

History

Lesson 1 of an enquiry of 4 lessons

The British Empire (1776-1900)

Enquiry: What did British colonialism look like in the nineteenth century?

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The British Empire, 1776-1900

In the two hundred years before 1776, Britain had built up a colonial empire. Most of Britain's colonies were in North America and the Caribbean. This empire was very important to Britain. It allowed Britain to show its power overseas and to make vast sums of money. In 1776, disaster struck. Britain's thirteen American colonies decided to overthrow British power and become an independent country - the United States of America. The loss of America shocked Britain. However, increasingly turning its gaze towards the East, the British Empire rebuilt its power and influence. Over the course of the nineteenth century, Britain claimed control over colonies in Asia, Africa and Australia. The British empire was so large that it became popular to refer to it as 'the empire on which the sun never sets'.



Political dominance

One prominent feature of British colonialism was political dominance. Political dominance means having power over how a place and its people are governed. In many of Britain's colonies, there was a strict political hierarchy (a structure of power in which some people are above others). The British were at the top and made all of the important decisions and laws. The British also demonstrated their power through violence and military force, using the army to establish and maintain control. This political power was often resisted by people in the colonies who wanted control over their own lives on their own lands.



Economic exploitation

Another common feature of colonialism is economic exploitation. In the context of nineteenth-century British colonialism, economic exploitation means unfairly taking advantage of people in the colonies to increase Britain's own wealth (money). In British colonies, this happened in a number of ways. It could involve using British power to take land (often by force) from people in the colonies. It could mean forcing people to pay taxes to the British government. It could involve using people in the colonies as cheap labour - making them work for little money and in poor conditions. These are just a few examples of the ways in which Britain exploited its colonies for its own economic benefit.



Culturalism and racism

Colonialism was built upon culturalism and racism. In the context of nineteenth-century British colonialism, culturalism involved the belief that the British way of life was better than those of other cultures. This attitude glorified British society as the best in human history. Culturalism showed little respect for the cultures and ways of life of other peoples and societies. Racism involved the belief that the white 'race' was superior to other 'races'. In the nineteenth century, racism was based upon incorrect 'scientific' ideas that humanity is split up into different groups, called 'races', which are biologically separate from one another. This idea has now been proven scientifically false. These attitudes defined the unequal nature of colonialism. The ideas of culturalism and racism were used to justify British power - many in Britain argued that Britain deserved to rule over and exploit other people because they believed that British culture and the white race were superior. Many even claimed that British rule was for the benefit of peoples in the colonies, whom they labelled as 'backward'. Many people who experienced British colonialism in the colonies disagreed; they challenged colonialism's culturalist and racist beliefs and structures.



Challenge reading: China - a complex case

Interestingly, the situation could be more complex than this. There were many places that were not officially British colonies, but which many historians argue were still part of the British Empire. These places were not under Britain's direct political control, but were still influenced by British power. One example of this is China. In the nineteenth century, China was still ruled by its own leaders (the Qing empire) and was not under the political control of the British monarch or British governors. However, Britain and other European empires did use their militaries (armies and navies) to wage wars against China. These wars are known as the Opium Wars. When Britain and the European empires won these wars, they forced Chinese leaders to sign agreements that they did not want to sign. One of the main things these agreements forced China to do was to allow British merchants to sell opium - a dangerous drug - to Chinese people. Britain made loads of money selling this dangerous drug to Chinese people, against the wishes of the Chinese government. Furthermore, the small area of Hong Kong was taken from China as a British colony, however the vast majority of China remained under Qing rule. This showed that the British Empire had power over China, even though it did not directly govern the country.



Comprehension Questions

1. Where were most of Britain's colonies in 1776?
2. What happened in 1776 that was disastrous for the British Empire?
3. Why did many people refer to the British Empire as 'the empire on which the sun never sets' in the nineteenth century?
4. What were some of the key features of British colonialism in the nineteenth century?
5. Challenge question (read the challenge reading to answer this): How was China affected by British power despite the fact that it was not an official British colony?

