
Western Imperialism

c. 1750–c. 1900 CE

Imperial means “empire,” and in the era c. 1750–c. 1900, the western European powers—and to a lesser extent the United States and Japan—established empires outside their borders. Western Europe’s empires were global, with territories in Africa, Asia, North and South America, Australia, and islands in the Pacific, Atlantic, and Indian Oceans. Britain’s territories were so vast, British subjects could claim, “The sun never sets on the British Empire.” By the end of this era, Britain’s imperial possessions covered one-fourth of the Earth.

In the first era of European imperialism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the focus was on the Americas. In the late eighteenth and through the nineteenth centuries, the nations of Europe restarted the process, but this time Africa and Asia were the primary targets. Ironically, during this age of “new” Imperialism, Spain and Portugal, two of the greatest empires of the previous era, began to decline in global power.

I. Industrialized Nations Accumulate Colonies Around the Globe

A. Causes of Imperialism

1. The Industrial Revolution

- i. Using inventions of the Industrial Revolution such as steamboats, railroads, and machine guns, western European nations were able to overwhelm Africans with the new technologies. As a result, large numbers of Europeans with superior military forces reached the interior of Africa for the first time.

2. Nationalism

- i. Nationalism—a sense of pride and devotion to one's country—was a powerful force in Europe and the Americas in the early nineteenth century. It was an important factor in empire-building in this era.
- ii. National pride showed itself in two ways. First, the older European nations engaged in an unofficial competition to see who could grab the most territory around the world. It was a kind of “keeping up with the Joneses” rivalry. If England claimed *this*, then France wanted *that*, and on it went. Second, new nations, such as Germany and Italy, wanted to show that they belonged with the so-called Great Powers, so they got into the imperialism game, too.



Be sure to study maps of imperialism in Africa and Asia c. 1914. There will be at least one or two questions on the AP World History exam related to imperialism.

3. Economics

- i. Controlling world markets was an idea going back to the first round of European imperialism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In this “new” imperialism, not only were governments and their treasuries involved, but also multinational corporations.
- ii. These multinational corporations put pressure on governments to help them claim their “share” of the global economy. The economic stakes were greater because the amount and value of global trade was also greater. Africa and Asia held vast amounts of raw materials, such as cotton, rubber, and minerals that industrialized nations wanted to keep their economies booming.
- iii. European imperialists saw Africa and Asia as potential markets for their mass-produced goods, such as cloth and steel.

4. "The White Man's Burden"

- i. The white Europeans believed they were doing their "little brown brothers" in Africa, Asia, and Oceania a favor by conquering them. After all, they reasoned, the Europeans developed the inventions of the Industrial Revolution that made it possible to travel around the world. To many Europeans, bringing "them" technology, plus education, medicine, and Christianity, was a noble cause.
- ii. The English writer Rudyard Kipling wrote a poem entitled "The White Man's Burden" about these ideas.

B. Imperialism in Africa

1. European imperialism in Africa before the nineteenth century
 - i. Even though Europeans had shared much history with the people of Africa's Mediterranean coast going back to the Classical Era (c. 600 BCE–c. 600 CE), they lacked the ability to move south of the Sahara Desert into Africa's interior.
 - ii. In the sixteenth century, the Portuguese set up some military outposts around South Africa's Cape of Good Hope and along the rim of the Indian Ocean, but they did not establish any colonies. Within a hundred years, Europeans were transporting slaves from the Atlantic coast of Africa to the Americas but, again, did not attempt to establish colonies along West Africa's coast.
 - iii. The Dutch East India Company (the "VOC") established a colony at Cape Town, South Africa, in the mid-seventeenth century, and over the next one hundred years, Dutch settlers established farms throughout the region.
2. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Britain began sending settlers into South Africa, and these British settlers eventually experienced strife with the Dutch colonists ("Boers")—not to mention heightening tensions that

already existed between the Dutch and the African people of the region.

3. Starting in the 1830s, France followed Britain's example and became a major African colonial power, first in Algeria and then across most of northwest Africa.
4. Belgium began the infamous "scramble for Africa" in the 1880s when it grabbed an enormous area in the "heart" of Africa—The Congo. When the other European powers saw Belgium become a major colonial power, they began a rush to outdo each other in gaining territories. The "Great Powers" of Europe met at the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 to divide Africa among themselves peacefully. They didn't invite anyone *from* Africa, however, to participate in the division of these lands. Clearly, this approach would lead to problems.
5. By 1914, the sweep of European colonialism was so complete that only two areas in Africa were independent nations: Ethiopia (Italy tried, but failed, to make it a colony) and Liberia (founded as a colony for former U.S. slaves).

