Expansion and Resistance: Crash Course European History #28

Crash Course: European History
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Hi I'm John Green and this is Crash Course European History.

So we've made it to the nineteenth century, and as European societies are trying to build cohesive political structures known as nations, many are also expanding or initiating overseas empires. And so while more European nations were grounded in the rule of law and constitutional guarantees, including property rights, life was very different in the empires governed by those nations, where there were few if any rights.

While many nation-builders and citizens supported rights and the rule of law as a bedrock of their nations, expansion entailed taking away the rights of others. And understanding how this contradiction functioned, and who it benefited, is key to understanding not just 19th century colonialism, but also the contradictions we still live with today. [Intro] So, when we last looked at expansion, the. British were moving forcefully into India, in part to compensate for losing monopoly rights over trade with North America, while the Spanish and French were losing their grip in the Western Hemisphere.

But by the mid-19th century, Asia, Africa, and the Pacific islands were now the focus of imperial activity, much of it to gain trading advantages and acquire more raw materials like palm oil for industry. And much firmer political control of territories was established, as in India, North Africa, and Australia. In the nineteenth century, the Chinese continued to attract European trade because of their excellent products, especially tea and silk.

The English were leaders in industrialization, but they mostly made low quality products that pretty much nobody wanted, including the Chinese. But the British needed something to sell in exchange for tea and silk, and they ended up focusing on drug smuggling. When the Chinese government began to crack down on the opium smugglers—many of whose descendants are today some of the most respected and wealthy families in Britain—the smugglers convinced the British government to initiate the Opium Wars of 1839-1842 and 1856-1860.

British success in these wars forced China to open new ports to trade. And while China had banned opium in 1799, the British used the idea of "freedom of trade" to keep opium sales going and increasingly imposed their political and economic will on Chinese rulers. Regions in Southeast Asia and the Pacific were also targets for forced trade and takeovers of land.

The French set up rubber and other plantations in Indochina, the British took vast quantities of lumber from Burma, and the Dutch set up a variety of plantations in Indonesia, no longer confining their interests simply to trading posts. Pacific islands also became way-stations for ships to resupply and obtain other raw materials. The French, British, and Belgians headed for the interior of Africa, now that they had quinine with which to treat malaria infections.

While the Portuguese maintained a toehold on a part of Southwestern Africa, the French took over much of West and North Africa and the British took areas in the south and east. Belgian King Leopold assaulted the Congo for its rubber (and yes, we are using that verb intentionally), while Otto von Bismarck, generally not a fan of expansion outside of Europe, allowed German businessmen and adventurers to head for regions in Asia and southeastern and southwestern Africa. He also allowed them to launch ventures in the Middle East, especially the Ottoman Empire.

But the largest and most continuous enterprise was the one the British built in India and. Central Asia. They sought manufactured goods and raw materials, but they were also motivated by simple plunder.

The British invested little in ruling India, instead using different princes' well-trained soldiers for conquering new areas and policing. Governance of the colony involved some 4,000 British officials and tens of thousands of local civil service workers who did the main work. And as in the past, European invaders relied on local people to serve as informants, and guides, and go-betweens and negotiators.

They were some of the human "tools of empire." And while "explorers" and colonial generals were portrayed in European newspapers and magazines as standard bearers of heroic masculinity, they required vast entourages of local people to survive. This was especially true in Africa where from village to village go-betweens and guides had to lead and negotiate the supposedly "lone" adventurer's food, and safe passage, and health care needs. It is well-documented that many of these romanticized heroes became addicted to drugs and alcohol because of the stresses but also because of the boredom of the slow movement of hundreds of animals and carriers of supplies and weapons.

Let's go to the Thought Bubble. 1. Other tools of empire were industrial, like steamships built to navigate rivers 2. and weaponry that local people lacked (at least initially). 3. Europeans often sold inferior or outdated weapons to the people they wanted to conquer, 4. who were quick to duplicate the better models that fell into their hands. 5.

Railroads also became tools of empire in that they were set up not to benefit local people 6. but to strip them of their goods and get those goods to ports as quickly as possible. 7. Infrastructure was built to disadvantage not advantage colonized peoples. 8. A final and crucial tool of empire was the aforementioned quinine, 9. which was made from the bark of the cinchona tree found primarily in South America. 10.

Jesuit priests were introduced to the drug by indigenous people in South America, 11. but initially the bark had to be procured and ground up, 12. which made quinine difficult to produce in large quantities. 13. But after the 1820s, French scientists devised procedures to extract quinine from the bark, 14. and then in the 1850s, the Dutch finally obtained the closely guarded cinchona seeds, 15. which South Americans were embargoing, 16. and the Dutch set up successful plantations in Indonesia. 17. The medicalization and plantation production of cinchona meant that quinine was widely available to Europeans, 18. which in turn allowed for the invasion of Africa's interior, where malaria was common.

Thanks Thought Bubble. Oh my gosh, the center of the world just opened! Our two main bits are right next to each other!

