

Topic 6.8 - Causation in the Imperial Age

Standards

Category	Description
Theme	Social Interactions and Organization (SIO)
Learning Objective	Unit 6: Learning Objective I — Explain the relative significance of the effects of imperialism from 1750 to 1900
Key Concepts	KC-5.1, KC-5.2, KC-5.3, KC-5.4
Education standards met	Argumentation, causation, comparison, continuity and change over time, primary source analysis

Learning Objectives

- Explain multiple effects of imperialism from 1750 to 1900 and evaluate which were most significant.
- Use evidence from across Unit 6 to build an argument about economic, political, and social effects of imperialism.
- Analyze primary sources for point of view, purpose, historical situation, and claims.
- Compare different types of imperial effects, including territorial change, economic exploitation, and migration.
- Practice writing AP-style short answers that make defensible claims and support them with specific evidence.

Lesson Overview

This topic asks students to do more than identify what happened during the imperial age. It asks them to weigh historical significance. From 1750 to 1900, imperialism reshaped the world through industrial capitalism, colonial expansion, coercive labor systems, migration, racial hierarchies, and resistance movements. Some historians emphasize the political effects of imperialism, such as the expansion of empires and the redrawing of sovereignty. Others stress its economic effects, especially extraction, unequal trade, and the integration of colonized regions into global capitalism. Still others focus on its social consequences, including racial ideologies, migration, and new patterns of resistance. In this lesson, students use evidence from across Unit 6 to explain not just the effects of imperialism, but the relative significance of those effects. Imperialism expanded empires, intensified global economic integration, and transformed subject peoples' daily lives, often at the same time.

Essential Vocabulary

- **Relative significance** — judging which cause or effect mattered more and explaining why.
- **Extraction** — removal of wealth or resources from one place for the benefit of another.
- **Colonial subordination** — political and economic dependence forced on a colonized society.
- **Imperial administration** — the system by which imperial states governed colonies and subject peoples.
- **Racial hierarchy** — a ranking of peoples based on race that was used to justify unequal treatment.

Background Reading

Imperialism from 1750 to 1900 cannot be separated from industrialization. As industrial states expanded production, they sought raw materials, markets, labor, and strategic territory overseas. This process deepened older imperial systems and created new ones. European powers expanded more aggressively into Africa and Asia, while the United States and Japan also developed stronger imperial ambitions by the end of the nineteenth century. Imperial rule was therefore both political and economic: states claimed sovereignty over territory, but they also reorganized colonized regions to serve imperial needs. The 1898 Treaty of Paris, for example, formally transferred Spain's remaining empire in the Caribbean and Pacific to the United States, showing how imperialism could reshape territorial control through war and diplomacy.

The economic effects of imperialism were enormous. Colonized societies were often reorganized to export raw materials and import manufactured goods, binding them more tightly to global capitalist markets. Colonized labor and land supported imperial wealth, while colonial governments collected taxes, enforced labor systems, and built infrastructure that often served extraction more than local development. Dadabhai Naoroji argued that British rule in India created a "drain" of wealth that impoverished India even while imperial officials praised law, order, and administration. His argument is important because it shows that imperialism did not only conquer territory; it also redirected wealth away from colonized societies and toward imperial centers.

Imperialism also transformed social life. Colonial regimes promoted racial hierarchies that justified unequal laws, labor systems, and access to power. New migration patterns moved workers across imperial networks, whether as contract laborers, merchants, soldiers, or settlers. These migrations changed gender roles, family structures, and urban life in both colonies and receiving societies. Imperialism also generated new forms of resistance. Colonized intellectuals, local elites, workers, and peasants responded in different ways, from legal protest to rebellion to nationalist organizing. That means the effects of imperialism were not limited to conquest itself. They extended into economics, migration, identity, political consciousness, and anti-colonial resistance.

When historians ask about the relative significance of imperialism's effects, they are asking students to prioritize evidence. Was the most important effect political, because empires redrew sovereignty and controlled governments? Was it economic, because imperial extraction reordered global wealth and labor? Or was it social, because imperialism changed race relations, migration, and daily life? Strong historical arguments can defend different answers, but they must compare categories of effects rather than merely list them. Unit 6 provides evidence for all three. The task is to judge which effects were most consequential and explain why.

Primary Sources

Source 1

Title: *Treaty of Peace Between the United States and Spain*

Author: United States and Spain (1898)

https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/sp1898.asp

“Spain relinquishes all claim of sovereignty over and title to Cuba. And as the island is, upon its evacuation by Spain, to be occupied by the United States, the United States will, so long as such occupation shall last, assume and discharge the obligations that may under international law result from the fact of its occupation, for the protection of life and property.

