

# Imperialism and Resistance Shape the Modern World

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Albert Edward, Prince of Wales and future king of the United Kingdom and emperor of India (1901-1910), stands on an elephant he killed during his state visit to India, 1875-1876. Illustration: Big History Project, courtesy of Lebrecht Music & Arts/Corbis

Let's be honest, people have been conquering one another from the earliest of times. Think about it, during the Age of Exploration (1400s-1800s) conquerors traveled far beyond their normal realms in search of new items. For example, the Spanish took over parts of the Americas, Africa, and the Pacific Islands under the banner of "God, gold, and glory," and the Spanish king expected the conquistadors to bring home gold, and lots of it, glory for the Spanish crown, and spread the Catholic faith throughout these new territories. However, in the mid-nineteenth century something changed with regard to the nature of those conquests. In fact, by the mid-nineteenth century there was so much colonial activity that historians have labeled this era the Age of Imperialism (1850-1914), which was the period of time when imperial or colonial powers (mainly European nations) colonized a vast portion of the world.

In order to understand why European motives for colonization changed in the nineteenth century, we must take a look at three main factors that make this era different from previous ones. The first of these factors has to do with the changes in industrialization and consumer

economies that were developing in Europe, the United States, and Japan at this time. The second has to do with the geographic scope of these conquests as colonizers moved inland from their traditional coastal fortifications and into the interior of the conquered lands. The final big change was the impact colonization had on tens of millions of lives.

When thinking about this period there are three questions we want to figure out. The first is what happened in the nineteenth century that shifted European colonization from a handful of countries with interests in coastal areas to one that included almost every European country taking over large chunks of Africa, the Pacific Islands, and Asia? Secondly, what did both the colonizer and colonized think about this expanded colonial activity? And finally, how did the people who were colonized resist the imperial powers?

These are really big questions to answer and to do so we need to keep a few ideas in mind. One is that imperialism was a global phenomenon that involved a number of countries and as such, there are multiple factors we need to consider when understanding their motivations to colonize. Likewise, within these countries there were both proponents and opponents of colonization. Additionally, imperial countries differed in how they chose to exercise control over their colonies, with some establishing systems of direct rule while others governed indirectly. Finally, just as there were multiple factors to consider regarding the imperial powers' motivations to establish colonies, there were also a variety of responses from people within these territories to imperial subjugation.

## **Economic and political changes help bring about colonization**

One of the key drivers of imperialism in the nineteenth century was industrialization. Remember, the factories established in European countries during industrialization were dependent on ready sources of cheap raw materials to keep the machines operating around the clock. These factories were producing manufactured goods at rates never before seen. Consequently, industrialized nations needed new markets to sell these finished products as the supply far exceeded the demand within the country they were being produced.

The premier of France, Jules Ferry, spoke to the French government regarding expanding their overseas colonies, citing most importantly the need for markets but also the desire to bring civilized rule over these colonies.

*In the area of economics, I allow myself to place before you, with the support of some figures, the considerations which justify a policy of colonial expansion from the point of view of that need, felt more and more strongly by the industrial populations of Europe and particularly those of our own rich and hard working country: the need for export markets. What is lacking for our great industry, drawn irrevocably on to the path of exportation by the (free trade) treaties of 1860, what it lacks more and more is export markets.*

Clearly, Ferry is making an economic case for France to acquire overseas colonies but he also interjects notions of cultural and racial superiority into his argument.

*Gentlemen, I must speak from a higher and more truthful plane. It must be stated openly that, in effect, superior races have rights over inferior races. I repeat that superior races have a right, because they have a duty. They have the duty to civilize inferior races.*

This sentiment was certainly shared by many people of European ancestry at this time but there were others who rejected these ideas altogether as can be read in the responses to Ferry's comments from other French government officials. Unfortunately, Ferry was not the only one to believe in the superiority of Europe. David Livingston, the English missionary and explorer, made a similar economic argument but also added a religious component to the mix.

