

## ВСЕОБЩАЯ ИСТОРИЯ. СПЕЦИАЛЬНЫЕ ИСТОРИЧЕСКИЕ ДИСЦИПЛИНЫ

Original article

УДК 94:327.2(410)

ББК 63.3(4 Вел)

DOI: 10.14258/izvasu(2025)3-07

### Imperial Factor in British Foreign Policy: Historical and Methodological Aspects of the Study

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## GENERAL HISTORY. SPECIAL HISTORICAL DISCIPLINES

Научная статья

### Имперский фактор во внешней политике Великобритании: исторический и методологический аспекты изучения

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**Abstract.** The article is devoted to an urgent problem of modern imperial studies, which draw on the historical experience of Great Britain to identify the role of the imperial factor in British foreign policy. It attempts to identify new methodological possibilities for studying the problem, which are opened up by involving the category of imperial identity. The authors proceed from the position, which is quite widespread in modern historiography, that the struggle to strengthen the empire during its heyday in the 19<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was the core of British foreign policy. The British elite's views on the empire's foreign policy were shaped by imperial identity, rooted in the recognition of Britain's exceptional international status. This, in turn, necessitates a clearer distinction between imperial identity and imperial ideology. According to the authors, this approach creates a relevant program of discussion within the framework of the "new imperial history" and makes it possible to trace the origins of the modern imperial narrative, which still remains influential in Great Britain and beyond.

**Аннотация.** Статья посвящена актуальной проблеме современных имперских исследований, которые обращаются к историческому опыту Великобритании для выявления роли имперского фактора в британской внешней политике. В ней предпринята попытка выявить новые методологические возможности изучения проблемы, которые открываются благодаря привлечению категории имперской идентичности. Авторы исходят из достаточно распространенного в современной историографии положения, что борьба за укрепление империи в период ее расцвета в XIX и первой половине XX в. была ядром британской внешней политики. Представления элит о внешнеполитическом курсе Британской империи формировались на основе имперской идентичности, базировавшейся на осознании исключительного международного положения Великобритании. Это, в свою очередь, заставляет более четко разграничивать идентичность и имперскую идеологию. По мнению авторов, такой подход создает актуальную программу дискуссии в рамках «новой имперской истории» и дает возможность проследить истоки современного имперского нарратива, который до сих пор остается влиятельным в Великобритании и за ее пределами.

**Keywords:** British Empire, Foreign Policy, interdisciplinarity, imperial identity

**For citation:** Arshitnceva O.A., Usoltsev S.A. Imperial Factor in British Foreign Policy: Historical and Methodological Aspects of the Study. *Izvestiya of Altai State University*. 2025. No 3 (143). P. 48–52. (In English). DOI: 10.14258/izvasu(2025)3-07.

The powerful colonial empires of the new era, among which the British Empire occupied a special place, limited their existence in the middle of the twentieth century. Despite such a short period, we can still observe some consequences of the colonial period, which require close attention to the problems of imperial history from various regions of social science, and above all historians and international relations experts. The post-imperial syndrome is one of the deep remnants of a bygone era, which, however, continues to correct itself in the form of a myth of imperial greatness. This myth is turning into a discursive tool with the help of which representatives of the political elite of former metropolises justify foreign policy attractions that are alarming in their ambitiousness [1, p. 160–161]. Many believe that Great Britain has relatively successfully overcome the post-imperial syndrome by the end of the twentieth century. However, British politicians, in the context of decision-making on the settlement of issues and security, in projects for the coming morning, the leadership of Iran, as a rule, use imperial narratives [2, p. 3].

Contemporary historiography, in response to these processes, offers new methodological approaches that should form a minimal analytical apparatus for the so-called “new imperial history”. For example, D. Lieven, a historian and political scientist known for his comparative studies of empires, speaks of the emergence of a new conceptual content for the old concept of “empire”, which is necessary for studying contemporary international political processes associated with the exploitation of imperial nostalgia. D. Lieven notes that many aspects of the historical perspective of empires are becoming relevant today in the context of contemporary problems of public and state security and the functioning of power. “Behind the politically correct terminology of global governance and humanitarian intervention, some old (and, in principle, often quite benevolent) imperial claims can be discerned” [3, p. 75–77].

