HISTOIRE NOUVELLE DE L'EUROPE
Published on *EHNE* (https://ehne.fr)

Pacification, an Imperial Process

19th-20th centuries

Author-s:
[Jean-François KLEIN](#) [1]

Abstract

Pacification is a term generally appended to the colonial wars and wars of decolonization waged by Europeans throughout their overseas empires. A diachronic analysis helps demonstrate how this term is much more complex, and that it has roots in the very origins of Europe, for it was derived from the Roman Republic, and has been in continual use ever since.

Article

In France, the term "pacification" is traditionally attributed to wars conducted overseas by Europeans during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the "colonial moment" of importance which followed territorial conquests. Whatever form they took, colonial empires imposed their presence and *legal* violence through "pacification" campaigns. Moreover, the colonial state may have needed to "pacify" territories which had already been subjugated but which were beset by more or less violent insurrections, or as part of the conflicts connected to decolonization. Generally speaking, colonial officials used the terms "pirate", "dacoit", "outlaw", "insurgent", etc., to refer to the rebels, who were thereby branded with infamy and fell under the force of colonial law, which authorized the legal use of violence and coercion in order to bring back "concord" and to establish colonial power in the name of "just law". Then could begin the process of "improvement", which is to say the exploiting of the people and natural wealth of the territory, in order to recuperate the cost of its conquest and administration. Incidentally, the term "pacification" was never used to designate wars of conquest, which were brutal and contained in short time frames, always denoting instead a process which was *internal* to a territory, whether national or imperial. It was ultimately the final phase before settling in.

Some historians retrace the beginnings of this violence and "colonial" practice to the asymmetric wars of the French Revolution—especially the Vendée War (1793-1795) studied by Jean-Clément Martin, in which the generalissimo Hoche was presented as the "pacifier of the Vendée"—or to the Napoleonic Empire, notably when confronted by the Spanish guerillas, who violently opposed the Grande Armée in 1806. Bugeaud, who was a young officer at the time, took part in the conflict and drew lessons which he applied in Algeria with the violence and the brio for which he is known, but also with a capacity for negotiation and accommodation through the Arab Bureaux he established in 1844. This field experience partially served as the model used by American officers in their struggle against the Native Americans of the Great Plains (J. Frémeaux). Other colonial officers refined these ideas, and tested them in other places and times. For instance in the French colonial empire, Faidherbe, who in 1857 founded the Senegalese Tirailleurs, inaugurated a specific policy for West Africa. Twenty years later, in Tonkin and later Madagascar, Pennequin and Pavie created the expression "to conquer hearts", an expression that stood for a program, and which was the equivalent of the "winning hearts and minds" of the Anglo-Saxons. It aimed to develop a strategy which was less oriented toward the simple use of brute force, seeking instead to rally indigenous populations to their own system of domination by way of a series of accommodations which fully made them actors within this system.

Shortly afterwards, Gallieni and Lyautey took up and claimed these ideas for themselves, in order to theorize them and to create what was called a "French school of pacification". A "school" which distinguished itself in Morocco and Syria, and then in the conflicts surrounding decolonization (Indochina, Algeria, Madagascar, Cameroon), and which was later exported to Israel, the United States, and Latin America. Even more recently, these theories have resonated in Iraq as well as Afghanistan and Mali.

The roots of "pacification", however, go much further back. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, officers who conducted asymmetric wars against the Amerindians in Latin America, Central America, and North America all used the term "pacification". This should not, however, be seen as the beginnings of colonialism, as we should bear in mind the importance of the edicts of pacification which punctuated the Wars of Religion (1562-1598), and which tried to put an end to the violence of the "Warriors of God" studied by Denis Crouzet. The most famous of these was uncontestably the Edict of Nantes which, from 1598 to 1685, imposed peace in the kingdom of France between Catholics and Protestants. In fact, "pacification" has always been conducted by the armies, whether regular or not, of European powers—royal or republican, legalist or in rebellion—in order to silence a specific enemy either by the sword or by negotiations. Although the term appeared for the first time in the French language in 1455, in *Le mystère de la Passion* penned by the dramatist and theologian Arnoul Greban, its origins go further back to the roots of Europe. Charlemagne, for instance, took the title of "pacifier of the Saxons" in 785, a feat of arms and political endeavour thus being inscribed in his title.

The term actually has Latin origins, and was used to describe a political and martial practice of the Roman world. It borrows from the Latin the word *pacificatio*, which in French means "return to peace, accommodation, reconciliation". This strong term itself stems from *pacificatum*, the "pacifier", a title attributed to magistrates of the Roman Republic, notably the consuls and proconsuls who enjoyed *Imperium*, the "command" of legions. Julius Caesar was the one who pacified Gaul, just as Octavian was the *pacificator* of the Roman world after crushing Mark Antony's sedition at the battle of Actium (31 BCE). From the accession of Augustus (14 BCE), every Roman emperor was proclaimed "pacifier", providing the Empire with the very essence of its existence, along with the maxim "Empire is peace". Hence, the *pacificator* was, in the original sense of the word, "a maker of peace", and therefore of prosperity. He provided and imposed—often *manu military*—economic, social, military, and especially moral norms.

After the brutal shock of the conquest began the gradual submission of the final rebels, both through the use of armed forces (conventional, police, or militia armies) and through a civilian policy ready to negotiate with the rebellion. One went with the other, and "pacification" consequently imposed the law of the victor on the vanquished. In practice, it was the legal argument that made it possible to impose—within a conquered territory, and on both the legal and moral level—the violence of the rule of law in the face of radical subversion. It fought against insurrections, which gave rise to the term "Counterinsurgency," which was used during the conquest of Highland Burma (1886-1899) or the state of emergency in British Malaya (1948-1960). In fact, it was always an *interior territory* which was pacified—whether it was a *real* one within the territory, or an *imagined* one on a map or in people's minds. The goal was as much to reestablish peace over a territory beset by civil war as to reestablish order by putting an end to dissension by all possible means, accompanied by political accommodation and a large array of repressive measures adapted to the situation of the terrain and population. "Pacification" was no longer strictly speaking a *war*, because the conquest was declared as being complete. Unlike war, it instead involved a long process unfolding over long periods of time, one that made simultaneous use of different means to reduce resistance against the rule of law, whether it was one that was genuine or in the name of a self-proclaimed law of one people to dominate other peoples, the ancient *versus* of the "civilizing mission" specific to all empires, whether colonial or not. We have come full circle, with the term now representing the more or less violent management of

difference.

Bibliography:

Burbank, Jane, Cooper, Frederick, *Empires. De la Chine ancienne à nos jours,* Paris, Payot, 2011.

Cochet, François, Dard, Olivier (eds.), *Subversion, anti-subversion, contre-subversion*, Paris, Riveneuve éditions, 2009.

Klein, Jean-François, *Pennequin, une "éthique coloniale française"? Penser la pacification, dépasser la colonisation (1849-1916),* unpublished thesis for *habilitation à diriger les recherches* (HDR) in modern history, typescript, under the direction of Olivier Forcade, Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2015, forthcoming from Presses universitaires de Rennes.