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978-1-107-11225-4 - Export Empire: German Soft Power in Southeastern Europe, 1890–1945

Stephen G. Gross

Excerpt

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Introduction: The foundations of soft power and informal empire

A global economic crisis like the present one lets the problems of Central Europe mount to a catastrophic extent. An upswing in the world economy will certainly lead to a temporary improvement of the situation in Central Europe, but crisis here will always be imminent as long as conflict takes the place of cooperation, the drive for autarchy the place of collaboration . . . and as long as commercial activity remains restricted to small markets, which will never be an adequate basis for an economic system.¹

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries Germany's prosperity and its power on the world stage have existed because of its economy and its exports. Yet during the greatest upheaval in European history in recent times – the thirty-year crisis that lasted from 1914 to 1945 – Germany's economy came under severe strain, threatening to undermine the very basis of German society. The twin crises of World War I and the Great Depression spawned competing visions for new world orders as Germans debated how to rescue their economy from chronic unemployment and their nation from social dislocation. Some viewed the disruption of war and depression as mere hurdles on the track back to an integrated global market, which they hoped to pursue by deepening ties across the Atlantic. Others, led by Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party, saw in these crises the chance to push Germany toward autarchy, to militarize the economy, and to use hard power to conquer a formal, territorial empire in Europe.²

¹ Wilhelm Gürge and Wilhelm Grotkopp (eds.), *Grossraumwirtschaft: der Weg zur europäischen Einheit. Ein Grundriss* (Berlin: Organisation Verlagsgesellschaft, 1931), preface.

² Adam Tooze, *Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (New York: Penguin, 2006); Theo Balderston, *Economics and Politics in the Weimar Republic* (Cambridge University Press, 2002); Eric Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (Princeton University Press, 2007), 129–69; Harold James, *The End of Globalization: Lessons from the Great Depression* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

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However, a third group, of businessmen, academics, publicists, and economists, wanted to navigate a middle path between free trade and autarchy, between global integration and formal imperialism. They drew on techniques and strategies – a liberal *Weltpolitik* – first developed in the empire of Kaiser Wilhelm II during the 1890s. After 1918 they aimed to build an informal commercial empire in the heart of Europe, and in doing so give Germany a continental economic base to compete in an increasingly turbulent and cutthroat global marketplace.

German imperialism evokes images of military aggression and ethnic cleansing. Yet even under the Third Reich, German imperialism has also worked through more subtle processes of economic and cultural penetration. Before Nazi Germany set Europe ablaze and brutally conquered a territorial empire in the Second World War, a different kind of informal empire existed in and from Germany, without which Hitler's violence would have been impossible. This informal German empire was much more than just German; it involved German minorities as well as non-German elites from across Southeastern and Central Europe. And it gave Germany access to the markets and resources of half a continent. This empire emerged, however, not through guns fired. Instead, it arose through the work of businessmen of all kinds who manufactured products demanded outside Germany, through private institutions that engineered development programs, and through professors and students who became messengers of German ideas. It combined the export of goods and culture. And it was built with a kind of influence that can be called soft power.

The proponents of German soft power and informal empire differed in their goals from Hitler, and his violent project for *Lebensraum*. Nevertheless, by gaining access to critical resources and foreign markets during a period of global depression, these elites and the institutions they worked through enabled Hitler to militarize the German economy, and they helped make the Third Reich's territorial conquest during the Second World War economically possible. To understand Hitler's hard power and formal empire in Europe, we must first pay careful attention to Germany's soft power and informal economic empire.

Germany built its informal empire through foreign trade, through exports and imports. And the geographical focus of this trade empire was Southeastern Europe: the peninsula stretching from the plains of Hungary, in its northernmost formulation, to the Aegean Sea at its southern tip. It is a mountainous and forested region interspersed with fertile valleys, much of it belonging to the Danube river basin. The term Southeastern Europe was and is often used interchangeably with the Balkans, a label that took on a pejorative meaning after the brutality of the Balkan

wars in 1912 and 1913.³ In comparison to Western Europe, before 1945 the region was agrarian and poor after decades, centuries even, of demographic growth, parcelized farming, and economic mismanagement. Since the middle of the nineteenth century the de-urbanization of older, predominantly Muslim towns had stymied industrial development. Agricultural productivity had actually declined in many places, where the rapidly expanding population led to deforestation and the cultivation of marginal land. By the turn of the twentieth century three-quarters of Southeastern Europe's population engaged in farming; the region's GNP per capita was a third that of Britain.⁴

