

# George Will discovers the “Yellow Peril”

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On Friday, the *Washington Post* published a column by George Will titled, “Civilized nations’ efforts to deter Russia and China are starting to add up,” praising the Biden administration’s efforts to mobilize the world’s imperialist powers behind US efforts to dominate Russia and China.

Will lauded the decision by the government of Boris Johnson in the UK to send a carrier strike group into waters of the Black Sea claimed by Russia, which led Russian aircraft and ships to fire warning shots in a standoff that threatened a military confrontation between two nuclear-armed countries.

He likewise celebrated joint military exercises by the United States and Japan and moves by Japan toward recognition of an open military alliance against China—moves that threaten a major war in the Pacific.

“Henry Kissinger has said, not unreasonably, that we are in ‘the foothills’ of a cold war with China,” noted Will, adding, “It is, therefore, well to notice how, day by day, in all of the globe’s time zones, civilized nations are, in word and deed, taking small but cumulatively consequential measures that serve deterrence.”

In a media establishment that constantly glorifies military aggression and demonizes whole nations and peoples, Will’s comment largely stands out only by the degree of his enthusiasm.

There is, however, something qualitatively new in the use of the word “civilized” to describe the forces being mobilized in a military alliance against China and Russia. If those countries arming themselves against Russia and China are “civilized,” it stands to reason that Russia and China are un-“civilized,” or, to use a synonym, barbarous.

Will’s casting Washington’s imperialist operations as a struggle to defend “civilization” is a deliberate evocation of the ideology of the first age of imperialism preceding the first World War. Then, the insatiable

quest of the capitalist great powers for raw materials, markets, and enslaved labor was clothed in the ideology of racial superiority and the conquest by the “civilized” nations of the “barbarous” ones.

The most developed of these racial myths was the myth of the “Yellow Peril,” which was used to justify the carve-up of China in the so-called 1895 “Triple Intervention” by Germany, France and Russia, and later in the murderous suppression of the Boxer uprising by the eight-nation alliance of the Western European powers.

In 1895, the Kaiser commissioned a drawing to popularize the concept, titled “Nations of Europe, defend your faith and your homes!”

In the drawing, the “Archangel Michael, a symbol for Germany, stands on a cliff before a group of seven women with shields and armor”[1] representing the nations of Europe. Germany would lead the European powers in the struggle against the barbarism of the East, depicted as a Buddha setting the land below him aflame.

The image “expressed the monarch’s perception of the imminent danger caused by the yellow race, and it soon became one of the most infamous political illustrations of the day,” noted one academic survey. The drawing was printed in the *New York Times* in 1896 and was placed by German Chancellor Bismarck under his Christmas tree.

If Will’s column were to be depicted as a 19th-century neoromantic print, the image commissioned by the Kaiser would fit the bill, only instead of representing the Second Reich, the Archangel would stand in for Washington. Now, too, in Will’s account, Washington is heroically exhorting the “civilized” world to take up arms against the peril in the East.

Of course, the racist ideology of imperialism was not always presented in the elevated neoclassical imagery. Four years after Wilhelm produced his drawing, as

German soldiers were departing to suppress the Boxer rebellion, Wilhelm's successor, Kaiser Wilhelm II, urged his troops to commit war crimes against Chinese civilians:

Whoever falls into your hands will fall to your sword! Just as a thousand years ago the Huns, under their King Attila, made a name for themselves with their ferocity, which tradition still recalls; so may the name of Germany become known in China in such a way that no Chinaman will ever dare look a German in the eye, even with a squint!

While Kaiser Wilhelm sent a copy of his "Yellow Peril" print to Tsar Nicholas II, his successors in the third Reich would expand the group of racially inferior peoples to the Slavs of Eastern Europe. They would do so by implementing the so-called Generalplan Ost—through which "tens of millions of Slavic inhabitants (and Jews) would be killed, either through deliberate starvation or as a result of forcible emigration." [2]

As historian Stephen G. Fritz wrote in his monumental study of Nazi Germany's war in the East:

Hitler's conception of Lebensraum had been informed and influenced not only by notions of social Darwinism but also by nineteenth-century European colonial and imperialistic practices. The European scramble for colonies in Africa and Asia had been justified not only by economic necessity but also by reference to the alleged racial inferiority of the "backward" and "uncivilized" peoples of those continents.

It is in these stinking waters that the *Washington Post* is fishing for ideas to justify US imperialism's efforts to militarily and economically encircle China and Russia. In column after column in the American press, iconography of imperialist racism keeps appearing, oozing from the cracks, staining everything it touches and spilling over into rising anti-Asian violence in

America's streets.

## Notes

[1] Zu, J., & Akira, I. (2006). The 'Yellow Peril' and its influence on Japanese–German relations. In *Failure, nationalism, and literature: the making of modern Chinese identity, 1895-1937*(pp. 80–83). essay, Stanford University Press.

[2] Fritz, S. G. (2015). *Ostkrieg: Hitler's war of extermination in the East*. University Press of Kentucky.



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