

Imperialism and Resistance Shape the Modern World

By Saul Straussman and Bridgette Byrd O'Connor, Big History Project, adapted by Newsela staff on 06.13.16

Word Count **3,098**

Level **910L**



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 riches. For example, the Spanish took over parts of the Americas, Africa, and the Pacific Islands. They did so in the name of "God, gold, and glory." The Spanish king expected the conquistadors to bring home gold, and lots of it. He also expected his soldiers to bring glory to the Spanish crown. At the same time, they were told to spread the Catholic faith throughout these new territories.

However, in the mid-nineteenth century something changed. The nature of those conquests altered. In fact, by the mid-nineteenth century there was so much colonial activity that historians named this era the Age of Imperialism (1850-1914). It was the period of time when imperial or colonial powers (mainly European nations) colonized a vast portion of the world.

Let's try to understand why European motives for colonization changed in the nineteenth century. We must take a look at three main factors. They make this era different from previous ones. The first factor 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 range of these conquests. The colonizers traditionally based themselves along the coasts of their colonies. Now, they began to move inland 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. Before, just a handful of countries were interested in coastal areas. Why did this change to 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? And finally, how did the people who were colonized resist the imperial powers?

These are really big questions. To answer them we need to keep a few ideas in mind. One is that imperialism was a global phenomenon. It involved a number of countries. As such, there are multiple factors we need to consider when understanding their motivations to colonize. Likewise, within these countries there were those who favored colonization and those who were against it. Additionally, imperial countries differed in how they chose to control their colonies. Some established systems of direct rule, while others governed indirectly. Finally, there were a variety of responses from people within these territories to being ruled by imperial powers.

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 raw materials. They needed sources of materials to keep their machines operating around the clock. These factories were manufacturing goods at rates never before seen. Consequently, industrialized nations needed new markets to sell these finished products. The supply had far exceeded the demand within the European countries where they were being produced.

Through colonization they could get cheap, raw materials. Then they could make them into products in European factories. And then, they could sell them back to the people they colonized.

The premier of France, Jules Ferry, spoke to the French government about expanding their overseas colonies. He cited most importantly the need for markets.

...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. However, he also adds ideas of cultural and racial superiority to 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 Europeans at this time. Yet, there were others who rejected these ideas altogether. They 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. Yet he also added religion 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.

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 and Livingston make imperialism a moral, civilizing crusade. It might seem confusing that a country would undertake such an adventure for that reason. Maybe it was just to add a justification for colonization. Maybe they wanted colonialism to seem like it was about more than money.

Great Britain and France were on the move to conquer parts of Africa. Needless to say, other countries were bound to get involved. The German missionary and pro-imperialist advocate Friedrich Fabri believed it was essential for Germany to acquire colonies. His reasoning included economic arguments as well as the mission to civilize. However, Fabri also took a more patriotic, nationalistic approach. He wrote that England controls its colonies, yet has just one-fourth as many troops as Germany.

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. They were competing for national honor. Ito Hirobumi was one of the leading samurai of Japan during the Meiji Restoration and a former prime minister. He stated that imperialism will be a goal for his country. His goal was to compete with Europe and America:

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 during the era of imperialism. Economics, racism, religion, and nationalism were all at play. Wealthy, industrialized nations were also conquering people who were not exactly welcoming. This meant that a strong military was necessary. During the Industrial Revolution great leaps were made in weaponry. They 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.

The invention of rifles that could be easily reloaded and the Gatling gun (an early machine gun) changed things drastically. Suddenly, the rest of the world could not stop the industrialized nations from taking their lands. They were armed just with arrows, muskets, and spears. 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 battle, the Mahdiyya army lost 11,000 soldiers; the British army lost 40.

The scramble for territory

Now we know why imperial nations decided to colonize other parts of the world. Let’s now take a look at how successful they were. Take a look at the chart below. We can see 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 taken at a great pace during the last half of the nineteenth century. 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.

