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Latte Lightweights

By Josef Joffe

Will the 21st be yet another American century? Don't bet on it, for the American empire is doomed, and the cause is coffee. First, the facts. Denny's, the chain of 1,700 downscale eateries, is switching to freshly ground whole-bean coffee. Dunkin' Donuts is testing espresso in 200 outlets. 7-Eleven began to sell "gourmet blends" last year. So do various McDonald's around the U.S.

Alas, they do not know the iron law of history that says bad coffee fuels expansionism, machismo and the warlike passions while good coffee wafts with civility, pacificity and abandon.

Just take the great martial powers of modern times: the U.S., the Soviet Union, Germany, Britain, Japan, China and Israel. The age of America's expansion in the 19th century was marked by the low-tech coffeepot that was left on the fire until the brew inside had thickened into a blackish acid just right for tanning buffalo hides.

Or the old Soviet Union: toxic mud and tepid water. But the Red Army went all the way to Berlin in 1945. It blithely crushed revolts in various satellite countries, moved into Cuba, Africa and Afghanistan. Prussia-Germany? In the old days, only the rich could afford real coffee; the masses had to make do with a blend of burnt barley and chicory. But that stuff took the Wehrmacht to the gates of Moscow and Cairo.

Japan and China? Between Tsushima, where the Japanese sank the Russian fleet, and Pearl Harbor, where they wiped out America's, the sons of Nippon did not even know from coffee; all they had was green tea. Ditto the Chinese when they chased American soldiers down the Korean Peninsula. Ditto the British, who for 400 years ruled the seas while swilling Java that was as tasty as their food. Tiny Israel has bested the Arabs in five wars. And why? Because Israeli "coffee" could eat through the armor of a Soviet-built T-72 in three minutes.

Now look at the other side. As every Middle East hand knows, Arab (or Turkish) coffee, especially when spiced with cardamom, is among the best in the world. But when did Arabs last win a war? Or the Italians, who have given the world the Gaggia and the macchiato? Indeed, the Muslim states are the best case in point. Arab power was done in for good when Ferdinand and Isabella demolished the last Moorish stronghold on Iberian soil in 1492. This was no accident, comrades, as the Soviets used to say. It so happens that qahwa came into widespread use throughout the Islamic world in the mid-15th century. Fifty years

later, Arab power was finished. And soon after, so was the Ottoman Empire. In 1699, the Turkish advance was stopped once and for all at the gates of Vienna. But now it was the Habsburgs' turn. Retreating, the Turks left their coffee sacks behind, and the Austrians took to mocha with the same passion they later devoted to waltzing along the Danube. In Austria's legendary coffeehouses, a great culture grew--from Mozart (who, alas, did not write the Coffee Cantata; that was Bach) to Kafka and Freud. The Habsburg empire was, however, doomed, battered by the French in the 18th century and trounced by the chicory-gulping Prussians in the 19th century.

But to make this grand theory truly watertight, we must show that it also works in a dynamic way. Ergo: when bad-coffee countries discover the bliss of Kenyan Blue, they should lay down their assault rifles at the first hiss of a milk steamer.

Precisely. In Germany, once the most militaristic society on earth, you can now get a perfect cappuccino on every block. And Germans have become as aggressive as Caspar Milquetoast. The Russians? Moscow has turned into latte land, and so the remnants of the Red Army cannot even overwhelm a bunch of bedraggled Chechens. Why does Israel, a modern-day democratic Sparta, talk withdrawal from Lebanon? Just count the espresso machines on Tel Aviv's Shenkin Street.

Which brings us to the decline and fall of the American empire. Yes, the mightiest nation on earth still slugs it out with the Saddams and the Milosevics. But willpower is melting away like foamed milk on top of a double-shot decaf. The numbers speak for themselves. At the beginning of this decade, there were but 500 "gourmet coffeehouses" in the U.S., says the National Coffee Association; now there are 7,000, including 2,000 Starbucks.

Why great empires thus falter was explained by a 16th century Arab physician. Imbibe the brew, he warned, and "the body becomes a mere shadow of its former self. The heart and the guts are so weakened..." Or, in modern parlance, you polish either your gold-plated Melior or your M-16. You can't launch a Hellfire missile with a frappuccino in hand. Pleasure trumps prowess.

So, move over, America--and we can forget about Europe. The 21st century will belong to China and India. They have a billion tea-slurping people each, and there isn't a Starbucks in sight on Tiananmen Square.

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