

1 Steam and Isthmus Canals

On 17 November 1869 the French Imperial steam yacht, *L'Aigle*, leading a procession of ships, was the first vessel to sail the Suez Canal. On board was Eugénie, Empress of France, wife of Napoleon III. The naval pageant was the climax of days of festivities celebrating the opening of the canal. There were balls, fireworks and public entertainment on a grand scale, while the streets of Alexandria were decorated with flags and arches. At night lighted torches on roofs illuminated the city. In the harbour the men-of-war and merchantmen displayed coloured lanterns. The host was Ismail, the Khedive of semi-independent Egypt, whose predecessor, Muhammad Said, had allowed Ferdinand de Lesseps to draw up plans for the digging of the canal and for a new harbour, Port Said.

To underline the international importance of the occasion European royalty were well represented. Among those who had travelled to Egypt were Franz Joseph I, Emperor of Austria-Hungary; Crown Prince Friedrich III of Prussia; Grand Duke Michael of Russia; and Prince Hendrik, the brother of the Dutch king. The British delegation was a more modest one. Great Britain was represented by Henry Elliot, British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire rather than by a member of the royal family; no better illustration of the fact that the canal was, first and foremost, a French project, constructed by a French engineer and largely financed by French money. Due to their concerns about an advance in Egypt by France, their political and colonial rival, and the easier access to India the new shipping route offered France, the British had viewed the digging of the canal with distrust, doing their best to wreck the project. For similar reasons, the Ottoman Sultan, Abdulhamid II, was conspicuously absent. He could hardly attend a ceremony in a part of his Empire that in the past, by military might, had forced Istanbul to grant it independence in all but name, while he also feared a decline of the traditional trade routes in the region. Fortified in his reservations by British diplomats he had opposed the project from the start (Palmer 1992: 132).

Little more than a year later, towards the close of the Franco-Prussian War – which would lead to the dethronement of Napoleon III – another impressive ceremony took place, this time in France. On 18 January 1871, in the Hall of Mirrors in the Palace of Versailles, Wilhelm I, king of Prussia, was crowned Emperor of Germany. Present at this exclusively German party were princes, grand dukes and other representatives of the nobility of the individual states and of important mercantile free cities, such as Hamburg

and Bremen, numerous military officers and other German dignitaries; and, of course, Otto von Bismarck, Prime Minister of Prussia, the first Chancellor of the new German Empire and the architect of the meeting, of Prussia's foreign policy and of German unification. Though the ceremony was not as grand as the painting from 1885 by Anton von Werner wants us to believe – many of the officers present were in simple field dress (Steinberg 2011: 307) – it was a manifestation of a German patriotic spirit on French soil. For the first time the *Kaiserhymne*, the Prussian national anthem *Heil dir im Siegerkranz* (Hail to Thee in Victor's Crown), resounded as the semi-official hymn of the new Empire.

There was still a third important ceremony that took place around the same time, albeit with less pomp and with no royalty or aristocracy present: the driving in of the last spike into the track of the American Transcontinental Railway at Promontory Summit in Utah on 10 May 1869. The railway connecting the American east and west coasts offered new perspectives for trade with Australia, New Zealand and China (and looking in the opposite direction, with Europe). The opening of the Suez Canal and the completion of the Pacific railroad, the *Straits Times* would write in January 1870 in Singapore, were 'two vast enterprises destined to exert

Figure 1 Suez Canal around 1890



Source: KITLV 38174

a mighty influence upon the trade of the world, and to revolutionize that of the entire East' (Bogaars 1955: 101).

The Suez Canal drastically shortened the journey from Europe to India and the Far East. Combined with the replacement of sailing vessels with steamships, which took place around the same time, the possibility to sail the Canal soon led to a boost in trade and passenger travel. The Persian Gulf, India and Asia were to experience an influx of ships and European residents, including, as Margaret MacMillan (1988: 21) and others have pointed out, women, changing not only the composition but also the way of life of the foreign communities that had sprung up in Asia. To the south, Australia, New Zealand and the islands in the South Sea saw a similar intensification of sea traffic. The replacement of sailing ships with steam-propelled ones not only enhanced European shipping and trade in the Pacific, it also boosted sea traffic from the west coast of the United States into the Pacific.