*My object in going into the country south of the desert was to instruct the natives in a knowledge of Christianity, but soon found that, for the purpose of commerce, it was necessary to have a path [from the interior] to the sea.*

*In a commercial point of view, communication with this country is desirable. Angola is wonderfully fertile, producing every kind of tropical plant in rank luxuriance. Cotton is produced in great abundance, bananas and pine-apples in great luxuriance; but the people having no maritime communication, these advantages are almost lost.*

*A prospect is now before us of opening Africa for commerce and the Gospel. By encouraging the propensity for trade, the advantages that might be derived in a commercial point of view are incalculable; nor should we lose sight of the inestimable blessing it is in our power to bestow upon the unenlightened African, by giving him the light of Christianity.*

Both Ferry's and Livingston's addition of making imperialism a moral, civilizing crusade begins to muddy the waters as to why a country would undertake this adventure; or maybe it is to add a justification for colonization that goes beyond the monetary value.

Needless to say, with Great Britain and France on the move to conquer parts of Africa, other countries were bound to get involved. The German missionary and pro-imperialist advocate Friedrich Fabri believed it was imperative for Germany to acquire colonies. His reasoning included the typical economic arguments as well as the mission to civilize; however, Fabri also took a more nationalistic approach when he wrote:

*The fact is that England tenaciously holds on to its world-wide possessions with scarcely one-fourth the manpower of our continental military state. That is not only a great economic advantage but also a striking proof of the solid power and cultural fiber of England. It would be wise for us Germans to learn about colonial skills from our Anglo-Saxon cousins and to begin a friendly competition with them.*

And each time an industrialized nation joined the fray, another nation felt the need to participate in the name of national honor. Ito Hirobumi, one of the leading samurai of Japan during the Meiji Restoration and a former prime minister, states that imperialism will be a goal for his country in order to compete with Europe and America:

*It is the imperial aim decided upon at the time of the [Meiji] Restoration of imperial rule. The aim of our country has been from the very beginning to attain among the nations of the world the status of a civilized nation and to become a member of the comity of European and American nations which occupy the position of civilized countries.*

Clearly there were issues of economics, racism, religion, and nationalism at play during the era of imperialism. Wealthy, industrialized nations were also conquering people who were not exactly welcoming, which meant that a strong military was a necessity. During the Industrial Revolution great leaps were made in weaponry that made the gap between industrialized nations, such as Europe, the United States, and Japan, and the rest of the world seem more like a canyon. With the invention of the breech-loading repeating rifle and the Gatling gun (an early version of a machine gun), suddenly the rest of the world armed with arrows, muskets, and spears could not stop the industrialized nations from taking their lands. The British pro-imperialist Hilaire Belloc wrote, "Whatever happens, we have got/The Maxim Gun, and they have not." These new weapons had a devastating effect on the people who tried to resist colonial powers with force. One example occurred in 1898, when the British decided to seize a large region of Sudan from the state of Mahdiyya. In the decisive battle, the Mahdiyya army lost 11,000 soldiers; the British army lost 40.

### The scramble for territory

Now that we know why imperial nations decided to colonize other parts of the world, let's look at how successful they were in their efforts. I can see in the chart below that most of Africa and the Pacific Islands were the focus of European and American colonization.

Percentage of Land Area Controlled by European Powers and the United States in 1900

Region	Percentage Controlled
Africa	90.4
Pacific Islands	98.9
Asia	56.5
Americas	27.3

*Source: Shultz, Neal and Elisabeth Sperling. "Landscape Teaching Unit 7.5 The Experience of Colonialism 1850 – 1914." World History for Us All. PDF file, 18. See also Supan, Alexander. Die territorial Entwicklung der Europäischen Kolonien. Gotha: Perthes, 1906. Print, 254.*

Therefore, land was appropriated at a great pace during the last half of the nineteenth century, and as a result, millions of people were suddenly under the rule of a foreign power. The biggest "winner" in this race was Great Britain, as demonstrated in the following chart:

Population and Territory Acquired by European Colonial Powers by 1939

Country	Area of Country (in square miles)	Population of Country (in millions)	Area of Colonies (in square miles)	Population of Colonies (in millions)
Great Britain	94,000	45.5	13,100,000	470
France	212,600	42	4,300,000	65
Belgium	11,800	8.3	940,000	13
Netherlands	13,200	8.5	790,000	66
Germany (1914)	210,000	67.5	1,100,000	13

Source: Townshend, Mary Evelyn. *European Colonial Expansion Since 1871*. Chicago: Lippincott, 1941. Print, 19.

While it is difficult to figure out who claimed what territory from the tables above, we can see that Great Britain controlled a lot of territory based on the total land area and population of the colonies under their control. We can get a better idea of the area Great Britain controlled by looking at the following map, which will help to put the above figures in perspective.



