

Colonialism, Explained

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By Jamila Osman

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Colonialism **is defined** as “control by one power over a dependent area or people.” In practice, colonialism is when one country violently invades and takes control of another country, claims the land as its own, and sends people — “settlers” — to live on that land.

There were two great waves of colonialism in recorded history. The first wave began in the 15th century, during Europe’s **Age of Discovery**. During this time, European countries such as Britain, Spain, France, and Portugal colonized lands across North and South America. The motivations for the first wave of colonial expansion can be summed up as **God, Gold, and Glory**: God, because missionaries felt it was their moral duty to spread Christianity, and they believed a higher power would reward them for saving the souls of colonial subjects; gold, because colonizers would exploit resources of other countries in order to bolster their own economies; and glory, since European nations would often compete with one another over the glory of attaining the greatest number of colonies.

Colonial logic asserted that a place did not exist unless white people had seen it and testified to its existence, but European colonists did not actually *discover* any land. The “New World,” as it was first called by Amerigo Vespucci, an Italian navigator and cartographer, was not new at all: People had been living and thriving in the Americas **for centuries**.

Yet, in many history books, Europe's expansion is remembered as exploration, and the men who helmed ships that landed in foreign countries — and proceeded to commit violence and genocide against native peoples — are remembered as heroes. One of these men, an Italian explorer named Christopher Columbus, even has [a federally recognized holiday to honor him](#). Columbus *thought* he was on his way to Asia, but found himself in the Caribbean instead. The first indigenous people he came across were the Taíno, who accounted for the majority of people living on the island of Hispaniola (which is now divided into Haiti and the Dominican Republic). They had a [highly evolved and complex culture](#). But this did not stop Columbus from claiming the island and its inhabitants for Spain. By 1550, a mere 58 years after he first landed on the island, what was once a thriving culture and community was severely decimated by European diseases and the brutality of a newly instated slave economy.

The second wave of colonial expansion began during the 19th century, centering around the African continent. In what is called the [Scramble for Africa](#), European nations such as Britain, France, Portugal, and Spain sliced up the continent like a pie, creating arbitrary borders and boundaries, and claiming large swaths of land for themselves. These artificial borders split cultural groups, resulting in fierce ethnic tensions that have had [devastating ramifications](#) throughout the continent. Indigenous political, economic, and social institutions were decimated, as were traditional ways of life, which were deemed inferior.

Among the most brutal of colonial regimes was that of Belgium under King Leopold II, known as "the Butcher of Congo." His well-documented acts of violence against the Congolese people resulted in an estimated [10 million deaths](#). Belgium, like a lot of the white Western world, can directly attribute much of its wealth and prosperity to the exploitation and deaths of indigenous people of color.

The treatment of the indigenous people on the land now known as the United States is [just as horrifying](#). The primarily British Europeans who settled here — just like the Europeans who settled in Africa and the rest of the Americas — overall did not care that there were people already living on the land. The majority did not want peace and harmony between cultures; they wanted the land for themselves. They did not want to share the abundant resources; they wanted to generate wealth to fill their own pockets. Most had no respect for indigenous cultures or histories; they wanted to enforce their own instead. These colonizers did not care that land was considered sacred and communal. Most believed that everything, including the earth, was meant to be bought and sold.

The Europeans who first settled along the East Coast of the United States believed it was their [Manifest Destiny](#), or God-granted right, to claim territory for themselves and their posterity. As they spread across the entirety of the continental U.S., they pushed the indigenous populations — who had lived on and tended to the land for millennia — farther and farther west. Native Americans were moved to reservations — parcels of land that were barren and far from economic opportunities. In 1830, President Andrew Jackson, [hailed by President Donald Trump and commemorated on the U.S. \\$20 bill](#), signed the [Indian Removal Act](#), which led to the forced removal, relocation, and mass death of thousands of indigenous people. In 1838, the Cherokee were forced west by the U.S. government, which seized control of their land. Forced to walk thousands of miles, an estimated 4,000 Cherokees died on what would later come to be called the [“Trail of Tears.”](#) This historic loss of lives, land, and culture has led to what Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, social worker and professor, [describes as historical trauma](#) — intergenerational emotional and psychological damage.

The legacy of colonialism continues to manifest in obvious ways: Many of the world’s poorest countries are former European colonies. Walter Rodney’s groundbreaking book *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* makes the claim that poverty on the continent can be traced back to European exploitation of African resources. In the United States, those living on reservations experience extraordinarily high poverty, alcoholism, unemployment, and [suicide rates](#).

In less obvious ways, the violence of colonial thinking continues to shape the trajectories of countries that were once colonizers too. Colonizers believed the world was theirs for the taking, saw the masses of people as disposable, and believed that nothing mattered more than the currency in a white man’s pocket. As the world’s top 1% continue to hoard the majority of the earth’s resources, and the unending quest for profit trumps the needs of the majority of people, it becomes clear that colonialism is not just a relic of the past.

Wherever colonialism has manifested in the world, from across the Americas to every corner of the African continent, it has been met with a fierce struggle of resistance. Throughout history, indigenous peoples have risen up and successfully overthrown colonial powers, demonstrating that while colonizers could steal land and resources, they could not take the dignity of a people determined to be free.