Some fifteen years later, on 7 November 1885, at Graigellachie in British Columbia, the last spike on the Canadian transcontinental railroad was driven, with its terminus at Port Moody near Vancouver. The Canadian Pacific Railway gave Great Britain and its colonies an additional stake in trans-Pacific trade. Russia did not lag far behind. In 1891 construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway, connecting St Petersburg with Vladivostok on the West Pacific north coast, was started, a sign of Russia's aim to expand eastwards into north Asia. Sometimes the locomotive, that other steam-powered means of transport enabling fast communication, worked in tandem with the steamship. Sometimes it acquired a significance of its own as a means to penetrate deep into a country. Railways were essential in the opening up of the Asian continent and in expanding influence. They were a medium of 'peaceful conquest' (Doumer 1905: 343). It was not just trade people were thinking of. After the Prussian victory in 1866 over Austria and in 1870 over France had demonstrated how important the movement of troops and equipment by rail could be for victory on the battlefield, railways entered the strategic considerations of military experts and laymen. They had not only become avenues of trade – and of civilisation some would stress – but also instruments of military advance and defence. Railways, the London newspaper *The Outlook* wrote in May 1902, referring to China, were 'the source and agencies of all power. From the railway line proceed all military influence and effective political action' (Cunningham 1902: 189).

One of the side effects of faster and intensified communication was that in trade and politics the home country could expand its hold over its overseas possessions. Decisions were increasingly taken at home by the government officials and cabinets, and by directors and boards of commercial

companies, rather than on the spot in Asia and the Pacific. The telegraph was an equally important contributing factor in realising this, allowing for frequent contact between the home government and company headquarters and its representatives abroad, also, or especially so, at moments of crisis. An overland connection running from London through Germany, Russia, Southeastern Europe and Iran to Calcutta, had been completed in January 1870. In that same year a more secure – from a British perspective – direct submarine telegraph cable link between London and Bombay also became operative. From Madras the line was extended to Singapore and Hong Kong, bringing the whole of the Far East within its reach.

A greater European and American presence in the Pacific, combined with a new sense of colonial grandeur in the first half of the 1880s, first in France and thereafter in Germany, made the Pacific an arena of fierce competition between the powers. Steam meant speed and made it possible to sail irrespective of wind directions and currents, but it also had its setbacks. Coals had to be stored on board ship where space was limited. On long voyages, steamers, whether they were warships or merchantmen, had to bunker at coaling stations, the possession of which became of vital importance. Colonies required coaling stations en route. Trans-Pacific shipping made the same necessity felt and had seen to it that Samoa, Hawaii and other Pacific island groups had acquired a new strategic importance. In the considerations of contemporaries coaling stations, also serving as naval bases, were not just important for own trade and the protection thereof, they could also be used as a base from which to attack the shipping lines of rivals with what the Germans sometimes called *Handelsstörer*, warships which had the specific task of disrupting the enemy's trade. How effective such a strategy could be would only become apparent in the first months of World War One, with the exploits of the German raider, the *Emden*; her operations in the Bay of Bengal, the Andaman Sea and along the Malay coast led to panic in British India, Ceylon and the Malay Peninsula. When, pursued by British, French, Russian, Japanese and Australian warships, she raided the port of Penang she single-handedly sank about twenty Allied vessels, including a French torpedo boat and a Russian cruiser. When, in times of war, access to coaling stations was denied fleets either had to take along coalers, as the Russian fleet – which used Singapore as a coaling station for decades – did when it sailed from the Baltics to the Far East during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, or coalers had to be directed to faraway seas in advance, as Germany did to supply its raiders on the eve of World War One.

