

The British Empire

General historical overview

The English expansion began relatively late compared to other European nations, like Spain and France. In fact, when the British founded the first permanent colony in Jamestown 1607, the French had already settled in Canada. One reason for that was the late development of the necessary navigation skills. Colonization was started not necessarily for expansion but rather for trade. Finding new products was a motivation. Another one was the search for freedom of religious minorities which could not be achieved in Britain. Also emigrants were looking for a general better life when the population as well as the unemployment was increasing in Britain.

Religious minorities founded important colonies in America like the Pilgrims in Plymouth 1620, the Catholics in Maryland 1632 or the Quakers in Pennsylvania 1681. In other parts of the world expansion started as well. In 1599/1600 the East India Trading Company was founded. Here the first motivation was again trade. India was viewed as the door to Far East. During the 16th century the British managed to expand over the Indian continent even though they started with only a few trading posts. So they established a dominating position and fought back the Portuguese and the Dutch. They founded the City of Madras in 1639, purchased Bombay from the Portuguese in 1661 and in 1690 founded the City of Calcutta.

Through the 18th century the main enemy was France, but in 1757 Robert Clive achieved a victory which gained the British the rule over Bengal. The French influence decreased and a few years later their position was reduced to a few trading posts and therefore soon became meaningless.

In the 18th century the population in the British colonies in North America quickly increased from 260000 to 2, 3 million within a few decades (1700-1770). Also, 3, 4 million slaves were brought to the British colonies from Africa between 1162 and 1807. The settlers in the colonies were mostly self-governed while still under rule of the English Crown. But conflicts started. Additional taxes on tea or legal documents led to discrepancies. The settlers rejected any sort of taxation ("no taxation without representation", meaning the

settlers did not want to pay taxes for a country where they did not live).

The confrontation tightened up through the Townshend Acts or the Boston Massacre. The reaction of the settlers was for instance the Boston Tea Party in 1773. First battles started in 1775.

In 1776 the Declaration of Independence was signed. In the North American Independence War (1776-1783) Britain had to admit defeat and with the Peace of Paris in 1783 acknowledged the independence of the colonies.

After the Independence of America Britain began to concentrate on India as the centre-piece of their empire. Of course the type of imperialism in India was different to the one in America. The Indian people had already developed a system of religion, society and also a massive population. The British came to rule over this country as opposed to settlement in other parts of the world like mentioned America. The settlers in these countries were looking for a new beginning while the conquerors of India were looking for power. After losing America the British had to expand their power in India to maintain their position of the leading nation in the world.

So the focus was on the East. The conquest of the Indian continent moved forward.

Also Australia was discovered for colonization in 1788, first with criminals, later with voluntary settlers.

Canada was still under British rule as well. To secure the loyalty of the French settlers they were given privileges. The French language as well as the French civil right was in use.

In 1791 the country was divided in a French part (today Quebec) and a British part (today Ontario).

In India the British quickly extended their power. It was mostly based on their superior military power, but also corruption and manipulation of Indian leaders played a role. The British interfered in the already tense political situation.

One main action was interfering in an important Indian law. For the Hindi a main aspect

was to continue the family line. If the family did not have a son, they would simply adopt one who was given all the rights and also duties of a natural son. The adoption was an important base of Indian law. The British General Dalhousie issued a law which stated that an Indian state whose leader died without a male heir would automatically become British property. So the Governor could enlarge the property of the East India Company of more than 750000 km².

Economic exploitation followed after the conquering. The English conquerors were given the economic power. The people were forced to import products as well as export material from or to Britain. Opposed to that importing machines to India was banned. The opium- and salt monopoly was in the hands of the British.

In the late 18th and early 19th century the British won several crucial battles, among others the battle against the Sepoys (Indian soldiers) who started to rebel over the British rulers. A reason was that the Indian Army felt their religious traditions were being violated. The war is

today known as the Indian Mutiny or the Great Rebellion and it lasted 2 years, 1857-58. This

war led to the formal break up of the Indian Mogul Empire and the country officially became a responsibility of the Crown (or Crown colony) and was directly under the rule of Queen Victoria who was given the title "Empress of India". The East India Trading Company was eventually broken up as well.

