

Imperialism & Resistance

by Saul Straussman and Bridgette Byrd O'Connor

Military Tech plays a deadly role

Clearly there were economic, political, religious, exploratory and ideological motives to justify the era of imperialism. Wealthy, industrialized nations were also conquering people who were not exactly welcoming, which meant that a strong military was necessary. During the Industrial Revolution great leaps were made in weaponry that made the gap between industrialized nations, like Europe, the US and Japan, and the rest of the world seem like a canyon.

With the invention of a loading repeating rifle and a Maxim Gun (an early version of a machine gun), suddenly the rest of the world armed with arrows, muskets and spears could not stop the industrialized nations from taking their lands. A British Imperialist named Hilaire Belloc once wrote: "Whatever happens, we have got the Maxim Gun, and they have not". These new weapons had a devastating effect on the people who tried to resist colonial powers with force. One example occurred in 1898, when the British decided to seize a large region of Sudan from the state of Mahdiyya. In the decisive battle, the Mahdiyya army lost 11,000 soldiers; the British army lost 40.

The Scramble for Territory

Now that we know WHY imperial nations decided to colonize other parts of the world, we should look at how successful they were in their efforts. I can see in the chart to the right that most of Africa and the Pacific Islands were the focus of European and American colonization.

% of Land Area Controlled by European Powers and the US in 1900	
Region	Percentage Controlled
Africa	90.4
Pacific Islands	98.9
Asia	56.5
Americas	27.3

Therefore, land was appropriated [taken] at a great pace during the last half of the 1800s, and as a result, millions of people were suddenly under the rule of a foreign power. The biggest "winner" in this race was Great Britain, as demonstrated in the chart below:

Population and Territory Acquired by European Powers by 1939				
Country	Area of Country (in square miles)	Population of Country (in millions)	Area of Colonies (in square miles)	Population of Colonies (in millions)
Great Britain	94,000	45.5	13,100,000	470
France	212,600	42	4,300,000	65
Belgium	11,800	8.3	940,000	13
Netherlands	13,200	8.5	790,000	66
Germany	210,000	67.5	1,100,000	13

While it is difficult to figure out who claimed what territory from the tables above, we can see that Great Britain controlled a lot of territory based on the total land area and population of the colonies under their control. We can get a better idea of the area Britain controlled by looking at the map on the below, which will help put the above figures in perspective.



Source: James Alcock, *International President, Federal Commonwealth Society*

Collaboration and Resistance

Even with the lopsided advantages the Europeans, Americans and Japanese had in technology, it would have been extremely difficult for them to rule over so many people across such a vast stretch of territory. According to the chart on the previous page, by 1939 Great Britain claimed to rule over 515 million people spread over a total

territory of more than 13 million square miles on 5 continents. Considering the challenges the British government must have faced as a colonial power, there was no way for them to rule these territories without the assistance of local people, willingly or not.

From the perspective of some of the colonized peoples, participating in the colonial government offered opportunities for advancement within British society. For example, an Indian writer noted that “[an] India-born [government official] practically cut himself off from his parent society, and lived and moved and had his being in the atmosphere so beloved of his British colleagues. In mind and manner he was as much of an Englishman as any Englishman.”

European powers also exploited existing conflicts within a territory and used their technological superiority to their advantage. For example, the British were able to do this quite successfully in their rule of India. Sir James Caird, who was a member of the British government, explained in 1878 how Great Britain was able to conquer and control India with relatively few men:

“We have introduced a system the first object of which...is necessarily the subjugation of the people. This is [made] possible by the religious differences between the Hindus and the Muslims which prevent their union against us...A handful of Englishmen could not hold these multitudes on any other principle. The strength we wield is a powerful army, now by the aid of the railway and the telegraph capable of rapid concentration at any threatened point.”

Obviously, many Indians did not want to be under British rule but the British were able to maximize their control by using the Indians’ internal fights against them. Therefore, the question remains as to **how the colonized people resisted these imperial powers**. There is no seemingly simple answer to this question and

the answer depends largely on the location and time period of colonization. However, there were some *patterns* that emerged as we investigated efforts at resistance. We can break their responses into four overlapping reactions: co-option, military resistance, mysticism and nationalism. Often there is a blending of these reactions.

Co-option

The first response is an interesting one in that the less technically advanced country somehow co-opts the ideas of the more technologically advanced country. This can be seen in two examples. The first is Japan in the late 1800s. The Japanese encountered European Imperial powers and it made the government slightly fearful of the industrial nations' superior military power. The leadership of Japan therefore began an extensive building program in order to imitate the technological advancements of Europe and the US while also maintaining traditional Japanese culture. The two images of the Japanese military to the right offer an interesting before and after comparison.



