

Imperialism & Colonialism

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Definition

In a strict sense, **imperialism** is the process of creating an empire. An empire is a complex political unit made up of diverse social units, each with distinct cultural identities, hierarchically organized under the domination of one of its parts. An empire is thus distinct from a national state, which is relatively homogeneous in its sociocultural features, and a multinational state based on a free federation of its component parts.

Historically, empires generally developed from the expansion of a relatively compact and homogeneous core state extending the territorial range of its domination. Imperial expansion in its early forms was thus largely geographically contiguous, involving a process of progressive movement outward from an original core territory. Various forms of imperial political administration were established, but all involved a substantial delegation of political authority to local officials or agents, creating a recurring problem of fragmentation as local peoples chose to prioritize their own interests over those of the imperial center. This produced a typical cycle of imperial expansion followed by a phase of decay induced by overexpansion and the emergence of people resisting in the periphery which threatened imperial power.

Nevertheless, imperial development often took place on top of a parallel process of cultural enlargement of the center that contributed to historical nation-building. Thus, the Roman city-state left a legacy that contributed to the formation of the Italian nation long after its imperial dominion had disintegrated, and the Chinese and Russian empires both contributed to the formation of modern national identities and nation-states.

History in the Early Modern Period

The emergence of economies and societies with a strong commercial orientation coupled with modern technologies of warfare and transport in Western Europe led to a new form of imperialism from the sixteenth century onward, as European powers, starting with the Spanish and Portuguese, sought to establish imperial dominion over geographically distant overseas territories. Their motivations were different from those of ancient imperialism in that they were concerned less with the construction of enlarged imperial states than with the strengthening of the political-military system of the core states in the Europe.



A combination of ambitions and tensions in the home states fuelled a subsequent development of settler **colonies**, and in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries European powers developed colonial plantation economies in South America and the Caribbean, worked by slaves imported from Africa, to grow products for the European market.

These processes gave rise to an internationalization of the European economies and contributed significantly to the transformation of European societies into partially or fully capitalist systems, in which commercial interests and social groups dominated. Overseas expansion now became intimately tied up with the desire to secure both overseas markets and sources of raw material for the expanding capitalist industries of Europe, and the central imperial role shifted to the pioneer of capitalist industrialization, Britain.

After the Industrial Revolution

British imperialism experienced a major political shock in the 1770s with the secession of the United States. However, the imperial system was preserved through a combination of more sensitive management of relations with colonial peripheral communities (exemplified by the eventual granting of self-government to settlers) and a more intense focus on the extension of imperial interests through trade and economic ties rather than territorial expansion. The latter has been aptly referred to as the "imperialism of free trade."

However, it was never possible to separate economics from politics, as the British experience in India demonstrated. From the seventeenth century onward, the East India



