

THE CONSEQUENCES OF IMPERIALISM



British East India Headquarters in London

Unit Overview

As European nations and the United States advanced their quest for territory, millions of people found their traditional way of life threatened by foreign influences. The colonized soon realized that their traditions and beliefs were challenged by a Western culture that was firmly believed in its own superiority. Chinese, Africans and Indians reacted to this attitude in several ways with mixed results. Let's see how it all happened.

STOP: Answer Section A Questions

Critics of Imperialism

To most Europeans and Americans, it seemed logical that Westerners should carry civilization and progress to more primitive countries. Non-whites would receive the benefits of better medicine, a higher standard of living and improved **infrastructure**. This would prepare them for democracy and self-government. Peace and stability would lead to the acceptance of Christianity. This thought pattern seemed reasonable, but it actually fit the description of a **logical fallacy**. It overlooked the fact that the **colonized** already had well-established and complex cultures based on deeply rooted traditions. The European model of progress was also destructive to local communities and the environment.

The power and arrogance demonstrated by the **colonizers** did have some critics in the United States and Europe. Reformers such as **J.A. Hobson** often saw imperialism as part of a double standard. Nations who had fought hard for democratic principles and civil liberties were ruling vast areas as dictators. The ideals of representative democracy were ignored as the West continued to manage lands in Asia, India and Africa. Authors of fiction and non-fiction works also responded. For example, **Joseph Conrad** traveled to Africa as a naval officer and wrote a series of magazine articles. These became the basis for his novel titled **Heart of Darkness** published in 1902. It tells the story of a British citizen who fulfilled his desire for adventure when he took a position on a steamship operated by a company searching for African ivory. Conrad included his eye-witness observations of the cruel treatment of African natives. The majority of Europeans, however, continued to believe that the inhabitants of their colonies welcomed their presence and benefitted from it. The natives of Africa, India and China, however, viewed this from a different perspective.

STOP: Answer Section B Questions

The African Reaction to Imperialism

Given the sheer size of the continent, it was not surprising that the African reaction to nineteenth century colonialism varied. Civil wars and the ill-effects of the slave trade had so devastated some areas of Africa that the Europeans were welcomed. Africans living here hoped that the outsiders would end the violence and turmoil. Other sections of the continent attempted to resist but soon discovered that they were no match for the well-equipped armies of Europe. Yet, not every conquest was easy. There were exceptions to the quick acquisition of land by Great Britain and the other Western powers. **Ethiopia**, for example, had a geographic advantage thanks to mountains along its borders. The country also had a capable leader

named **Menelik II**. He knew how to use rivalries to his advantage. Great Britain, Italy and France were each determined to control this part of Africa. Therefore, Menelik II was able to defeat an Italians when they tried to take over his country. After Italy lost the **Battle of Adowa** to the Ethiopians in 1896, Menelik II even managed to extend his empire. **Addis Ababa**, the capital city of Ethiopia, reflected Menelik's interest in Western technology and featured new schools, hotels and hospitals.



Map of Ethiopia

Although a number of Europeans resided in Algeria and South Africa, relatively few Westerners desired to live in Africa. Instead, the colonial powers governed their territories indirectly. Treaties were negotiated with local rulers already in power, but this did not mean that life remained the same for most Africans. The nations of Europe wanted to take advantage of the natural resources their colonies had to offer. To do this, they needed African labor. At first, natives were simply forced to work in the mines and on the plantations, but **taxes** soon proved to be a more valuable weapon. Most Africans had always paid taxes in the form of goods or services. Those who worked for foreign investors were paid wages and were forced to pay their taxes in money. The tax money was used to provide services

such as improved farming methods and healthcare, but these improvements actually benefitted businessmen more than Africans. Even though the British had outlawed slavery within their empire in 1833, military campaigns such as the Boer War were fought at the expense of the African people and created a lifestyle similar to that of a slave.