Source: James Alcock, *International President, Federal Commonwealth Society*

**Collaboration and resistance**

Even with the lopsided advantages the Europeans, Americans, and Japanese had in technology, it would have been extremely difficult for them to rule over so many people across such a vast stretch of territory. According to the chart above, by 1939 Great Britain claimed to rule over more than 515 million people spread out over a total territory of more than 13 million square miles on five continents. Considering the challenges the British government must have faced as a colonial power, there was no way for them to rule these territories without the assistance of local people, willingly or not.

From the perspective of some of the colonized peoples, participating in the colonial government offered opportunities for advancement within British society. For example, an Indian writer noted that an “India-born [government official] practically cut himself off from his parent society, and lived and moved and had his being in the atmosphere so beloved of his

British colleagues. In mind and manner he was as much of an Englishman as any Englishman.” But doing so was not without its costs. “It was no small sacrifice for him, because in this way he completely estranged himself from the society of his own people, and became socially and morally a pariah among them.”

European powers also exploited existing conflicts within a territory and used their technological superiority to their advantage. For example, the British were able to do this quite successfully in their rule of India. Sir James Caird, who was a member of the British government, explained in 1878 how Great Britain was able to conquer and control the Indian subcontinent with relatively few men:

*We have introduced a system the first object of which ... is necessarily the subjugation of the people. This is [made] possible by the religious differences between the Hindus and the Mohammedans [Muslims] which prevent their union against us. A handful of Englishmen could not hold these multitudes on any other principle. The strength we wield is a powerful army, now by the aid of the railway and the telegraph capable of rapid concentration at any threatened point.*

Obviously, many Indians did not want to be under British rule but the British were able to maximize their control by using the Indians’ internal quarrels against them. Therefore, the question remains as to how the colonized people resisted these imperial powers. There is no seemingly simple answer to this question and the answer depends largely on the location and time period of colonization. However, there were some patterns that emerged as we investigated efforts at resistance. We can break the responses into four overlapping reactions: co-option, military resistance, mysticism, and nationalism. Often there is a blending of these reactions.

The first response is an interesting one in that the less technologically advanced country somehow co-opts the ideas of the more technologically advanced country. This can be seen in two examples. The first is Japan during the Meiji Restoration in the late nineteenth century. The Japanese encounter with imperial powers during this period made the government slightly fearful of the industrialized nations’ superior military power. Therefore, the samurai leadership of Japan began an extensive building program in order to emulate the technological advancements of the West while also maintaining traditional Japanese culture. The two images of the Japanese military shown below offer an interesting before and after comparison. The second example is that of Emperor Menelik II of Ethiopia who was able to play the colonial powers against one another. In doing so he was able to purchase modern weapons and remake his army based on a European model. With these modern weapons and a skillfully trained military, Menelik was able to defeat an invading Italian army, thus ensuring his people’s freedom for almost another four decades.



Japanese Samurai, 1860s



Japanese Soldiers, 1904

The response used most often by indigenous people was some form of military resistance. These wars of resistance occurred throughout the Age of Imperialism from West and South Africa to Burma and the Philippines. One of the most protracted and bloody battles took place in the Philippines after the United States acquired the archipelago, and other territories, at the conclusion of the Spanish-American War in 1898. The Filipinos, led by Emilio Aguinaldo, declared their independence on January 23, 1899.

The hostilities in the Philippine War of Independence began on February 4, 1899 and continued for two years. The United States needed 126,000 soldiers to subdue the Philippines. The war took the lives of 4,234 Americans and 16,000 Filipinos. As usually happens in guerrilla campaigns, the civilian population suffers the worst. As many as 200,000 civilians may have died from famine and disease.

We can learn from statistics such as these that the majority of those who attempted to resist imperial expansion with the use of force were defeated.

The same outcome also came to those indigenous people who resisted imperial aggression by using religious mysticism. In the face of overwhelming technological advances, some groups believed that their spiritual practices would protect their fighters from the bullets of the invading forces. However, the use of mysticism in war was often met with devastating results for the resisters. These types of movements occurred in many parts of the world including the American Midwest in the 1890s (Sioux Ghost Dancers), in China from 1899 to 1900 (Boxer Rebellion), and in East Africa from 1905 to 1907 (Maji Maji Rebellion).

