

British Empire- Source and Activity Pack

Was the British Empire primarily a force for progress, or a system of exploitation and oppression?



Debate Resources

This pack contains all the resources you need to prepare for debate. It has full page and extended versions of the Ebook sources, the students activities and the transcript of the video overview for each claim. You will also find at the back some discussion questions, suggested further reading (although this list is by no means exhaustive) and a glossary of key terms.

Was the British Empire primarily a force for progress, or a system of exploitation and oppression?

Empire spread the infrastructure of the modern world

Context: Empire spread the infrastructure of the modern world. Slavery and plantation wealth were central to early empire. But empire changed over time. By the 1830s, Britain had rejected slavery, abolished it across the empire, and used naval power to suppress the slave trade. Later, railways, ports, steamships, telegraphs and public services connected isolated regions and enabled large-scale trade. They made movement faster, safer and cheaper than before. For millions, distance became less of a barrier to work, markets, news, letters, prices, and opportunity.

ACTIVITY

How could Source 1 be used as evidence that railway travel changed Indian ideas about distance and movement and improved lives?

How could Source 2 be used as evidence that railways changed and developed India's economy?

Use Sources 1 and 2 together. How do they support the argument that empire spread the infrastructure of the modern world?

Empire spread the infrastructure of the modern world

Source 1: Bholanauth Chunder, an English-educated Bengali traveller, trader and colonial subject in British India, describes the impact of railway travel in *The Travels of a Hindoo* (1869)

“The train started at 10 A.M., and we fairly proceeded on our journey. Surely, our ancient Bhagiruth, who brought the Ganges from heaven, is not more entitled to the grateful remembrance of posterity, than is the author of the Railway in India.

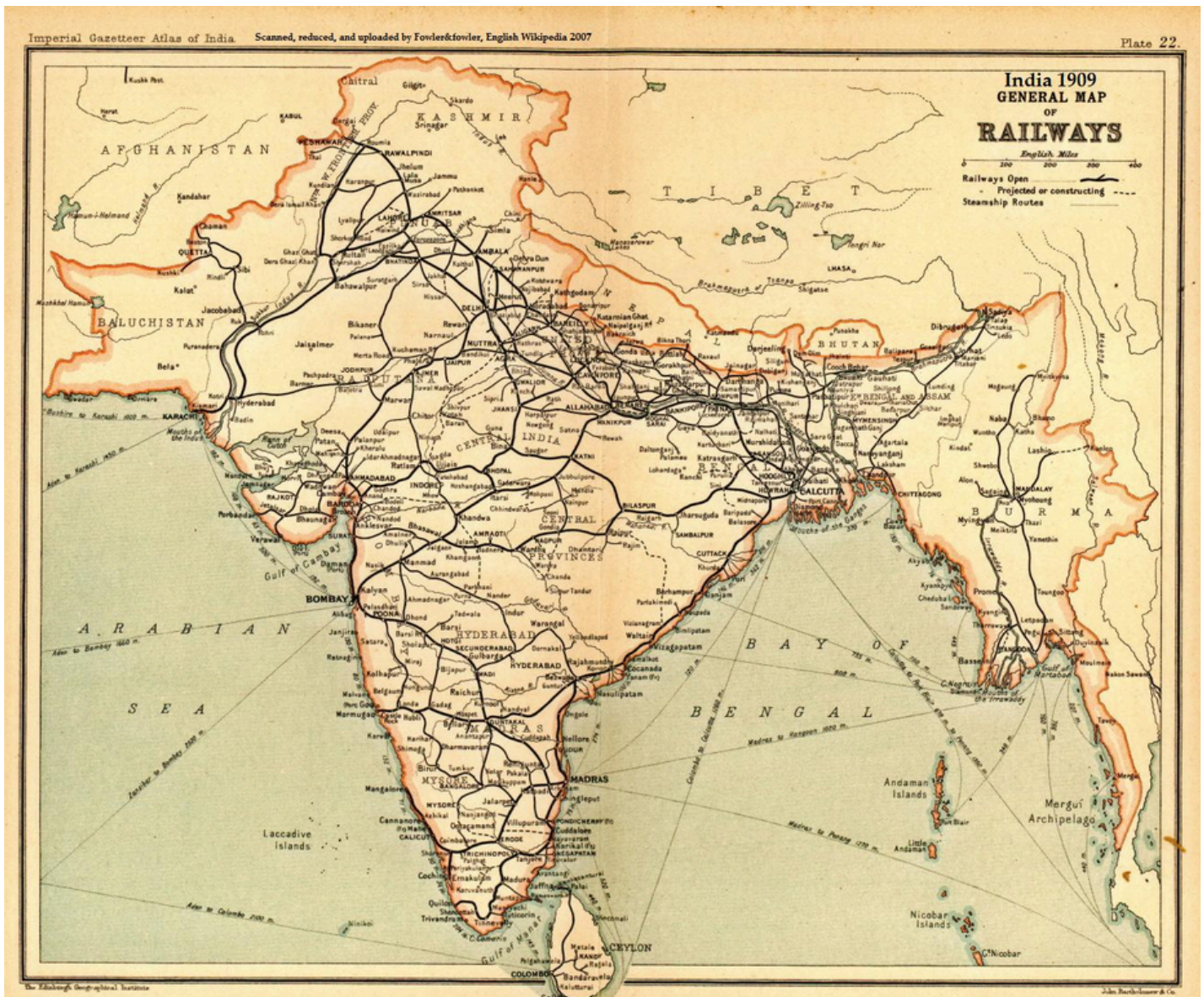
Travelling by the Rail very much resembles migrating in one vast colony, or setting out together in a whole moving town or caravan...

The long vista that is opening from one end of the empire to the other, will, in a few years, tempt him out-of-doors to move in a more extended orbit, to enlarge the circle of his terrene acquaintance...

The fact has become patent, that which was achieved in months and days is now accomplished in hours and minutes, and celerity (speed) is as much the order of the day as security and saving.”