Despite these economic challenges, Germans saw Southeastern Europe as a place of latent possibilities: "the land exceptionally fertile, the harvests rich in potential, the population ready to be educated."⁵ In contrast to Poland or Russia, which many Germans viewed as a barbarous region and the focal point for their vision of *Lebensraum*, German business elites saw the Southeast as a region "in embryo," a site of "constant renovation" that was ineluctably "Europeanizing" itself.⁶ These small, new, and relatively fragile states offered the path of least resistance to German economic expansion. Their raw materials and agricultural products seemed to complement the needs of German industry. Their geographic proximity to Germany, the presence of German minorities, and the use of German as the commercial lingua franca gave German merchants certain advantages. Within this region Romania and Yugoslavia held the most value for Germany – the former for its petroleum, grain, and oil seed crops; the latter for its minerals like copper, bauxite, and manganese. As such, they became the focal point for German soft power and informal empire, and provide the bulk of examples for this book.

³ Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); for a critique of Todorova see Holm Sundhaussen, "Der Balkan: Ein Plädoyer für Differenz," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 29 (2003), 608–24.

⁴ Ivan Berend and György Ranki, *Economic Development in East-Central Europe in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974); John R. Lampe and Marvin R. Jackson, *Balkan Economic History, 1550–1950: From Imperial Borderlands to Developing Nations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982); Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 31–3; Paul Bairoch, "Europe's Gross National Product: 1800–1975," *Journal of European Economic History* 5 (1976), 273–340.

⁵ Quotation from Hermann von Sauter, "Die wirtschaftliche Entwicklung der Balkanstaaten," in M. J. Bonn (ed.), *Die Balkanfrage* (Munich: Handelshochschule, 1914), 183–202, at 199; Welimir Bajkitsch, "Deutschlands Wirtschaftsinteressen am Balkan," *ibid.*, 203–33; Willy Lochmueller, *Unsere Zukunft liegt auf dem Balkan! Afrikanische oder europäische Politik?* (Leipzig: Volger, 1913), 35–9.

⁶ Special report by the Mitteleuropäischer Wirtschaftstag on Southeastern Europe commissioned by the Four-Year Plan in 1940, p. 148, 294B, R 63, Bundesarchiv Berlin (BA).

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The story of German soft power and economic influence goes far beyond the late nineteenth century and the interwar decades. It extends into our own day, and involves a longstanding German tradition of trying to shape European and global affairs. Throughout the twentieth century Germany has relied heavily on trade to drive its economy. Today only three countries do over one trillion dollars' worth of exports a year: China, the United States, and Germany. This is a remarkable feat for a nation of just eighty million people. Exports have kept the German economy stable through the euro crisis, and they have made Germany the country that all other European states look to in order to hold the EU together. Without paying careful attention to the ebbs and flows of German trade, it is difficult to fully understand the Wilhelmine Empire, the Weimar Republic, the Third Reich, or the enduring role of Germany as a global power today.

Scholarship on German trade and imperialism in Southeastern Europe

German trade in the Balkans first gained public attention in the tense months preceding the Second World War, when Anglophone economists began criticizing German policy as a tool of exploitation. The Third Reich, they argued, was conducting a “bloodless invasion” whereby it dumped useless junk like aspirin or musical instruments into Southeastern Europe in return for valuable raw materials that could fuel its military, like oil.⁷ These studies revolved around the terms-of-trade question, and whether Germany was able to forcibly extract more imports from the Balkans for a given amount of exports. For economists writing in the aftermath of Munich and Appeasement, and with limited access to German trade statistics, the answer was a resounding yes. Those who suggested Germany might not be exploiting these small states were criticized for lending credence to Nazi propaganda in a time of imminent war.⁸

After 1945 the terms-of-trade debate reentered the limelight in a new context, as economic development of the “Third World” became a major goal of the United Nations and the United States. Yet the new discipline

⁷ Paul Einzig, *Bloodless Invasion: German Economic Penetration into Danubian States and the Balkans* (London: Duckworth, 1939); Guenter Reimann, *The Vampire Economy: Doing Business under Fascism* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1939); Antonin Basch, *The Danube Basin and the German Economic Sphere* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943).

