

THE GLOBAL 1860s

October 15-17, 2015

Department of History, Princeton University
Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies
Oxford Centre for Global History

The “long 1860s”, from roughly the Indian Rebellion of 1857 to the Paris Commune of 1871, witnessed an extraordinary sequence of developments possessing international and often trans-continental significance. There was a clutch of major wars: China’s Taiping Rebellion, the U.S. Civil War, the War of the Triple Alliance in South America, and the wars of Italian and German unification. Other states and regions relatively untouched by *major* warfare nonetheless experienced momentous internal changes in this same era: Russia abolished serfdom and the Meiji restoration transformed Japan, while the Ottoman Empire proceeded with major state reforms. Simultaneously, scientific, economic, financial and technological shifts, and intellectual innovations, working through the 1860s aided long distance communications and contacts, and altered patterns of knowledge and human experience: e.g. the coming of the telegraph and a much faster spread of advanced steam power. There were also conspicuous changes in attitudes to rights and human organization. Arguments over women’s emancipation, for instance, became more vociferous in this era, in Iran and parts of China and Latin America as well as in the “West”.

This international conference, which will be held at Aaron Burr Hall, Princeton University, 15-17 October 2015, will explore critically how far these and other developments in the long 1860s may profitably be viewed and analyzed as interconnected to some degree, as distinct from just contemporaneous phenomena. Bringing together expert scholars with different approaches and areas of

concentration, its emphasis will be very much on discussion and the exchange of ideas as well as the delivery of short papers. The paragraphs below sketch out some initial thoughts. We know there will be many more.

Conference Description

“The world has learnt much, but not enough to enable it to live in peace.” So noted a January 1864 article in the London *Times*, which quickly identified a common theme in the passing year’s events: “From the East and West, from the most ancient empires and the newest republics, the reports are of the same warlike character.” Germany, Poland, Italy, Mexico, China, and the United States made the *Times*’s list of war-ravaged countries. Across the Channel, the Parisian daily *Opinion Nationale* reached a similar conclusion some months later, counting also Algeria, New Zealand, Afghanistan, and Java as among “the three-quarters of humanity... living in the barbarous state of *war*.”¹

For once, newsmen were not exaggerating (by much). Americans are accustomed to thinking of the 1860s as a decade of crisis, revolution and reconfiguration. But from a global perspective, the U.S. Civil War was one of many geographically very widely dispersed conflicts at this time. In Continental Europe, wars of national unification in Germany and Italy (which also directly affected Austria, Denmark and France) remade the map and altered the balance of power, with wide-reaching consequences. In South America, the War of the Triple Alliance involved Paraguay, Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay in the largest armed conflict in Latin American history. And in China, the Taiping Rebellion grew from a provincial uprising into a war that had claimed 20 million lives by its end in 1864. In West Africa, the Jihad states clashed with each other and expanded their reach,

¹ London *Times*, January 5, 1864; *Opinion Nationale* quoted in [Philadelphia] *Christian Recorder*, November 12, 1864.

while the British Empire faced a more than usually serious outbreaks of violence in New Zealand, Jamaica, and the Indian subcontinent.

Yet if *some* contemporaries perceived the long 1860s as being exceptionally violent, and also as a momentous and formative era for other reasons, it has taken scholars rather longer seriously to examine and consider such assessments. In part, this has been because the idea of a “hundred years peace”, an interregnum between the destruction of Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815 and the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, has caused some historians to downplay the conflicts and turbulence inflaming large parts of the world in the middle decades of the nineteenth century.² Even the pioneering world historian Eric Hobsbawm, who recognized that the 1860s was indeed “a decade of blood,” remained partially committed to a Eurocentric chronological model of the nineteenth century that placed emphasis on its *relative* peace.³

Yet in the past two decades – in part because of the fashion for provincializing Europe – scholars have begun to think harder about the direct and indirect relationships between the many conflicts of the mid-nineteenth century. Some have gone so far as to propose the idea of a “world crisis” reaching from 1850 to 1871.⁴ Moreover, a recent crop of historians on both sides of the Atlantic have sought to recast the whole of the nineteenth century within a genuinely global geographic compass. This has produced a flowering of ambitious works with varying emphases and interpretations, but in virtually all of them the problem of the “great turbulence at midcentury,” as Jürgen Osterhammel describes it, has

² Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Beacon Press, 2001 [1944]); Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (Random House, 1987).

³ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital* (New York: Vintage, 1975), 78.