Japanese Samurai, 1860s



Japanese Soldiers, 1904

The second example is that of Emperor Menelik II of Ethiopia who was able to play the colonial powers against one another. In doing so he was able to purchase modern weapons and remake his army based on a European model. With these modern weapons and a skillfully trained military, Menelik II was able to defeat an invading Italian army, thus keeping his people free from European rule for almost another 40 years.

Military Resistance

The response used most often by native people was some form of military resistance. These wars occurred throughout the 1800s from West and South Africa to Burma and the Philippines. One of the longest and bloody battles took place in the Philippines after the US took the series of islands, and other territories, at the conclusion of the Spanish-American War in 1898. The Filipinos, led by Emiliano Aguinaldo, declared their independence in 1899

"The hostilities in the Philippine War of Independence began on February 4, 1899 and continued for two years. The US needed 126,000 soldiers to subdue the Philippines. The war took the lives of 4,232 Americans and 16,000 Filipinos. As usually happens in guerrilla warfare, the civilian population suffers the worst. As many as 200,000 civilians may have died from famine and disease."

These statistics are not unique. There were many different wars that had similar mortality rates. We can learn from statistics such as these that the majority of those who attempted to resist imperial expansion of territory with the use of force were defeated. It is critical to not forget that despite the fact that the colonial powers and native people were battling with organized soldiers and military weapons, the civilian populations were almost always the most devastated by these wars. **None** of the military fighting happened in Europe, so all of the civilian casualties were native populations.



Religious Mysticism

The same outcome also came to those indigenous [native] people who resisted imperial aggression by using religious mysticism. In the face of overwhelming technological advances, some groups believed that their spiritual practices would protect their fighters from the bullets of the invading forces. However, the use of mysticism in war was often met with devastating results for the resisters.

These types of movements occurred in many parts of the world including the American Midwest in the 1890s (Sioux Ghost Dancers), in China from 1899-1900 (Boxer Rebellion), and in East Africa from 1905-1907 (Maji Maji Rebellion).

Nationalism

Along with the military resistance mentioned above, political resistance also found its voice in this time period. While the concept of nationalism was often used by imperialists to justify their wars, theft and actions, resisters soon adopted it as inspiration for movements against the colonial powers. India provides us with plenty of examples of expressions of national identity during the time of British control, called the British Raj. In 1885, English-speaking Indian writers and philosophers created the Indian National Congress. By the end of the 1800s it was demanding that the British leave India so that Indians could govern their own country. Two of the Congress' most famous members were the nationalist Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Mohandas K. Gandhi. Tilak and Gandhi's message was that Indians should not use military force to drive the British from India, but rather they encouraged Indians to use political and economic means. In a speech to the Indian National Congress in 1907, Tilak called for a boycott of British-made goods, not a military response:

"We are not armed, and there is no necessity for arms either. We have a stronger weapon, a political weapons, in boycott. We have perceived one fact, that the whole of the British government, which is carried out by a handful of Englishmen, is carried out with our assistance. We are all in subordinate service. This whole government is carried on with our assistance and they try to keep us in ignorance of the power of cooperation between ourselves by which is in our own hands at present...I want to have the key of my house, and not merely one stranger turned out of it. Self-government is our goal; we want a control over our administrative

machinery. We don't want to become clerks and secretaries and remain clerks and secretaries. At present, we are clerks and willing instruments of our own oppression in the hands of an alien government, and that government is ruling over us not by its innate strength but by keeping us in ignorance and blindness to the perception of this fact."

Gandhi is perhaps best known for promoting Indian freedom through nonviolent resistance. One can hear the nationalist pride in his chiding of the British in this imaginary dialogue he wrote for his book *Indian Home Rule*

"We hold the civilization [the British] support to be the reverse of civilization. We consider our civilization to be far superior to yours. If you realize this truth, it will be to your advantage and, if you do not...you should only live in our country in the same manner as we do...We consider your courts and schools to be useless...The common language of India is not English but Hindi. You should, therefore, learn it. We can only communicate with you only in our national language."

Conclusion

The Age of Imperialism during the late 1800s and early 1900s was caused by a variety of factors, and was in part spurred on by the Industrial Revolution. The need for raw materials and new markets were the primary economic reasons for European colonization. The imperial powers further justified their expansion by stating that they had a "moral" obligation to bring civility and religion to the newly conquered people. Imperialism led to numerous changes in the colonies, some of which were irreversible in that the identities of the colonies were forever altered by the experience. Responses to European aggression were varied and the effects of this era of expansion can still be felt today. While many of these former colonies are not independent nations, the legacies of imperialism remain as some areas of the world continue to catch up economically and politically with their former rulers.

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