Empire spread the infrastructure of the modern world

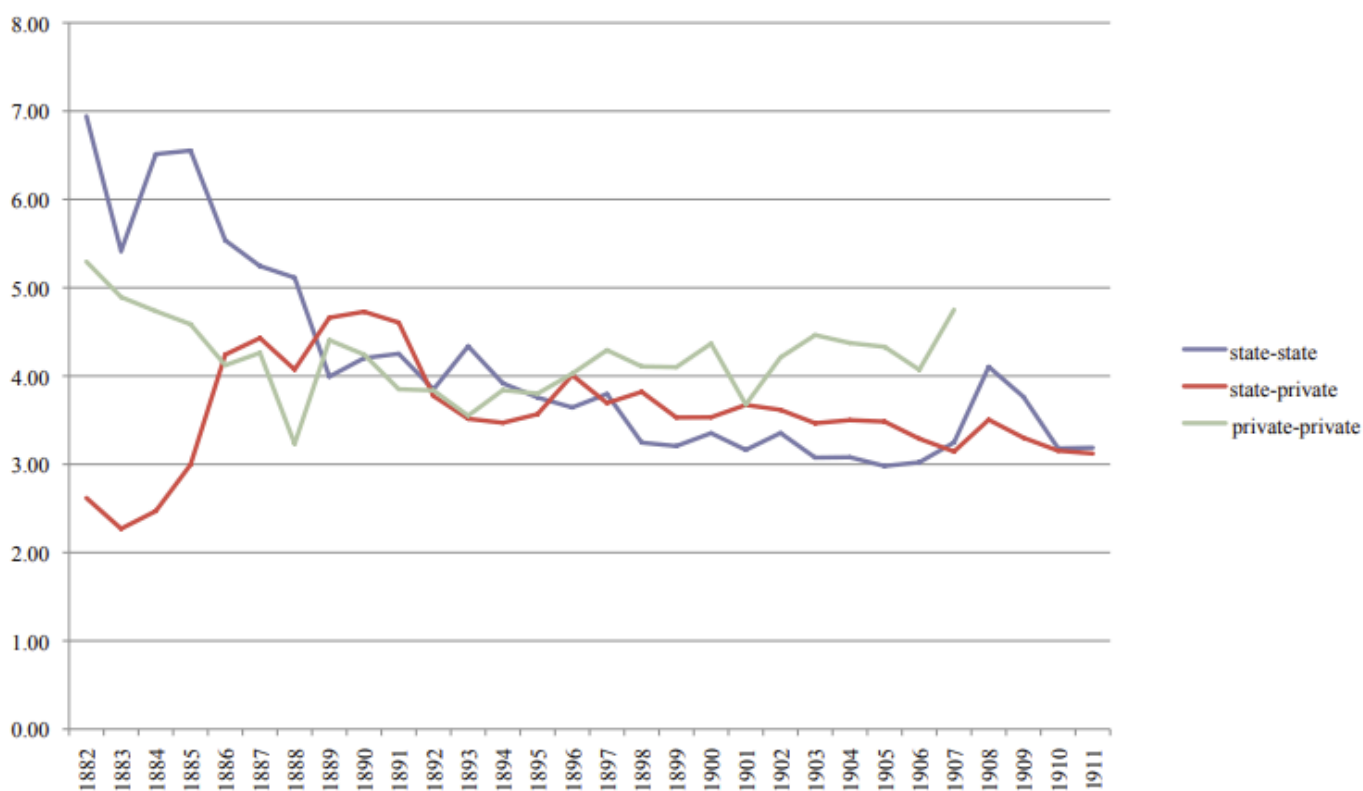
Source 2a: Railway map of India, 1909, reproduced in Tirthankar Roy, A New Economic History of Colonial India.



Empire spread the infrastructure of the modern world

Source 2b: Indian railways by 1909, with a graph showing falling haulage costs, c.1882–1911

Figure 3: Avg Cost of Hauling 1 Ton 1 Mile (annas)



British imperial growth was built through systemic exploitation

Context: British imperial growth was built through systemic exploitation. Slavery and plantation economies injected wealth into Britain's ports, merchants, banks, insurers and manufacturers. Sugar plantations turned enslaved labour into one of Britain's most profitable imperial industries, Caribbean sugar. After abolition, exploitation continued in other forms: damaged Indian industry, revenue pressure on cultivators, debt, low-paid labour and imperial markets. Skilled artisans lost work, farmers were pushed towards subsistence, and colonial economies were tied to British power.

ACTIVITY

How could Source 3 be used as evidence that slavery was part of an economic system?

How could Source 4 be used as evidence that imperial infrastructure carried a detrimental human cost?

Use Sources 3 and 4 together. How far do they support the argument that imperial growth was built on exploitation?

British imperial growth was built through systemic exploitation

Source 3: United Kingdom, Parliament, House of Commons.
“Indian Coolies on the Uganda Railway.” Hansard, vol. 67, 23 Feb. 1899, cols. 273–74.

HANSARD 1803–2005 → 1890s → 1899 → February 1899 → 23 February 1899 → Commons Sitting → QUESTIONS.

INDIAN COOLIES ON THE UGANDA RAILWAY.

HC Deb 23 February 1899 vol 67 cc273–4

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SIR W. WEDDERBURN I beg to ask the Secretary of State for India whether his attention has been drawn to the mortality among the Indian coolies employed on the Uganda Railway; and what arrangements are made for their protection, both at the port of emigration and in Africa? §

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR INDIA The answer given by the Under Secretary for Foreign Affairs to the honourable Member for Chesterfield will have supplied the information sought by this question. I will only add: (1) The mortality among coolies employed on the Uganda Railway Works during 1898 appears to have been about 16 per 1,000 per annum on an average labour force of 12,800 hands; (2) at the port of emigration the labourers are kept, as far as possible, apart from all infection; they are medically inspected before they go on board, where their food, clothing, sanitation, and medical attendance are provided for. There are hospitals at the base and at different points on the works. Medical men and medical subordinates. European and Indian, are provided for the service of these hospitals and of the labourers. At the most unhealthy season of the year nearly 10 per cent, of the labourers were in hospital; at healthier seasons from 2½ to 5 per cent, may be in the hospital. The medical report of July last says: "The prevailing diseases are malarial fever, diarrhoea, dysentery, liver complaint, scurvy, and ulcers. A complication of the last two generally necessitates invaliding." Those who are invalided are sent back to India. 274

British imperial growth was built through systemic exploitation

Source 4: Mary Prince, describing being sold as a child in Bermuda, c.1780s, published in 1831. Her account shows slavery as an economic system: children were treated as property, examined by buyers, priced in pounds, and sold to different owners

“We followed my mother to the market-place, where she placed us in a row against a large house, with our backs to the wall and our arms folded across our breasts... our mother stood beside, crying over us.

At length the vendue master, who was to offer us for sale like sheep or cattle, arrived... He took me by the hand, and led me out into the middle of the street... I was soon surrounded by strange men, who examined and handled me in the same manner that a butcher would a calf or a lamb he was about to purchase...

I was then put up to sale. The bidding commenced at a few pounds, and gradually rose to fifty-seven, when I was knocked down to the highest bidder... I then saw my sisters led forth, and sold to different owners... one went one way, one another, and our poor mammy went home with nothing.”

Empire built modern government by making power more formally documented, predictable and open to challenge

Context: Empire built modern government by making power more formally documented, predictable and open to challenge. More decisions moved into courts, offices, written agreements, councils and records, where they could be argued over rather than depending only on personal authority, local power and custom. This could matter in people's lives. A land promise could be written down. A dispute could be taken to court. A petition could be sent to officials. A political meeting could pass resolutions demanding representation. Even within the limits of colonial rule, colonised people could use these methods to press for reform. Over time, habits of law, record-keeping, petitioning and public debate helped train political leaders, build nationalist movements and shape the courts, civil services and parliaments of post-colonial states.

ACTIVITY

How could Source 5 be used as evidence that written agreements and colonial courts gave colonised people a way to challenge action, even within an unequal system?

How could Source 6 be used as evidence that colonised people used meetings, petitions and resolutions to argue for greater representation?

Use Sources 5 and 6 together. How far do they support the argument that British rule built modern government by creating legal and political methods that colonised people could use to make claims, challenge decisions and demand representation?

