

## WHAT IS COLONIALISM?

**Key terms:** *subjugate*; bring under submission or control, *exploit*; to use someone selfishly or for profit against their will, *assimilation*; to be absorbed into, *cash crop*; a crop grown to sell for profit, *monoculture*; growing one or two crops (if a country, then their economy is based on only one or two crops/minerals) {highlight these terms when you find them}

“Colonialism occurs when one nation *subjugates* another, conquering its population and *exploiting* it, often while forcing its own language and cultural values upon its people. In antiquity, colonialism was practiced by empires such as Ancient Greece, Ancient Rome, Ancient Egypt and Phoenicia. Modern colonialism began during what’s also known as the Age of Discovery. Beginning in the 15th century, Portugal began looking for new trade routes and searching for civilizations outside of Europe. In 1415, Portuguese explorers conquered Ceuta, a coastal town in North Africa, kicking off an empire that would last until 1999. Spain decided to try exploration too. In 1492 Christopher Columbus began looking for a western route to India and China. Instead, he landed in the Bahamas, kicking off the Spanish Empire. Spain and Portugal became locked in competition for new territories and took over indigenous lands in the Americas, India, Africa and Asia.

England, the Netherlands, France and Germany quickly began their own empire building overseas, fighting Spain and Portugal for the right to lands they had already conquered. Starting in the 1880s, European nations focused on taking over African lands, racing one another to coveted natural resources and establishing colonies they would hold until an international period of decolonization began around 1914, challenging European colonial empires up to 1975. Colonial powers argued that they were acting in the best interests of those whose land and peoples they exploited. Even before decolonization, indigenous people on all continents staged violent and nonviolent resistance to their conquerors.

Colonial governments invested in infrastructure and trade and disseminated (spread) medical and technological knowledge. In some cases, they encouraged literacy, the adoption of Western human rights standards, and sowed the seeds for democratic institutions and systems of government. However, coercion and forced assimilation often accompanied those gains, and scholars still debate colonialism’s many legacies. Colonialism’s impacts include environmental degradation, the spread of disease, economic instability, ethnic rivalries and human rights violations--issues that can long outlast one group’s colonial rule.”<sup>1</sup>

“Colonialism flourished between the late 1400s and the 1800s as European countries took over the Americas, Africa and most of Asia, mostly to gain access to resources such as gold, silver, furs, fish, timber and land. But also to procure labourers/slaves, install

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<sup>1</sup> "Colonialism facts and information - National Geographic." 19 Feb. 2019, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/topics/reference/colonialism/>. Accessed 10 Jan. 2020.

trading and military posts and paralleling this expansion, 'converting' indigenous peoples to Christianity.

Not all colonialism was the same. Some colonies were established by the migration of settlers from the colonizing country, as in the British colonies in North America, Australia, and New Zealand. Some colonies were founded by religious groups fleeing persecution, such as the Pilgrims who settled in what is now Massachusetts. Other colonies were organized by groups of merchants or businessmen, such as the British, Dutch, and French East India Companies.

In North America most colonialism was of the settler variety, and the Europeans who moved to North America in the 13 colonies soon found themselves in disagreements with the "mother" country of England. The resulting American Revolution of 1776-1783 led to a temporary decline in the power of England. Spain continued to hold Cuba and the Philippines until 1898, but otherwise retired from its role as a colonial power. England and other European nations, meanwhile, entered a new colonial era in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, looking to get rich off of the other parts of the world.

The riches produced by colonialism helped stimulate the industrial revolution of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This tremendous increase in the use of machines greatly strengthened the military power of European countries, allowing them to extend their rule over areas of Asia and Africa. In parts of Asia and Africa where before there had been only European commercial posts, European nations sent troops along with commercial agents, government officials and Christian Missionaries. The Europeans forced these areas to become markets for their industrial products and suppliers of raw materials.

By the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century the British controlled all of India, which was ruled by a British viceroy; the Dutch assumed similar control over Indonesia, then known as the Netherlands East Indies; and the French seized Indochina. The entire continent of Africa, except for Ethiopia and Liberia, was divided up among the European powers after the Conference of Berlin in 1885. Historian W.E.B. DuBois describes the pillage of Central Africa because of the profiteers set on supplying the world with ivory for billiard balls and piano keys:

Thousands of miles of fertile country were turned into wilderness and ruin, hundreds of thousands of elephants were slain and thousands of human beings. It has been estimated that not more than one in five of the captives bearing ivory ever reached the ocean. Starved and weakened by disease and the strain of marching, they line the long paths with their death.

Ivory was exported by the ton. As early as 1788, London was importing more than 100 tons of ivory a year. This continued for the century: 514 tons were imported in 1884. This meant the death of 75,000 elephants a year and, as DuBois noted, thousands of people. Henry M. Stanley wrote in 1891: "Every tusk, piece, and scrap...had been steeped and dyed in blood. Every pound weight has cost the life of a man, woman or child, for



every five pounds a hut has been burned, for every two tusks a whole village has been destroyed... It is simply incredible that because ivory is required...populations, tribes and nations should be utterly destroyed."