Spain cedes to the United States the island of Porto Rico and other islands now under Spanish sovereignty in the West Indies, and the island of Guam in the Marianas or Ladrones.

Spain cedes to the United States the archipelago known as the Philippine Islands, and comprehending the islands lying within the following line: A line running from west to east along or near the twentieth parallel of north latitude, and through the middle of the navigable channel of Bachi, from the one hundred and eighteenth (118th) to the one hundred and twenty-seventh (127th) degree meridian of longitude east of Greenwich, thence along the one hundred and twenty seventh (127th) degree meridian of longitude east of Greenwich to the parallel of four degrees and forty five minutes (4 [degree symbol] 45') north latitude, thence along the parallel of four degrees and forty five minutes (4 [degree symbol] 45') north latitude to its intersection with the meridian of longitude one hundred and nineteen degrees and thirty five minutes (119 [degree symbol] 35') east of Greenwich, thence along the meridian of longitude one hundred and nineteen degrees and thirty five minutes (119 [degree symbol] 35') east of Greenwich to the parallel of latitude seven degrees and forty minutes (7 [degree symbol] 40') north, thence along the parallel of latitude of seven degrees and forty minutes (7 [degree symbol] 40') north to its intersection with the one hundred and sixteenth (116th) degree meridian of longitude east of Greenwich, thence by a direct line to the intersection of the tenth (10th) degree parallel of north latitude with the one hundred and eighteenth (118th) degree meridian of longitude east of Greenwich, and thence along the one hundred and eighteenth (118th) degree meridian of longitude east of Greenwich to the point of beginning. The United States will pay to Spain the sum of twenty million dollars (\$20,000,000) within three months after the exchange of the ratifications of the present treaty.”

Guided Analysis Questions

1. What does this treaty show about the political effects of imperialism in 1898?
2. How does the wording of the treaty reflect the legal and diplomatic language of empire?
3. What claims of power or authority are embedded in the transfer of Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines?
4. How could this document be used to argue that imperialism had major geopolitical effects?
5. What limitations would a historian face if using only this source to evaluate the effects of imperialism?

Source 2

Title: *Poverty of India*

Author: Dadabhai Naoroji

[https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Page:Poverty_of_India._Papers_and_statistics_\(IA_povertyofindiapa00naorrich\).pdf/15](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Page:Poverty_of_India._Papers_and_statistics_(IA_povertyofindiapa00naorrich).pdf/15)

“WHILE pointing out in these notes one of the unfavourable results of the present system of British administration, I do not for a moment mean to ignore the very bright side of British rule, and the many blessings of law and order which it has conferred on India. On the latter subject I have already expressed my sentiments on several occasions.

My object at present is to show in greater detail what I have already stated before, that, under the present system of administration, India is suffering seriously in several ways, and is sinking in poverty. In my humble opinion, this is the question, or rather the most serious question, of the day. Whether I am right or wrong will be for you to judge, after hearing what I have to say. If I am right, I shall have discharged a duty as a loyal subject to urge upon our rulers to remedy this most serious evil. If, on the other hand, I am shown to be wrong, none will rejoice more than myself; and I shall have equally done a duty, as a wrong feeling of a serious character will be removed.

These notes were written two to three years ago. I lay them before you as they are. If necessary, I shall consider hereafter any modification that the light of subsequent events may suggest, either in confirmation or refutation of the views expressed in them. There will be a few repetitions from my former papers, but they are necessary in order to make these notes complete.

I have endeavoured to avail myself as much as possible of the weight of official or other great authorities, and facts from official records; hence I shall have more quotations than might be thought suitable in an address before an audience; and my notes may prove dull, but I only hope they may be found of some importance to atone for such dullness.

In July, 1870, I made a rough estimate, in my paper on "The Wants and Means of India," placed before the East India Association, as follows:— "The whole produce of India is—from its land. The gross land-tax is put down for 1870-71 a little above £21,000,000. Now, I suppose I shall be within the mark if I say that Government takes for this land-tax, on an average, one-eighth of the gross produce, if not more. This gives for the gross production of the country, say, about £168,000,000; add to this—gross opium revenue about £7,000,000; gross salt revenue, £6,000,000; gross forest, £600,000.

The total, thus, of the raw produce of the country amounts to under £182,000,000—to be on the safe side, let us say £200,000,000, to include the produce of half a million tons of coal, of alienation lands, or anything else there may be. Now, the population of the whole of British India is nearly 150,000,000; giving, therefore, less than 27s. a head for the annual support of the whole people."