Empire built modern government by making power more formally documented, predictable and open to challenge

Source 5: The 1904 Maasai Agreement in court

In 1913, Maasai representatives brought a case against the East Africa Protectorate government. This 1904 agreement was used in court because it recorded earlier promises about Maasai land, reserves, compensation and protection from European settlement.

“We, the Undersigned, being the Lybon and Chief representatives of the existing clans and sections of the Masai tribes in the East Africa Protectorate... have, of our own free will, decided that it is for our best interests to remove our people, flocks, and herds into definite reservations away from the railway line, and away from any land that may be thrown open to European settlement.

We recognize that the government, in taking up this question, are taking into consideration our best interests.

Now, we, being fully satisfied that the proposals for our removal to definite and final reserves are for the undoubted good of our race, have agreed as follows... We ask, as a most important point in this arrangement, that the government will establish and maintain a station on Laikipia, and that officers whom we know and trust may be appointed to look after us there. Also that the government will pay reasonable compensation for any Masai cultivation at present existing near Nairobi.

We would, however, ask that the settlement now arrived at shall be enduring so long as the Masai as a race shall exist, and that European or other settlers shall not be allowed to take up land in the settlements.”

Empire built modern government by making power more formally documented, predictable and open to challenge

Source 6: Delegates at the first meeting of the Indian National Congress in Bombay in 1885. Its early membership was mainly English-educated and elite.



THE FIRST INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS, 1885.

Empire made exploitation and oppression lawful

Context: British rule claimed to bring law, order and modern administration, but those systems often served imperial power. Colonial government classified people, land and authority in ways that made control appear official, rational and legal. Once land was classified and recorded in this way, it could then be divided and opened to settlers, plantations, cash-crop schemes and commercial concessions. Political exclusion and racial hierarchy limited who could exercise power, whose knowledge counted and whose rights were protected. Decisions about territory, justice and representation were made within structures designed to preserve British authority. Law and administration therefore helped make exploitation and oppression appear legitimate.

ACTIVITY

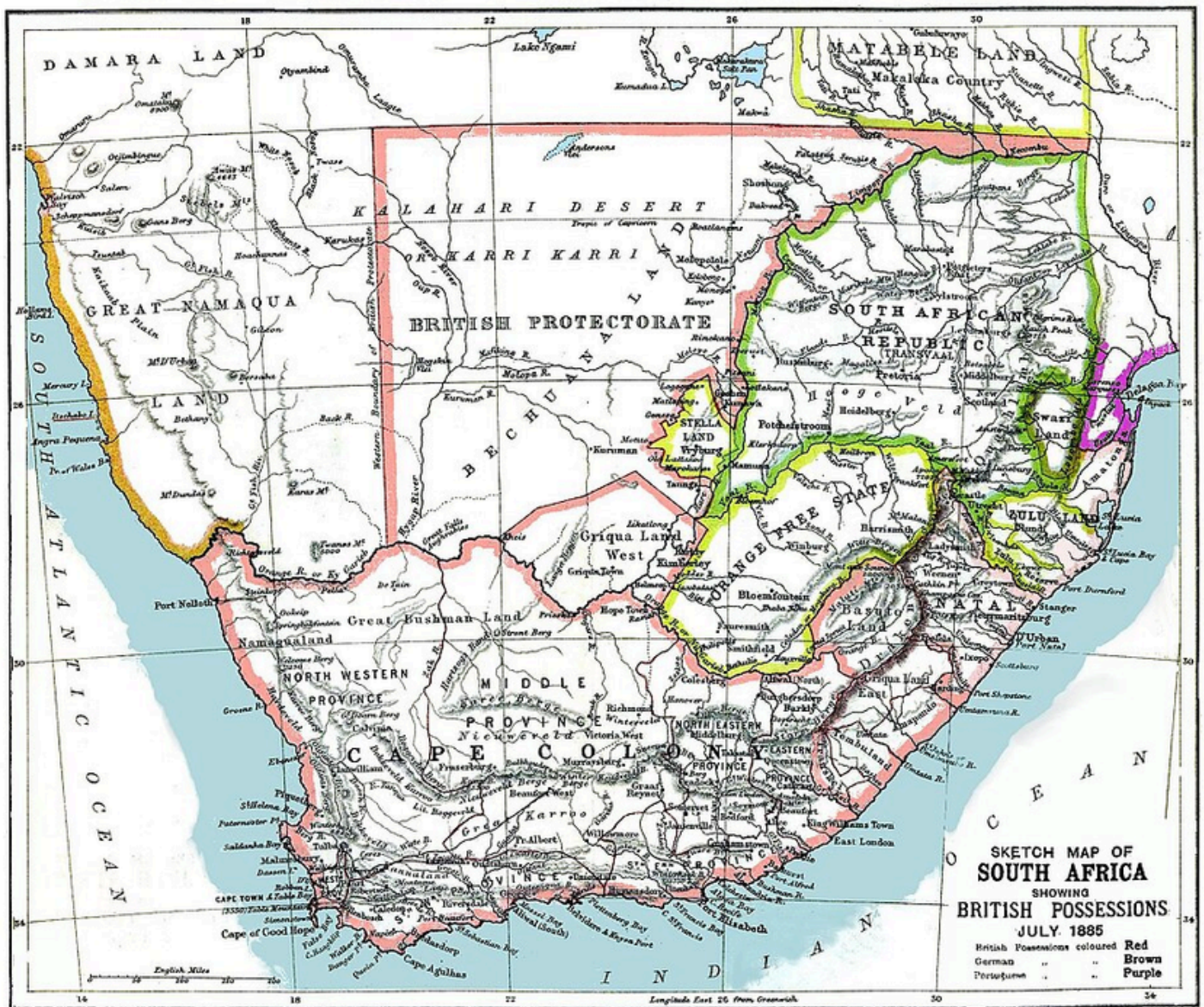
How could Source 7 be used as evidence that colonial mapping helped turn land into territory that could be divided, claimed and exploited, and what tension might this create with pastoralist methods of using land?

How could Source 8 be used as evidence that colonial law enforced racial hierarchy by protecting European privilege over colonised people?

Use Sources 7 and 8 together. How far do they support the argument that British rule used law and administration not to modernise government, but to make land exploitation, racial privilege and oppression appear orderly, legal and legitimate?

Empire made exploitation and oppression lawful

Source 7: Anonymous, "Map of Southern Africa Highlighting Territories of Bechuanaland, Bathoeng [Sic], Sebele, Khama, Transvaal, and Tongaland"



Scottish Geographical Magazine, 1885.

This late nineteenth-century map shows parts of southern Africa divided into named territories by coloured boundary lines. Such maps were used in colonial land treaties. For pastoralist peoples such as the Maasai in East Africa, land use often depended on seasonal movement, grazing routes and access to water.

Empire made exploitation and oppression lawful

Source 8: In 1883, the Ilbert Bill proposed allowing senior Indian judges to try European British subjects in criminal cases. This extract comes from a letter by judges of the Calcutta High Court objecting to the bill.

