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Imperialism and the Colonial Experience

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter has examined the long history of European expansion and conquest into what is now known as the “developing world.” Although the initial steps, often unplanned, were taken by traders, chartered companies, fortune-seekers, and “men on the spot,” the Industrial Revolution marked the arrival of “high” imperialism, as the English, French, and Dutch raced to carve out rival empires that circled the globe. Europeans encountered diverse and different societies. In the Americas, the populous empires of the Aztecs and Incas as well as many other indigenous peoples suffered demographic collapse as a result of diseases, especially smallpox, brought by the Europeans. While Africa remained largely unsettled until the “scramble for Africa” after 1884, it provided the slaves that powered the plantation economies of the Americas. Throughout the colonial period, imperial powers remained ambivalent about the endeavour and sought to use private chartered companies for expansion, as well as to govern on the cheap through indirect rule. Despite important differences across countries, the colonial experience has played an important role in structuring developing societies in the post-colonial world. Indeed, the first concerns for “development” emerged as the colonial powers responded to national struggles for self-determination in after World War II.

VIDEO RESOURCES

Viewpoints on life under apartheid in South Africa. BBC, 1985.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/apartheid/7217.shtml>

Time 40:52

Black South Africans discuss change in their country. The contributors are a domestic servant who lives with a white family and only sees her own children once a month, a teacher, an activist, a businessman, a councillor, and an actor who uses drama to satirize apartheid.

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***Chronicle: Digging for Slaves.* BBC, 1989.**

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/chronicle/8627.shtml>

Time 49:19

This program provides an overview of recent excavations in North Carolina and Virginia that have attempted to uncover slave quarters on plantations. These digs have shown that the slaves brought agricultural techniques and traditional crafts from West Africa, some of which are still practised today. The finds reveal how innovative the African slaves were and highlight the ways in which they coped with the horrors of captivity.

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***The Story of India (Episode 6).* PBS-BBC, 2007.**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=81oG_liAYJ8

Time 59:01

This episode examines the British Raj and India's struggle for freedom. Wood reveals how in South India a global corporation came to control much of the subcontinent, and explores the magical culture of Lucknow, discovering the enigmatic Briton who helped found the freedom movement. He traces the Amritsar massacre, the rise of Gandhi and Nehru, and the events that led to the Partition of India in 1947.

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***Free at Last* [documentary on the Atlantic Slave Trade]. BBC, 2007.**

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/documentary_archive/6425135.stm

Time 22:03

Resistance was one way of surviving the sheer brutality of slavery. What were the boundaries of rebellion? And what covert strategies were used? Part one of the series looks at African complicity, the barbaric violence and the riches at stake.

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***Romila Thapar—India's Past and Present: How History Informs Contemporary Narrative.* IDRC webcast.**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J8HhLJzpx3Y>

Time 1:05:37

In conversation with IDRC president David M. Malone, historian Romila Thapar, widely recognized as India's foremost historian, challenged the colonial interpretations of India's past, which have created an oversimplified history that has reinforced divisions of race, religion, and caste.

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Africa's Slave Trade to Colonialism to Liberation

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Czj-YIdQG4>

Time 2:29:45

The history behind Africa's slave trade, how it started, and where in Africa it began first

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Apartheid in South Africa Interviews with Black & Afrikaner Leaders, 1957

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wdlD-Q9wmfY>

Time 33:57

A documentary on racism in South Africa. Apartheid is an Afrikaans word for a system of racial segregation enforced through legislation by the National Party governments, who were the ruling party from 1948 to 1994, of South Africa, under which the rights of the majority black inhabitants of South.

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The Roots of African Slave Trade: Who Started It, and Who Stopped It (Documentary)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iTDEgr0RLso>

Time 40:20

In Africa there were a number of societies and kingdoms which kept slaves, before there was any regular commercial contact with Europeans, including the Asanti, the Kings of Bonny and Dahomey.

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Chomsky: History of US Imperialism. Boston University, 2008.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eAeWqBQr1GA>

Time 09:27

Noam Chomsky—arguably the most famous Western intellectual and dissident alive today—interprets former President Bush’s foreign policy actions (such as the Iraq war) in the long history of American Imperialism. He points out how the US was founded as an Empire—contrary to popular perception—and has been driven since inception—again, contrary to popular perception—by an “expansion is the path to security” strategy. This lecture was delivered at Boston University in the United States on April 24th, 2008 under the title of “Modern-Day American Imperialism: Middle East and Beyond.”