Along with the military resistance mentioned above, political resistance also found its voice in this time period. While the concept of nationalism was often used by imperialists to justify colonization, resisters soon adopted it as inspiration for movements against the colonial powers. India provides us with plenty of examples of expressions of national identity during the time of the Raj, as the British period of direct colonial rule was sometimes called. In 1885, English-speaking Indian intellectuals created the Indian National Congress. By the end of the nineteenth century, it was demanding that the British leave India so that Indians could govern their own country. Two of the Congress' most famous members were the nationalist Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Mohandas K. Gandhi. Tilak and Gandhi's message was that Indians should not use military force to drive the British from India, but rather they encouraged Indians to use political and economic means. In a speech to the Indian National Congress in 1907, Tilak called for a boycott of British-made goods, not an armed resistance.

*We are not armed, and there is no necessity for arms either. We have a stronger weapon, a political weapon, in boycott. We have perceived one fact, that the whole of this administration, which is carried on by a handful of Englishmen, is carried on with our assistance. We are all in subordinate service. This whole government is carried on with our assistance and they try to keep us in ignorance of our power of cooperation between ourselves by which that which is in our own hands at present can be claimed by us and administered by us. The point is to have the entire control in our hands. I want to have the key of my house, and not merely one stranger turned out of it. Self-government is our goal; we want a control over our administrative machinery. We don't want to become clerks and remain [clerks]. At present, we are clerks and willing instruments of our own oppression in the hands of an alien government, and that government is ruling over us not by its innate strength but by keeping us in ignorance and blindness to the perception of this fact.*

Gandhi is perhaps best known for promoting Indian freedom through nonviolent resistance. One can hear the nationalist pride in his chiding of the British in this imaginary dialogue he wrote for his book *Hind Swaraj* or *Indian Home Rule*.

*We hold the civilization that you support to be the reverse of civilization. We consider our civilization to be far superior to yours. If you realize this truth, it will be to your advantage and, if you do not, according to your own proverb, you should only live in our country in the same manner as we do. We consider your schools and courts to be useless. The common language of India is not English but Hindi. You should, therefore, learn it. We can hold communications with you only in our national language.*

## **Conclusion**

The Age of Imperialism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was caused by a variety of factors, and was in part spurred on by the Industrial Revolution. The need for raw materials and new markets were the primary economic reasons for European colonization. The imperial powers further justified their expansion by stating they had a moral obligation to bring civility and religion to the newly conquered people. Inevitably, imperialism led to numerous societal changes in the colonies, some of which were irreversible in that the identities of the colonies were forever altered by the experience. Responses to European aggression were varied and the effects of this era of expansion can still be felt today. While many of these former colonies are now independent nations, the legacies of imperialism remain as some areas of the world continue to catch up economically and politically with their former rulers.

**Quiz**

- 1 According to the article, each of the following contributed to Europe's imperialism EXCEPT:
- (A) the desire to gain power over other nations
  - (B) the need to strengthen its army by absorbing neighboring armies
  - (C) the feeling of superiority over other countries
  - (D) the increased amount of goods being produced
- 2 Based on the article, which of the following statements BEST represents Mohandas K. Gandhi's approach toward imperialism?
- (A) Gandhi supported military action and promoted the use of force to conquer imperialism.
  - (B) Gandhi took a neutral stance on imperialism and felt that peace would be reached through nonviolence.
  - (C) Gandhi was a peaceful nationalist and promoted political and economic measures to fight imperialism.
  - (D) Gandhi took an aggressive stance on the topic and suggested an armed resistance to imperialist countries.
- 3 Which of the following sentences from the article show the most common way that cultures fought against imperialism?
- (A) Obviously, many Indians did not want to be under British rule, but the British were able to maximize their control by using the Indians' internal quarrels against them.
  - (B) The first response is an interesting one in that the less technologically advanced country somehow co-opts the ideas of the more technologically advanced country.
  - (C) The response used most often by indigenous people was some form of military resistance.
  - (D) In doing so he was able to purchase modern weapons and remake his army based on a European model.
- 4 Which of the following aspects of the article is NOT thoroughly discussed?
- (A) the way in which countries fought against imperialism
  - (B) the reasons why Europeans felt entitled to colonization
  - (C) the varying methods used to achieve colonization
  - (D) the lives of colonized people prior to imperialism



## Answer Key

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