



The Rule of Empires: Those Who Built Them, Those Who Endured Them, and Why They Always Fall

By Timothy Parsons

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In *The Rule of Empires*, Timothy Parsons gives a sweeping account of the evolution of empire from its origins in ancient Rome to its most recent twentieth-century embodiment. He explains what constitutes an empire and offers suggestions about what empires of the past can tell us about our own historical moment.

Parsons uses imperial examples that stretch from ancient Rome, to Britain's "new" imperialism in Kenya, to the Third Reich to parse the features common to all empires, their evolutions and self-justifying myths, and the reasons for their inevitable decline. Parsons argues that far from confirming some sort of Darwinian hierarchy of advanced and primitive societies, conquests were simply the products of a temporary advantage in military technology, wealth, and political will. Beneath the self-justifying rhetoric of benevolent paternalism and cultural superiority lay economic exploitation and the desire for power. Yet imperial ambitions still appear viable in the twenty-first century, Parsons shows, because their defenders and detractors alike employ abstract and romanticized perspectives that fail to grasp the historical reality of subjugation.

Writing from the perspective of the common subject rather than that of the imperial conquerors, Parsons offers a historically grounded cautionary tale rich with accounts of subjugated peoples throwing off the yoke of empire time and time again. In providing an accurate picture of what it is like to live as a subject, *The Rule of Empires* lays bare the rationalizations of imperial conquerors and their apologists and exposes the true limits of hard power.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Unhappy empires are, in crucial respects, all the same—and happy ones don't exist, according to this incisive study. Historian Parson (*The British Imperial Century, 1815–1914*) surveys imperial regimes from Rome's rule in ancient Britain to Spain's in Peru, Britain's in India and Kenya, and Nazi Germany's occupation of France. He identifies a single mercenary purpose behind these diverse examples: to loot the wealth and exploit the labor of conquered peoples. At the same time, he argues, stable rule requires the cooperation and assimilation of imperial subjects, which sets up a fatal contradiction—as an empire co-opts its subjects, it becomes harder to profitably exploit them, and the financial underpinnings of empire crumble. Challenging neo-imperialists like Niall Ferguson, the author insists that there is no such thing as benign empire; he fingers Britain's allegedly liberal empire as one of the most dysfunctional, because of its racist refusal to assimilate its populace. Parsons draws together an enormous amount of scholarship into a lucid, cold-eyed analysis of the mechanics of imperial control. The result is a compelling critique of empires past and of their latter-day nostalgists. (*June*)

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Review

"A lucid, cold-eyed analysis of the mechanics of imperial control. The result is a compelling critique of empires past and of their latter-day nostalgists." --*Publishers Weekly*

"Parsons, an Africanist by training, samples instructive imperial experiences: Roman Britain, Muslim Spain, Spanish Peru, the East India Company in Italy, Napoleonic Italy, British Kenya, and Vichy France." --
Charles S. Maie, *Foreign Affairs*

"Parsons sets an ambitious agenda for his case study on empires and largely succeeds. Explicitly setting out to counter the neoimperialist historiography of the last decade, Parsons uses a series of historic imperial episodes to illustrate the limits of empire and explain why empires subsequently fall... Students of empire, historical or otherwise, would be well advised to read this book... Highly recommended." --*Choice*

About the Author

Timothy Parsons is a Professor of African History at Washington University. He is the author many books, including *The British Imperial Century, 1815–1914: A World History Perspective*, and *The 1964 Army Mutinies and the Making of Modern East Africa*.

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