It is difficult to figure out who claimed what territory from the tables above. Still, we can see that Great Britain controlled a lot of territory. Take a look at 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. It will help us put the above figures in perspective.



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

Collaboration and resistance

The Europeans, Americans, and Japanese clearly had lopsided advantages in technology. Even so, 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. Their subjects were spread out over a total territory of more than 13 million square miles, across five continents. Clearly, the British government must have faced great challenges as a colonial power. Considering the challenges, they needed the assistance of local people to rule these territories. The people helped them. Some did so willingly. Others were forced to.

Some of the colonized peoples participated in the colonial government. They did so for opportunities to advance within British society. For example, an Indian writer noted that an "India-born [government official] practically cut himself off from his parent society."

He "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 had costs. "It was no small sacrifice for him, because in this way he completely estranged himself from the society of his own people." He became "socially and morally" an outcast.

European powers also exploited conflicts that already existed in a territory. They also used their technological superiority to make them worse. For example, the British were able to do this quite successfully in their rule of India. Sir James Caird was a member of the British government. In 1878, he explained how Great Britain was able to conquer and control the Indian subcontinent. At the time, there were religious conflicts in India. They eventually led Pakistan and Bangladesh to separate from India. Caird explained how Great Britain controlled the 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. Still, the British were able to use the Indians' internal quarrels against them. Therefore, the question remains as to how the colonized people resisted these imperial powers. There is no simple answer to this question. It depends on the location and time period of colonization. However, there were some patterns that emerged as we investigated. We can break the responses into four reactions: co-option, military resistance, mysticism, and nationalism. Often there was a mix of these reactions.

The first response of co-option is an interesting one. The less technologically advanced country somehow co-opts the ideas of the more technologically advanced country. They copied it. This can be seen in two examples.

The first is Japan during the Meiji Restoration in the late nineteenth century. The Japanese encountered the imperial powers during this period. It made the government fearful of the industrialized nations' superior military power. Therefore, the samurai leadership of Japan began an extensive building program. Their goal was to copy the technological advancements of the West. At the same time, they wanted to maintain traditional Japanese culture. The two images of the Japanese military shown below offer an interesting before and after comparison.



Japanese Samurai, 1860s



Japanese Soldiers, 1904

The second example is that of Emperor Menelik II of Ethiopia. He was able to play the colonial powers against one another. He gained support from Russia. 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 the invading Italian army. His military victory ensured his people's freedom for almost another four decades.

The response used most often by indigenous people was some form of military resistance. These wars of resistance occurred throughout the Age of Imperialism. They happened from West and South Africa to Burma and the Philippines. One of the most bloody battles took place in the Philippines. Spain was the colonial power there for more than 300 years. At the conclusion of the Spanish-American War in 1898, the United States acquired the archipelago, and other territories. The Filipinos declared their independence on January 23, 1899.

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

We can learn from numbers such as these. They show that most of those who tried to resist colonization with the use of force were defeated.

Some also resisted colonization by using religious mysticism. They were faced with much more powerful weapons. Some groups turned to their traditional spiritual practices. They believed they 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. In the American Midwest in the 1890s the Sioux used the Ghost Dance against the U.S. military. In China from 1899 to 1900, the Chinese staged the Boxer Rebellion against the British and other European powers, the Americans and the Japanese. The Chinese used martial arts and spiritual possession. In East Africa from 1905 to 1907, magic was used in the Maji Maji Rebellion against Germany. Resistance fighters there wore a potion.

Military resistance was just one way of fighting imperialism. Political resistance also found its voice in this time period. The idea of nationalism was often used by imperialists to justify colonization. Resisters soon adopted it. They used it as inspiration for movements against the colonial powers.

India provides us with examples of expressions of national identity. In 1885, English-speaking Indian intellectuals created the Indian National Congress. It demanded that the British leave India. The Indians wanted the right to govern their own country.