During the first half of the 19th century the slavery was officially abolished. The British recovered their interest in the African continent end of the century. Through the abolition of slavery they had lost an important economic factor. No real settlement had been established there since the slave trade had been the only interest. Sierra Leone, the first colony for instance was a refuge for liberated slaves.

After the inner continent and not only the coasts had been discovered the Britain began to claim possession of certain states like Egypt, Somalia, Kenya, and Uganda.

In 1814 Britain had conquered the province at the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa which was also a key to the route to India. Conflicts began to rise between British settlers and the Boers, who had originally been the Dutch settlers and had founded provinces in South Africa, Transvaal and the Oranje State in the middle of the century.

1899 the Boer war broke out and also led to a Guerrilla War after an official victory of the British. In 1902 the provinces became British colonies, but self-governed. In Africa the British had established a big empire that led from the "Cape to Cairo".

In Canada in the meantime the continuing rivalries between the British and the French started movements for independence. In 1867 the way for the Dominion of Canada and political autonomy was cleared. The idea of the Dominions was political

self-determination with at the same time still a connection to the mother country. So the country was still a piece of Britain's empire.

In the early 20th century Australia, New Zealand, the South African Union and Newfoundland reached Dominion status. Full independence was given to these countries after their participation in the First World War. The British Empire became the British Commonwealth of Nations. Most of the so-called "coloured" members reached Dominion status after the Second World War through pressure of independence movements.

India's struggle for independence was long and difficult. After the Great Rebellion the resistance towards the oppression and a new sense of nationalism grew in the country.

The most influential group for the fight of independence was the INC, Indian National Congress, founded in 1885. The ambition was to end the British rule. Conflicts rose, terror attacks and sabotage by the Indian nationalists followed. The British were not able to get the situation under control and in 1909 the India Councils Act was passed. This act guaranteed a certain level of self determination but the want for complete independence was still strong.

After the First World War the political conflicts grew stronger again. Gandhi, who had already become the leader of the independence movements, started his famous non-violence resistance.

British goods were boycotted as well as the educational system and the law system. These methods proved to be very effective. In 1930 Britain refused to give India Dominion status and that led to massive activities all throughout India. Gandhi was arrested again and aggressive, violent protests started.

Finally in 1935 the British passed the India Act as a new constitution for India.

In the Second World War India fought for Britain on several fronts.

India became a member of the United Nations in 1945 even though the negotiations over the independence had not come to an end. In 1947 the Prime Minister Attlee announced the British would pass the rule over India in 1948 at the latest. The Independence of India Act was passed in 1947 and the Indian Union became independent members in the British Commonwealth of Nations.

In the early 20th century the British Empire covered 1/5 of the earth and almost 1/4 of the world population. Britain had built an empire a 100 times bigger than its own size. Today the Commonwealth consists of 51 states.

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Time Line

Important historical facts

- § 1599/1600 founding of the East India Trading Company
- § 1620 first permanent settlement in North America
- § throughout the 17th century expansion in India
- § Increasing population in North America (from 200000 to 2.3 million)
- § 1773 Boston Tea Party
- § 1776 Independence Of the United States
- § Followed by the Independence War 1776-1783
- § 1788 first colonization in Australia and New Zealand
- § Late 18th and early 19th century several battles in India won by the British
- § Most important: the Indian Mutiny or Great Rebellion 1857 – 1858
- § India became Crown colony and Queen Victoria “Empress of India”
- § 1814 conquering of the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa
- § First half of the 18th century abolition of slavery
- § 1867 Dominion of Canada after long conflicts
- § 1899 Boer War in South Africa
- § 1902 Boer colonies became British colonies
- § Early 20th century: Dominion of New Zealand, South African Union and Newfoundland
- § 1931 British Empire became the British Commonwealth of Nations
- § Most of the so-called “coloured” members (e.g. South Africa) reached Dominion status for their participation in World War II
- § In India: 1885 founding of the INC (Indian National Congress)
- § New nationalism led to the wish of independence and self-determination
- § In 1909 Indian Council Act was passed
- § In 1930 Britain refused to give Dominion status to India
- § Violent conflicts followed
- § 1935 India Act was passed for a new constitution of India
- § 1945 India became a member of the United Nations even though not fully independent
- § 1947 Indian Act was passed and India reached independence almost immediately and became a member of the Commonwealth