

# Colonialism and Imperialism



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## 1. Colonialism

### The Historical Context

From 1870 a series of great economic changes in advanced capitalist powers (“Second industrial revolution”) brought a wave of new technologies that radically transformed the economy of the most advanced countries.

Cheaper transportation and communication allowed people to travel throughout the world in a way and in a quantity hitherto inconceivable. This process of global integration has been called the **first globalization**.

In this context we should understand the phenomenon of **colonialism or imperialism**. Both terms are used interchangeably to refer to the territorial expansion of the European industrial powers, especially after 1870. The result of this expansion was the formation of large overseas empires.

### The Causes of Colonial Expansion

The colonial and imperialist expansion undertaken by the industrial powers from 1870-1914 was motivated by several factors:

- **Economic factors** (raw materials, new markets to sell and buy, valve for population pressure in the metropolis)
- **Political factors** (national prestige, lobby groups interested in colonization, action of highly influential politicians)
- **Geostrategic factors** (geographic privileged enclaves)
- **Cultural and scientific factors** (thirst for knowledge, extension of Western culture)

### Causes of Colonialism

When asked about the causes of the European imperial expansion in the late nineteenth century, historians have traditionally highlighted **economic causes**.

Capitalist development led European powers to seek new spaces in which they could obtain:

- Raw materials to supply its industries (textile fibers, minerals...).

- Markets to sell their products.
- Territories in which the colonial powers could profitably invest capital, usually in infrastructure such as railways, roads, or bridges.
- New lands to locate the growing European population, allowing emigration to ease population pressure in Europe.

These factors were important, but have been often overstated. It is now known that many colonies were not a good deal for European imperialist countries and that, in many cases, the cost of invading and controlling the colonies considerably exceeded the benefits. In fact, commercial exchanges, demographic flows, and financial investments were much more intense between free countries than between the colonial powers and their colonies. It cannot be said that “imperialism was just about economic exploitation of the colonies”

So, without underestimating the economic reasons, which are keys to understanding imperialism, we should focus our attention on other factors.



The nineteenth century was the century of nationalism. European powers faced a race for power and prestige that eventually would lead to the First World War. These **political causes**, based on national prestige, were keys to triggering and maintaining the colonial expansion.

Each country had its own motivations: France, to forget its defeat by Prussia in 1870; Germany and Italy, recently born nations, to reach the greatness of the old European states, such as Britain or France. Important politicians like the British Benjamin Disraeli or the French Jules Ferry

ardently defended the importance of colonial expansion to their respective countries.

**Geostrategic considerations** joined the political motives. Countries often conquered a country to hinder the expansion of a rival power or to facilitate communication between different regions of the empire.

This was the case of Gibraltar, Malta, or Cyprus or the Suez Canal for the British. All these enclaves and colonies permitted the British Navy to sail from Britain to India –the main British colony- anchoring in British possessions.



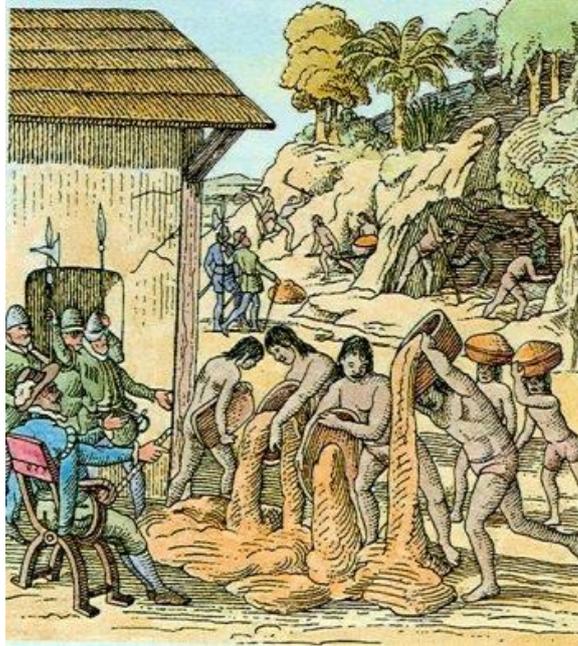
We also should mention what can be called **ideological and scientific factors**:

- The eagerness to discover new and unknown territories, something that Europeans had experienced since the fifteenth century.
- The belief on European superiority linked to “social Darwinism”.
- The desire to evangelize non-Christian populations.
- The will of extending the values and progress of Western culture.

