Global Impacts of Imperialism

The goal and result of imperialism was the creation of colonies politically submissive and economically profitable to their European owners. (Daniel R. Headrick, The Tools of Empire, p. 11)

Imperialism, a process of accumulation and acquisition of land, resources, labor, and profit, was supported by an ideology that suggested certain peoples and certain territories required domination, assistance, and "civilization." The creation of empires was not a Western invention, and overseas conquest was nothing new. The Chinese, Turks, Persians, Aztecs, Incas, and many African states had empires, to only name a few. What made European imperialism different was its immensely large scale as compared with earlier efforts at conquest.

European imperialism, beginning in the 1800s, was characterized by an enormous disparity in power between the colonizers and the colonized, due to industrialization. Along with nationalist goals, industrialization motivated European states to find and obtain cheap and profitable raw materials and labor, to become more self-sufficient. They sought out new lands to relieve their overpopulated cities, and new markets for their manufactured goods. They sought to civilize the natives with their Western ways, and convert them to Christianity. Shortly after the Europeans began this process, the United States, and Japan followed suit, establishing their own overseas possessions. The Muslim Empires, Africans, Chinese, Indians, and many other peoples were collectively dominated during the Age of Imperialism.

Decline of the Muslim World
The Muslim world extended from western Africa to Southeast Asia. By the 1700s, the Mughals in India, the Ottoman Turks in the Middle East, and the Safavids in Iran were all in deep decline. Many factors led to this, for example, corruption, which diverted taxes away from the state. Years of expansion were good for these empires, but as more trade was focused along the Atlantic Ocean and away from the old silk road routes, the Muslim empires saw their wealth and power decrease. Over-expansion, and nationalist revolts stirred discontent against their governments.

As ideas of nationalism spread from Europe, ethnic revolts erupted throughout the Ottoman Empire in places like Serbia, Greece, and Egypt. For example, when Egyptian nationalists revolted in 1882, Britain made Egypt a protectorate.

Many Muslim Empires sought to modernize, which pitted those who wanted change against those with traditional values. However, many of these modernizations were relatively short lived. In the 1850s, Egypt hired a French company to build the Suez Canal, a 100-mile waterway. Opening in 1869, it greatly reduced sailing distances between Europe and Asia. Over time, however, Egypt was unable to pay back its loans for the canal and other projects. Egypt was forced to sell most of their shares in the Suez Canal and Britain quickly bought them up, gaining control of the canal. The imperialist countries of Britain and Russia also extended their spheres of influence into Iran, especially after the discovery of oil in the early 1900s.
These Muslim empires also sought to Westernize. They built railroads, improved education, and even adopted democratic reforms to some degree. These reforms were a mixed blessing as populations boomed due to better medical care and farming methods, leading to increased competition for land and more unrest.

**China and European Imperialism**

China is an example of a country that avoided direct European domination, but still fell prey to European imperialism. China’s social hierarchy was different from that of the Europeans’. Due to China’s Confucian influence utility was more highly valued than wealth. The emperor and his family were obviously the most powerful and influential, but the educated and wealthy land-owning scholar-gentry were the highest in the social hierarchy. The next highest in status were the peasants. They were valued because they produced most of the food and paid most of the taxes. Next were artisans who produced tools and objects necessary for the functioning of the empire. Other people such as actors or merchants were regarded as the bottom of society, because they did not produce anything themselves. Merchants were regarded as a necessary “evil” since they traded goods and created wealth for China, but they made their profits off other people’s hard work.

The Chinese were the first to develop the compass, the stern-post rudder, printing, gunpowder, and many other innovations, but because they did not emphasize progress and wealth – they were not fully developed as when the Europeans acquired them. The Chinese had colonies, but they received a yearly tribute from them instead of regular trade. By the mid-1400s the “Little Ice Age” had brought lower global temperatures and reduced agricultural output, forcing them to end overseas expeditions. They focused on protecting what they had, fortifying the Great Wall and reducing unnecessary costs.

In 1644 a series of northern tribes attacked and conquered the Chinese, bringing in the Qing (“pure”) dynasty. Even though they were not ethnically Chinese, they adopted many of their ways and traditions. Their army lost skill and discipline from more than a century of peace. As the population grew, government services collapsed, and corruption siphoned off much of China’s wealth. This made China weaker and more susceptible to foreign domination.

Several military engagements further weakened the Qing. In the 1700s, the British started making huge profits by trading opium grown in India for tea grown in China. The Qing outlawed opium and called for a stop to the trade, but the British refused, insisting on the right of free trade. The one-sided Opium War (1839-1842) was the result and Qing were soundly defeated. The Qing lost Hong Kong to the British, however this would not be their only defeat.

A rebellion in Korea in 1894 led to the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95) in which the Qing lost even more territory. Korea was a resource-rich Chinese dependency that Japan gained after their victory. The crushing defeat exposed the Qing’s weakness and the door was opened for other countries to extend spheres of influence into China.

In 1899, an ultranationalist group called the Boxers attacked foreigners in China to scare them out. In response, the western powers and Japan organized a multinational force crushed the rebellion. The Qing was forced to make concessions once again, and their
society was further westernized. Finally, in a massive revolt, the Qing were toppled. Heading into the 1900s China was almost constantly at war with itself or fighting off foreign invasion.