⁴ Michael Geyer and Charles Bright, “Global Violence and Nationalizing Wars in Eurasia and America: The Geopolitics of War in the Mid-Nineteenth Century,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 38 (Oct. 1996), 619–57; David Armitage, in “Interchange: Nationalism and Internationalism in the Era of the Civil War,” *Journal of American History*, 98, 2 (September 2011), 461.

loomed large.⁵ Our aim in this conference will be critically to debate and interrogate these arguments about the global significance of the long 1860s but also to broaden and deepen them.

The military conflicts of this era will inevitably form part of our discussions, as will the connections between these conflicts and issues of empire and nationalism (often simultaneously). The long 1860s is still sometimes looked at in teleological fashion as a forcing ground of modernities – and consequently and necessarily of newly energetic nationalisms. Yet, in some respects, the 1860s witnessed both the continuing strength and violence of older empires, and the emergence and recasting of newer empires: e.g., a newly-unified Germany was certainly nationalistic, but also chose explicitly to style itself an empire and engage in overseas colonization, while a re-cemented United States moved in the late nineteenth century from internal colonialism into overseas imperial adventures.

We also intend to address and analyze other major sources of change in this era that had transcontinental repercussions. A marked consolidation of overland and maritime steam power in this period for example provided for more diverse and thicker patterns of migration, travel and contacts in some regions than had previously been possible. The long 1860s witnessed both important extensions of railways and consequently of Western tourism in the Ottoman Empire, and the first serious visits by Japanese envoys to various European capitals to acquire information on political, social, financial and economic conditions. Throughout the conference we will be seeking to identify more *informal* sources and precipitants of change, and how individuals and private enterprises contributions to this, as well as the exertions of states and empires.

⁵ C.A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World* (Blackwell, 2004); Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World* (Princeton, 2013); Charles Maier, *Leviathan 2.0: Inventing Modern Statehood* (Harvard, 2014); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (Knopf, 2014).

We also seek to use this Conference to explore and identify possible areas of cross-border and cross-continental contact and cross-fertilization that have thus far been neglected. Most current self-declared “global” historians are male. This may help to explain why the changes in the position of women and in discourses about them that are very evident at this time in many regions are nonetheless barely touched on even in the best recent global histories of the long nineteenth century. Yet not only did initiatives to do with women’s rights in this era markedly increase in parts of Asia, Europe, the Americas and the Pacific World, but such initiatives were also sometimes connected with the wars of this period. Mass warfare in the long 1860s led to a new emphasis on the duties (and perks) of male citizens. This in turn focused more attention on issues of female citizenship, and on the lack of it across the globe.

But most of all, perhaps, we hope seriously to test the hypothesis that the long 1860s really was a more than usually significant era of “global” change. We want to interrogate how far – and where – such perceptions gained ground at this time, and how and in what ways men and women reacted to them. (It has been suggested for instance that the emergence of impressionist and pointillist art styles about this time was in part a response to the increasing speed and shifts in sensation made possible by a quantum rise in new technology.) Conversely, we want to identify regions and groupings where levels of change and greater connectedness remained limited or were relatively ignored, and we want to look too at *misperceptions* and at failures in understanding. For instance, US historians eager to “globalize” the American Civil War now rightly stress some of its international consequences: how blockades on cotton produced in the Southern states led, for instance, to new experiments in cotton production in Egypt and India. Yet in some respects the American conflict seems to have been viewed at the time by many of those living outside it as a local and regional event only. Most

expert war planners in Europe in 1914, as Michael Howard noted long ago, blithely assumed that the hideous and long-drawn out levels of casualties in the American Civil War would not and could not happen in their own continent, but that the quick German campaign against France in 1870 was rather the model to play with. In other words, they still provincialized the United States.

So, in holding this conference, we are aiming at an event that will be simultaneously broad-ranging (and broadly-recruited in terms of discipline, place of origin, and area of concentration), pioneering, and properly skeptical. The conference will begin on the late afternoon of Thursday October 15, with an opening agenda session, a reception, and a dinner for all speakers. On Friday and Saturday, October 16-17, there will be a series of panels, with opportunities too for wider discussion. Committed speakers include historians and scholars from other disciplines at Princeton University, Professors James Belich and John Darwin, joint heads of the “Global Nodes, Global Orders” Leverhulme-funded network based at Oxford University, and Jürgen Osterhammel, whose recent *Transformation of the World* (published by Princeton University Press) has raised and illumined many of the issues we seek to address.