Two of the Congress' most famous members were the nationalist Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Mohandas K. Gandhi. Their message was that Indians should not use military force to drive the British from India. Rather, they encouraged Indians to use political and economic means. In a speech to the Indian National Congress in 1907, Tilak said the Indians should stop buying British-made goods. Instead, he called for a boycott of them. He did not want 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.

The point is to have the entire control in our hands. 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 the passage below. He chides the British in this imaginary dialogue. He wrote it for his book *Hind Swaraj*, or *Indian Home Rule*.

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 was caused by a variety of factors. In part, it was 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. They claimed they had a duty to bring civility and religion to the newly conquered people.

Inevitably, imperialism led to numerous societal changes in the colonies. Some of these were irreversible. Identities of the colonies were forever altered by the experience. Responses to European aggression were varied.

The effects of this era of expansion can still be felt today. Many of these former colonies are now independent nations. Yet the legacies of imperialism remain. Some areas of the world continue to catch up economically and politically with their former rulers.

Quiz

- 1 Which answer choice accurately characterizes Mohandas K. Gandhi's reaction to British imperialism in India?
 - (A) indifferent
 - (B) violent
 - (C) strategic
 - (D) impartial

- 2 Look at the two charts in the section "The scramble for territory".
What is the MOST likely reason that these two charts are included?
 - (A) to demonstrate the frustration of countries that were overtaken by Europe
 - (B) to show how successful Europe was at claiming land
 - (C) to show the decline of Europe's power as a result of imperialism
 - (D) to demonstrate the negative view other countries had toward Europe

- 3 Read the introduction [paragraphs 1-5].
Select the paragraph that explains the MAIN causes of European colonization.

- 4 Which selection from the section "Collaboration and resistance" explains that colonized cultures responded differently to imperialism?
 - (A) The Europeans, Americans, and Japanese clearly had lopsided advantages in technology. Even so, it would have been extremely difficult for them to rule over so many people, across such a vast stretch of territory.
 - (B) Some of the colonized peoples participated in the colonial government. They did so for opportunities to advance within British society.
 - (C) European powers also exploited conflicts that already existed in a territory. They also used their technological superiority to make them worse. For example, the British were able to do this quite successfully in their rule of India.
 - (D) Therefore, the question remains as to how the colonized people resisted these imperial powers. There is no simple answer to this question. It depends on the location and time period of colonization.

Answer Key

- 1 Which answer choice accurately characterizes Mohandas K. Gandhi's reaction to British imperialism in India?
- (A) indifferent
 - (B) violent
 - (C) strategic**
 - (D) impartial

- 2 Look at the two charts in the section "The scramble for territory".
What is the MOST likely reason that these two charts are included?
- (A) to demonstrate the frustration of countries that were overtaken by Europe
 - (B) to show how successful Europe was at claiming land**
 - (C) to show the decline of Europe's power as a result of imperialism
 - (D) to demonstrate the negative view other countries had toward Europe

- 3 Read the introduction [paragraphs 1-5].
Select the paragraph that explains the MAIN causes of European colonization.

Paragraph 2:

Let's try to understand why European motives for colonization changed in the nineteenth century. We must take a look at three main factors. They make this era different from previous ones. The first factor 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 range of these conquests. The colonizers traditionally based themselves along the coasts of their colonies. Now, they began to move inland and into the interior of the conquered lands. The final big change was the impact colonization had on tens of millions of lives.

- 4 Which selection from the section "Collaboration and resistance" explains that colonized cultures responded differently to imperialism?
- (A) The Europeans, Americans, and Japanese clearly had lopsided advantages in technology. Even so, it would have been extremely difficult for them to rule over so many people, across such a vast stretch of territory.
 - (B) Some of the colonized peoples participated in the colonial government. They did so for opportunities to advance within British society.
 - (C) European powers also exploited conflicts that already existed in a territory. They also used their technological superiority to make them worse. For example, the British were able to do this quite successfully in their rule of India.
 - (D) **Therefore, the question remains as to how the colonized people resisted these imperial powers. There is no simple answer to this question. It depends on the location and time period of colonization.**