Imperialism: Crash Course World History #35

Crash Course: World History
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Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course World History, and today we're gonna discuss 19th century imperialism. So the 19th century certainly didn't invent the empire, but it did take it to new heights, by which we mean lows, or possibly heights, I dunno, I can't decide, roll the intro while I think about it.

(Intro)

Yeah, I don't know, I'm still undecided. Let's begin with China! When last we checked in, China was a thriving manufacturing power, about to be overtaken by Europe, but still heavily involved in world trade, especially an importer of silver from the Spanish empire.

Europeans had to use silver because they didn't really produce anything else the Chinese wanted, and that state of affairs continued through the 18th century. For example, in 1793, the Macartney Mission tried to get better trade conditions with China and was a total failure.

Here's the Qianlong Emperor's well known response to the British: "Hither to all European nations including your own country's barbarian merchants have carried on their trade with our celestial empire at Canton. Such has been the procedure for many years, although our celestial empire possesses all things in prolific abundance and lacks no product within its own borders."

But then Europeans, especially the British, found something that the Chinese would buy: opium. By the 1830s, British free trade policy unleashed a flood of opium in China, which threatened China's favorable balance of trade. It also created a lot of drug addicts.

And then in 1839 the Chinese responded to what they saw as these unfair trade practices with...a stern letter that they never actually sent. Commissioner Lin Zexu drafted a response that contained a memorable threat to "cut off trade in rhubarb, silk, and tea, all valuable products of ours without which foreigners could not live."

But even if the British had received this terrifying threat to their precious rhubarb supply, they probably wouldn't have responded because selling drugs is super lucrative.

So the Chinese made like tea partiers, confiscating a bunch of British opium and chucking it into the sea. And then the British responded to this by demanding compensation, and access to Chinese territory where they could carry out their trade.

And then the Chinese were like, "Man that seems a little bit harsh," whereupon the British sent in gunships, opening trade with Canton by force.

Chinese General Yijing made a counter attack in 1842 that included a detailed plan to catapult flaming monkeys onto British ships. Stan, is that true?

All right, apparently the plans actually involved strapping fireworks to monkeys' backs and were never carried out, but still!

Slightly off topic: obviously I don't want anyone to light monkeys on fire. I'm just saying that flaming monkeys lend themselves to a lot of great band names, like the Sizzling Simians, Burning Bonobos, Immolated Marmoset...Stan, sometimes I feel like I should give up teaching world history and just become a band name generator. That's my real gift.

Anyway, due to lack of monkey fireworks, the Chinese counterattacks were unsuccessful, and they eventually signed the treaty of Nanjing, which stated that Britain got Hong Kong and five other treaty ports, as well as the equivalent of two billion dollars in cash. Also, the Chinese basically gave up all sovereignty to European spheres of influence, wherein Europeans were subject to their laws, not Chinese laws.

In exchange for all of this, China got a hot slice of nothing. You might think the result of this war would be a shift in the balance of trade in Britain's favor, but that wasn't immediately the case. In fact, the British were importing so much tea from China that the trade deficit actually rose more than 30 billion dollars.

But eventually after another war and one of the most destructive civil rebellions in Chinese and possibly world history, the Taiping Rebellion, the situation was reversed, and Europeans, especially the British, became the dominant economic power in China.

Okay. So but when we think about the 19th century imperialism, we usually think about the way that Europe turned Africa from this [map] into this [map], the so-called scramble for Africa. Speaking of scrambles and the European colonization of Africa, you know what they say--sometimes to make an omelette, you have to break a few eggs. And sometimes, you break a lot of eggs and you don't get an omelette.

Europeans have been involved in Africa since the 16th century, when the Portuguese used their cannons to take control of cities on coast to set up their trading post empire, but in the second half of the 19th century, Europe suddenly and spectacularly succeeded at colonizing basically all of Africa. Why?

Well, the biggest reason that Europeans were able to extend their grasp over so much of the world was the same reason they wanted to do so in the first place: industrialization. Nationalism played its part, of course. European states saw it as a real bonus to be able say that they had colonies--so much so, that a children's rhyme in *An ABC for Baby Patriots* went, "C is for colonies. Rightly we boast. That of all great countries Great Britain has the most."

But it was mostly, not to get all Marxist on you or anything, about controlling the means of production. Europeans wanted colonies to secure sources of raw materials, especially cotton, copper, iron, and rubber, that were used to fuel their growing industrial economies.