⁸ Frederic Benthams of the Royal Institute of International Affairs, for instance, made this claim in *South-Eastern Europe: A Political and Economic Survey* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939); Paul Einzig, “Why Defend Nazi Trade Methods?” *The Banker* (May 1941), 108–13; Frederic Benthams, “A Reply to Dr Einzig,” *The Banker* (June 1941), 182–6.

of development economics quickly generated criticisms of existing global economic relations. Among the earliest and most important was the argument made by the Argentinian Raul Prebisch and Hans Singer, an émigré German Jew working at the United Nations, that over time primary product exporters were bound to see their terms of trade deteriorate in the face of technological advances in industrial production.⁹ Foreign trade, in other words, could be a channel whereby industrial states exploited agrarian ones. Eastern and Southeastern Europe was a natural place to study this phenomenon, given the recent history of German trade policy, and the fact that many pioneers of development economics came from this half of the continent and considered it to be the first “underdeveloped” region.¹⁰ Yet when scholars revisited Nazi trade policy they found little to support the Prebisch–Singer hypothesis. To the contrary, according to many estimates Germany paid prices for Balkan imports that were well above those of the world market, while selling exports at competitive prices.¹¹ This led some historians to conclude that, given the lack of alternative trade partners, before 1939 Southeastern Europe may have actually benefited from participating in Germany’s economic sphere.¹²

Diplomatic historians questioned this interpretation, and in doing so suggested the notion of informal imperialism to understand German trade policy. Through archival studies of trade treaty negotiations, they claimed Germany used its economic muscle not to change the terms of trade. Instead, it willingly paid high prices to achieve the *political* goal of securing resources for rearmament. With a refurbished military at its disposal, the Nazis intended in the future to exploit Southeastern Europe and its raw materials “peacefully, if possible, but through direct military appropriation if necessary.” Diplomatic historians, in

⁹ Hans Singer, “The Distribution of Gains between Investing and Borrowing Countries,” *American Economic Review* 40 (1950), 473–85; Raul Prebisch, *The Economic Development of Latin America and its Principal Problems* (Lake Success, NY: United Nations, Economics Commission for Latin America, 1950).

¹⁰ Paul Rosenstein-Rodan was from Krakow and Peter Bauer from Budapest. Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 279; Joseph Love, *Crafting the Third World: Theorizing Underdevelopment in Rumania and Brazil* (Stanford University Press, 1996).

¹¹ Charles P. Kindleberger, “German Terms of Trade by Commodity Classes and Areas,” *Review of Economics and Statistics* 36 (1954), 167–74; Larry Neal, “The Economics and Finance of Bilateral Clearing Agreements: Germany, 1934–1938,” *Economic History Review* 32 (1979), 391–404.

¹² Alan Milward, “The Reichsmark Bloc and the International Economy,” in Edward N. Peterson, Gerhard Hirschfeld, and Lothar Kettenacker (eds.), *Der “Führerstaat”: Mythos und Realität; Studien zur Struktur und Politik des Dritten Reich* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981), 377–413.

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other words, portrayed German involvement in Southeastern Europe as imperial in nature, imperialism defined broadly by the *intent* to exploit economically.¹³

Yet just as diplomatic historians turned to informal imperialism to analyze German trade, studies of empire began moving beyond economics to explore questions of race, ideology, and culture. Scholarship on Nazi imperialism, moreover, began shifting away from the Balkans and away from the economy, toward Eastern Europe and Russia to explore the ideological dynamics behind the racial violence of the Second World War.¹⁴ Over time, historians traced the emergence of a “German myth of the East,” which juxtaposed German orderliness, efficiency, and civilization with Slavic dirtiness, disorder, and barbarism.¹⁵ They showed how this myth gained traction before the First World War among military leaders and pan-Germanists, how it became institutionalized among radical think-tanks in the 1920s and 1930s, and how, during the Second World War, the Nazis harnessed this discourse to plan the deportation of Slavic nationalities.¹⁶ More recently, historians have compared the Third Reich with other empires to see how Germans governed the non-German nationalities of Europe, and to understand why empires commit ethnic cleansing.¹⁷ Scholars have likewise turned to the

¹³ Hans-Jürgen Schröder, “Südosteuropa als ‘Informal Empire’ Deutschlands 1933–1939: das Beispiel Jugoslawien,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 23 (1975), 61–83; David Kaiser, *Economic Diplomacy and the Origins of the Second World War: Germany Britain, France, and Eastern Europe, 1930–39* (Princeton University Press, 1980); quotation from William S. Grenzebach, *Germany’s Informal Empire in East-Central Europe: German Economic Policy toward Yugoslavia and Rumania 1933–1939* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1988), 240.

¹⁴ For instance, Omer Bartov, *The Eastern Front, 1941–45: German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1985); Woodruff D. Smith, *The Ideological Origins of Nazi Imperialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Michael Burleigh, *Germany Turns Eastwards: A Study of Ostforschung in the Third Reich* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

¹⁵ Wolfgang Wippermann, *Die Deutschen und der Osten: Feindbild und Traumland* (Darmstadt: Primus, 2007); Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius, *The German Myth of the East: 1800 to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Kristin Kopp, *Germany’s Wild East: Constructing Poland as Colonial Space* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012).