It became apparent that Africans had become second-class citizens in their own land. Since resistance to the foreign onslaught proved ineffective, some Africans attempted to adopt Western culture as a means to regain power over their territories. To maintain authority over their colonized lands, Europeans supported only minimal education for native Africans. Fearful that too much knowledge might lead to a loss of control over their dominions, Europeans moved Asians and Indians into Africa for those jobs which required special skills. The native work force was reserved for unskilled labor. **Missionaries** worked to spread Christianity throughout Africa, but the priorities for the ruling nations were simply to maintain order and to make a profit. Although they did not advocate a complete change in government, Africans educated in the Christian mission schools of South Africa began to push for equal treatment. In 1912, the **African National Congress** was formed with the purpose of establishing political rights and individual liberty for the native population.

STOP: Answer Section C Questions

The Chinese Reaction to Imperialism

Although China escaped having its lands divided into colonies, foreign influence dominated economic and political life within the country's borders. Unfortunately

for the Chinese, the corrupt and nearly bankrupt government was unable to deal with the expanding population and the effects of unequal treaties. For many, a change in government seemed the best way to restore China to her former greatness. **Hong Xiuquan**, a leader of a small village in southern China, believed this was his mission. With a peasant army of one million followers known as **Taipings**, he began a rebellion in 1853. After the rebels took control of the local region, the British government became alarmed and decided to protect their economic investment in China. Great Britain sent troops to assist the Chinese government in ending the **Taiping Rebellion**.



Sun Yat-sen

Although the rebellion was unsuccessful, most Chinese now realized that some kind of change was necessary. However, opinions were sharply divided in terms of how to approach the future. The revolt convinced many Chinese that modernization was crucial to the country's independence, peace and security. The young **Emperor Guangxu** agreed with this viewpoint and favored a new approach. There was serious opposition to this policy from those who favored a return to traditional Chinese values and culture including his aunt, Empress **Cixi**. She was a powerful and charismatic woman who drew enough political support to have her nephew imprisoned. Organizations dedicated to removing foreign influences from China began to grow in membership. The most famous of these groups was the Society of the Righteous and Harmonious Fists or the **Boxers**.

The Boxers adopted the slogan, “Death to the foreign devils,” and spearheaded a rebellion in 1900. The violence escalated and threatened European businessmen as well as Christian missionaries. The Chinese government, controlled by Empress Cixi, secretly supported this movement. Driven by economic concerns, Western nations quickly formed the **Eight Power Expedition** consisting of soldiers from Russia, Austria-Hungary, Great Britain, Germany, France, Japan, and the United States. This combined effort ended the **Boxer Rebellion** and resulted in the **Treaty of Peking (Beijing)**, another humiliating agreement for China. Although the Boxer Rebellion was not a military success, it reinforced China’s growing anti-foreign sentiment.

The next revolution, led by **Sun Yat-sen**, was successful in overthrowing the government, and China became a republic in 1911. Sun Yat-sen hoped to combine Western ideas and traditional Chinese values into a guiding policy for a strong nation. He proposed to end Western domination of trade, to reform the economy and to establish an open relationship between the people and the government. These were worthy goals, but they would prove difficult to accomplish.

STOP: Answer Section D Questions

The Indian Response

Unlike Asia and Africa, India experienced an extensive European presence long before the nineteenth century. In 1599, eighty London merchants formed the **British East India Company**. They established their first trading station in India at Surat in 1612 and quickly added more ports. The company also became involved in Indian internal affairs and supported those rulers who did not oppose their activities. The **Industrial Revolution** rapidly increased Great Britain’s need for raw **cotton** to fuel its growing textile industry. In spite of the necessity of feeding the growing population of India, farms were converted into plantations to grow cash crops such as **tea**. This decreased the country’s food supply. The island of **Ceylon**, which today is known as the nation of **Sri Lanka**, saw its tropical forests destroyed for the purpose of clearing land in order to plant commercial crops for export. The British East India Company’s power and profits skyrocketed; unfortunately, the company’s corruption and mismanagement also increased. At the same time, Indians began to resent their authority.