Finally, the European imperial expansion cannot be understood without taking into consideration the European **technological superiority**, the use of quinine to protect Europeans from malaria, and the internal rivalry between ethnic groups that facilitated European invasions.

## 2. The Great Colonial Empires and Conflicts between the Powers

European colonial empires were born in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Firstly Portuguese and Spanish, then French, English and Dutch, Europeans conquered vast territories in other continents.

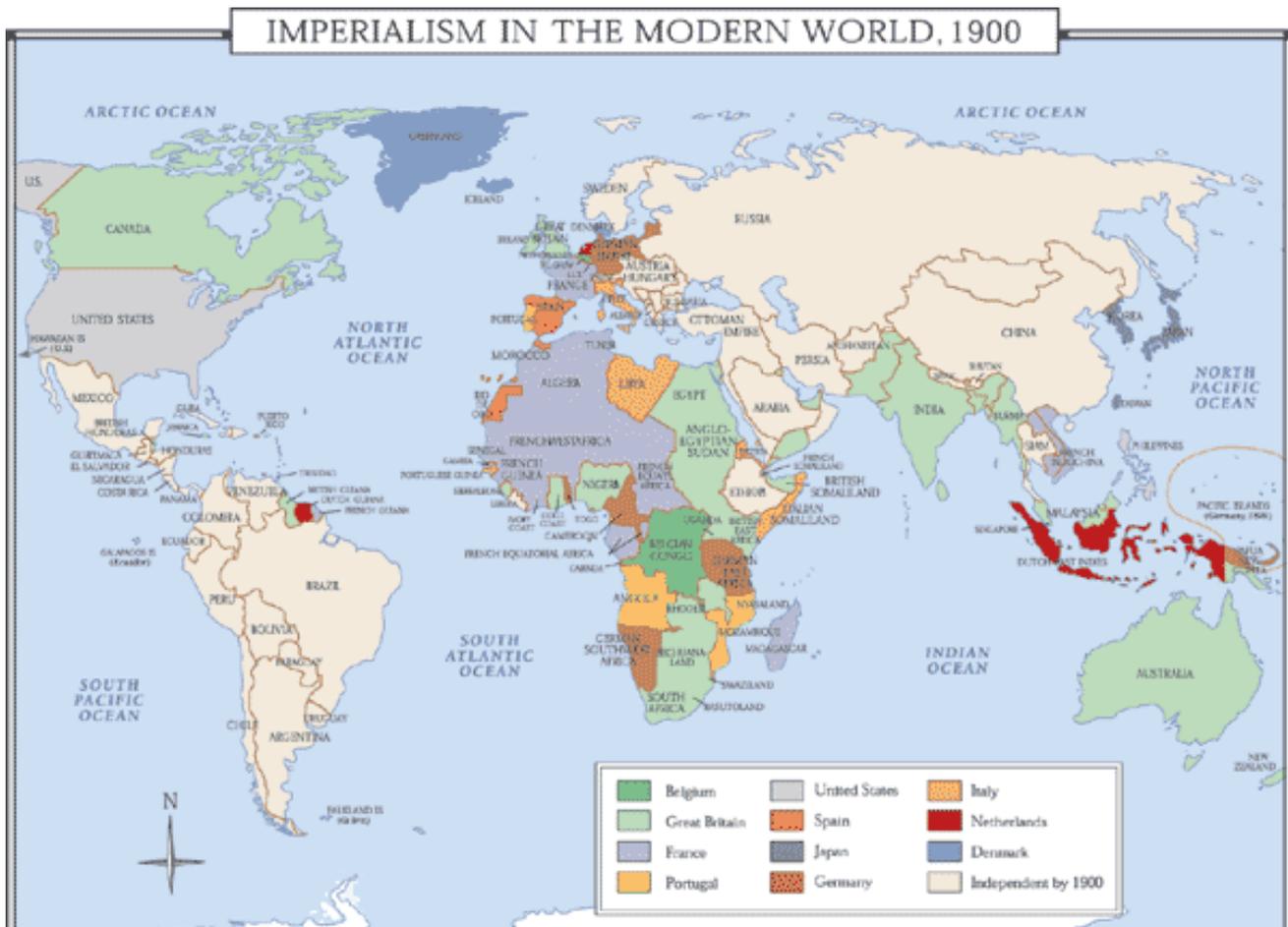


The new expansion of the nineteenth century was led by the great industrial powers.