“The present law protects European British subjects from the exercise of this dangerous combination of duties by anyone but their own countrymen. The Bill under consideration proposes to remove this protection....

[The Bill would] deprive them of the right, which they at present enjoy, that in every case the inquiry or trial shall be conducted by a European British subject....

On a review of the course of legislation since 1793, it is impossible, the judges consider, to doubt that the intention and practice of the Government has been to surround the investigation and trial of offences, charged against European British subjects... with special precautions, and among those precautions to restrict the jurisdiction in such cases to European officials.”

Empire secured order through trade and alliance

Context: Empire secured order through trade and alliance.

British rule depended on local rulers, merchants, chiefs, soldiers and princely states. It often advanced through treaties, protection and arbitration with existing authorities who chose to work with Britain. They sought to protect shipping, keep trade moving, defend territory, settle disputes, preserve status or strengthen their position against rivals. Across ports, sea routes and frontier zones, British power challenged piracy, slave trading and local conflict. This made commerce safer, authority more predictable and movement more secure. Britain gained influence, while local partners gained protection, recognition, rule-based trade and opportunity. These alliances grew from overlapping interests in security, status, trade and political stability.

ACTIVITY

How could Source 9 be used to challenge the claim that British power only created order by force?

How could Source 10 be used to show that some local rulers sought British power as an arbiter and for protection, and that British power was not simply about domination?

Use Sources 9 and 10 together. How far do they support the argument that empire could create order because British and local interests could overlap?

Empire secured order through trade and alliance

Source 9: General Treaty for the Cessation of Plunder and Piracy by Land and Sea, 1820

In 1820, Britain made a treaty with Arab rulers in the Gulf. The treaty aimed to create peace, regulate shipping, protect friendly vessels trading with British ports, and prevent the carrying off and transportation of enslaved people.

“There is established a lasting peace between the British government and the Arab tribes, who are parties to this contract.

Article 4

The pacificated tribes shall all of them continue in their former relations, with the exception that they shall be at peace with the British Government, and shall not fight with each other.

Article 5

The vessels of the friendly Arabs shall all of them have in their possession a paper (Register) signed with the signature of their Chief, in which shall be the name of the vessel, its length, its breadth, and how many Karahs it holds.

Article 7

If any tribes, or others, shall not desist from plunder and piracy, the friendly Arabs shall act against them according to their ability and circumstances, and an arrangement for this purpose shall take place between the friendly Arabs and the British at the time when plunder and piracy shall occur.

Article 9

The carrying off of slaves, men, women, or children from the coasts of Africa or elsewhere, and the transporting them in vessels, is plunder and piracy, and the friendly Arabs shall do nothing of this nature.

Article 10

The vessels of the friendly Arabs, bearing their flag above described, shall enter into all the British ports and into the ports of the allies of the British so far as they shall be able to effect it; and they shall buy and sell therein, and if any shall attack them the British Government shall take notice of it.”

Empire secured order through trade and alliance

Source 10: Moshoeshoe's letter to Sir George Grey, 1858. Moshoeshoe was ruler of the Basotho in southern Africa. In 1858, war broke out between the Basotho and the Orange Free State, a white Boer settler republic. Moshoeshoe wrote to Sir George Grey, the British High Commissioner, describing Boer pressure on Basotho land and his hope that British arbitration could restore justice and peace.

"About twenty-five years ago my knowledge of the White men and their laws was very limited. I knew merely that mighty nations existed, and among them was the English. These, the blacks who were acquainted with them, praised for their justice.

... People who had come from the Colony first presented themselves to us, they called themselves Boers. I thought all white men were honest. Some of these Boers asked permission to live upon our borders. I was led to believe they would live with me as my own people lived, that is, looking to me as to a father and a friend.

About sixteen years since, one of the Governors of the Colony, Sir George Napier, marked down my limits on a treaty he made with me. I was to be ruler within those limits.

Then came Sir Harry Smith, and he told me not to deprive any chief of their lands or their rights, he would see justice done to all... He said the Whites and Blacks were to live together in peace.

I tried my utmost to satisfy them and avert war. I punished thieves, and sent my son Nehemiah and others to watch the part of the country near the Boers, and thus check stealing. In this he was successful, thieving did cease. We were at peace for a time.

Still I tried to avert war.

I knew what misery I should bring upon the country by leaving the Basutos to ravage the Boer places, and therefore I have agreed to the proposal of Mr. J. P. Hoffman... If they have remained quiet, it has been owing to my persuasions and my promises that they might have good hope of justice, Your Excellency having consented to act as arbitrator between the Boers and Basutos."

Empire imposed rule by coercion

Context: Empire protected British trade, land, authority and profit by treating resistance as disorder. When colonised people rebelled, protested, struck, refused cooperation or demanded self-rule, imperial governments branded them uncivilised and dangerous and forced them into obedience. Coercion went beyond ordinary policing. Villages were burned, civilians removed, families detained, protesters shot, and suspects tried by military courts. These were not isolated abuses. Officials, soldiers and police adapted coercive methods across the empire: reprisals after the 1857 Indian uprising, concentration camps in South Africa, martial law and reprisals in Ireland, emergency regulations in Palestine, and detention and resettlement in Malaya and Kenya. Empire ruled not only through law, but through fear, punishment and emergency power.

ACTIVITY

How could Source 11 be used as evidence to challenge the claim that imperial order protected civilians?

How could Source 12 be used to show that British order could depend on removing rights rather than protecting them?

How could Sources 11 and 12 together be used as evidence that imperial order was not shared security, but control imposed on people who resisted it?

Empire imposed rule by coercion

Source 11: Emily Hobhouse on British concentration camps in South Africa, 1901

1.— MRS. B. AND JOHANNES
ADRIAN B.

2.—Came now from Kopje Aleen, Winburg.

3.—Four grandchildren (orphans), one deaf and dumb. Their fathers on Commando.

4.—Her old husband, aged 75, in St. Helena.

5.—Since November 26.

6.—Poor old Mrs. B. and her husband do not know why they were brought away. They were people from Cape Colony, and had only been four years in Free State. He was, therefore, not a burgher, and had never been on Commando or taken arms. Had intended returning to the Colony, but rinderpest had killed their cattle, and could not afford it. So they were staying with friends on their farm (D.'s). The Commandos passed occasionally, but so also did the "troop Commandos," as she calls the soldiers. They and their friends were all turned out together and brought away in trucks. At Bloemfontein they were separated, her husband being detained and sent down to Greenpoint, while she was brought to camp. She has just heard in a roundabout way that he has been sent to St. Helena, but still he does not yet know where she is. The old woman is very poor, very forlorn, and in need of clothing for herself and children, but, most of all, appeals to get her old husband back lest he die. He has done nothing to merit exile.

Empire imposed rule by coercion

Source 12: Military courts under emergency rule in Mandate Palestine. In 1945, British authorities issued the Defence (Emergency) Regulations in Mandate Palestine. These regulations created military courts for emergency offences, outside the normal protections of civilian courts. The extract shows what rights an accused person had, and what powers the military court could use.

