascension to the throne had important implications for Germany’s international rivalries.

<sup>75</sup>General trends related to globalization also strongly affected the development of nationalism and the elite discourse about geopolitics (see Conrad, 2008; Eley, 2015; Grimmer-Solem, 2019).

<sup>76</sup>The notion that colonies were key to imperial greatness was shared by the middle classes (Lebow, 2008, p. 337) and also by many academics, as the example of Gustav Schmoller shows (Eley, 2015, pp. 28–29).

parts of Poland (Vogler, 2019a, pp. 812–13), in 1871 there was little European territory left that could have been occupied without causing a great power conflict (cf. Kennedy, 1988, pp. 212–13). European rulers' desire for improving their prestige through territorial gains manifested itself in this era's so-called "Scramble for Africa" (Barnhart, 2016).

With respect to the second mechanism, although Germany rapidly gained economic strength (Baranowski, 2011, pp. 9–10; Frederick, 1999, pp. 309–10, 319; Kennedy, 1988, pp. 209–11), a key incentive for establishing colonies was their economic exploitation (Baranowski, 2011, pp. 47–49; Koponen, 1995). This was related to the belief that territorial expansion and additional export destinations were critical to a country's economic survival (Holmes, 2004, p. 38; Van Evera, 1985, pp. 89–90). Thus, while Germany's budget pressures were much less pronounced than for other countries, Bismarck's colonial bid in 1884 was also economically motivated, including the search for new markets (Kennedy, 1980, chap. 10).<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, although the naval arms race with Britain proved to be "enormously expensive" (Kennedy, 1980, p. 417),<sup>78</sup> this newly created force also represented the capacity to defend colonies. As a result, the economic "need" to exploit colonies became comparable to a self-fulfilling prophecy.<sup>79</sup>

The claim that German imperialism was an outcome of international rivalries (broadly in accordance with mechanisms I and II) is also supported by the analysis of Baranowski (2011). She argues that many of Germany's elites saw their country as being in a state of international competition with other major powers. Only the acquisition of a colonial empire would allow Germany to maintain its great power status. Otherwise, its decline would have been a real possibility.<sup>80</sup> This line of argument is fully compatible with the notion that processes of relative comparison between ruling elites, along with the economic pressures that resulted from military rivalry, created conditions that amplified imperial expansion.

Germany serves as a good illustration with respect to the third mechanism as well. Specifically, the powerful naval forces that had been created gradually became politically influential actors themselves. For instance, the German Grand Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, who was the State Secretary of Imperial Germany's Naval Office from 1897 to 1916, pushed for financing additional naval armament. He hoped to eventually challenge Britain, the dominant sea

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<sup>77</sup>Conservative political forces and the political allies of domestic producers were important lobby groups in this episode, but the "supreme control always remained in the Chancellor's hands" (Kennedy, 1980, p. 170).

<sup>78</sup>See also Frederick (1999, p. 328).

<sup>79</sup>However, it is important to acknowledge that (1) the argument about Germany's finances was not prominent in the public discourse at the time; and (2) despite the hopes of German political and economic elites, the country's colonies mostly turned out to have low economic value (Frederick, 1999, p. 310).

<sup>80</sup>See also Kennedy (1980, esp. pp. 314–15).

and colonial power, which — if successful — might have resulted in colonial gains for Germany (Baranowski, 2011, pp. 38–39; Holmes, 2004, esp. pp. 39–43; Kennedy, 1980, chap. 10).<sup>81</sup> Additionally, a byproduct of the fleet's growing strength was Germany's increased ability to establish and secure colonies (cf. Bönker, 2013; Ganz, 1977). These observations about the navy are echoed by Hull (2013), who suggests that Imperial Germany was characterized by a military culture that allowed for a relatively high degree of institutional autonomy and strategic discretion of its armed forces. Hull also argues that autonomy is reflected in the army's brutal strategies when fighting against populations in Germany's African colonies.

It was not just the high-ranking military leader von Tirpitz who supported the building of a massive fleet; many German naval officers also embraced an ideology of "navalism." These officers developed an interest in a powerful navy that would help Germany achieve different objectives, including the acquisition and defense of an overseas empire. Military elites shared the view of their political leadership that imperial expansion was a necessary means to protecting the country's great power status (Bönker, 2012; Kissinger, 1994, p. 185).<sup>82</sup> This is in accordance with the first and third mechanisms.<sup>83</sup>

In sum, several mechanisms clearly apply to this rivalry, too. The persistent struggle among European rulers for prestige through colonial gains was particularly evident with respect to Germany as a great power latecomer. Its ruling elites sought territorial gains to put themselves on an equal footing with established empires. And by building a powerful navy, the German government created not only the budget pressures that "justified" imperial exploitation, but also a powerful pro-imperialist interest group. However, budget pressures played a much less important role in shaping imperialism than in previous centuries.

As a result of all these dynamics, Britain intensified its ambitions to subjugate and economically exploit territories in Africa toward the end of the nineteenth century — even though it already possessed many colonies (Barnhart, 2016, pp. 398, 417–18; Hynes, 1979; Wendt, 2016, pp. 234–36).<sup>84</sup> Moreover, Germany rapidly gained colonies around the world. In this respect,

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<sup>81</sup>In accordance with this goal, von Tirpitz wrote in his memoirs that "Without sea-power, Germany's position in the world resembled a mollusc without a shell" (quoted in Holmes, 2004, p. 27).

<sup>82</sup>As Bönker (2015) emphasizes, however, the possibility of a British blockade caused Germany's strategy to shift away from protecting the colonies and toward insisting on the neutrality of international trade.

<sup>83</sup>The Pan-German League, a leading nationalist interest group in Imperial Germany, illustrates that, in addition to military elites, members of other social groups like academics and industrialists also lobbied for imperialism (Sweeney, 2015).

