EMPIRES OF THE EAST

FALL 2016-2017
1:20-3:15 W 5245 Mosse Humanities Building (MHB)

Professor André Wink
Office hours: 3:00-4:00 TR (any other time of the week by appointment)
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Course requirements: attendance of the weekly seminars, weekly readings, viewing of documentaries, participation in discussions, at least one short in-class presentation, one mid-term writing assignment (take home essay questions November 2-9) and a final writing assignment (take home essay questions December 14-21)

Subject of the seminar

“The impulse that drew an Alexander, a Timur, and a Baber eastwards to the Indus was the same that in the sixteenth century gave the Portuguese that brief lease of sovereignty whose outworn shibboleths they have ever since continued to mumble; that early in the last century made a Shah of Persia for ten years the arbiter of the East, that all but gave to France the empire which stouter hearts and a more propitious star have conferre d upon our own people; that to this day stirs the ambition and quickens the pulses of the Colossus of the North.”

Curzon, Persia and the Persian Question (1892)

Recent events in South Asia and the Middle East— from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 to the development of global jihadism or “terrorism” and the rise of Osama bin Laden and the Taliban, as well as the so-called Islamic State (ISIS or ISIL) — have taken almost everyone by surprise. They have also sparked a new and intense interest in the historical evolution of a region that until recently most Americans were quite unfamiliar with and regarded as of little relevance for themselves. In the daily press, in foreign policy journals, and in academic books, what is now often called the “new great game” for empire became a hotly debated subject. Parallels have been drawn between the Cold War engagements of recent decades and the nineteenth-century contest between Russia and Great Britain for power and influence in the same region. As the above quotation from Lord George Nathaniel Curzon [1859-1925; Viceroy of India, 1899-1905] illustrates, the struggle for empire in South Asia and the Middle East has been depicted as something that was historically inevitable and of all ages — proof, if any were needed, of the old adage that “geography is destiny.” But where does this inevitability come from? And what does it bode for the future of the region? Will America, now that it has been drawn into it, be just another, the latest, empire to become “the arbiter of the East”? In this seminar we will explore these, and related issues in five parts.
I. Geography and history

September 7, 14, 21


II. The rise of Islam and the Turko-Mongol empires

September 28, October 5, 12


View: YouTube — “In the footsteps of Marco Polo” (1.5 hour)

III. The Indian Ocean and global trade

October 19, 26, November 2


[November 2-9: mid-term writing assignment on essay questions relating to parts I-III]

IV. Modern imperialism and the Great Game

November 9, 16, 23


View: YouTube — “The fall of the British empire, Parts 1-3" (appr. 3 hours)

V. The rise of Asia: Turkey, Iran, India, and China in the 21st century

November 30, December 7, 14


[December 14-21: final writing assignment on essay questions relating to parts IV-V]