19. Conduct of prosecutions and representation of accused

Every prosecution before a Military Court shall be conducted by a Military Court prosecutor. The accused may be defended by an advocate.

20. Evidence

In relation to evidence, Military Courts shall apply English law and the practice of the courts exercising criminal jurisdiction in England: Provided that a Military Court may, if it is satisfied that it is in the interest of justice so to do, admit any particular evidence notwithstanding that it would be inadmissible in England, but in every such case shall record its reasons for so doing.

21. General provisions as to procedure

Every trial before a Military Court shall be conducted summarily and the Court shall, as regards any matter of procedure not provided for in these Regulations, adopt such course as appears to the Court best calculated to do justice.

30. Judgments etc, of Military Courts and decision of General Officer Commanding

There shall be no appeal from any judgment, sentence, order, decision or direction (whether given, passed or made before or after the coming into force of the Defence (Emergency) (Amendment No. 8) Regulations, 1947) of a Military Court, or of the General Officer Commanding in relation to any proceedings, conviction or sentence of a Military Court, and no such judgment, sentence, order, decision or direction shall be called in question or challenged, whether by writ or in any manner whatsoever, by or before any Court.

52. Death Sentences

(2) Every such sentence shall direct that the person sentenced shall be hanged by the neck until he is dead.

Empire opened new routes into power

Context: Empire opened new routes into power. Empire did not simply educate. It helped create new professional and political classes that later challenged empire and ran post-colonial states. Education under the British Empire created lasting institutions such as the University of Bombay in India in 1857 and Makerere College in Uganda in 1922. Schools, colleges, universities, hospitals and training schools prepared teachers, doctors, lawyers, administrators, journalists and political leaders. English became a language of law, government, print and international debate. For those who gained access, education could transform life chances, bringing income, status, employment and public voice. Access remained unequal, but empire expanded opportunity by opening new routes into work, influence and political power.

ACTIVITY

How could Source 13 be used to challenge the claim that empire only restricted colonised people's opportunities?

How could Source 14 be used as evidence that education under empire could open routes into teaching, politics and national leadership?

Use Sources 13 and 14 together. How far do they support the argument that empire opened new routes into work, influence and political power, even if access remained unequal?

Empire opened new routes into power

Source 13: Wood's Despatch on education in India. In 1854 Sir Charles Wood sent a despatch to the Government of India setting out plans for education under British rule. The selected paragraphs deal with scholarships, teacher training, medical and engineering colleges, and public employment.

“Paragraph 63: Scholarships and advancement

The system of scholarships should be extended, so that the best pupils of the lower schools shall be provided for in schools of a higher order, and “superior talent in every class may receive that encouragement and development which it deserves.”

Paragraph 65: Training, professions and practical usefulness

The encouragement of young men of ability, but of slender means, to pursue their studies is useful and benevolent. Government should give practical encouragement to education. Students with an aptitude for teaching should be supported while training as schoolmasters, helping them qualify for “a career of practical usefulness” and one which would secure them “an honourable competence through life.” Admission to places of instruction, such as the medical and engineering colleges maintained by the State, might also be made “the rewards of industry and ability,” educating people for special employments under Government.

Paragraph 75: Education and public employment

Where other qualifications were equal, “a person who has received a good education... should be preferred to one who has not”; even in lower positions, a man who could read and write should be preferred to one who could not.”

Empire opened new routes into power

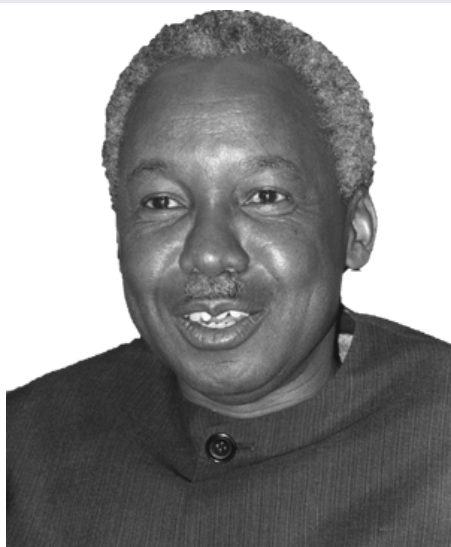
Source 14: Obituary of Julius Nyerere

“This obituary traces Nyerere’s route from education to teaching, anti-colonial politics and leadership of independent Tanganyika.

Julius Nyerere “was 12 before he first went to school, but was immediately singled out for his lively intelligence by the Roman Catholic priests. After Makerere University, in Kampala, he taught for three years, admitting, later in life, that he was a schoolmaster by choice and a politician by accident.

In 1949 he became the first Tanzanian to study at a British university, when he went to Edinburgh on a government scholarship. And it was there... that he developed his own political ideas.

Nyerere left teaching in 1954, formed the Tanganyika African National Union, and campaigned for the nationalist movement. He was elected to the Tanganyika legislature in 1958... became chief minister in 1960... and in 1961... was sworn in as prime minister of the newly-independent Tanganyika.”



Colonised peoples refused to be defined only by empire

Context: Colonised societies had their own languages, beliefs, laws, literatures, political traditions and ideas of authority. British rule tried to make English, Christianity, European law and imperial schooling the standards by which those cultures were judged. In India, the Caribbean and Africa. Local knowledge, languages, customs and authority could be ranked, dismissed or reshaped by British ideas of progress. But colonised peoples decided what to keep, reject and reuse. They turned English into argument, education into organisation, religion into local leadership, law into rights claims, and print into mobilisation. Cultural change was driven by colonised peoples who adapted imperial tools, fought racial hierarchy, and carried their own identities beyond empire.

ACTIVITY

How could Source 15 be used to challenge the claim that cultural and social change in colonised societies was mainly a result of empire, rather than colonised peoples' own efforts?

How could Source 16 be used as evidence that British education policy tried to reshape colonised peoples' language, knowledge and values?

How far do Sources 15 and 16 support the view that colonised peoples drove cultural change by resisting imperial ideas of inferiority and used education, language and print for their own purpose?

Colonised peoples refused to be defined only by empire

Source 15: Pixley ka Isaka Seme, "The Regeneration of Africa," 1906

Seme was a South African student who delivered this speech in English at Columbia University. He later became a lawyer and helped found the South African Native National Congress, later the African National Congress.

"I am an African, and I set my pride in my race over against a hostile public opinion."

"The giant is awakening! From the four corners of the earth Africa's sons... are marching to the future's golden door..."

"The African already recognizes his anomalous position [his unjust and unnatural position] and desires a change. The brighter day is rising upon Africa..."

Yes, the regeneration of Africa belongs to this new and powerful period! By this term regeneration I wish to be understood to mean the entrance into a new life... The basic factor which assures their regeneration resides in the awakened race-consciousness. This gives them a clear perception of their elemental needs and of their undeveloped powers.

The ancestral greatness, the unimpaired genius, and the recuperative power of the race, its irrepressibility, which assures its permanence, constitute the African's greatest source of inspiration. He has refused to camp forever on the borders of the industrial world; having learned that knowledge is power, he is educating his children... These return to their country like arrows, to drive darkness from the land."

