

Coffee and the Rise and Fall of Empire: An Incontrovertibly Perky Theory

By Joseph Joffe

MUNICH — The summer of '97 in America: Dairy Queen and A&W root beer floats are but faint memories, like sock hops and 30-cent gas. It's frappuccino now. And macchiato. And Starbucks.

And, perhaps, the end of the American empire.

The handwriting was on the wall when the McDonald's in Boston's Logan airport began serving espresso to the Big Mac crowd. You can now get a double at the Pit Stop Espresso in Palmer, Alaska. There are 1,300 Starbucks outlets in North America, and each week, 5 million people come for a mocha or a latte.

What handwriting? And why the Gibbous ruminations about the rise and decline of nations?

The connection between coffee and clout first thrust itself on this author in Moscow in 1978, while the "Evil Empire" was still on a roll. The Brezhnevites had just unleashed a Europe-wide propaganda campaign against America's "neutron bomb."

On an official visit with a *delegatsiya*, I complained bitterly to my KGB handler about the nasty swill the Rossiya Hotel was serving up as "coffee."

Trying to humor me, he offered KGB jollity: "What do Russian coffee and the neutron bomb have in common?" I was flummoxed. "Both kill people and leave buildings intact. And what is the difference? You can protest the neutron bomb but not Russian coffee!"

At that point, the germ of a theory began to bud in my caffeine-depleted brain. It is destined to dethrone every theory about the rise and fall of the great powers developed in the last four centuries — from Machiavelli via Gibbon and Spengler to Lenin and Paul Kennedy.

Bad coffee equals expansionism, imperialism and war; good coffee drips with civility, pacifism and lassitude. That is the long and the short of it.

Here I was in the heart of the Soviet empire, and not a

single Melitta filter in sight. Not even one of those lowly percolators Americans used to bubble their beans between the conquest of the West and the advent of the Melior. Just toxic mud and tepid water.

But what an empire! The Soviets had more nukes and troops than the Americans. They were masterminding wars throughout Africa. They were collecting Third World pawns by the bushel. And they were about to invade Afghanistan.

Was it communism or coffee that drove them? A systematic survey of world history quickly turned the germ into a fully blown and, I might add, incontrovertible theory.

Who had ruled the world for 400 years? Britain. What had distinguished Albion from the rest? The Magna Carta? The Royal Navy? Big Ben? No, horrible coffee all the way to victory in the Falkland war of 1982.

What about the United States? The age of American expansion from the Louisiana Purchase to Vietnam was marked by the ubiquitous coffee-pot where the coarse-ground meal was first scalded and then left on the fire to thicken into an acid brew just right for tanning buffalo hides.

Or take Germany. During the height of German expansionism between the 1890s and the 1940s, Germans distinguished between "Kaffee" and "Bohnenkaffee" (literally: bean coffee). The masses drank the former, a mix of burnt barley and chicory. Only the very rich could afford the real stuff. And look where it got them — all the way to Moscow.

Bad coffee, then, is the milk of warriors. But any decent theory must also work in reverse, and hence good coffee should reduce the martial passions along with a nation's military skills. The Arabs are the best case in point. When was Arab power done in for good? When Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain completed the *reconquista* by driving the

Moors from Granada, their last stronghold on Iberian soil, in 1492.

It so happens that *qahwa* came into use throughout the Arab-Islamic world in the mid-15th century. That rang the death knell for the two great Islamic empires, the Ottoman one on the northern and the Arab one on the southern rim of the Mediterranean.

The Turks made one more try, which brought them to Senta, southeast of Vienna. There they were stopped in

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1697, and ever since neither Turks nor Arabs have won any significant battle. Why not? As is well known, Arab or Turkish coffee, especially when laced with cardamom, is among the best in the world.

The Ottomans had their bittersweet revenge, though. Withdrawing from Vienna, they left their coffee sacks behind. The Austrians took to mocha with more passion than young Wolfgang Amadeus to the violin.

Soon Vienna was replete with coffeehouses, whence a great culture grew, from Strauss to Musil and Freud. But the Hapsburg empire was doomed, reduced to a has-been by the coffee-snubbing Prussians in the 19th.

So far, we have established that bad coffee makes for virility and expansionism while the art of the demitasse favors bad generals and the gentler pursuits of life. To deflate all naysayers, we must show that the theory works not just in a static but also in a dynamic way.

Accordingly, cultures,

when moving, say, from instant to mocha java, should turn pacific at the first hiss of an espresso machine.

This is precisely what happened to Germany, the most aggressive nation in this century. But since 1945, hobnails have been strictly verboten, and Germans have become as aggressive as sloths.

Go to Moscow today and you'll probably find a latte stand right next to Lenin's tomb. But the heirs of Marshal Zhukov can no longer beat a bunch of ragtag Chechens.

So what about America? I fear the worst. Yes, the United States still has the most sophisticated military machine in the world, and every once in a while it does slug it out with the Saddams and the Karadzics. But look at the downside. In 1992, Starbucks operated a paltry 162 hangouts nationwide. Just in the first half of 1997, it has opened 212 new stores, aiming for a total of 2,000 by millennium's end.

No good can come of this. The age of American greatness will come to an end in an ocean of hazelnut and amaretto if Starbucks and epigones expand unchecked. There is a reason why the great empires of yore have gone under when confronted with a Melior full of freshly brewed Kenyan Blue. Either you tend to your gold-plated Gaggia or to your F-16. You don't fight with a frappuccino in hand.

All is not lost yet, America. Just dig out that old percolator. Put in some coarse-ground Maxwell. Scorch and burn for an hour or so until the brackish liquid smells like your very own toxic dump. Shudder and gulp.

This is the kind of stuff that made Clint Eastwood's day and took Douglas MacArthur all the way to the Yalu River. ☺

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