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Imperialism: Crash Course World History

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=alJaltUmrGo>

Time 13:45

In which John Green teaches you about European Imperialism in the nineteenth century. European powers started to create colonial empires way back in the sixteenth century, but businesses really took off in the nineteenth century, especially in Asia and Africa. During the 1800s, European powers carved out spheres of influence in China, India, and pretty much all of Africa. While all of the major (and some minor) powers in Europe participated in this new imperialism, England was by far the most dominant, once able to claim that the “sun never set on the British Empire.” Also, they went to war for the right to continue to sell opium to the people of China. Twice. John will teach you how these empires managed to leverage the advances of the Industrial Revolution to build vast, wealth-generating empires. As it turns out, improved medicine, steam engines, and better guns were crucial in the nineteenth-century conquests. Also, the willingness to exploit and abuse the people and resources of so-called “primitive” nations was very helpful in the whole enterprise

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Colonialism in 10 Minutes: The Scramble For Africa

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pw12KGSj53k>

Time 09:48

An excerpt from the film *Uganda Rising* showing in a (very!) brief overview the utter decimation of Africa that took place via colonialism and the so-called “Scramble for Africa.” Despite the film’s focus on Uganda, this sheds light on just how much of the violence that we see today actually has a colonial/European precedent rooted in exploitation and racism.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Provide a definition of “colonialism.”
2. How did the Industrial Revolution influence Europe’s colonial interests?
3. How did the principle of “self-determination” influence Africa’s independence?
4. Explain why nationalism was a factor in driving colonial expansion in the nineteenth century.
5. What were chartered companies? What role did they play in European colonial expansion?
6. Provide a short definition of the era of high imperialism.
7. What critics can be set against Hobson–Lenin thesis of imperialism? Explain briefly, but clearly.

ANSWER KEY: REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Colonialism can be defined as a process of the territorial conquest, occupation, and direct control of one country by another. In some cases, colonialism involved large-scale settlement of people from the colonizing country, while in other cases indirect rule sustained colonial power. In almost all cases, colonialism created and/or worsened poverty, exclusion, and tensions between groups in the colonized society. Competing explanations for colonialism exist, some favoring economic motivations, others prioritizing political and/or socio-cultural explanations.
2. According to some who stress the economic motivations for imperial expansion, the Industrial Revolution in Europe was a major factor. In particular, European countries expanded in search of new markets. As domestic markets became saturated, new investment opportunities and new consumers were needed to sustain continued economic growth. However important this may have been, it does not provide an explanation of precisely why the investment colonizers made in their colonies was ultimately so small.
3. The principle of self-determination, or the idea that a people should have the right to choose their own forms of political, economic, social, and cultural organization, greatly fuelled the drive for independence in colonies. Namely, self-determination was linked to the right to self-rule and the illegitimacy of colonial rule. World War II saw the heavy use of colonial armies pressed into service in the fight against the Axis powers. This experience of fighting for freedom positively influenced Africans and Asians in demanding rights vis-à-vis their colonial rulers. Initially, the embrace of self-determinism drove colonial powers to place greater emphasis on development in the colonies as a way of forestalling independence and a dissolution of their empires.
4. Growing nationalism toward the end of the nineteenth century was a one factor explaining expansion of colonial empires. First, newly unified nations like Germany saw the acquisition of colonies as a means to catch up to their older rivals like France and England. Second, all European countries sought to boost their prestige and sense of greatness, which they thought came from large colonial holdings.
5. A chartered company was a private company given a monopoly on commercial rights by a state for the purposes of promoting trade and exploration in a geographic region. These companies injected private capital and investment and in so doing gave their home states an advantage over their imperial rivals. Chartered companies were especially used by the British, Dutch, and French, and included such notable examples as the Dutch East India Company and the Hudson's Bay Company.
6. The conception of "high" imperialism refers to the expansion of European empires which was aimed at a search for new markets: economic returns within Europe were dwindling, and industrial capitalism had to search abroad for new investment opportunities and consumers. Renewed expansion and the creation of new colonies were thus necessary, because most of Europe still practised protectionist trade policies. Indeed, this economic explanation offers an appealing logic, and the emphasis on the role of capitalism dovetails neatly with the eventual exploitation, most especially of African labour, that followed during the era of "high" imperialism.
7. There are critiques against this theory of imperialism. For instance, historians point to the limited investment made in the new overseas colonies. Other scholars find that the thesis places too much importance on impersonal economic structures in general and ignores any role Asians and Africans may have played in particular. Other critics highlight political and economic factors to explain the rapid expansion of empire.