IMPERIALISM

Empire building is an old theme in world history. Societies have sought to dominate weaker neighbors as long ago as ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, all the way through to the present. Motivations have been similar - to obtain natural resources, to subdue enemies, to accrue wealth, to win power and glory - but until the rise of the west, most empires have expanded to territories next to their borders. With the combination of sea power, centralized governments, and industrialized economies, European nations set out to build empires all over the world, like none that had been seen before. They were driven by the need to provide raw materials for their industrial capacity, and the types of goods exchanged were determined by that need.

TYPES OF IMPERIALISM

Europeans began building their empires in the western hemisphere in the early 1500s, but by the 1800s, Spain and Portugal were no longer powerful countries, and the largest British colony had become the United States. Britain, France, Germany, Russia, and the Netherlands continued to colonize during this era, but they also devised other ways to spread their empires. In the late 19th century Japan and the United States joined the European nations as an imperialist power.

Types of imperialism in the 1800s included:

* Colonial imperialism - This form of imperialism is virtual complete takeover of an area, with domination in all areas: economic, political, and socio-cultural. The subjugated area existed to benefit the imperialist power, and had almost no independence of action. In this era, almost all of Africa and southern and southeast Asia were colonized.
* Economic imperialism - This form of imperialism allowed the area to operate as its own nation, but the imperialist nation almost completely controlled its trade and other business. For example, it may impose regulations that forbid trade with other nations, or imperialist companies may own or have exclusive rights to its natural resources. During this era, China and most of Latin America were subjected to economic imperialism.
* Political imperialism - Although a country may have had its own government with natives in top political positions, it operated as the imperialist country told it to. The government was sometimes a relatively permanent "puppet government," as happened in late Qing China, and other times the control was temporary, as occurred in the Dominican Republic when the United States ran its government until it got out of debt.
* Socio-cultural imperialism - The dominating country deliberately tried to change customs, religions and languages in some of the countries. A good example was British India, where English was taught in schools, Indian soldiers dressed British-style, and western trading rules were set up. Generally, the imperialist countries assumed their cultures to be superior, and often times they saw themselves as bringing about improvements in the society.

IMPERIALISM IN AFRICA

Between 1450 and 1750 Europeans traded with Africa, but they set up very few colonies. By 1850, only a few colonies existed along African coastlines, such as Algeria (French), the Cape Colony (Great Britain,) and Angola (Portugal). Instead, free African states continued, and after the end of the slave trade in the early 1800s, a lively exchange took place between Europeans and African states, such as the Sokoto Caliphate in western Africa and Egypt and Ethiopia in northeast Africa. They traded manufactured goods for gold, ivory, palm oil (a substance used in soap, candles, and lubricants). Under the leadership of Muhammad Ali¸ and his grandson Ismail¸ Egypt grew to be the strongest Muslim state of the 19th century, producing cotton for export and employing western technology and business methods. They benefited from the American Civil War, when cotton shipments from the southern U.S. were cut off, but the Egyptian cotton market collapsed after American shipments resumed after the Civil War was over.

In the latter half of the 19th century, dramatic changes occurred, as Europeans began to explore Africa's interior, and by 1914, virtually the entire continent was colonized by one or the other of the competing European countries. European imperialists built on the information provided by adventurers and missionaries, especially the famous Dr. David Livingstone and Henry Stanley. Livingstone, a Scottish missionary, went to Africa in the 1840s and spent three decades exploring the interior of Africa and setting up missionary outposts all the way from central Africa to the Cape Colony on the southern tip. When people in Britain lost contact with Livingstone, journalist Henry Stanley became a news sensation when he traveled to Africa and found Livingstone. The two sparked interest in Africa and others followed, including the imperialists.

Belgium was one of the first countries to sponsor expeditions to develop commercial activities, first establishing the Congo Free State under the direction of Belgium's King Leopold II, and eventually seizing it as the Belgian Congo. This event set off the Scramble for Africa, in which Britain, France, Germany, and Italy competed with Belgium for land in Africa. The Berlin Conference of 1884-5, in an effort to avoid war, allowed European diplomats to draw lines on maps and carve Africa into colonies. The result was a transformation of political and economic Africa, with virtually all parts of the continent colonized by 1900.