FRENCH IMPERIALISM IN AFRICA

France’s experience with imperialism was influenced by two things. First, France had a longstanding interest in the region bordering the Mediterranean Sea due to its own coastline between Italy and Spain. Second, France lost most of its original over-seas colonies as a result of the Seven Years War (1756 – 1763) and the Napoleonic Wars (1790 – 1815). Thus, French imperialism was an effort to regain lost power and its overseas empire grew out of the developments to expand that power.

During the Napoleonic Wars, France had been plagued by constant attacks by Barbary pirates along the Mediterranean coast. After peace was restored in 1815, the piracy stopped – but relations with cities along the Barbary Coast of North Africa remained very tense. Disgusted by the situation, King Charles X ordered the invasion of Algeria in 1830. The attacks on the Algerian coast ignited resistance by nomadic Berbers between 1832 and 1837, who opposed the French invasion of their homeland. After a third war against the Berbers in 1840 – 41 failed, the French began to use terror tactics against the native Africans that included the destruction of wells and crops.

The first French initiative south of the Sahara desert took place along the Senegal coast in 1843. Initially, a privately owned trading company established a port named St. Louis at the mouth of the Senegal River. By 1848, the French government took over the local administration in Senegal. Eventually, the French military directed a series of expeditions into the interior regions along the Senegal River to establish a line of French Forts.

Although the French explorer Rene Caillie passed through the western Sudan enroute to Timbuktu in 1827 – 28, there was no French presence in the area prior to the 1850’s. However, the French had always viewed the Sudan as a link between their colonial territories in Algeria and Senegal, as well as a gateway to the Congo Valley.

In 1855, French troops advanced from the Senegal River to the Niger River and began formalizing their presence in the Sudanic region of Western Africa. Fearing that British dominance in Nigeria might spread to other regions in the Sudan, French aggression against opposing African tribes increased from 1876 – 1881. As their campaign against tribal kingdoms dragged on, the French sent more military expeditions into the region.

In 1881, the French acquired Tunisia. Then, in 1887, an expedition secured the rich trading centers of the Ivory Coast. By 1893, the territory surrounding the tribal area known as the “land of the three rivers” became French Guinea. As a result of France’s imperial expansion, a federation of eight French Colonial territories called French West Africa was formed in 1895. This union included the colonies of Senegal, French Sudan, Cote d’Ivoire (Ivory Coast), Dahomey (later called Benin), Tunisia, Algeria, and French Morocco.
Unlike its motivations for expansion in Africa, French expansion in Indochina was based on two completely different influences: the protection of Christianity and religious missionaries in the region, coupled with the desire to find a southern trade route to China through Vietnam and the Tonkin Gulf.

Anti-Christian persecutions in the Far East provide the most immediate cause for French concerns in Indo-China. In 1856, the Chinese executed a French missionary in southeastern China, and in 1857, the Vietnamese Emperor ordered the execution of the Spanish Bishop of Tonkin. Under Napoleon III, France decided that the defense of the Catholic church was essential to colonial success in the region. Accordingly, the French joined the British in the Second Opium War from 1857 – 1860 and succeeded in taking Saigon in Vietnam by 1860.

The Treaty of Saigon, signed in 1864, officially gave France control of three key provinces in Vietnam. Then, in 1867, French troops seized three additional provinces. Initially, resistance to the French developed through the efforts of a local organization called the Can Vuong, which hoped to re-install the Vietnamese heir to the throne of their country. Unfortunately, the Can Vuong didn’t have the military power needed to make a lasting defense against the expanding French. By 1883, north and central Vietnam joined south Vietnam as French protectorates.

French Indo-China was formed in October 1887 from the major regions of Vietnam and the Kingdom of Cambodia. At the end of the Franco-Siamese War in 1893, the region of Laos was also added to the French federation of Indo-China. Although the French initially left the local rulers in power, who were the Emperor of Vietnam and the Kings of Cambodia and Laos, they actually gathered all colonial power in the hands of French military leaders with the local rulers acting only as figureheads.

From 1885 – 1917, nationalist sentiments intensified in Vietnam as several groups led rebellions against the French colonial government – But all uprisings failed to obtain any concessions for the Vietnamese people from their French overseers.

The lack of militant activities changed in the late 1920’s with the formation of the Vietnamese Nationalist Party. The party began to generate attention among the French colonial authorities and were blamed for the assassination of a French labor recruiter despised by the local people in 1929.

Using French and Vietnamese soldiers of the colonial French army to collect and arrest key members of the Vietnamese Nationalist Party sparked additional tension in the region. On 10 February 1930, there was an uprising by Vietnamese soldiers in the colonial army’s Yen Bai garrison known as the “Yen Bai Mutiny.” The attack was the largest disturbance against the French colonialists in Vietnam during the 19th century.
BRITISH IMPERIALISM IN AFRICA and ASIA

Britain’s experience with colonial expansion in Asia and Africa began in the early 1700’s. However, until the British government took personal interest in their British colonial holdings around the world, the East and West India Trading Companies were the key agents of British imperial expansion.