For a long time, Great Britain had been the only European nation that could rely on its own network of coaling stations in the Pacific. France had

conquered Indochina, but because of the three regular shipping lines it established connecting Saigon with Manila, Bangkok and Singapore – only the latter was viable – it did not arrange for a coaling station until 1891 (Lanessan 1895: 207). Before that date, French merchantmen and warships on their way to and from Saigon took in coals in Singapore. Saigon only got its own bunker facility after Singapore's acting Governor, Sir Frederick Dickson, banned the coaling of foreign warships without government permission in 1890 (Bogaars 1955: 114-5). Germany, in fact, never succeeded in building a network of coaling stations in the Pacific that could successfully support its navy in times of war. This was a consequence of, but also one of the reasons for, the decision of German naval command to opt for the construction of a strong offensive fleet in European waters – even temporarily sacrificing its naval presence in the north Pacific – also intended to serve as a deterrent for an attack on its colonies.

Once steam power had become more efficient than wind power, governments, navies, owners of passenger and freight ocean-going shipping lines, all went in search of suitable coaling stations. The consequences of this were felt first in the South Pacific, where the increase in sea traffic would contribute to the opening up and subsequently submission to Western rule of the island groups located there. Establishing an exclusive coaling station and preferably also a naval base became an additional reason, besides economic exploitation, to look for land in Samoa and other Pacific island groups. By 1900 there were no independent island states left in the Central and South Pacific; the last to lose its independence being Samoa. All had become German, British, French or American. To the north, in China and Southeast Asia, coals had a political significance in another way. Steam power made coals a strategic commodity, even, in the words of a contemporary author, a 'valuable material of war' (Norman 1884: 188). Control of coal mines became essential and, as these words indicate, entered the discussions about relations between the powers and provided yet another impulse for colonial territorial expansion.

In the early 1870s, it had not immediately dawned upon everybody what prospects the sailing of the Suez Canal and the replacement of wind with steam power offered. In the words of a senior Hong Kong colonial civil servant in those days, Dr Ernst Johann Eitel (1895: 571-2), Hong Kong, the British naval base and entrepôt port in the Far East, experienced a 'complete revolution'. Yet, as he recollects twenty-five years later,

as it took Hongkong merchants several years to realize how much nearer, to London Hongkong now was, so it took Her Majesty's government and the

British public several decades of years to realize the increased political and strategic importance Hongkong had assumed [...] in the general scheme of British Colonial defence, and its subsequent need of first class fortifications.

Shipping and commerce had flourished, but another reason why Hong Kong had grown in importance for British colonial interests was that it was the only coaling station for the British navy in the Far East, and this in a time of 'universal employment of steamers in the navies of all great Maritime Powers' (ibid.: 572). There had also been misconceptions. In Singapore, like Hong Kong a port of transshipment, it was erroneously feared that the opening of the Suez Canal would hurt its trade with nearby ports (Bogaars 1955: 119). In fact, the Suez Canal only increased the economic importance of the city. With ships no longer having to round Africa, of the three possible routes on the way to or from the Far East – through the Straits of Malacca, by way of the Sunda Strait or passing through the waters between the Moluccas and New Guinea – only the first remained a viable option, at the same time adding to the strategic importance of the coast of continental Southeast Asia. In Shanghai, a different reaction had prevailed. The city experienced a financial crisis due to speculation inspired by too optimistic a belief in what the Suez Canal would mean for China trade (Wright 1908: 91).

Not all British merchants and politicians had been as ignorant as the words of Eitel suggest. Shipping companies immediately saw the advantage. In November 1869, the British P&O passenger ship *Delta*, part steamer, part sailing vessel, emblematically sailed in the wake of the *L'Aigle*. Six years later, the British took control over the running of the Suez Canal. In November 1875, after Ismail had gone bankrupt, the British government, without consulting Parliament, bought Ismail's shares in the Suez Canal Company and, as a result, acquired almost half of the total number of shares. The British Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, told the House of Commons in February 1876 that the purchase of the shares had been a 'political transaction', aimed at securing the route to India and other British possessions in the East.¹ Again, a few years later, in 1882, Great Britain strengthened its grip still further by occupying Egypt, intervening as powers were prone to do when domestic disturbances threatened their economic interests and the lives of their nationals. Egypt remained a nominal province of the Ottoman Empire, but from then on was ruled by the British and their Consul General. It brought the British immediate gains, but diplomatically Egypt became a

1 Disraeli in House of Commons 21-2-1876 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/commons/1876/feb/21/resolution-adjourned-debate).

millstone around Great Britain's neck. British control over Egypt remained a major bone of contention for years to come between Great Britain and France, with Germany trying to exploit Anglo-French animosity.