And in addition to providing the motive for imperialism, European industrialization also provided the means. Europeans didn't fail to take over territory in Africa until the late 19th century because they didn't want to; they failed because they couldn't. This was mostly due to disease.

Unlike in the Americas, Africans weren't devastated by diseases like smallpox because they'd had smallpox for centuries and were just as immune to it as Europeans were. Not only that, but Africa had diseases of its own, including yellow fever, malaria, and sleeping sickness, all of which killed Europeans in staggering numbers.

Also, nagana was a disease endemic to Africa that killed horses, which made it difficult for Europeans to take advantage of African grasslands, and also difficult for them to get inland, because their horses would die as they tried to carry stuff.

Also, while in the 16th century Europeans did have guns, they were pretty useless, especially without horses. So most fighting was done the old-fashioned way, with swords. That worked pretty well in the Americas, unless you were the Incas or the Aztecs, but it didn't work in Africa, because the Africans also had swords. And spears, and axes.

So as much as they might have wanted to colonize Africa in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, Africa's mosquitoes, microbes, and

people were too much for them.

So what made the difference? Technology.

First, steam ships made it possible for Europeans to travel inland, bringing supplies and personnel via Africa's navigable rivers. No horses? No problem.

Even more important was quinine medicine, sometimes in the form of tonic water, mixed into refreshing quintessentially British gin and tonics. Quinine isn't as effective as modern antimalarial medication, and it doesn't cure the disease, but it does help moderate its effects.

But of course the most important technology that enabled Europeans to dominate Africa was guns. By the 19th century, European gun technology had improved dramatically, especially with the introduction of the Maxim machine gun, which allowed Europeans to wipe out Africans in battle after battle. Of course, machine guns were effective when wielded by Africans, too, but Africans had fewer of them.

Oh, it's time for the open letter? And my chair is back!

An open letter to Hiram Maxim. But first, let's see what's in the secret compartment today. Oh, it's Darth Vader! What a great reminder of imperialism.

Dear Hiram Maxim, I hate you. It's not so much that you invented the Maxim machine gun, although obviously that's a little bit problematic, or even that you look like the poor man's Colonel Sanders. First off, you're a possible bigamist. I have a long standing opposition to bigamy. Secondly, you were born an American but became a Brit, thereby metaphorically machine gunning our founding fathers. But most importantly, among your many inventions was the successful amusement park ride, the Captive Flying Machine. Mr. Maxim, I hate the Captive Flying Machine. The Captive Flying Machine has resulted in many a girlfriend telling me that I'm a coward. I'm not a coward, I just don't want to die up there! It's all your fault, Hiram Maxim, and nobody believes your story about the light bulb. Best wishes, John Green.

All right. So, here is something that often gets overlooked. European imperialism involved a lot of fighting and a lot of dying. And when we say that Europe came to dominate Africa, for the most part that domination came through wars, which killed lots of Africans and also lots of Europeans, although most of them died from disease. It's very, very important to remember that Africans did not meekly acquiesce to European hegemony: they resisted, often violently, but ultimately they were defeated by a technologically superior enemy.

In this respect, they were a lot like the Chinese, and also the Indians, and the Vietnamese, and--you get the picture.

So by the end of the 19th century, most of Africa and much of Asia had been colonized by European powers. I mean, even Belgium got in on it, and they weren't even a country at the beginning of the 19th century. I mean, Belgium has enjoyed like, 12 years of sovereignty in the last 3 millennia.

Notable exceptions include Japan, which was happily pursuing its own imperialism, Thailand, Iran, and of course Afghanistan. Because no one can conquer Afghanistan, unless you are--wait for it--the Mongols.

[Mongol montage]

It's tempting to imagine Europe ruling their colonies with the proverbial topaz fist, and while there was always the threat of violence, the truth is a lot more complicated. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

In most cases, Europeans ruled their colonies with the help of, and sometimes completely through, intermediaries and collaborators. For example, in the 1890s in India, there were fewer than 1,000 British administrators supposedly ruling over 300 million Indians. The vast majority of British troops at any given time in India, more than two-thirds, were in fact Indians under the command of British officers.

Because of their small numbers relative to local populations, most European colonizers resorted to indirect rule, relying on governments that were already there but exerting control over their leaders.