“The continued interest to the imperial past of great powers in the global political agenda, in particular, in the context of post-colonial discourse, makes the imperial issues even more relevant and stimulates not only specific historical but also methodological search. Meanwhile, interdisciplinarity still remains the most perspective direction” [4, p. 47]. It can be related to history in general as well as to its particular aspects. What are these perspectives in such specific subject

**Ключевые слова:** Британская империя, внешняя политика, междисциплинарность, имперская идентичность

**Для цитирования:** Аршинцева О.А., Усольцев С.А. Имперский фактор во внешней политике Великобритании: исторический и методологический аспекты изучения // Известия Алтайского государственного университета. 2025. № 3 (143). С. 48–52. DOI: 10.14258/izvasu(2025)3-07.

such as the ideas of elites and the society about the role of the empire in global politics, shaping the imperial consciousness, imperial ideology, and imperial identity? In search of the answer the article attempts to reveal new interdisciplinary opportunities emerging at the crossroads of the historical political approach, the classical paradigm in the theory of international relations based on the category of foreign policy interests and security, and the concept of identity actively developed by humanists.

Opt for British plots is explained by the above-mentioned surge of interest namely to the imperial history of the British Empire, its formation, flourishing and decline remaining a reference object of research. Modern historiography is extensive and diverse enough to meet all kinds of research demands, including fundamental generalizations of modern approaches and theoretical concepts. Five-volume Oxford History of the British Empire is worth mentioning the first among others. The authors comprehensively study the interaction of British and non-Western societies as well as the significance of the empire for different communities and the political elite of the metropole. In the last fifth volume historiographical reviews of the imperial security and the theory of colonial discourse are of special interest [5]. Among classical works of general type the history of the British Empire by N. Fergusson is noteworthy in that the popular historian relies on an original institutional conception. In his recent seminal work *Visions of Empire: How Five Imperial Regimes Shaped the World*, American researcher K. Kumar offers a compelling perspective on the British imperial experience through a comparative analysis of past empires [6]. Even such brief review of fundamental and special research clearly demonstrates the diversity of conceptual assessments of the imperial tradition which have developed in modern British studies, the fact, in its turn, stimulating interdisciplinary borrowings.

In various versions that describe the ongoing process of global order transformation, experts in international affairs frequently employ the concept of a “large space without defined boundaries” to characterize the framework of international and global security. It should be noted that the majority of modern experts in international affairs analysis use the motion of big space in another meaning which makes their spatial categories different from postulates of traditional geopolitical schools. Friedrich Ratzel and his followers are known to be the first who

at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries formulated "universal" laws of physical growth of the states and flexibility of borders. Particularly, the widely-discussed new spatial dichotomy "Global North" — "Global South" differs from the traditional geopolitical postulate of planetary dualism by the fact that the supporters of this vision of the new global order frequently use the concept of collective identity borrowing it from another subject area. In its turn, in special papers on identity problems one can see chapters devoted to, for example, global identity [7, p. 330–338]. Among the diverse themes of contemporary identity studies, as they are conventionally called, there are paradoxical, at first glance, terminological borrowings from the rather archaic vocabulary of geopolitics. It is about attempts to combine the geopolitical discourse and the category of identity in the description of the complex worldview. Not rejecting the approach to characterizing contemporary global political reality, we will restate the question in the opposite way: Is the category of identity applicable to the research of the historical political phenomenon of big spaces and complex polities such as colonial empires of Early Modern Times.