The second ceremony, the coronation of Wilhelm I, not only signified the unification of Germany. Within less than two decades, Germany would claim its place among the mightiest nations in the world, its leaders dreaming of supplanting Great Britain as the most important power of the day, economically and military. During the initial years of its existence the young German Empire still behaved as a purely European continental power, as one of the major actors in the diplomatic manoeuvring in Europe. In the course of time, Germany's aspirations grew. Though they were given a different name, *Schutzgebiet* (protectorate) or *Pachtgebiet* (leased territory), colonies were acquired in Africa, the Pacific and China; transforming Germany from a continental European power into one that had global ambitions and interests.

From the beginning, once it was decided that Germany should have its own overseas possessions, plans were ambitious. In June 1884, Bismarck linked the German colonisation policy with expansion of the German consular network, the establishment of coaling stations, and the setting up of new passenger shipping lines to China and Australia (Koschitzky 1887-88 I: 158). There was one drawback. For its overseas possessions, Germany had to turn to regions not yet colonised by other European nations: parts of Africa, Pacific islands and, ultimately, China. Initially, in Asia the ambitions of German businessmen and politicians made Samoa, New Guinea and a number of other islands in the South Pacific hotspots of international tension. By the end of the century attention shifted from the Southern to the Northern Pacific, to China, raising the stakes considerably. Manchuria, Korea and China became the object of bitter international competition. 'The Far East, which a year ago was an uncommon, has since become a familiar phrase in the terminology of International Politics,' wrote Lord Curzon (1896: ix), one of the political heavyweights of those days, and a stubborn one for that, in the introduction to the fourth edition of his book about international developments in Asia in 1896. Another British author, William A. Pickering (1898: 264), an equally influential contemporary Asia expert who, among other things, had won his spurs for his role in Malaya as colonial civil servant in charge of Chinese affairs, argued that China was far more important for British economic interests than Turkey, that other great flashpoint of international rivalry and conflict.

There was also an event that had not yet taken place, but for decades, at least since the 1830s, had cast its shadow: the opening of the Panama

Canal. It should have been a grand ceremony, but on the date the festivities were planned, 15 August 1914, World War One had already started and all plans for an impressive opening had to be cancelled. The significance of the Panama Canal (it could also have become the Nicaragua Canal) was at least as great as that of the Suez Canal. It would, it was ventured in advance, make the Pacific the future centre of world trade, outshining the importance of the Atlantic Ocean. Or, as a Japanese author wrote, the canal would revolutionise the Pacific Ocean and make it 'the platform of commercial and political enterprise' (Inagaki 1890: 21, 47). Though still undug, the canal featured prominently in the assessment of the strategic importance of, and international rivalry over, a series of small South Pacific islands, which, the argument was, could serve as valuable and strategically located coaling stations along the route between Australia and New Zealand and the Panama Canal. In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the Panama Canal came to figure with equal prominence in scenarios about the economic and political importance of the north Pacific and the international rivalries developing there. One scenario was that between the United States and Japan. In both countries, the military consequences of a canal cutting the Central American isthmus loomed large in strategic thinking. In Japan army Inspector General, Yamagata Aritomo, predicted in 1888 that the Panama Canal, combined with completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway and the Russian Trans-Siberian Railway, would make East Asia a new focus of Western imperialism for which Japan had to prepare (Drea 2009: 70). For the United States, the Panama Canal was no longer just a passage that would stimulate sea traffic between its east coast and Asia and its west coast and Europe; the shortened route it allowed American warships to take from the Atlantic to the Pacific became a vital element in the considerations of those who planned for the defence of the country against a new potential aggressor: Japan.