Frederick Lugard, who was Britain's head honcho in Nigeria for a time, called this "rule through and by the natives." This worked particularly well with British administrators, who were primarily middle class men but had aristocratic pretensions, and were often pleased to associate with the highest echelons of Indian or African society.

Now, this isn't to say that indigenous rulers were simply puppets. Often, they retained real power. This was certainly true in India, where more than a third of the territory was ruled by Indian princes. The French protectorates of Morocco and Tunisia were ruled by Arab monarchs, and the French also ruled through native kings in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

For the most part, Europeans could almost always rely on their superior military technology to coerce local rulers into doing what the Europeans wanted. And they could replace native officials with Europeans if they had to. But in general, they preferred to rule indirectly. It was easier and cheaper. Also, less malaria (9:51). Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So while we can't know why all native princes who ruled in the context of European imperialism put up with it, we can make some pretty good guesses. First of all, they were still rulers. They got to keep their prestige and their fancy hats, and to some extent their power. Many were also able to gain advantages through their service, like access to European education for themselves and for their children. Mahatma Gandhi, for instance, was the son of an Indian high official, which made it possible for him to study law in England.

And we can't overlook the sheer practicality of it. The alternative was to resist, and that usually didn't work out well. I'm reminded of the famous couplet, "Whatever happens, we have got the Maxim gun, and they have not."

But even with this enormous technological advantage, it wasn't always easy. For example, it took 25 years, from 1845 to 1870, for the British to fully defeat the Maori on New Zealand. Because the Maori were kick-ass fighters who had mastered musketry and defensive warfare. And I will remind you, it is not cursing if you're talking about donkeys.

In fact, it took them being outnumbered three-to-one with the arrival of 750,000 settlers for the Maori to finally capitulate. And I will remind you that the rule against splitting infinitives is not an actual rule.

Those of you more familiar with U.S. history might notice a parallel between the Maori and some of the Native American tribes, like the Apaches and the Lakota, a good reminder that the United States did some imperial expansion of its own as part of its nationalizing

project in the 19th century.

But back to Africa. Sometimes African rulers were so good at adapting European technology that they were able to successfully resist imperialism. Ethiopia's Menelik II defeated the Italians in battle, securing not just independence but an empire of his own.

But embracing European-style modernization could also be problematic, as Khedive Ismail of Egypt found out during his rule in the late 19th century. He celebrated his imperial success by commissioning an opera, Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida*, for the opening of the Cairo Opera House in 1871. Giuseppe Verdi, by the way--no relation to John Green.

And Ismail had ambitions of extending Egypt's control up the Nile, west toward Lake Chad. But to do that, he needed money, and that's where he got into trouble. His borrowing bankrupted Egypt and led to Britain's taking control over the country's finances and its shares in the Suez Canal that Ismail had built, with French engineers and French capital, in 1869. The British sent in 1,300 bureaucrats to fix Egypt's finances, an invasion of red tape that led to a nationalist uprising, which brought on a full-scale British intervention after 1881 in order to protect British interests.

This business imperialism, as it is sometimes known, is really at the heart of the imperialistic impulse. Industrialized nations push economic integration upon developing nations, and then extract value from those developing nations, just as you would from a mine or a field you owned.

And here we see political history and economic history coming together again. As western corporations grew in the latter part of the 19th century, their influence grew as well, both in their home countries and in the lands where they were investing.

But ultimately, whether the colonizer is a business enterprise or a political one, the complicated legacy of imperialism survives. It's why your bananas are cheap, why your call centers are Indian, why your chocolate comes from Africa, and why everything else comes from China.

These imperialistic adventures may have only lasted a century, but it was the century in which the world as we know it today began to take shape.

Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

(Outro)

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller, our script supervisor is Danica Johnson, the show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer and myself, and our graphics team is Thought Bubble. Oh, our intern! I'm sorry, Meredith the Intern. Our intern is Meredith Danko.

Last week's Phrase of the Week was "homogeneous mythologized unitary polity." Thank you for that suggestion. If you want to guess this week's Phrase of the Week or suggest future ones, you can do so in comments, where you can also ask questions about today's video that will be answered by our team of historians.

Thanks for watching Crash Course. Remember, you can get this shirt, the Mongol shirt, or our poster at dftba.com. Speaking of which, as we say in my hometown, "Don't Forget to be Awesome."