

The Age of Imperialism (1870–1914)

Although the Industrial Revolution and nationalism shaped European society in the nineteenth century, imperialism—the domination by one country or people over another group of people—dramatically changed the world during the latter half of that century.

Imperialism did not begin in the nineteenth century. From the sixteenth to the early nineteenth century, an era dominated by what is now termed **Old Imperialism**, European nations sought trade routes with the Far East, explored the New World, and established settlements in North and South America as well as in Southeast Asia. They set up trading posts and gained footholds on the coasts of Africa and China, and worked closely with the local rulers to ensure the protection of European economic interests. Their influence, however, was limited. In the **Age of New Imperialism** that began in the 1870s, European states established vast empires mainly in Africa, but also in Asia and the Middle East.

Unlike the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century method of establishing settlements, the new imperialists set up the administration of the native areas for the benefit of the colonial power. European nations pursued an aggressive expansion policy that was motivated by economic needs that were created by the Industrial Revolution. Between 1870 and 1914, Europe went through a “Second Industrial Revolution,” which quickened the pace of change as science, technology, and industry spurred economic growth. Improvements in steel production revolutionized shipbuilding and transportation. The development of the railroad, the internal combustion engine, and electrical power generation contributed to the growing industrial economies of Europe and their need to seek new avenues of expansion.

The expansion policy was also motivated by political needs that associated empire building with national greatness, and social and religious reasons that promoted the superiority of Western society over “backward” societies. Through the use of direct military force, economic spheres of influence, and annexation, European countries dominated the continents of Africa and Asia. By 1914, Great Britain controlled the largest number of colonies, and the phrase, “the sun never sets on the British Empire,” described the vastness of its holdings. Imperialism had consequences that affected the colonial nations, Europe, and the world. It also led to increased competition among nations and to conflicts that would disrupt world peace in 1914.

Old Imperialism

European imperialism did not begin in the 1800s. In their efforts to find a direct trade route to Asia during the age of Old Imperialism, European nations established colonies in the Americas, India, South Africa, and the East Indies, and gained territory along the coasts of Africa and China. Meanwhile, Europe’s Commercial Revolution created new needs and desires for wealth and raw materials. Mercantilists maintained that colonies could serve as a source of wealth, while personal motives by rulers, statesmen, explorers, and missionaries supported the imperial belief in “Glory, God, and Gold.” By 1800, Great Britain was the leading colonial power with colonies in India, South Africa, and Australia. Spain colonized Central and South America. France held Louisiana and French Guinea, and Holland built an empire in the East Indies.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, colonialism became less popular. The Napoleonic Wars, the struggle for nationalism and democracy, and the cost of industrialization exhausted the energies of European nations. Many leaders also thought that the costs to their respective empires outweighed the benefits, especially the cost of supervising the colonies. However, in the mid-nineteenth century, Europe—especially Great Britain and France—began an economic revival. During the Victorian Era, which lasted from 1837 to 1901, Great Britain became an industrial giant, providing more than 25 percent of the world’s output of industrial goods. In France, Napoleon’s investment in industry and large-scale ventures, such as railroad building, helped to promote prosperity. Thus the Industrial Revolution stirred ambitions in many European countries and renewed their confidence to embark on a path of aggressive expansion overseas.

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