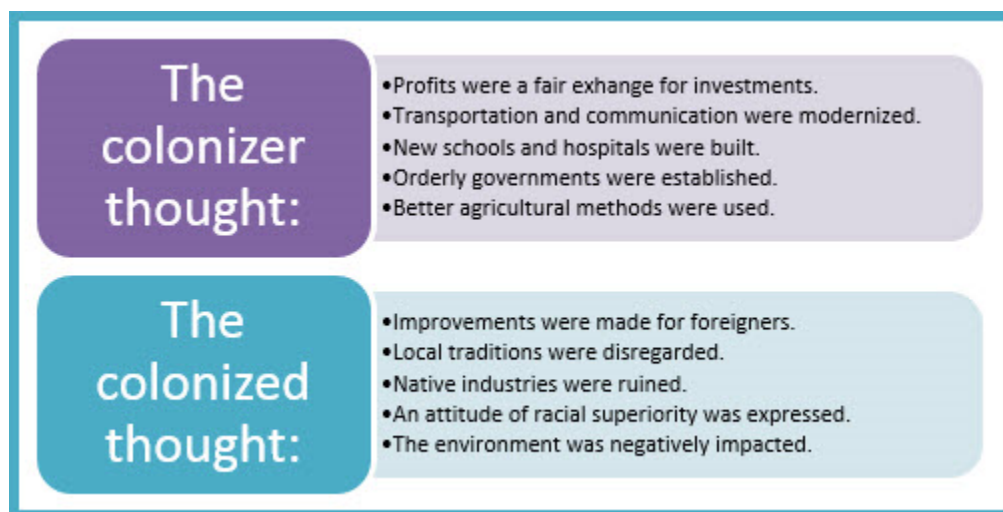
The British East India Company struggled to maintain control of India and recruited an army of natives referred to as **sepoys** to assist with this task. In 1857, the British supplied these troops with ammunition and weapons. The cartridges were sealed with either beef or pork fat. To use them, soldiers had to bite off the seal. The British military never questioned this aspect of their duty, but Indian soldiers were highly offended by this practice. Those who followed the Hindu faith did not eat beef; those who followed the Muslim faith did not eat pork. For some native Indians this proved to be the last straw. It resulted in what the British called the **Sepoy Mutiny** which was actually a full-scale revolt. The East India Company requested military assistance from the British government, and it took over a year to restore order. Since Great Britain did not want its supply of raw materials disrupted, the government began to rule India directly through a Cabinet post in London and a British official called a **viceroy** in India.

The British believed they knew what was best for the Indian people and embarked on an ambitious program for improvement. They built railroads and telegraph lines. The Indians provided the labor and the funding through taxes, but British engineers directed the work. The lives of the poor in India improved very little, and educated Indians resented their status as second-class citizens. In spite of their knowledge and skill, the best jobs, highest salaries and finest houses were reserved for British citizens living in India. This form of **racial discrimination** caused injured pride and frustration. Many native Indians believed that the best way to achieve greater equality and self-government was through the political process. This led to the formation of a political party called the **Indian National Congress** which met for the first time in 1885. The Congress eventually became a powerful organization that pulled together millions of people working for reform and greater individual liberties.

STOP: Answer Section E Questions

What Does It All Mean?

The colonized and the colonizer viewed the same series of events from totally different perspectives. For the colonizers, the profits that they earned seemed fair. They took great pride installing modern transportation, communication and transportation systems. The foreigners introduced new agricultural techniques, built hospitals and established schools. In some cases, orderly governments were established, and civil wars stopped. From the colonizer's point of view, they had earned the gratitude and respect of the people that they controlled.



To the colonized, however, these changes seemed more of a threat than a benefit. From their perspective, most of the improvements were provided for the convenience of foreigners or to increase profits. Native people already had traditions, customs and religions that they did not wish to disregard. Local communities and economies were often based on native handicraft industries that disappeared under imperialism. The attitude of racial and social superiority created feelings of distrust and resentment that were never resolved. The loss of forest areas and alterations to the landscape impacted the environment in negative ways. Would the industrialized nations of the world assume responsibility for the negative aspects of colonialism? Would the relationship between the colonized

and the colonizer led to cooperation or conflict? We are still struggling with these questions today.

Additional Resources and Activities



[Main Points Worksheet](#)

[What Was the Boxer Rebellion? Article with Quiz](#)

[The East India Tea Company: The Company that once Ruled India Article with Quiz](#)