African Resistance

As in Nigeria, Africans across the continent resisted European attempts to colonize their lands. However, the contest between African states and European powers was never equal because of the Europeans’ superior arms. Africans resisted the Europeans with whatever forces they could raise and often surprised the Europeans with their military ability. With the single exception of Ethiopia, though, all these attempts at resistance ultimately failed. Edward Morel, a British journalist who lived for a time in the Congo, made an observation about the Africans’ dilemma:

**PRIMARY SOURCE**

Nor is violent physical opposition to abuse and injustice henceforth possible for the African in any part of Africa. His chances of effective resistance have been steadily dwindling with the increasing perfectibility in the killing power of modern armament.

Thus the African is really helpless against the material gods of the white man, as embodied in the trinity of imperialism, capitalistic exploitation, and militarism.

**EDWARD MOREL, The Black Man’s Burden**

**Unsuccessful Movements** The unsuccessful resistance attempts included active military resistance and resistance through religious movements. Algeria’s almost 50-year resistance to French rule was one outstanding example of active resistance. The resistance movement led by Samori Touré in West Africa against the French is another example. After modernizing his army, Touré fought the French for 16 years.

Africans in German East Africa put their faith in a spiritual defense. African villagers resisted the Germans’ insistence that they plant cotton, a cash crop for export, rather than attend to their own food crops. In 1905, the belief suddenly arose that a magic water (*maji-maji*) sprinkled on their bodies would turn the Germans’ bullets into water. The uprising became known as the Maji Maji rebellion. Over 20 different ethnic groups united to fight for their freedom. The fighters believed that their war had been ordained by God and that their ancestors would return to life and assist their struggle.

However, when resistance fighters armed with spears and protected by the magic water attacked a German machine-gun post, they were mowed down by the thousands. Officially, Germans recorded 75,000 resisters dead. But more than twice that number perished in the famine that followed. The Germans were shaken by the rebellion and its outcome. As a result, they made some government reforms in an effort to make colonialism more acceptable to the Africans.
Ethiopia: A Successful Resistance Ethiopia was the only African nation that successfully resisted the Europeans. Its victory was due to one man—Menelik II. He became emperor of Ethiopia in 1889. He successfully played Italians, French, and British against each other, all of whom were striving to bring Ethiopia into their spheres of influence. In the meantime, he built up a large arsenal of modern weapons purchased from France and Russia. In 1889, shortly after Menelik had signed a treaty with Italy, he discovered differences between the wording of the treaty in the Ethiopian language and in Italian. Menelik believed he was giving up a tiny portion of Ethiopia. However, the Italians claimed all of Ethiopia as a protectorate. Meanwhile, Italian forces were advancing into northern Ethiopia. Menelik declared war. In 1896, in one of the greatest battles in the history of Africa—the Battle of Adowa—Ethiopian forces successfully defeated the Italians and kept their nation independent. After the battle, Menelik continued to stockpile rifles and other modern weapons in case another foreign power challenged Ethiopia’s liberty.

Strange But True! In the late 1890s, Emperor Menelik II of Abyssinia (now Ethiopia) ordered three new electric chairs after learning that electrocution had become the newest method of capital punishment. When the chairs arrived from New York, the Emperor was shocked to discover that electric chairs needed electricity to work. Abyssinia didn’t have electrical power yet so the Emperor decided to use one of the electric chairs as his throne.

Resistance Movements in Africa, 1881–1906

GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Maps

1. Region Which region had the largest area affected by resistance?
2. Region Was any region unaffected by resistance movements?
"African Resistance"

Directions: Use the following graphic organizer to take notes on the "African Resistance" section of the text, on page 782. Be sure to have clear examples of successful and unsuccessful movements of resistance.

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<th>Unsuccessful Movements</th>
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