So this is a train. I'm not sure if its a real train, it might just be a model train, I'm not a scientist. All I know is that railroads were incredibly important in the 19th century, and remain so.

And if you look at where nations built railroads inside their nations, and where they built railroads inside their colonies, you'll immediately understand the difference between living in a nation and living in a colony. In Britain, for instance, the railroads primarily connect cities to each other, so people and goods can be connected and distributed. But if you look at where Britain built railroads in, for instance Sierra Leone in the early 20th century, you'll see that those railroads are designed almost entirely to get goods from the interior of the country to a port. and that brings us to resource extraction.

The discovery of diamond and gold mines in South Africa from the 1860s into the 1880s provided another impetus to colonization and contests over territory. To get Africans to leave their homes and

work in the mines, the British demanded that taxation be paid in currency instead of in produce or other goods. So to acquire funds, Africans had to leave their farms for the mines, where work was treacherous and often fatal.

South African lands were also simply stolen to drive people into the mines. Was there resistance to the violence, theft, and exploitation of imperialism? Yes.

Colonized people rebelled in a variety of ways. In 1857, local people in India including Indian soldiers and even the widow of a local ruler,. Rani Lakshmi Bai, Queen of Jhansi, launched a rebellion against expanding British rule and its seizure of property.

Her wealth had been stolen, and she had been removed from power. “We all know,” read a circular letter that year, “that if [the English] stay in. Hindustan [India] they will kill everyone and spoil our faith. . . In this scenario we ask you what you are doing to defend your faith and our lives. . . .

And this has been published in order to save the religion and faith and the lives of all you Hindus and Muslims.” As they crushed the rebellion, the British justified the ensuing slaughter as needed to punish the supposed rapes that vicious Indians had inflicted on “white” women. But later investigations proved that no such rapes had occurred. The English additionally branded the Rani a prostitute.

She died in battle during the uprising, one of more than 5,000 Indians killed on June 17, 1857. Resistance to empire took many forms. In the Belgian Congo, for instance, where local people were horrifically abused by the colonial authorities, officials realized that the fertility level was dropping.

Across the colonized world drop in births like this, seen by historians as a form of intentional “strike,” and they’ve been happening for a long time. For example, in the Caribbean, women used the peacock flower to abort fetuses; enslaved women elsewhere used rue, willow, ergot, and other plants so that additional children would not be born into slavery. Such was the horror of colonial oppression that many people did not want a new generation to be born into the world.

That said, some local people living under colonial conditions prospered not just as soldiers and civil servants but as business and professional people. They were labor contractors, and merchants, and large property owners. The Tagores of Bengal owned agricultural estates but as the English advanced, they invested their growing funds in establishing silk and other mills while also serving as high level agents for British companies in India.

Rabindranath Tagore of that family won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913—the first non-European to do so. Empire builders justified their conquests by describing themselves as fully entitled to take the wealth, land, and know-how of distant peoples and even to enslave them. Initially they argued that local people, whom they often called “savages” needed to be turned into Christians for their salvation.

In this explanation, imperialism became a holy endeavor, as it had been for the Spanish and Portuguese more than three centuries earlier. But after the mid-nineteenth century publication of Charles Darwin’s Origin of Species and. The Descent of Man, empire was viewed as imperative in order to save civilization from violent brutes.

Now, I know what you’re thinking. “I’ve studied European history a bit, and its pretty violent.” We agree, obviously, but people tell themselves stories in order to justify the oppression of others. And indeed, to justify wherever they find themselves in life. In this telling, humans had evolved from lower forms of existence, and Darwin argued that human development reached a pinnacle in white men.

So according to him, all people of other races were less-evolved and less accomplished. Social Darwinists—people who took Darwin’s scientific studies and made them the basis of expansionist and domestic politics—believed that white people needed to be engaged in conquest to preserve their superior lives. So the justification for, say, stealing palm oil or diamonds from colonized regions was that it helped keep white people superior, and those were the people who really mattered.

I know that it’s tempting, especially for people who benefited from colonialism to say that this is all in the past, but the wealth extracted from colonized regions had a lasting effect on both the colonizer and the colonized. And ideas about race that were constructed to justify colonialism are still deeply ingrained in lived human experience around the world. Imperialists eventually tried to calm what came to be called the “Scramble for Africa” with the Berlin Conference of 1884-85, which ruled that European nations with outposts on African coasts could claim the corresponding interior region.

There were also conditions, for example, against selling firearms to Africans. But the main result of all of this was to intensify imperial competition. The British and French almost came to blows at Fashoda in Sudan in 1898; the Germans threatened.

French holdings in North Africa early in the twentieth century. And eventually these growing international tensions within Europe would lead to World. War, which we’ll hear more about that in a few more weeks.

But for now, I want to ask you to shift perspectives and consider the experience of those who were most negatively affected in this imperialism. How that imperialism is still shaping life today. Thanks for watching, I’ll see you next time.