C. Imperialism in Asia and the Pacific

1. In contrast to their experiences in Africa, Europeans found that much of Asia could not be brought into their empires because Asian governments were strong enough to keep the Europeans at bay—the Ottoman Empire still had a formidable military force, Japan was becoming one of the major powers, and Europeans desired China's economic assets more than its land.
2. The biggest example of European imperialism in Asia was India. It was England's "jewel in the crown" of colonies.
 - i. After England won the Seven Years' War against France in 1763, France lost control of most of its North American and South Asian holdings. The English took possession of Canada and the eastern half of what was to become the United States. With significant help from the British East India Company (EIC), they established rule over South Asia.

- ii. By the mid-nineteenth century, the EIC had folded, and the British government began direct control over its colony in South Asia and remained the colonial power there until 1947. The British called their rule in India the *raj*, and Queen Victoria was named empress of India. In addition, during the nineteenth century, the British extended colonial control to Malaysia and Singapore and several islands in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. They used these islands as strategic refueling stations for their steam-powered military and cargo ships.

D. The United States, Germany, and Japan Build Empires

1. U.S. Imperialism

- i. The U.S. government believed that it was destined to rule the North American continent "from sea to shining sea."
 - The first step in this goal was to purchase the Louisiana territory from France in 1803.
 - In the 1840s, victory in a war with Mexico yielded Texas and all the land to the Pacific coast south of Canada.
 - Alaska was purchased from Russia in 1867.
 - By the end of the century, along with the other imperial powers, the United States began acquiring islands in the Pacific for strategic refueling bases.
 - Spain's decline as a world power was sealed when it lost the Spanish-American War (1898–1901). As a result of its victory in this war, the United States added the Philippines, Guam, and Puerto Rico to its colonial holdings.
 - Finally, the United States annexed Hawaii, with its rich sugar plantations and vital port, Pearl Harbor.

2. German Imperialism

- i. Germany, of course, is in Europe, but because it was established only in the late nineteenth century, it merits

separate discussion. The German Empire was founded in 1871. Its leaders were determined to make their new nation a formidable power in Europe.

- ii. In that era, international respect was granted to those with the most "toys," meaning colonies. At the Berlin Conference, Germany wrangled several African territories in strategic moves to counter British gains in Africa. They also claimed parts of the Marshall, Solomon, and Caroline Islands, and Western Samoa, which were all in the South Pacific.

3. Japanese Imperialism

- i. When Japan changed its government in the 1860s in the Meiji Restoration, it was eager to join Germany and the United States in establishing a place with the major powers of Europe.
- ii. Japan began an aggressive campaign to create an empire in the Pacific region. Japan also wanted to counter Russian gains in East Asia after that nation completed the Trans-Siberian Railway.
- iii. An early test of Japan's new "Western-style" army was in the Sino-Japanese war with China in the 1890s. Japan claimed Korea after their victory in that war. Everyone, except Japan, was shocked when the Japanese defeated Russia in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905. The conflict was for control of territories in Manchuria and, again, Korea.

II. Results of Western Imperialism

A. Africa

- 1. Europeans peacefully divided Africa among themselves at the Berlin Conference in 1885, paying little attention to the concerns of the African people who were affected.
- i. Europe's confidence in its racial and cultural superiority did not leave much room for debate about the potential disadvantages of imperialism.

- ii. Social Darwinism—the idea that civilizations with superior technology and tactics *deserved* to conquer those without these advantages—was a powerful force in this era.
- 2. At Berlin, the British attempted to form a series of colonies that stretched “from Cape Town to Cairo,” that is, from South Africa to Egypt. They were stymied by Germany, who inserted a colony in East Africa.
 - i. The best-known imperialist in this era was Cecil Rhodes, the British entrepreneur whose business was in the gold and diamond mines of South Africa. The colony of Rhodesia was named after him.
- 3. Europeans created “White dominions” and “settler colonies.”
 - i. Britain developed “White dominions,” places where the colonists, through disease and conquest, eventually outnumbered the native people.
 - “White dominions” occurred in Oceania (Australia and New Zealand) and in North America (in their American and Canadian colonies).
 - ii. “Settler colonies” were areas where Europeans settled and ruled, but remained a minority.
 - South Africa and Singapore were two British examples of settler colonies.
 - The Philippines was a settler colony for the United States.
 - A French example of a settler colony was Algeria in North Africa, where over 100,000 European colonists claimed rule over an Arab Muslim population of more than 2 million.
- 4. Social efforts by imperialists had mixed results.
 - i. Christian missionaries had success spreading their faith in sub-Saharan Africa, but they made no progress in the Muslim north.

