

H-Diplo ARTICLE REVIEW 988

21 October 2020

Georgios Giannakopoulos. "A World Safe for Empires? A.J. Toynbee and the Internationalization of Self-Determination in the East (1912-1922)." *Global Intellectual History*, online 25 September 2018. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23801883.2018.1527185>.

<https://hdiplo.org/to/AR988>

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By all accounts a mild and shy man, Arnold J. Toynbee was no controversialist, but he had an unerring habit of embroiling himself in controversy. In the 1930s, he loomed large in the rancorous debate over appeasement.¹ In the early 1950s, he scandalised British audiences by suggesting their empire was no better than any other, and that the West needed to show a great deal more humility in its dealings with the "rest."² He then upset even more people, a little later, by arguing that the world needed to embrace some kind of universal religion if it was to escape the horrors of another world war.³ These were not, however, Toynbee's first experiences of public dispute. In the early 1920s, he was at the centre of a fight over the Koraes Chair in Modern Greek and Byzantine History, Language and Literature at the University of London, to which he was appointed in 1919, and from which he resigned, under an ominous cloud, five years later.⁴

The Koraes episode has been explored in considerable detail, not least by Richard Clogg, because it raised important questions about academic freedom and the role of donors in the governance of British universities.⁵ But as Georgios Giannakopoulos rightly shows, Toynbee's time in that post was a pivotal one for the development of his thinking, which was at this point in some turmoil. In 1919 he turned thirty years old and was wrestling with what ended up being life-long guilt about avoiding military service when so many others of his generation had died, as well as regret about propaganda he had produced for the British government during the war.⁶ He was struggling too with his politics, having abandoned Liberalism

¹ Toynbee's views evolved over time, as did many in the 1930s, but for a sense of where they ended up, see Arnold J. Toynbee, "After Munich: The World Outlook," *International Affairs* 18:1 (1939): 1-28.

² See especially Toynbee, *The World and the West* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), which grew out of a set of Reith Lectures given on BBC Radio in 1952. They provoked many furious responses, including Douglas Jerrold's response, *The Lie about the West: A Response to Professor Toynbee's Challenge*. (London: J. M. Dent, 1954).

³ Toynbee, *A Study of History*, vols. VII-X (London: Oxford University Press, 1954).

⁴ On this period in Toynbee's life and his career more broadly, see William H. McNeill, *Arnold J. Toynbee: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

⁵ Richard Clogg, *Politics and the Academy: Arnold Toynbee and the Koraes Chair* (London: Frank Cass, 1986).

⁶ Toynbee later expressed "misgivings" about his propaganda work (*Acquaintances* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 153). On the war and military service, see William H. McNeill, "Toynbee Revisited," in Wm. Roger Louis (ed.) *Adventures with Britannia: Personalities, Politics and Culture in Britain* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996), 177.

for the Labour Party, to the annoyance of much of his family. And at the same time, he was trying to come to terms with the fact that at the Versailles Peace Conference, which he had attended with the British delegation, he had largely failed to influence the final settlement.⁷ The Koraes Chair thus provided the young Toynbee with much needed time to reflect.⁸ It gave him space to establish himself not just as a specialist on Greece, but as an analyst of contemporary affairs—his earlier career as a classicist having ended unhappily with his resignation from a Fellowship at Balliol College, Oxford, in December 1915. And it allowed him to travel—an activity Toynbee enjoyed as much, if not more, than writing. In 1921 and 1922, the University of London granted him leave to write for the *Manchester Guardian* on the latter stages of the Greco-Turkish War.

It was this reporting that first got Toynbee into trouble with the sponsors of the Koraes, as Giannakopoulos notes, before the publication of the distinctly pro-Turkish *The Western Question in Greece and Turkey* (1922) brought about the final break.⁹ But his thinking around the time also shows bigger ideas coalescing. Toynbee had long adhered to the notion that history was an epic tale of rising and falling “civilisations.”¹⁰ This idea was reinforced by reading first Henri Bergson’s work on “creative evolution” and the “*élan vital*” that supposedly animated all living things, including entire societies, and then Jan Smuts’s appropriation of the theory in *Holism and Evolution* (1926).¹¹ And it became ingrained as Toynbee ventured out beyond the confines of Harrow and Oxford on his post-graduate “Grand Tour” of Italy and Greece in 1911-12. Disappointed that the modern-day inhabitants of those places did not live up to his idealisation of their ancient forebears, he was driven not just to the racism commonplace at the time, but also to the view they were living evidence that civilisations rise and then fall into moral decline.¹²

