The Game of Imperialism: Africa & Asia

Background information on imperialism in Africa:

Europeans first took an interest in Africa during the 1400s. They found that slaves could be bought along the African coast from tribal rulers who had taken prisoners of war. The African rulers would sell their prisoners in return for cloth, guns, and iron. Between 1450 and 1865, European traders transported some 10 million slaves to North America and South America where they were sold to owners of sugar and cotton plantations and encomienda owners. Companies from France, England, Portugal, Holland, and Denmark were earning tens of thousands of dollars on each voyage to America.

Attitudes towards slavery began to change during the 1800s as more and more people learned about the inhumane conditions forced upon captive Africans. Pressure for legal action resulted in Great Britain abolishing the slave trade and declaring slavery against the law in all of its possessions. Other European nations also began taking a dim view of the marketing of human beings. Christian missionaries urged African rulers to stop selling their prisoners of war.

This humanitarian reform movement influenced European businessmen to look for other products in which to trade. Soon, peanuts, palm oil, and other commodities needed by European industrialists were flowing out of “the Dark (unknown) Continent.” Crops grown in the African interior were set to the coast where local tribesmen, acting as middlemen, sold them to trading companies. European countries at this time had not yet established any real colonies in Africa. Explorers, missionaries, consuls (government representatives), and a few scattered pockets of settlers were the only foreigners on the continent. Countries had little desire to start new colonies. Past experience had shown that the establishment and administration of distant possessions was expensive and often troublesome.

In the early 1880s, a dramatic change occurred in Europe’s colonial policies. Suddenly, half a dozen countries were involved in a spirited land rush that saw nearly all of Africa fall into European hands. Only Ethiopia and Liberia maintained their independence. The conquest of territory --- known as “imperialism” --- was carried out by Britain, France, Germany, Portugal, Italy, and Belgium. The Industrial Revolution had generated a need for raw materials and had created a class of wealthy businessmen who were interested in making foreign investments. The spirit of nationalism meant that nations that were rivals in Europe became rivals in Africa. When one country claimed a piece of land, others did likewise. No one wanted to be outdone in terms of markets, prestige, and power.

Imperialist nations often found themselves with conflicting claims during the race for colonies. The Berlin conference was held from 1884 – 1885 in Germany to define boundary lines and ease international tensions. In a short time, Africa was divided up on paper. Nations then set out to establish firm control over their new territories. Although they hoped to gain control peacefully, many countries were willing to use force if necessary. Some African rulers recognized Europe’s technological and military superiority, and surrendered to the imperialists without incident. Other Africans fought skirmishes and all out wars of resistance. But by 1914, most of the continent was controlled by European powers. Colonial rule lasted for several decades until the post-WWII period when independence movements became widespread. European countries
were forced to choose between fighting expensive wars and giving up their colonies. Most chose to grant independence peacefully.

Although foreign nations had largely ignored African interests during the Age of Imperialism, their presence did have some positive effects. Railroads and roads were built and the level of education was generally improved. Cities grew up where Africans from different areas met for the first time to exchange ideas. Africans came into contact with a European civilization that offered medical, scientific, and technological advantages.

The end of colonialism left Africa with many problems. Self-government at times became an overwhelming responsibility. The continent was a vast underdeveloped area plagued by political and social unrest and widespread poverty. The end of colonialism meant that Africa’s future was now in African hands.

**Background information on imperialism in Asia:**
Europeans first became interested in the riches of Asia during the 1500s. Portugal, Spain, Great Britain, and The Netherlands established colonies and ports of trade in the centuries which followed. By the 1800s, most of Asia had fallen under Western control. Asian nations were no match for the economic and military power of Europe. At this time, the United States also became interested in trade with the Far East. American merchants began trading with China in 1844. In 1854, Matthew C. Perry, who was in command of a US naval squadron, convinced Japan to open its ports to ships from the United States.

Competition among Western nations for colonies intensified during the 1800s and 1900s. In time, Russia, France, and Japan joined the race for raw materials, markets, and wealth. The governments and economies of most Asian countries fell under the influence of the imperialist nations. Eastern cultures, which had long been cut off from the outside world, came into contact with Western civilization. Sections of Asian cities were patterned after modern European cities. Western art also spread to the East. Eastern art and Asian food spread to the West.

The people of Asia eventually grew dissatisfied with colonial rule. Imperialist nations had made huge profits while the majority of Asians suffered in poverty. Asians wanted to regain control of their homelands. A spirit of nationalism swept the continent during the 1900s, especially after WWII. When Japan surrendered in 1945, it had to give its huge empire in the Far East to the Western powers that formerly controlled the region. The return of colonialism was short – lived. In the 1940s, Burma, India, Pakistan, Lebanon, the Philippines, Ceylon (the island of Sri Lanka), Indonesia, and Jordan became independent countries. The nation of Israel was created by the United Nations in 1948 as a homeland for the Jews. Later, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam won independence.

With the Western powers gone, Asians took over their own governments. However, many problems remained. The Industrial Revolution in the West had put Asia at a great economic disadvantage. It was primarily an agricultural region with little industry. Most countries were underdeveloped and lagged behind in military technology. New rulers in some cases were unable to meet their countries’ needs and could not establish firm control over all of their people. This opened the way for revolutions and communist expansion into several parts of the continent.