

New Imperialism, 1869-1914
AP World History
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Imperialism was a trade strategy used continuously between 1750 and 1900 by both Britain and France, with both countries constantly acquiring new colonies for trade purposes. France acquired Algeria in 1830 and Indochina in 1884. India was formerly part of the British Empire beginning in 1857. There were, however a number of changes in imperialism from 1750 to 1900. Portugal, Spain and the Netherlands all declined as imperial powers. Germany, Russia, Japan, and the United States all rose as imperial powers, and all major countries in the world except Thailand, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, and Latin America were dominated by 1900.

The changes after 1869 are known as the “New Imperialism” period. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 is the reason the date 1869 is used for the beginning of this period. The Suez Canal connected the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean for the first time, making it substantially easier for Britain and France to control their eastern empires. The period is marked by the rise of new powers and the complete domination of most of the world by imperial powers.

So, why did Portugal, Spain, and the Netherlands decline as imperial powers? Both Spain and Portugal lost their American colonies due to Enlightenment-based rebellions and due to lack of interest in maintaining those colonies. Silver production in their colonies declined for years prior to Brazil’s revolution in 1822 and Simon Bolivar’s revolution in South America in 1825. The Dutch did not control much more than Indonesia and did not feel the financial benefit from the spice trade justified the massive expense involved in maintaining an empire.

Germany, Russia, Japan, and the U.S. all were rising imperial powers during the period from 1869-1914. They all became imperialist in an attempt to emulate Britain’s success with imperialism prior to the late 1800’s. Germany controlled the African countries of Tanzania, Namibia, Togoland, and Cameroon by 1884. In the period prior to 1884, Germany built a massive military force and was becoming increasingly aggressive toward the European powers over the fact that they did not have any overseas colonies. In order to appease Germany, the other European powers decided to divide Africa equally among themselves. This decision was made at a conference in Germany called the Berlin Conference. Russia aggressively sought to expand their empire, eventually leading to control of Vladivostok and most of central Asia by late 1800’s. Russia’s expansion was due to their desire for resources and warm water ports. Many of the existing ports in Russia were frozen shut in winter, which certainly hurt their ability to trade. Japan controlled Taiwan by 1895 and Korea and Manchuria by 1905. These territories were acquired due to a need for industrial resources such as steel and coal. Japan also became imperialist as a way to avoid being taken over by other imperialist countries in the world. The U.S. controlled Hawaii by 1893, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam by 1898, and Panama by 1903. The Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam were taken from Spain during Spanish American War. The U.S. kept most of these territories for strategic and nationalistic reasons. Controlling the Philippines and Guam gave the U.S. bases in the Pacific whereby they could gain access to trade with China and Japan. Guam and Puerto Rico are still American possessions, but the Philippines have had an uneasy relationship with the U.S. since 1898, with eventual independence granted in 1946. There was already resistance to Spain in the Philippines before the Spanish-American War. When the U.S. won the war, the rebel leader Emilio Aguinaldo,

thought his country would be independent. Instead, possession of his country simply changed hands, and Aguinaldo began resisting the U.S.

The imperialist period from 1869-1914 also saw the increased use of force as contrasted with the mostly diplomatic approaches used earlier. Under the rule of Leopold II, Belgium allowed private rubber companies to abuse the Congolese population in the Belgian Congo beginning in 1884. Britain fought two violent wars in Southern Africa during this period as well. The Zulu Wars were fought from 1879 to 1888 and the Boer War was fought with South Africa's Afrikaner population in 1900.

One last change in the period from 1869-1914 was that a number of independent countries existed prior to 1869, while only Japan, Thailand, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, and Latin America were independent beginning in 1869. There are explanations for why these countries remained independent. Japan decided to industrialize and be imperialist as a reaction to European imperialism. Thailand was allowed to be independent as a buffer state between Indochina and India. The French controlled Indochina and the British controlled India. The two countries feared conflict between these two areas, and thus allowed Thailand to be independent so that there would not be border clashes between India and Indochina. Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Afghanistan were used as buffer states between Russia and Britain. Iran and Saudi Arabia were not considered important because their main resource today, oil, was not discovered until after 1918. Afghanistan produced very little that was used in international trade. Latin American countries were protected by the Monroe Doctrine, which was passed in 1823. Countries were not so much fearful of the American military as they were fearful of upsetting the United States and losing trade with the U.S.