# Colonialism, Explained

*Adaptation of article by Jamila Osman, Teen Vogue*

Colonialism is defined as "control by one power over an area or people." In practice, colonialism is when one country violently invades or takes control of another country, declares 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 motivated by 'God, Gold, and Glory.' God, because they felt it was their duty to spread Christianity; gold, because colonizers would **exploit** resources of other countries; and glory, since European nations would compete with each other to gain the greatest number of colonies.

Colonists seem to believe that a place did not exist unless white people had seen it and declared its existence, but European colonists did not actually discover any land. The "New World," as it was first called 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 led it (who committed 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. The first **indigenous** people he came across were the Taíno, who had a highly evolved and complex culture. By 1550, only 58 years after he first landed on the island, the land was severely destroyed by European diseases and the newly established slave economy.

The second wave of colonial expansion centered around the African continent and was called the Scramble for Africa. European nations such as Britain, France, Portugal, and Spain sliced up the continent like a pie, creating meaningless borders and boundaries, and claiming large amounts of land for themselves. Indigenous people's political, economic, and social institutions were destroyed, as well as their traditional ways of life, which were seen as inferior.

In the United States, the treatment of the indigenous people was just as horrifying. The British Europeans who settled here overall did not care that there were people already living on the land. As they spread across the U.S., they pushed the indigenous communities farther and farther west. In 1830, President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act, which led to the forced removal, relocation,

and mass death of thousands of indigenous people. Forced to walk thousands of miles, about 4,000 Cherokees died on what would later come to be called the "Trail of Tears."

Today, we can see the legacy of colonialism in obvious ways. Many of the world's poorest countries are former European colonies. In the United States, native people experience extraordinarily high poverty, alcoholism, unemployment, and suicide rates.

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

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**Exploit**: make full use of, take advantage of (a resource).
**Indigenous**: native to a place; Native American