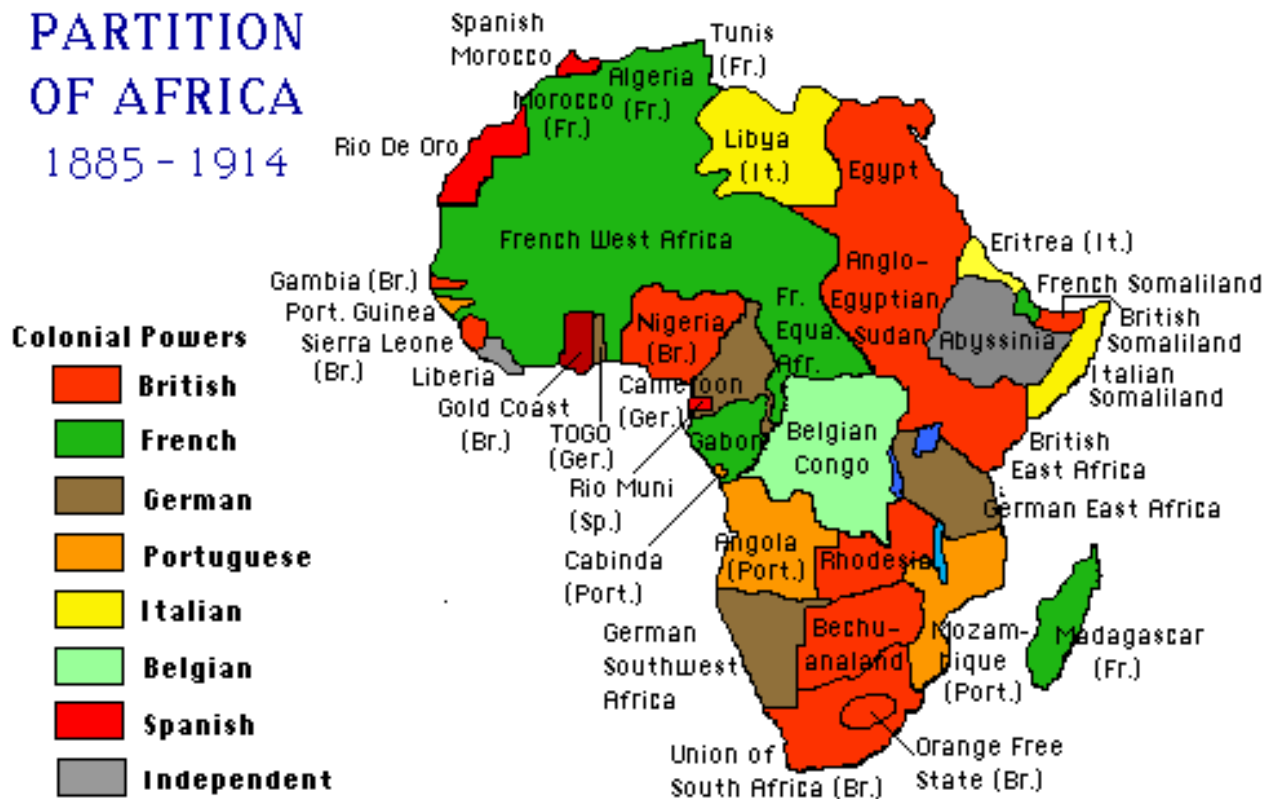
Company—a seemingly commercial structure intended to advance British economic interests while avoiding the responsibilities of formal colonization—was compelled to become more and more involved in the power dynamics of the subcontinent, leading to company rule of India. This eventually produced a major reaction by local political forces in 1857, referred to by the British as "the Indian Mutiny" and by Indian historians as "the first war of national liberation." This forced the British state to take direct responsibility for the administration of India and integrate it into the British Empire.

Later in the century a combination of factors—rivalry between European states, competition for access to markets, the pressure of special interest groups, and the

desire for symbols of imperial glory—led to an intense wave of colonial acquisitions in Africa and Asia. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the bulk of the African continent had been absorbed into one or another European empire, and over 50 percent of the territory of Asia was under European colonial rule.

The colonial experience was a mixed one for the colonized. The colonialism of weaker powers, such as Belgium and Portugal, tended toward the brutal and greedy. British colonialism, with its long experience and sophisticated methods of indirect rule through local elites, checked to some degree by democratic public opinion at home, was less harsh and more developmental. Colonialism provided a framework for transfers that could benefit the recipient societies: modern technologies, capital, education, public health, and Western-originated values of nationhood and democracy. But colonial administrations also imposed financial burdens on local populations and retarded local economic development when it threatened to conflict with the needs of the colonial power. The balance sheet of colonialism is complex, but at the end of the day it must incorporate the fact that colonial development was undertaken in a way that served the interests of the colonial masters and not local societies. Moreover, the liberal Western cultural values that were transferred with colonization contained within them a powerful critique of the ethos of colonial dependency.

PARTITION OF AFRICA 1885 - 1914



These processes fused with the impact of two global wars, in which colonial resources were mobilized to strengthen the military needs of the European colonial powers. In the aftermath of World War I (1914–1918), indigenous resistance to colonialism began to assume a new form, centered on a nascent anticolonial nationalism. World War II (1939–1945) intensified this process still further, and in its wake modern forms of anticolonial nationalism erupted throughout the colonial world.

This ushered in a long, and often highly conflictual, process of decolonization, especially bitter where nationalist forces had to deal not only with colonial administrations but also with privileged white settler groups, as in Algeria, Kenya, and Rhodesia. The independence of India and Pakistan in 1947 marked the commencement of this process, which unfolded throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

Imperialism. (2011). In *The encyclopedia of political science*. Retrieved from <http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/cqpolisci/imperialism/0>

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