To begin with, let us assume that the category of "large space without defined boundaries" is methodologically suitable for describing and reconstructing the ideas of contemporaries about the origin and essence of empires. Perhaps we will get a satisfactory result, since the imperial discourse of the period that E. Hobsbawm called "the century of Empire" continues to tempt politicians with imperial political myths and exploit the post-imperial syndrome. This, of course, cannot but arouse keen interest on the part of scientists. In modern interdisciplinary studies devoted to the influence of non-material factors of social development, such as people's ideas about themselves and others, phenomena of group and mass consciousness, the category of identity is important. Originating from postmodern discourse, this category retains its metalogical value.

At the turn of the 2020s, the theme of identity took a key position in the field of social sciences and quickly switched to the area of public politics and became an integral part of the political discourse. Nowadays the relevant agenda of research work is largely determined by the reverse influence of the political agenda which gives the direction to the identity policy. Due to the inherently complex and ambiguous nature of this category, its use in related fields of research — alongside their conceptual frameworks — first requires a clear and concise methodological and terminological definition whenever possible. The condition of the subject field of identity research does not simplify the task. We would refer to the reporting of a reputable domestic expert on identity problems I.S. Semenenko. In the introduction to the collective of 2023 she gives the following description: "Scientific discourses in which identity is a system-forming and significant element, absorb the array of relevant statements

on certain problems of social development, connected with the subjective space of politics and sociality, giving their well-reasoned presentation and recording this knowledge in texts of scientific publications" [7, p. 12].

Following the given logic in reasoning, of all the multiple options of collective political identity, we can point out the category of imperial identity interesting to us and compare it to the neighboring category of foreign policy identity and return to the simple question of methodological advantages of the category. To do this it makes sense to prove its efficiency from the specific material of the imperial history of Britain that is of interest to us.

Before moving on to the next topic, it is worth considering the perspective of Perm scholar O.B. Podvintsev, whose monograph, unfortunately published posthumously, addresses the complexities of imperial studies. He notes that recurring waves of interest in the study of empires, along with the diversity of national research traditions and academic disciplines involved, often lead to the repeated rediscovery of well-established ideas. At the same time, many valuable findings risk being overlooked or forgotten. As a result, the field of imperial studies cannot be limited to analyzing works from just the past few years [8, p. 17–18].

It is noteworthy that long before the current rise of identity theory popularity a historian, A. Thornton in his work "The Imperial Idea and Its Enemies" (1959) made an attempt to study the crisis of British identity connected with the collapse of the British Empire. Analysing its reasons the author first demonstrated that the imperial was the factor that determined not only the foreign policy of Great Britain: it was a complex phenomenon which developed under the influence of economic, military, demographic and social-psychological aspects of the empire existence. The "enemies" of the imperial idea, according to Thornton, "are, paradoxically, the expansion of the empire up to the limits where it is impossible to be controlled; the loss of leadership first in Europe and then in the whole world; hesitations about British supremacy caused, in particular, by the fear of external threat" [9, p. 50].

Similar topics are increasingly being raised by researchers. As can be seen from the analysis of publications, there is a tendency to reassess the significance of empires in modern historical processes. Studies of the problems of imperial consciousness, and social representations of people living within empires are very popular. Schematically speaking, two discursive blocks can be distinguished: 1) the traditional paradigm with the categories of "imperial ideology" or "ideology of imperialism"; 2) the concept of identity operating with such categories as "British identity" or "imperial identity". Many modern approaches find their place, squeezing between the first and second blocks. In Russian British studies, unsurprisingly, among older scientists,

we see gravitation towards the traditional paradigm, while younger researchers who want to keep up with trends gravitate towards modern approaches. Some researchers mechanically combine different approaches. You can find publications where the category of identity is included in the title, but in the text, the understanding of imperial identity is reduced to imperial ideology [10]. On the basis of various historiographic and methodological achievements and evaluating perspectives of interdisciplinary research of British imperial identity one can define the borders of its subject area and formulate the stage agenda in a form of several theses.