"The regeneration of Africa means that a new and unique civilization is soon to be added to the world."

Colonised peoples refused to be defined only by empire

Source 16: Macaulay's Minute on Indian Education, 1835

Macaulay was a British official in India. In this minute, he argued that government education funds in India should support English-language education rather than Arabic, Sanskrit or local Indian languages.

“What then shall that language be? One-half of the Committee maintain that it should be English. The other half strongly recommend the Arabic and Sanscrit. The whole question seems to me to be, which language is the best worth knowing?

I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.

We have to educate a people who cannot at present be educated by means of their mother-tongue. We must teach them some foreign language. The claims of our own language it is hardly necessary to recapitulate. It stands preeminent even among the languages of the west...

In one point I fully agree with the gentlemen to whose general views I am opposed. I feel with them, that it is impossible for us, with our limited means, to attempt to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.”

Empire was defended at the time as a means to reform, development and improvement.

Context: British power had profited from slavery, yet empire changed direction. Britain abolished the slave trade in 1807, policed it at sea, and abolished slavery across most of the empire in 1833. Missionaries, humanitarian campaigners, newspapers and MPs exposed abuses and forced inquiries when rule failed its stated standards. Across generations, people educated in imperial schools, through service in armies, working in courts, hospitals, railways and civil services used those experiences to claim rights and later self-government. In both world wars, millions served; in the Second World War, empire and Commonwealth forces fought Nazi and Japanese oppression. Defenders argued that empire could reform, connect peoples, and create institutions that colonised peoples later used to claim rights and self government.

ACTIVITY

How could Source 17 be used to challenge the claim that colonised people viewed empire exclusively as oppression?

How could Source 18 be used to support the argument that empire was not only imposed, but could also mobilise millions in a cause defended as morally just?

Use Sources 17 and 18 together. How far do they support the claim that, at the time, empire was defended through claims about rights, loyalty, service and shared moral purpose?

Empire was defended at the time as a means to reform, development and improvement.

Source 17: M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, trans. Mahadev Desai, Part III, Chapter X, “The Boer War.”

Gandhi later became one of the most famous critics of British rule. But during the Boer War, he recalled that he put aside his sympathy for the Boers because he believed Indian claims to rights depended on loyalty to British rule. He argued that demanding rights as a British citizen also created a duty to defend the British Empire, and that India’s emancipation might still be achieved within it. Gandhi therefore organised Indian volunteers to serve as an ambulance corps.

“When the war was declared, my personal sympathies were all with the Boers, but I believed then that I had yet no right, in such cases, to enforce my individual convictions... Suffice it to say that my loyalty to the British rule drove me to participation with the British in that war. I felt that, if I demanded rights as a British citizen, it was also my duty, as such, to participate in the defence of the British Empire. I held then that India could achieve her complete emancipation only within and through the British Empire. So I collected together as many comrades as possible, and with very great difficulty got their services accepted as an ambulance corps.”

Empire was defended at the time as a means to reform, development and improvement.

Source 18: The British Commonwealth and Its Allies Will Destroy the Nazi Tyranny, Second World War poster, Imperial War Museum



Empire was challenged at the time as exploitative and oppressive

Context: British imperial power faced resistance from Ireland and across the empire because exploitation was built into its rule. Slavery was not an early wrong cancelled by reform; it generated wealth, hardened racial hierarchy, and showed how British law could turn people into property and make land available for imperial seizure. Enslaved people rebelled in Barbados, Demerara and Jamaica against forced labour, family separation, brutal punishment and terror. Indigenous peoples resisted land seizure because losing land meant losing movement, livelihood, sacred places and ancestral ties. Workers struck, newspapers exposed injustice, and campaigns in India, Ireland, West Africa and the Caribbean demanded land, rights and self-government. Reform did not redeem empire; it showed how much pressure was needed before Britain gave ground.

ACTIVITY

How could Source 19 be used as evidence that opposition to empire at the time was based on claims of economic exploitation?

How could Source 20 be used as evidence that British rule was challenged at the time as foreign domination and a denial of self-government?

Use Sources 19 and 20 together. How far do they support the argument that, at the time, empire was challenged as economic exploitation and foreign rule?

Empire was challenged at the time as exploitative and oppressive

Source 19: Dadabhai Naoroji on the economic “drain” from India, 1901

“These evils have ever since gone on increasing, and more and more counterbalancing the increased produce of the country, making now the evil of the “bleeding” and impoverishing drain by the foreign dominion nearly or above £30,000,000 a year in a variety of subtle ways and shapes.

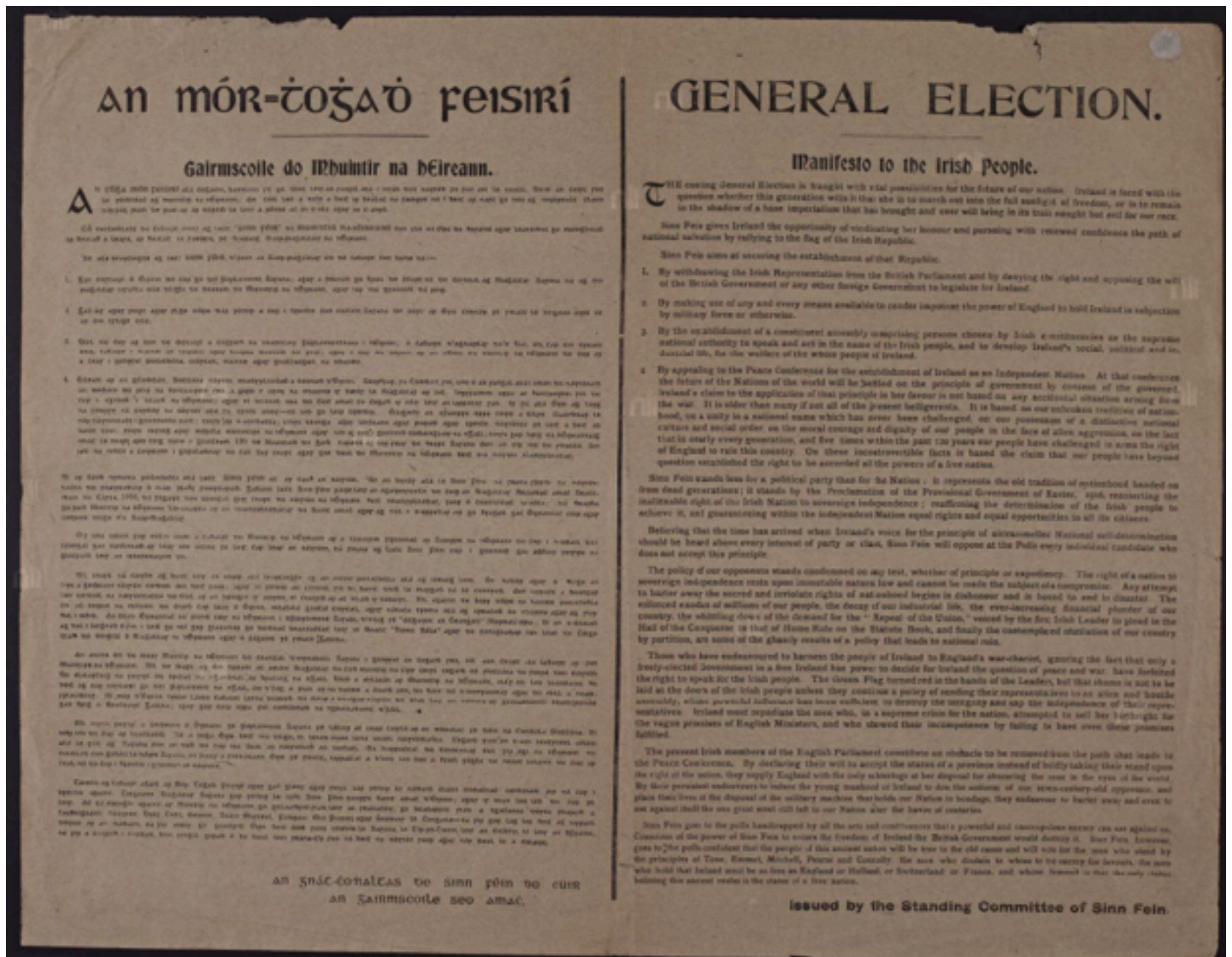
If the profits of exports and freight and insurance, which are not accounted for in the official statistics, be considered, the present drain will be nearer forty than thirty millions.