¹⁶ Ingo Haar und Michael Fahlbusch (eds.), *German Scholars and Ethnic Cleansing* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005); Michael Fahlbusch, *Wissenschaft im Dienst der nationalsozialistischen Politik? Die “Volksdeutschen Forschungsgemeinschaften” von 1931–1945* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1999); Ingo Haar, *Historiker im Nationalsozialismus: deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft und der “Völkstumskampf” im Osten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000); Michael Wildt, *An Uncompromising Generation: The Nazi Leadership of the Reich Security Main Office*, trans. Tom Lampert (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009).

¹⁷ Mark Mazower, *Hitler’s Empire: Nazi Rule in Occupied Europe* (London: Penguin, 2008); Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books,

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cultural and racial aspects of the Wilhelmine Empire, finding precedents in the 1890s for attitudes about racial hierarchies, violence, and total solutions that would reemerge in the 1930s and 1940s in more radical forms.¹⁸

These recent shifts in scholarship have generated new ways of thinking about trade, international relations, and imperialism. They identified previously overlooked non-state organizations – academic institutes and think-tanks – that influenced policy-making. They introduced questions of economic development and labor into imperial history. And they broadened the chronological sweep for studying German imperialism, highlighting provocative connections between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries.¹⁹

All of this has raised new questions that need answering in order to fully grasp the multidimensional nature of German imperialism. If certain continuities exist between nineteenth-century German attitudes toward Eastern Europe and the ethnic violence of the Second World War, can other ones be found to help us understand German ambitions in South-eastern Europe? Were Serbs, Croats, or Romanians included in the increasingly biological racism that Germans used to justify imperialism in Russia? How can we reconcile Germany's imperial agenda in South-eastern Europe with the possibility that these states, or at least groups within these states, may have benefited from economic ties with Germany? By contrast, to what extent did trade or economic development lead to dependency and exploitation? Finally, and most broadly, how can we merge a study of economics with culture and ideology to provide a new picture of German imperialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries?

2010); Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton University Press, 2010); John Darwin, *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire since 1405* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008); Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).

¹⁸ Sebastian Conrad and Jürgen Osterhammel (eds.), *Das Kaiserreich Transnational: Deutschland in der Welt, 1871–1914* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004); Isabel Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); Sebastian Conrad, *Deutsche Kolonialgeschichte* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2008); Andrew Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South* (Princeton University Press, 2010).

¹⁹ Dirk van Laak, *Über alles in der Welt: deutscher Imperialismus im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2005); Shelly Baranowski, *Nazi Empire: German Colonialism and Imperialism from Bismarck to Hitler* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Uta Poiger, "Imperialism and Empire in Twentieth-Century Germany," special issue of *History and Memory* 17, nos. 1–2 (2005), 117–43.

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	<i>Informal empire</i>	<i>Formal empire</i>
<i>Soft power</i>	Cultural or economic hierarchy Networks and incentives	Political hierarchy Networks and incentives
<i>Hard power</i>	Cultural or economic hierarchy Threat and coercion	Political hierarchy Threat and coercion

Figure 0.1 Matrix of power

Soft power, informal empire, and the importance of networks

To answer these questions, *Export Empire* uses the concepts of soft power and informal empire to trace how Germany translated its economic and cultural capital in Southeastern Europe into political influence from the 1890s to the 1940s.²⁰ These concepts fit into a matrix that describes how one country or group can exert power over another (see Figure 0.1). Two variables define this matrix. First, how is power exercised – through the hard power of coercion, or through soft power that relies on networks and incentives? Second, what is the hierarchical relationship between the two countries – is it an economic or a cultural hierarchy, or is there also an explicitly political one? As the relationship between these two countries migrates from the top to the bottom of the matrix, the stronger one increasingly depends on coercion to achieve its goals. As the relationship moves from left to right – from informal to formal imperialism – hierarchies of power between the two countries become more entrenched and reinforced by political channels.