From its base in India, the East India Company had engaged in an increasingly profitable tea and opium trade with China since the 1730’s. Using Opium as a catalyst to force China to open its ports to trade, the British reversed the trade imbalances resulting from their imports of tea from China and India.

Meanwhile, the French success against the Dutch in the Netherlands in 1795 allowed the British to take control of the Cape Colony on the southern tip of Africa. The British goal in South Africa was to secure the settlements there before they fell into the hands of Napoleon Bonaparte.

British administration brought economic benefits to India and the Cape of Africa, but governors were content to allow the life in their colonies to go on pretty much as usual.

AFRICA

1816 marked the end of the Napoleonic Period, and the beginning of a powerful African nation: The Zulu. Under the leadership of the powerful and skilled African leader, Shaka Zulu, the Zulu tribe developed a highly disciplined and militarily stratified army that dominated the southeastern region of Africa for nearly sixty years.

Meanwhile, during the early 1800’s, Dutch farmers know as Boers clashed with British colonial authorities over the new policies regarding the control of their lands and the use of slave labor. Frustrated with the lack of representation in the local government or control over their situation, the Boers finally decided to move across the Vaal River and establish their own Dutch Republic. Known as the “Great Trek,” during the 1830’s several thousand Boers soon found themselves in fierce conflict with the Zulu’s whose land they were taking.

Suddenly, in the 1860’s, a new discovery compounded the troubles that were dividing the native and colonial people of South Africa: the discovery of Gold in the Dutch Transvaal Republic. Quickly, adventurers from all parts of the world rushed into the region to make their fortune. Although the Boers tried to keep “outsiders” from gaining political rights in the area, their attempts to start a rebellion failed.

Unfortunately, outsiders were not the greatest problem to threaten both the Boers and British colonialists. In 1873, Cetshwayo became the new ruler of the Zulu nation, reviving the military methods and policies of his uncle, Shaka Zulu. Causing the massacre of many of his own people and the invasions of Dutch and tribal lands throughout the region, Cetshwayo caused major concerns by the British government in the Cape Colony.

Immediately, the British demanded the Zulu chief to cease all military operations in the British and Dutch sectors of the colony. This demand was quickly followed by an ultimatum of terms in 1878, requiring Cetshwayo to disband his army and discontinue his military operations. When Cetshwayo
returned no answer, a British force of 5,000 soldiers and 8,200 natives invaded Zululand in January 1879, without authorization from the British government in Europe.

Although the conflict between the Zulu and the colonialists lasted until 1887, the intense fighting only lasted about a year. On 22 January 1879, at the Battle of Isandlwana, Cetshwayo’s army of 20,000 warriors managed to surround and surprise the British forces, killing 850 Europeans and around 450 Africans in the British service. In its aftermath, the following day, a party of some 5,000 Zulu raided a nearby British border post at Rorke’s Drift. One hundred and thirty-nine British soldiers successfully defended their garrison for over 10 hours against an intense assault by four to five thousand Zulu warriors in one of histories finest battles.

By 1886, the discovery of gold in the Cape Colonies compounded the problems between the Dutch Boer’s and the British government. Two Boer Wars were fought between the British Empire and the two independent Boer republics: The Orange Free States and the South African Republic or Transvaal. The average Boers, farmers who had lived most of their lives in the saddle, stalking predators, and learning to be expert marksmen, became skilled guerrilla fighters and light cavalrymen. As a result of their rock hard determination, the Boer War lasted from 1899 – 1902. Unfortunately, the larger numbered and better equipped British forces prevailed and by 1910, the Boer republics were absorbed into the new Union of South Africa.

ASIA

In India, the East India Company had regulated both trade and political matters since the late 1700’s. The company had even been allowed to raise its own army, made up of British officers and Indian soldiers called Sepoys. At first, the British considered India as a source of potential rather than actual economic profit. Yet, as the trade in opium to China, tea to England, and cotton to various markets increased, India became Britain’s most valuable colony known as the “Jewel in the Crown.”

Setting up restrictions in the 1830’s that prevented the Indian economy from operating its own factories, manufacturing its own goods, or trading its own raw materials, the British eventually flooded the Indian markets with cheap and ready-made clothing that cheated Indian merchants from making profit for themselves.

By 1850, the British controlled most of the Indian sub-continent. However, there were many pockets of discontentment. As economic problems increased, this feeling of resentment and nationalism extended to the Indian soldiers. In 1857, Indian soldiers rebelled against their commanders during the Sepoy Mutiny. The mutiny increased distrust between the British and the Indians and marked a turning point in British rule, or Raj, in the region.

Eventually the British government took direct control of all matters in India. This, along with the growing demands for more modernization and self-governing by the Indians led to the founding of two nationalist groups: The Indian National Congress in 1885, and the Muslim League in 1906. By the mid 1900’s, the Indian people were calling for better personal rights & self-government from the British.