By the time he went back to Greece ten years later, in 1921, Toynbee’s views were becoming somewhat more sophisticated, as Giannakopoulos shows.¹³ It was still organicist, of course, but now his concern was not only with how civilisations evolve, but also with how they interact, especially when they are in decline. In his mind and then in *The Western Question*, Toynbee conceived the Greco-Turkish war that he witnessed first-hand as a case study of those dynamics. That conflict and the way it was fought, with widespread atrocities, including wholesale ethnic-cleansing, was not some natural result of pent-up national feeling, but rather a product of bigger forces.¹⁴ Toynbee had earlier concluded that nationalism was anyway just another invented doctrine—a hugely dangerous one, as the Great War had shown, “converted to violence from the

⁷ Harold Nicolson later observed that Toynbee should have had his way, but was over-ruled by the politicians. See *Peacemaking 1919*, revised ed. (London: Methuen, 1964), 113.

⁸ On all of this, see McNeill, *Arnold J. Toynbee: A Life* (New York: Oxford, 1989), 64-91.

⁹ Toynbee, *The Western Question in Greece and Turkey: A Study in the Contact of Civilizations*. (London: Constable, 1922).

¹⁰ See especially McNeill’s analysis of Toynbee’s schoolboy essays, in *Arnold J. Toynbee*, 16-18.

¹¹ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1911); J. C. Smuts, *Holism and Evolution* (London: Macmillan, 1926).

¹² McNeill, *Arnold J. Toynbee*, 41. They were once “the centre of the world,” wrote Toynbee in a letter quoted by McNeill, but “now they are the hangers on of Europe, and come to us for their models of everything.”

¹³ Partly, as McNeill shows, this was because Toynbee had read Oswald Spengler’s *Untergang des Abendlandes* in the summer of 1920 (*Arnold J. Toynbee*, 98-99).

¹⁴ On what Toynbee saw, and how he reacted, see McNeill, *Arnold J. Toynbee*, 108-109.

outset”—but one that could be tamed, as absolutism had been, and one day would pass.¹⁵ Rather than a clash of nationalities, the Greco-Turkish war needed to be seen in a different perspective: as a function of the moral disintegration of Western civilisation and the disruption of the Near East caused by the import of Western ideas. The Greeks, he argued, were no longer “vital,” but had grown arrogant; the Turks, on the other hand, had been infected by late Western, essentially alien, political concepts, including nationalism. Both, as a result, were driven to ever more vicious conflict.¹⁶

Giannakopoulos argues that we can see here the foundations not just of Toynbee’s large-scale explorations of civilisations and their contacts in *A Study of History*, but also of his international thought. I agree—there is little doubt that his dissatisfaction with the nation-state and the ideology of nationalism can be traced back to this period and to this set of experiences.¹⁷ But Giannakopoulos goes one step further, suggesting that Toynbee’s version of internationalism, emerging from this time, was designed to make a “world safe for empires”—an idea derived from Erez Manela’s *The Wilsonian Moment*.¹⁸ In writing what he did, Toynbee “sought ways,” Giannakopoulos observes, “to make compatible the continuation of British and western imperial rule with the demands of self-determination” (8).

Here I have to disagree. Of course, much hangs on what is meant by “imperial” and “imperial rule” in this context—their definitions, as always, matter. But even if they are understood very loosely, in terms of some broad Western politico-ideational hegemony analogous to the indirect economic “neo-colonialism” much discussed during the Cold War, I think it is hard to see Toynbee as an imperialist. His contemporaries—including avowed imperialists—certainly did not see him as one.¹⁹ Critics who were in favour of the “continuation of western imperial rule” portrayed him as a defeatist or sometimes worse: as an active menace at the heart of the British establishment, bent on undermining public confidence in Britain, the Empire, and the West more broadly.²⁰ They pointed to passages like this one, from *The Western Question*:

The shadow upon the rest of humanity is cast by western civilisation, but westerners are quite unaware of the havoc they unconsciously wreak upon the world...Either the overshadowing figure must turn its head, perceive the harm that unintentionally it has been doing...or its victims, after vain attempts to arouse its attention and request it changes its posture, must stagger to its feet and stab it in the back.²¹

They recognised that Toynbee’s ire was reserved not just for nation-states, but for what he called in *A Study of History* “universal states”—empires, in other words, and present ones, not just those of the past. To him, these were not things to be

¹⁵ Toynbee, *Nationality and the War* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1915), 9.