The type of power a country deploys can change with the context. Informal empires often rely on both soft and hard power. An example of the former would be educational exchange programs, in which elites

²⁰ This book avoids the term hegemony, which is commonly used to describe a powerful nation acting to preserve a *liberal* international economy as well as the status quo. During the 1920s and 1930s, the German elites studied here were actively trying to *overturn* the status quo, in order to establish an alternative to a liberal global economy. Robert Gilpin, *Global Political Economy: Understanding the International Economic Order* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 94; Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton University Press, 2005).

from the periphery study in the universities of the core. An example of the latter would be the gunboat diplomacy used by nineteenth-century European states to extract debt repayments from non-Europeans. Formal empires, likewise, use soft power to justify their rule and ease the cost of governing their peripheries. Yet because formal empires maintain direct political administration over other regions or countries – possessing the ability to write laws, appoint government officials, control the police and the military, and even deport or kill their foreign subjects – they have at their disposal the greatest potential to deploy coercion or hard power.

This matrix is not a rigid grid, but instead a set of dynamic power relations. The relationship between two countries can move between quadrants, and even occupy more than one at a time. Indeed, the distinction between these terms is fluid, particularly between the two concepts most important to this study, soft power and informal imperialism. A country can use soft power even if it has no imperial ambitions; soft power does not necessarily lead to informal imperialism, nor must informal imperialism always be built on soft power. But the two often develop in tandem and they share important commonalities. According to political scientist Joseph Nye, soft power is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than through coercion or payments. If hard power is about using force to get others to accept your goals or policies, soft power is about convincing people that they want what you want, that they share your goals, and that your policies will benefit them as well as you. In international relations, hard power is measured in military strength, demography, resources, and territory. Soft power, by contrast, is amorphous and better captured by the ability of a nation to establish its ideas as legitimate in the eyes of others, and shape the preferences or policies of other nations and their leaders.²¹

Informal empire is perhaps an even more amorphous concept than soft power. John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, historians of the British Empire, first introduced the concept in the 1950s to illustrate how Britain secured markets outside its formal colonies during the nineteenth century. Their key contribution was conceptualizing imperialism as a sliding scale that changes with the context, illustrated by their aphorism, influence “by informal means if possible, by formal annexation when

²¹ Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), quotation from preface; Jan Zielonka, *Europe as Empire: The Nature of the Enlarged European Union* (Oxford University Press, 2006); Peter J. Katzenstein, *A World of Regions: Asia and Europe in the American Imperium* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

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necessary.”²² Since then the term has been refined, debated, and applied to numerous case studies, with a particular focus on British involvement in China and Latin America.²³ This has allowed historians to identify characteristics of informal imperialism, which advance into view or recede depending on the needs of the imperial power and the larger context of what is and is not possible.

First, in informal empires the stronger state often maintains military advisors to influence the weaker state’s armed forces. Second, nationals of the stronger state might occupy a preponderant presence in the domestic economy or the foreign trade of the weaker state. This approaches a monopoly position of owning or supplying the latter’s most critical sectors, or a monopsony position in purchasing its most strategic exports. Third, the stronger state, or banks representing the stronger state, can exercise control over the public finances of the weaker state. Fourth, the weaker state is frequently a net importer of capital from financial institutions in the stronger state, to the point of becoming dependent on this inflow of investment. Fifth, the weaker state may develop a group of indigenous elites who willingly collaborate and “share a common ‘cosmology’” with the stronger state, which often revolves around some project of modernization or development. Through these tactics the stronger state avoids direct political control but nevertheless exercises the sixth and most important aspect of informal imperialism: veto power over the domestic or foreign policies of the weaker state. These characteristics of informal imperialism, in other words, create a power gradient or hierarchy between two states that the stronger one can exploit.²⁴

Informal imperialism is often economic in nature. Take foreign trade, for example, which Albert Hirschman identified in 1945 as a potential instrument of informal power, and which Germany used to great success in the Balkans. In *National Power and the Structure of Foreign Trade*, Hirschman outlined two dynamics by which trade can further the “power of coercion which one nation may bring to bear upon other nations.”²⁵ First, through the “supply effect” of trade, states can acquire goods that

²² John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, “The Imperialism of Free Trade,” *Economic History Review* 6, no. 1 (1953), 1–15.

²³ A. G. Hopkins, “Informal Empire in Argentina: An Alternative View,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 26, no. 2 (1994), 469–84; Peter Winn, “British Informal Empire in Uruguay in the Nineteenth Century,” *Past & Present* 73 (1976), 100–26.

²⁴ This is a condensed account of Jürgen Osterhammel’s ten-part definition of informal empire in, “Semi-Colonialism and Informal Empire in Twentieth Century China: Towards a Framework of Analysis,” in Wolfgang Mommsen (ed.), *Imperialism and After: Continuities and Discontinuities* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986), 291–314.

²⁵ Albert Hirschman, *National Power and the Structure of Foreign Trade* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1945), 13.