Mr Montgomery Martin, after examining the records in the India House of a minute survey made in 1807–1814 of the condition of some provinces of Bengal and Behar, said in 1835 in his *Eastern India*: “It is impossible to avoid remarking two facts as peculiarly striking: first the richness of the country surveyed, and second, the poverty of its inhabitants.

What then must be the effect of the unceasing drain which has now grown to the enormous amount of some £30,000,000 a year, if not famines and plagues, destruction and impoverishment!”

Empire was challenged at the time as exploitative and oppressive

Source 20: Sinn Féin general election manifesto issued during the 1918 general election. It set out aims including withdrawing Irish representatives from the British Parliament, opposing foreign rule in Ireland, creating an Irish assembly, and seeking recognition of Ireland as a sovereign nation.



Acknowledgements

Source 1: Bholanauth Chunder, *The Travels of a Hindoo to Various Parts of Bengal and Upper India*, Vol. I, 1869.

Source 2: Railway map of India, 1909, reproduced in Tirthankar Roy, *A New Economic History of Colonial India*; and Dan Bogart and Latika Chaudhary, “A Historical Perspective on Railway Expansion and Economic Development in India,” Figure 3, “Avg Cost of Hauling 1 Ton 1 Mile (annas),” 1882–1911.

Source 3: United Kingdom, Parliament, House of Commons. “Indian Coolies on the Uganda Railway.” *Hansard*, vol. 67, 23 Feb. 1899, cols. 273–74.

Source 4: Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave. Related by Herself*, ed. Thomas Pringle (London: F. Westley and A. H. Davis; Edinburgh: Waugh & Innes, 1831). Extract from Prince’s account of being taken to the market-place in Bermuda and sold as a child. Available via Project Gutenberg.).

Source 5: Treaty/Agreement of 10 and 15 August 1904, reproduced in the 1914 High Court judgment in the case brought by the Masai Tribe against the Attorney-General of the East Africa Protectorate.

Source 6: Delegates to the first meeting of the Indian National Congress, Bombay, 1885. Wikimedia Commons, File: 1st INC1885.jpg. Public domain.

Source 7: Anonymous, “Map of Southern Africa Highlighting Territories of Bechuanaland, Bathoeng [Sic], Sebele, Khama, Transvaal, and Tongaland” (Manuscript, n.d 1890), CWM/LMS/Africa/Odds, Box 29, University of London. School of Oriental and African Studies, London. Images from the Council for World Mission Archive, SOAS Library, University of London. Used by permission for private study, educational or research purposes only.

Source 8: Letter of the Judges of the High Court of Calcutta, in *The Ilbert Bill: A Collection of Letters, Speeches, Memorials, Articles, &c., Stating the Objections to the Bill*. London: W. H. Allen & Co., 13 Waterloo Place, S.W., 1883. Talbot Collection of British Pamphlets, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

Source 9: General Treaty for the Cessation of Plunder and Piracy by Land and Sea, 1820, British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/R/15/1/738, via Qatar Digital Library.

Acknowledgements

Source 10: Moshoeshoe I. “Letter to Sir George Grey.” Internet Modern History Sourcebook, Fordham University, 1858 (transcribed online).dgc, London.

Source 11: Emily Hobhouse, Report of a Visit to the Camps of Women and Children in the Cape and Orange River Colonies, 1901, extract reproduced in The National Archives, WO 32/8061.

Source 12: Government of Palestine. The Defence (Emergency) Regulations, 1945. Palestine Gazette No. 1442, Supplement No. 2 (27 September 1945): 1058–1109.

Source 13: Wood’s Despatch on General Education in India, 19 July 1854, reprinted by the General Council on Education in India from a “Return to an Order of the Honourable the House of Commons.” Extracts from paragraphs 63, 65 and 75.

Source 14: Julian Marshall, “Julius Nyerere, Father of a Nation,” obituary of Julius Kambarage Nyerere, reproduced by the Julius Nyerere Foundation, 15 June 2005.

Source 15: Pixley ka Isaka Seme, “The Regeneration of Africa,” speech delivered at Columbia University, 5 April 1906; later published in African Affairs and reproduced by South African History Online.)

Source 16: Thomas Babington Macaulay, “Minute on Indian Education,” 2 February 1835, in Macaulay, Prose and Poetry, selected by G. M. Young, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957, pp. 721 to 724 and 729. Reproduced in the Internet Modern History Sourcebook.)

Source 17: M. K. Gandhi, An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth, trans. Mahadev Desai, Part III, Chapter X, “The Boer War.” Originally published in Gujarati in Navajivan, 1925 to 1929. Online edition: mkgandhi.org.

Source 18: The British Commonwealth and Its Allies Will Destroy the Nazi Tyranny, Second World War poster, Imperial War Museum. Service figures from UK Government figures on British Empire and Dominion military service in the Second World War.

Source 19: Dadabhai Naoroji, Poverty and Un-British Rule in India, London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1901, Introduction, p. viii.

Source 20: National Library of Ireland, General Election manifesto to the Irish People, Sinn Féin, 1918.

Discussion Points



The questions below are designed to start conversations about broader themes/concepts in history. You can use examples beyond this topic in your discussions, and share your opinions on the issues raised. These don't have specific sources (although you can of course use the sources in this pack if you feel they help!) You may wish to use other examples from history, current affairs or your studies. There is no definitive answer, and we have chosen topics historians and scholars from other fields continue to disagree on today.

Remember to be respectful in your language, and to listen to others' point of view.

1. Which aspects of infrastructure provide the most benefit to citizens when they are improved? (Some examples are education, health, transport, housing, employment.)
2. How might a person's identity influence their interpretation of history? How does identity play a role in the existence of differing narratives of the same events?