<sup>84</sup>Britain feared that Germany might reshape the international status quo (Kennedy, 1980, pp. 360, 464–66), which could have impeded its strategy of preserving primacy over the periphery (Onea, 2020, esp. pp. 131–35).

the years 1884–1900 (following the Congress of Berlin) must be seen as the most relevant period. During this time, Germany acquired territories in Africa, East Asia, and the Pacific, including German New Guinea, German Samoa, areas in Northeast China, German South West Africa (present-day Namibia), German West Africa (now Togo and Cameroon), and German East Africa (mostly Tanzania, Burundi, and Rwanda) (Wendt, 2016, pp. 240–41). Indeed, German political elites scrambled to grab all territories they could.

Like previous rivalries, this one also included major war.<sup>85</sup> But the two world wars were so destructive that the European state system ultimately needed to transform itself to one based mainly on peaceful economic competition. The resulting interstate cooperation culminated in the EU's polycentric system of governance (Vogler, 2020).

## Conclusion

I contend that the parallel existence of fundamentally different kinds of interpolity relationships (to the *inside* versus the *outside* of Europe) can be observed historically because one was partly constitutive of the other. Indeed, the *symmetry* of the struggle among major European powers, especially the sustained experience of rivalry, was the key reason for the *asymmetrical* relationships between these powers and polities in other world regions.

Specifically, I have argued that this can be explained through three concrete mechanisms. First, in ruling elites' constant struggle for relative prestige, imperial expansion in other world regions was a relatively easy and economical means to achieve territorial gains.<sup>86</sup> Second, longtime military rivalries led to massive pressures on public budgets. The rampant exploitation of colonial lands and peoples was seen as a way to alleviate these budget deficits. Third, by building large navies and armies for the initial purpose of engaging in interstate competition, rulers also created powerful interest groups that then developed a significant interest in the continued legitimization of their existence. The acquisition and defense of colonies became key means to justifying their status and access to public resources.

Importantly, I am *not* suggesting that no other motivations for imperialism existed. Certainly, some Europeans were motivated by religion, and those

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<sup>85</sup>Importantly, recent research suggests that the rivalry between Britain and Germany was not the main reason for the outbreak of World War I (e.g., Clark, 2012; Copeland, 2000). Still, it was one factor that significantly contributed to international tensions prior to the war's outbreak.

<sup>86</sup>From the perspective of political economy, one could think of this as a form of "market saturation." Competition for territory on the European continent was much costlier for the "producers" of coercion (states). Consequently, they expanded into other areas of the world, where the application of coercion was cheap and effective (in that it led to greater territorial gains).

who profited from imperialism often claimed that it had a “civilizing” mission, which was based on a notion of cultural superiority (Porter, 1994, pp. 20–29).<sup>87</sup> Such attempts to legitimize the often brutal exploitation of other continents may have been an impetus for some. But my claim is that the introduced mechanisms were far more important contributors to imperialism than any (ostensibly) civilizing mission. Furthermore, even if some actors were indeed motivated by such ambitions, it does not necessarily contradict my theory. Instead, we may view these motivations as complementary explanations.<sup>88</sup> In short, cultural (and ethnic) theories of imperialism and conflict are possible complements to my framework, but due to my focus on political–military and economic dynamics, a detailed exploration must be left to future theory extensions.

Imperialism also had the potential to feed back into European rivalry. This created self-reinforcing and intensifying processes of expansion and interstate conflict that only ended in the destructiveness of the world wars (Black, 2014, chaps. 3–5).<sup>89</sup> But how did the world wars fundamentally change the dynamics analyzed here? Three specific reasons can be identified: First, the collapse of major land empires (especially Austria–Hungary and Russia) indicated that territorial expansion on the continent itself was now also challenged by the awakened nationalism of many smaller European peoples. Second, Hitler’s failed attempt at establishing a European empire (Baranowski, 2011) sent a powerful signal that Europe needed to shift away from endless military rivalries to avoid destroying itself entirely. Third, World War II in particular ushered in a long process of decolonization, leading to a fundamental move away from traditional forms of overseas imperialism.

I have refined and empirically illustrated the suggested mechanisms through two case studies, one of the French–English rivalry in 1689–1815 and the other of the British–German rivalry in 1871/1897–1918. These case studies provide more details on how all three mechanisms connect interstate rivalries to imperialism, although certain mechanisms (such as budget pressures) are more pronounced in specific cases and periods. Moreover, although the case studies clearly show that the *dominant* causal direction was from interstate rivalries to imperialism, the French–English rivalry is particularly useful to understand potential feedback loops from colonial conflict to interstate war. Future contributions could build on my insights from these case studies by operationalizing the mechanisms in yet more detail.

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<sup>87</sup>Both Porter (1994, pp. 20–23) and Abernethy (2000, pp. 197–202) suggest that the shared religion of Christianity played a key role in European missionaries’ belief in engaging in a broader civilizing objective.

<sup>88</sup>Using the example of British economic imperialism coupled with *laissez-faire* ideology, Carr (1946) famously argued in his book *Twenty Years’ Crisis* that both political and economic elites are likely to follow an ideology that aligns with their own material interests.

<sup>89</sup>This is not to say that the world wars were primarily a result of imperialism, but rather that they brought an end to the broader dynamics explored throughout this article.

In short, my goal was to develop a theory that explores the connection between interpolity rivalry and imperialism. For this purpose, I first developed three causal mechanisms and then used two case studies to refine our understanding of those mechanisms. In the future, scholars may use these insights as a foundation for expanding this research program. Though a number of important questions must still be answered, this article provides a strong basis for upcoming studies on the historical political economy of interstate rivalries and imperialism.

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