¹⁶ Toynbee, *Western Question*.

¹⁷ Ian Hall, “‘The Toynbee Convictor’: The Rise and Fall of Arnold J. Toynbee’s Anti-Imperial Mission to the West,” *The European Legacy* 17:4 (2012), 457-459.

¹⁸ Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁹ See, for example, Jerrold’s *The Lie about the West*.

²⁰ See, for example, the arch-conservative Maurice Cowling’s hostile but perceptive treatment of Toynbee in *Religion and the Public Doctrine in Modern England*, vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 19-45.

²¹ Quoted in Elie Kedourie, “The Chatham House Version,” in Kedourie, *The Chatham House Version and Other Middle Eastern Studies* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1984 [1970]), 367.

saved or valued: they were vainglorious polities, “established by saviours with a sword,” not vital or creative, but “passive, conservative, archaistic, and in fact negative in every respect.”²²

For Toynbee, Elie Kedourie famously charged, “the west [was] a disintegrating society which...has shown itself to be murderously aggressive”—and that was the key to understanding his international thought and the kind of world he wanted to see.²³ His *Study of History* aimed at showing that Europeans were no better than anyone else: their civilisation had risen and was falling, as all others had done; their behaviour could be just as cruel, and—importantly—they had no reason to think their actions any more justified.²⁴ What was different was that what we would call modernity, especially the unification of the world by trade and technology, allowed us to see ourselves in this perspective, to learn lessons, change behaviour, and atone for wrongs committed. And in this very convoluted way, Toynbee was actually an anti-imperial radical, albeit a very “high-minded” one, and an heir to important aspects of English radicalism, as A.J.P. Taylor recognised in *The Troublemakers* (1957), and as conservative critics like Kedourie charged.²⁵

Of course, Toynbee was an inveterate moralist, and in later life turned ever more portentous, to the extent of inventing his own syncretic religion.²⁶ He was judgmental and could be dismissive. Some of his opinions—about Jews or the Inuit, among others—were both products of his age and, even then, unjustifiable. He was convinced, of course, that some peoples were not “ready” for self-determination and he doubted that the nation-state was the form of political organisation best suited to everyone, including Europeans. And he was a universalist, of sorts, convinced that it was possible to establish some kind of worldwide political and moral consensus. But I do not think that we can call him a putative saviour of western imperialism. For Toynbee, empires represented not the peak of achievement, but deluded last gasp of a dying civilisation, struggling to find a creative solution in a “Time of Troubles.” In 1922 and for the rest of his life, what was at issue was how to bring about the “unification of the world” that trade and technology demanded *without* the nation-state and war-making and imperialism that went with it.²⁷

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²² Kedourie, “Chatham House Version”, 361. The first quotation is Kedourie’s; the second is Toynbee’s. See also *Study of History*, vol. VII.

²³ Kedourie, “Chatham House Version”, 374.

²⁴ Kedourie argued Toynbee’s *Study and Survey of International Affairs* were contrived to “instil in their western readers a feeling of unease and guilt, and by so chastening them to diminish their greed and aggressiveness...promote what the founders of Chatham House desired, namely a just and peaceful international order” (“Chatham House Version,” 382).

²⁵ A. J. P. Taylor, *The Troublemakers: Dissent over Foreign Policy, 1792-1939* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985 [1957]), 16-17. On his high-mindedness, see also 189.

²⁶ Ian Hall, “‘Time of Troubles’: Arnold J. Toynbee’s Twentieth Century,” *International Affairs* 90:1 (2014), 33-35. See also Arnold J. Toynbee, *An Historian’s Approach to Religion* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956).

²⁷ Toynbee, “The Unification of the World and the Change in Historical Perspective,” *History* 33:117-18 (1948) 1-28.

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