Further Reading



Understanding Empire: Overviews & Big Debates

- **Niall Ferguson – Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World**

A provocative overview arguing that empire brought progress; useful for understanding one side of the debate.

- **Shashi Tharoor – Inglorious Empire**

A powerful counter-argument focusing on exploitation, economic drain and racial hierarchy.

- **David Olusoga – Black and British: A Short, Essential History**

Excellent for understanding slavery, resistance and the global impact of empire.

- **Maya Jasanoff – The Dawn Watch: Joseph Conrad in a Global World**

Explores imperialism through travel, trade and globalisation.

Empire, Infrastructure & Economic Change

- **Tirthankar Roy – The Economic History of India 1857–1947**

Clear explanations of railways, trade, markets and colonial economic policy.

- **Jon Wilson – India Conquered**

Challenges the idea that British rule was efficient or modernising.

- **BBC Bitesize: The British Empire**

Short, accessible articles on railways, trade, and colonial administration.

Slavery, Exploitation & Resistance

- **Olaudah Equiano – The Interesting Narrative**

A foundational text on slavery, identity and abolition.

- **Trevor Burnard – Britain's Slave Empire**

A clear introduction to how slavery shaped Britain's wealth.

Law, Rights & Political Change

- **Ramachandra Guha – Gandhi: The Years That Changed the World**

Excellent for understanding Gandhi's evolving relationship with empire

- **Judith Brown – Modern India: The Origins of an Asian Democracy**

Covers the rise of the Indian National Congress

- **Richard Rathbone – Murder and Politics in Colonial Ghana**

Shows how colonial law shaped power and resistance.

Further Reading



Mapping, Land & Indigenous Perspectives

- **Caroline Elkins – Imperial Reckoning**

On coercion, detention and emergency rule in Kenya.

- **John Lonsdale & Bruce Berman – Unhappy Valley**

On land, pastoralism, class and colonial rule in East Africa (useful for Maasai context).

- **Basil Davidson – Africa in History**

A readable introduction to African political traditions and resistance.

Education, Culture & Identity

- **Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o – Decolonising the Mind**

A powerful critique of language policy

- **Gauri Viswanathan – Masks of Conquest**

Shows how English literature teaching supported colonial authority.

- **Lynn Zastoupil & Martin Moir – The Great Indian Education Debate**

Explains the Orientalist–Anglicist clash over language and schooling.

Glossary

Term	Definition	Term	Definition
Abolition	The ending of a system, especially slavery.	Colonial	Relating to colonies or empire.
Administration	The management of government affairs.	Colonial Subject	A person living under imperial rule.
Advocate	A lawyer representing someone in court.	Colony	A territory controlled by another country.
Agreement	A formal arrangement between groups.	Commerce	Trade and business activity.
Alliance	A partnership between groups or countries.	Commercial Concession	Permission to use land or resources for business.
Ambulance Corps	A medical unit providing aid during war.	Commonwealth	Association of nations linked historically to Britain.
Anti-Colonial	Opposing colonial rule.	Compensation	Payment for loss or damage.
Appeal	A request for a higher court to review a decision.	Concentration Camp	A camp where people are detained under harsh conditions.
Aptitude	Natural ability or talent.	Coolie	Historical term for low-paid labourers; now offensive.
Arabic	A major language of the Middle East and North Africa.	Court	A place where legal cases are heard.
Arbitration	Resolving disputes through an independent decision-maker.	Cultivator	A farmer.
Arbitrator	A neutral person who settles disputes.	Debt	Money owed.
Artisan	A skilled craft worker.	Despatch	An official government communication.
Basotho	An African people of southern Africa.	Detention	Holding people in custody.
Bidder	A person offering money at an auction.	Dominion	Rule or control over a territory.
Boers	Dutch-descended settlers in southern Africa.	Drain Theory	The argument that wealth was removed from India by Britain.
Caravan	A travelling group moving together.	Economy	The system of producing and exchanging goods and services.
Cash Crop	A crop grown mainly for sale.	Emancipation	Freedom from control or domination.
Celerity	Speed or quickness.	Emergency Regulations	Special laws used during crises.
Civilisation	An organised society with shared culture and institutions.	Empire	A group of territories ruled by a powerful state.
Classification	Organising people or things into categories.	Enslaved Labour	Work performed by enslaved people.
Coercion	Forcing people through pressure or threats.	Evidence	Information used to prove facts.

Term	Definition	Term	Definition
Exploitation	Unfair use of people or resources for benefit.	Plague	A widespread disease outbreak.
Famine	Severe shortage of food.	Plantation	A large farm producing cash crops.
Foreign Rule	Government imposed by another country.	Plantation Economy	An economy based on large-scale plantation production.
Freight	Goods transported by ship, rail or road.	Plunder	Stealing goods by force.
Humanitarian	A person concerned with human welfare.	Political Exclusion	Preventing people from participating in politics.
Imperialism	The policy of extending a country's power over others.	Posterity	Future generations.
Independent State	A country that governs itself.	Prime Minister	The head of government in many countries.
Industrial World	Societies based on industry and manufacturing.	Privilege	A special advantage enjoyed by some people.
Inferiority	The belief that one group is less valuable than another.	Profession	A skilled occupation.
Infrastructure	Systems such as railways, ports, roads and communications.	Progress	Development or improvement over time.
Jurisdiction	Legal authority over a case or area.	Property	Something legally owned.
Legislature	A body that makes laws.	Protectorate	A territory controlled by a stronger state.
Manifesto	A public statement of political aims.	Public Employment	Jobs working for the government.
Manufacturer	A person or business producing goods.	Race-Consciousness	Awareness of shared racial identity.
Martial Law	Government by military authority.	Racial Hierarchy	A system ranking people by race.
Merchant	A trader who buys and sells goods.	Regeneration	Renewal or revival.
Military Court	A court run by military authorities.	Register	An official record.
Missionary	A person spreading a religion.	Representation	Having a voice in government through representatives.
Mother Tongue	A person's first language.	Reprisal	Punishment in response to resistance.
Nationalism	Support for self-government and national identity.	Reserve	Land set aside for a particular group.
Obituary	A published notice about a person's life after death.	Resistance	Opposition to authority or control.
Orbit	Area of movement or influence.	Resolution	A formal decision or statement agreed by a group.
Parliament	A law-making body.	Revenue	Money collected by a government.
Pastoralist	A person whose livelihood depends on herding animals.	Sanskrit	An ancient South Asian language.

Term	Definition
Scholarship	Financial support for education.
Self-Government	The ability to govern one's own country.
Self-rule	The ability to govern oneself.
Sentence	A punishment imposed by a court.
Settlement	A community established in a place.
Settler	Someone who moves permanently into a colony.
Slave Trade	The buying and selling of enslaved people.
Slavery	A system where people are legally owned by others.
Sovereign Nation	An independent country.
Subsistence	Producing enough only to survive.
Systemic	Built into a whole system.
Teacher Training	Preparation to become a teacher.
Telegraph	A system for sending messages over long distances.
Territory	An area of land controlled by a group or state.
Treaty	A formal agreement between states or groups.
Vendue Master	An auctioneer who conducts sales.
Vessel	A ship or boat.