- Europeans were determined to “civilize” their “little brown brothers” by dressing them in Western fashions and teaching them Western behavior, which usually only confused the local people.
- ii. Some African elites were sent to European schools in an attempt to bring them over to pro-Western thinking. These efforts often had unintended consequences for the colonizers, as you will see.
- 5. Popular European literature with imperialist themes set in Africa included *Tarzan*, the story of an English boy raised by apes in the African jungle, and *Heart of Darkness*, a novel that criticized imperialist attitudes toward Africans.

B. Asia and the Pacific

1. Europeans had much more contact with Asia before the “new imperialism” of this era, so the impact of their efforts was minimized in most areas.
 - i. Unlike their approach in Africa, the Europeans used a variety of methods to obtain direct and indirect control in Asia.
 - In Malaysia, for example, the British made treaties with local rulers that resulted in indirect control of that vital trade region.
 - France used a combination of military force and diplomacy to bring the Southeast Asia territory of Indochina into its empire.
2. Once England established itself in India, it primarily used “native” Indian forces to maintain British authority. These *Sepoys* were generally loyal to the crown, but you will learn about an important departure from that trend below. The British exported cotton and tea from its Indian colonies.
3. The most infamous example of European imperialism in Asia was the opium wars with China in the mid-nineteenth century.

- i. To offset huge trade deficits, the British began smuggling opium into China's ports, in defiance of Chinese laws. China's diplomatic protests went unheeded, and war broke out between the two nations.
 - ii. China was forced into a series of unequal treaties that increased Britain's economic presence and handed the island of Hong Kong to British authority.
 - iii. Other nations, including Russia, Japan, France, and Germany, jumped at the chance to make their own unequal treaties with China. Rather than attempt political colonization of China, these nations created "spheres of influence" within China, with each foreign nation having exclusive trading rights in "its" portion of China.
 - iv. As noted in Chapter 13, the United States proposed a trading free-for-all in China, called the *open door policy*, which was accepted by the nations involved. China's opinion didn't count.
4. European attempts to bring Christianity to Asia in this era met with fewer converts than in Africa. However, in China as many as 100,000 people joined the Christian faith.
 5. In popular European culture, books aimed at younger people highlighted these "exotic" lands and were especially nationalistic, praising the Europeans' dedication to the "white man's burden." *The Jungle Book*, about a young Indian boy's adventures in South Asia, was one famous title.

III.

Local Reactions to Imperialism

A. Africa

1. Reactions of Africans to European imperialism ranged from warfare to reluctant acceptance to full cooperation.
 - i. The French spent years in northwest Africa subduing local rebellions.

- ii. At the end of the nineteenth century, descendants of Dutch settlers believed that the newly arrived British were violating their property rights to land and slaves. In addition they were angry about the gold and diamonds the British were hauling out of the territory once claimed by Boers.
 - iii. The British battled Zulus and Dutch Boers in southern Africa, and Muslims in Sudan. The Boer war left hundreds of thousands of casualties in its wake.
2. Other Africans signed treaties and acted as guides and interpreters for Europeans. Still others cooperated fully with the European powers. Often these were members of the African ruling elite families, who benefited financially and materially from working closely with the outsiders. Some were sent to Europe for full indoctrination into Western culture. After returning to their homelands, many of these elites began preparing independence movements.

B. Asia

1. In Asia, the same pattern emerged as in Africa: Some local people rebelled violently, while others tried to "fit in" to the colonial powers' ways of life.
- i. Military resistance to European occupation occurred in Afghanistan (against the British), the Philippines (against the United States), and in China (against foreigners in general).
 - The Taiping and Boxer rebellions in China were highly anti-foreign in their nature.
 - In India, the "native" Sepoy army, whose soldiers were employed by the British colonial government and the East India Company, rebelled. It took British forces a year to suppress the rebellion. This resulted in the end of the Mughal Dynasty, which had begun in India in the sixteenth century, the dissolution of the East India Company, and the beginnings of the British *raj* over India.