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the main industrial nations conquered an important part of the planet.

- The British Empire constituted the largest in history.
- The French Empire occupied important territories in Africa and Indochina.
- European countries like Germany, Italy, Portugal, Holland, or Spain and non-European powers like the United States and Japan constructed or maintained lesser empires.

The metropolis struggled to extend their territories and, as a consequence, their interests often clashed and led to diplomatic conflicts. Despite attempts at a common agreed upon solution, such as the Berlin Conference in 1895, colonial conflicts were an important factor of international instability.



### The British Empire

Great Britain had been established since the seventeenth century as the great European **naval power**. Encouraged by its spectacular **industrial development**, the UK set up an empire stretching from Canada in America to Australia and New Zealand in Oceania, from Egypt to South Africa in Africa. In Asia, the large colony of India was known as the “jewel of the empire”. On top of that, many colonies and enclaves ranging from the Caribbean (Jamaica) to Asia (Hong Kong and Singapore), to Europe (Gibraltar, Malta, and Cyprus) shaped the most extensive empire in history.

### The French Empire

The French threw themselves into an active colonial expansion with a strong nationalist attitude and a remarkable industrial development. Its empire extended around two areas: Saharan and Equatorial Africa (Algeria, Morocco, French Congo...) and the Indochina Peninsula in Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia).

## Other Empires

Some former colonial powers like Spain in North Africa; Portugal in Africa; and the Netherlands in the Antilles, the Caribbean, and Indonesia remained remnants of its once vast empires. New countries like Germany and Italy struggled to get a place, mainly in Africa, in the grand colonial division that was alive across the globe.

At the end of the nineteenth century, two non-European powers joined the small group of colonist countries. The United States annexed the Philippines and Puerto Rico, while maintaining an indirect domination over Cuba after beating Spain in 1898; and Japan annexed Taiwan and Korea after defeating China in 1898 and Russia in 1904-1905.

## Conflicts between the Empires: the Scramble for Africa and the carve up of Africa

Tensions between European powers in other continents were not new. However, after 1870, the colonial powers threw themselves into an unprecedented career expansionism that gave rise to multiple tensions around the world.



*Cecil Rhodes' project:  
The British dominance  
from El Cairo (Egypt)  
to Cape Town (South  
Africa)*

The principle central conflict was Africa. After various frictions, the powers, led by German Chancellor Bismarck, decided to meet in order to establish general rules that would give order to the colonial race. In the **Berlin Conference of 1885**, the main agreement reached proclaimed that powers could acquire rights over colonial lands only if they possessed them or had an "effective occupation" (administration, army, police...)

This resolution further accelerated the colonization process: the **"Scramble for Africa"**

The resolutions of the Berlin Conference did not end tensions. The two great empires, the British and the French, fought to extend their influence and were about to start a general war over an incident in Fashoda (Sudan), in 1898. However, London and Paris reached an agreement in the early twentieth century and began a lasting friendship, the *Entente Cordiale*, which eventually led to a military alliance.

Very different was the case of Germany. Its expansionist ambitions had more serious consequences. Its continuous frictions with France in Africa were one of the causes of the First World War.

### **Colonial exploitation in Belgian Congo: an example of brutal colonialism**

The invention of the inflatable tire for J.B. Dunlop in 1887 and the growing popularity of automobiles greatly increased world demand for rubber.

To obtain it, King Leopold of Belgium did not hesitate to implement a brutal system of forced labor on the Congolese population. The tribal leaders were forced to organize work in their villages and black workers were brutally exploited. To ensure discipline, Belgian colonial agents were holding women and children of the tribe until the men returned with the amount of rubber that had been assigned. Those who refused or failed saw their villages burned and their children amputated as punishment.



### 3. The Consequences of Colonization

The consequences of Western imperialist expansion are quite complex and difficult to simplify.

Conquest and occupation were based on violence and the colonial system was founded on racial oppression and discrimination. In some cases the economic effects were harmful and indigenous people saw a foreign culture imposed on their own.

These were some of the most harmful consequences of European colonization:

- Economic exploitation
- Subjection to a foreign control
- Foreigners became the dominant social class
- Loss of its own culture

On the other hand, the Western scientific and technological progress benefited directly or indirectly the colonized populations. We could say that to some extent there were positive consequences:

- Improvement of health conditions
- Access to education for the native elite
- Construction of railways, ports...