The British Takeover of India
The Sikh empire in northwestern India had cordial relations with the British in the early 1800s, but soon became the beginning of what would be the “crown jewel” of the British Empire. Back in the 1600s, the British East India Company won trading rights in India, and by the mid-1800s they controlled three-fifths of the sub-continent. The goal of the British was to “divide and rule”, pitting groups and regions against each other, encouraging competition, and promoting disunity.

In 1857, the British issued new rifles to the Indian soldiers, or sepoys. Troops needed to bite off the tips of cartridges to load their rifles. The cartridges, however, were greased with fat – either from cows, which Hindus regarded as sacred, or from pigs, which were forbidden by Muslims. This, along with years of anger over British control led to the Sepoy Rebellion, in which angry sepoys led brutal massacres against the British. Ultimately, in 1858, Parliament ended the rule of the East India Company and placed India under the British crown.

An unequal partnership between Britain and India was established. Most British knew little about Indian achievements and dismissed Indian culture with contempt. India was a huge market, in which Britain flooded with textiles and other manufactured goods. This ruined the Indian weaving industry, which could not compete with British mass production. Most of the wealth that was generated in India went to the British. Britain transformed Indian agriculture, leading to more cash crops such as cotton or jute, and also leading to deforestation. Modernization led to a population explosion, and terrible famines in the late 1800s led to massive starvation. However, not all the change the British brought was negative.

There were some benefits to British imperialism, such as an increase in order and law, and an end to slavery and the caste system. Women gained more rights and the practice of sati was outlawed, a practice in which a widow was expected to throw herself on her husband’s funeral pyre. Technology improved India as well, such as roads, telegraph lines, and railroads. More contact led to a greater sense of nationalism. In 1885, the Indian National Congress was established which pushed for greater democracy. They looked forward to self-rule, but supported western-styled modernization. In time the Muslims resented Hindu domination and organized the Muslim League in 1906, which pushed for their own separate Muslim state.
The Rise of Japanese Imperialism
In the Japanese feudal age, the emperor headed Japanese society. Although revered, the emperor, was, in fact, powerless. Real power lay in the hands of the shogun, or supreme military commander. He distributed lands to warrior lords who supported him called daimyo. They, in turn, granted land to lesser warriors called samurai (“those who serve”). Much like China’s Confucian society, the remaining classes were the peasants, the artisans, and finally the merchants.

In 1603, a rebellion broke out and Tokugawa Ieyasu forced the emperor to name him shogun. The daimyo had to swear loyalty to him, which began the Tokugawa shogunate with him, not the emperor, in charge of Japan. An era referred to as the “Great Peace” began. A sword hunt was instituted to keep the peasants unarmed. Daimyo were prevented from building castles, and were forced to spend every other year in the capital of Edo (Tokyo). Their families remained in Edo, which kept the daimyo from rebelling against the shogun. Christianity was outlawed since it taught the Japanese of a higher power than the shogun. Japan went into an era of isolation for almost 250 years, only allowing one Dutch ship to trade with them each year (this was because they hadn’t pushed religion on them).

In 1853, a fleet of well-armed American ships commanded by Commodore Matthew Perry sailed into Tokyo Bay. Perry had a letter from the president demanding they open their ports to diplomatic and economic exchange. The United States eventually gained trading rights and the Europeans followed soon afterward. In 1867, Emperor Meiji assumed the throne and took power from the shogun. After a short civil war, Meiji leaders promoted westernization, modernization, capitalism, and democracy. The Japanese people did this with amazing speed, due in part because they were able to utilize the best technology of the day. Meiji leaders also ended formal class distinctions, leading to a strong rise in nationalism within a very homogenous society.

As Japan modernized and industrialized, they sought to expand their lands, since Japan was woefully poor in natural resources. With a modern army and navy, the Japanese won victories over China in 1894 and Russia in 1904. Japan officially annexed Korea in 1910 and imposed harsh rule over them, using the Koreans’ resources for their own benefit.

The Legacy of Colonization in Latin America (and elsewhere)
By the mid 1800s, most of Latin America had become independent. In 1823, the Monroe Doctrine was stated in a speech by the US president. James Monroe states that Europe could not imperialize in the western hemisphere. This policy would have been toothless if not for the support of the British and their navy, who were more than happy to confine their rivals to lands outside of the Americas.

As the United States industrialized, it too sought to find more lands and resources. Through warfare and diplomacy the US acquired around half of Mexico, Cuba, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and Guam amongst other territories. President Teddy Roosevelt issued the Roosevelt Corollary in 1904, which stated the US could intervene to stabilize the economic affairs of small states in the Caribbean and Central America if they were unable to pay their international debts. Although many states were happy to have their debts paid off, the US exerted more influence in their affairs beginning what was regarded as a “Bad Neighbor” policy.

Latin American states found it much easier to gain political independence than to gain economic independence. The story of Latin America is quite similar to other regions that have experienced foreign dominance. A legacy of dependency was established where the colonies would export raw materials to the mother country and import manufactured goods, which was much more beneficial for the imperialists. The core regions of today (e.g., US, Europe, Japan) often control the prices and terms of trade with the peripheral regions (e.g., Latin America, Africa). The economies of China and India have been expanding substantially, and the Middle East has benefited greatly from the oil trade. Nonetheless, the legacy of imperialism lives to this very day.