The European colonists forced Africans to produce *cash crops* no matter how low the prices were. They did this mainly to pay taxes only if they grew the cash crops the Europeans wanted. In some cases colonial powers went to even greater extremes. According to Guyanese writer Walter Rodney, French officials banned the Mandaja people (now part of Congo Brassaville) from hunting, so they would engage solely in cotton cultivation.

Often the British and French colonial governments would use forced labour to get work done at no cost to the Europeans. They demanded that Africans "give" their labour to colonial officials for a certain number of days. According to Rodney "a great deal of this forced labour went into the construction of roads, railways, and ports to provide the infrastructure for private capitalist investment and to facilitate the export of cash crops."

Rodney describes the impact of these policies on Africans:

Taking only one example from the British colony of Sierra Leone, one finds that the railway which started at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century required forced labour from thousands of peasants driven from their villages. The hard work and appalling conditions led to the death of a large number of those engaged in the work on the railway.

The French accomplished the same using different tactics. They forced Africans to join the French army and then used them as unpaid labourers. Rodney estimates that in one railroad project lasting 12 years, 25% of workers died annually from starvation and disease – thousands of Africans.

Among the most barbaric of all the colonial powers were the Belgians under King Leopold II. According to historian Adam Hochschild writing in *King Leopold's Ghost*, an estimated 5 to 8 million people were killed in the Belgian colonists' attempt to force the people of the Congo to supply rubber for Europe's needs.

Just as in earlier periods of colonialism, the European powers wanted the colonies only to open markets so that European products could be bought. The English, for example, took the cotton from India and Egypt but banned the Indians and Egyptians from processing the cotton into finished clothing. Instead Indians and Egyptians had to buy imported (and more expensive) clothing made in England. Thus Indian artisans who made fine textiles were forced out of business, and India became poorer.

In this way, the economies of many countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America were stunted. Instead of "developing," they were actually "underdeveloped" by Europeans. Prohibited by European powers from continuing their own cultures based largely on farming, and also prohibited from developing manufacturing, the colonies came to depend

heavily on a few crops or minerals, the prices of which went up and down in the world markets. These policies led to the African economies becoming “monocultures,” relying on one agricultural crop or mineral for most of their foreign currency and trade. For example, Gold Coast grew mainly cocoa and Senegal and Gambia grew groundnuts (peanuts).

The United States eventually became a colonial power itself. The U.S. military fought its own “colonial” wars early in the nation’s history – dozens of wars with the Native peoples throughout the 1700s and 1800s. From 1846 to 1848, the United States fought a war with Mexico, which resulted in the U.S. seizure of one third of Mexico. The United States annexed Hawaii in 1898, and a short time later defeated Spain in a war, acquiring Puerto Rico, the Philippines and Guam as colonies, and control over Cuba. The subsequent U.S. war against Filipino independence fighters was especially horrific. The United States had become a colonial power in its own right.

It wasn’t until after World War II (1939-1945) that the countries of Asia and Africa were able to force a weakened Europe into beginning to grant them independence. In some cases it came with huge struggles, such as that of the Indian people, led by Mahatma Ghandi and the Indian National Congress against the British, or that of the Vietnamese people, led by Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh against the French.

Even though almost all countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America are now formally independent and have their own representative at the United Nations, many of the economic and political relationships that were established during colonialism continue. Because of colonialism, many countries of the Third World still rely on one or two main crops. Most have never fully developed an industrial base. In addition, many of these countries owe lots of money to wealthy nations – that is, they are in debt and cannot afford to spend money on things their own people need.”<sup>2</sup>

#### **Now it’s your turn - based on the 1885 Treaty of Berlin:**

**1) Create a colour-coded legend connecting the colonizers to the African countries found in the reading and listed below and colour the corresponding countries while labelling them as well. We will refer to this throughout the semester.**

Britain: Ghana, Nigeria, Egypt, Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, South Africa (including Lesotho) and Sierra Leone, part of Somalia (from tip of horn to the western boundary)

France: Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, Gabon, Madagascar, Senegal, French Guinea (now named Guinea), Cote d’Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Algeria, Djibouti, Central African Republic and Benin.

Germany: Tanzania, Namibia, Togo, Cameroon

Portugal: Angola, Mozambique, Guinea Bissau

Belgium: Congo and Republic of Congo

Spain: Equatorial Guinea, Western Sahara

Italy: Libya, Eritrea, Somalia (from tip of horn to the southern boundary)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Peterson, Bob

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.joh.cam.ac.uk/library/library\\_exhibitions/schoolresources/exploration/scramble\\_for\\_africa](https://www.joh.cam.ac.uk/library/library_exhibitions/schoolresources/exploration/scramble_for_africa)



2) In your notes, create a table with the headings: economy (having to do with trade, jobs, money, items (commodities), wages), environment (anything to do with the natural world) and social (more to do with humans; again, jobs, health, culture, communities, infrastructure). List at least 5 EFFECTS in each category from colonization from the perspective of the colonists/inhabitants.

**AFRICA, circa 1885**



**LEGEND:**

Britain  
France  
Germany  
Portugal  
Belgium  
Spain  
Italy