The British Empire in its final decades was a complex system that united diverse territories with varying levels of autonomy. It included the metropolis, dependent colonies, self-governing dominions, and informal zones of influence in various parts of the world. Managing such a diverse space required developed administrative mechanisms, economic ties, and a military presence. State institutions, technological advances, and cultural policies served as instruments of cohesion. The international status of this space and its influence on international politics were commensurate with its scale. International relations scholars could not help but be interested in empires as a means of understanding and conceptualizing the modern world order. In this regard, clear conceptual distinctions between imperial ideology and imperial identity are important. [4, p. 50–51].

By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Britain had fully shifted its foreign policy focus toward safeguarding and expanding imperial interests. The pursuit of global leadership replaced the policy of "Splendid Isolation," with key decisions shaped not only by pragmatic calculations but also by the ruling elite's perception of the empire. It is essential to recognize that British foreign policy of this era was driven more by a sense of national and imperial identity than by rigid ideological doctrines. Through the awareness of its global role rather than formalized dogmas, Britain shaped its security strategy and asserted its power on the international stage.

Meanwhile, it is reasonable to distinguish between imperial and foreign policy identity, though their utmost crossing is quite characteristic of the period of "imperial classics" under study. If under foreign policy identity we concern a set of ideas about the state, its global role, and its place which are formed through its correlation with other states and political communities as well as through marking its borders, mostly symbolic one, this definition brings us back to comprehension of the imperial factor in British foreign policy just before the First World War. The notion of imperial identity allows us to objectively assess the foreign policy consensus among the British political elite concerning the participation of the empire in the war and practicing imperial conferences of war and postwar periods. The phenomenon of imperial patriotism, contribution to the victory on behalf of different parts

of the empire, and independent interests of dominions in the course of peaceful settlement, demonstrated the complex nature of imperial identity which was represented by different groups of the political elite and the society of all countries of the future Commonwealth.

The sentence of P. Geddes, "Think globally, act locally," which was once pronounced on a different occasion, is nevertheless applicable to the description of the British vision of imperial and international security in the conditions when world politics is replacing Eurocentric politics. Thus, the historian J. Darwin suggests, instead of the too general concept of "empire," the more specific British "world-system" [11].

A familiar imperial narrative is making a comeback in the media space today. Since Brexit, London has increasingly talked about Global Britain as a foreign policy course. Many are alarmed by this rhetoric, criticizing it as an "Empire 2.0" concept. However, few understand what this concept is and how it might influence global politics in the long term. For example, O. Turner argues that Global Britain is not just an idea or a slogan, but a foreign policy narrative and, more specifically, a narrative of empire. To appear reasonable, its grandiose ambitions require knowledge of past imperial "successes" and acceptance of the image of the empire by the British public. And yet, Global Britain lacks effectiveness: as a domestic rather than an international narrative; because of its inherent regressive worldview; and because it contradicts the preferences of the international partners on whom Britain relies to a large extent [12].

Another version of the relationship between the imperial legacy and Brexit is put forward by R. Sanders. In the wake of the 2016 referendum, the idea that 'imperial nostalgia' motivated the Leave vote became a staple of academic commentary. Yet, in his opinion, such claims suffer from four important flaws. They are usually polemical in character; they suggest, at least implicitly, that only Leave voters are subject to imperial patterns of thought; they fail to differentiate between Commonwealth and imperial loyalties; and they conflate 'nostalgia' with 'amnesia'. Saunders comes from a longer historical perspective to offer a new reading of the relationship between Brexit and Empire, focusing on the ways in which empire is remembered and articulated [13].

Summing up, it should be noted that the phenomenon of imperial thinking, which motivated the British political elite in the process of forming a foreign policy strategy throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, remains a relevant subject of interdisciplinary research. In particular, new perspectives are opening up for the established historical and political paradigm of studying British foreign and imperial policy not only within the framework of postcolonial discourse, but also due to the expansion of the methodological foundations and categorical research apparatus.

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