I then further raised the production from £200,000,000 to £300,000,000, to include the value of manufacturing industries, excise on spirits, and a large margin for any omissions, making 40s. a head for the gross production of India as a high estimate.”

Guided Analysis Questions

1. What claim does Naoroji make about the effects of British rule in India?
2. How does Naoroji use quantitative evidence to strengthen his argument?
3. What does the source suggest about the economic effects of imperialism?
4. How does Naoroji’s point of view shape his argument and tone?
5. How could this source be used to argue that economic effects were more significant than political effects?

Categories of Imperial Effects, 1750–1900

Category of effect	Description	Unit 6 examples
Political	Expansion of empires, annexation, treaty transfers, occupation, imperial administration	British rule in India, Berlin Conference, U.S. acquisition of the Philippines, French empire in Africa
Economic	Extraction of raw materials, taxation, labor coercion, unequal trade, market integration	Indian taxation and “drain,” cash-crop production, export economies, industrial demand for resources
Social	Racial hierarchies, migration, gender change, ethnic enclaves, social stratification	Chinese exclusion, contract labor migration, settler colonialism, changing women’s roles in sending societies
Cultural / ideological	Civilizing mission, missionary activity, imperial education, nationalist responses	Imperial justifications, Western education in colonies, anti-colonial critique
Resistance	Rebellion, reform, nationalism, anti-colonial intellectual movements	1857 rebellion, Indian National Congress, resistance in Africa and Asia

Building a Relative Significance Argument

Claim type	Stronger version	Why it is stronger
Simple claim	Imperialism had many effects.	Too broad; does not rank significance.
Better claim	Imperialism had political, economic, and social effects.	Names categories, but still does not judge significance.
Strongest claim	Although imperialism produced important political and social changes, its most significant effect was economic because it reorganized colonized societies to serve imperial extraction and reshaped labor, taxation, and trade over the long term.	Makes a judgment and supports it with reasoning.

Change / Continuity / Comparison

Change over time:

From 1750 to 1900, imperialism changed in scale, intensity, and structure. Empires had existed long before 1750, but in the nineteenth century they became more tightly connected to industrial capitalism and to the administrative capacity of modern states. Steam transport, telegraphs, and improved weaponry allowed imperial powers to project force and coordinate rule more effectively than before. As a result, imperialism increasingly involved direct claims to territory, formal treaty transfers, and bureaucratic governance. The 1898 treaty between Spain and the United States shows this shift clearly: imperial control appears not simply as conquest, but as legal cession, mapped boundaries, and international recognition of new sovereignty. Imperialism in this period therefore became more formally organized and more global in consequence.

Continuity over time:

Despite these changes, several continuities remained. Imperial systems continued to depend on the unequal extraction of wealth from subject peoples and on ideological justifications that framed imperial rule as beneficial or necessary. Naoroji's writing shows that even where imperial officials praised order and administration, colonized observers could see persistent impoverishment and unequal economic structures. This continuity matters because it reminds students that nineteenth-century imperialism was not a complete break from earlier empire. It preserved older patterns of hierarchy and unequal exchange, even while operating on a larger industrial scale. A strong historical argument should recognize that imperialism both changed in form and reproduced enduring structures of domination.

Comparison:

Comparing political and economic effects helps clarify relative significance. Politically, imperialism redrew maps, transferred sovereignty, and placed colonized peoples under new administrations. That mattered because it changed who ruled and how law was enforced. Economically, however, imperialism often reached deeper into everyday life by shaping taxes, labor obligations, access to land, production priorities, and the flow of wealth. A student could therefore argue that political effects were most significant because they enabled all the others: without conquest and treaty-based sovereignty, imperial states could not have restructured colonies. But a student could also argue that economic effects were more significant because they affected the daily survival of millions and reorganized colonial societies for the benefit of imperial centers. The strongest essays will not simply choose one category. They will explain why one type of effect had broader reach, longer duration, or deeper consequences than the others.

Key Takeaways

- Imperialism in the nineteenth century had political, economic, and social effects that were deeply interconnected.
- Industrial capitalism made imperial expansion more aggressive and more consequential.
- Political control mattered, but it often served larger economic goals such as extraction and market integration.
- Imperialism transformed daily life through migration, racial hierarchy, labor systems, and resistance.

- Strong historical arguments evaluate the relative significance of effects rather than merely listing them.

SAQ Practice Section

SAQ Set 1 — Source 1: *Treaty of Peace Between the United States and Spain*

- Identify ONE political effect of imperialism shown in the excerpt.
- Explain ONE broader historical development in the late nineteenth century that helps explain why the United States acquired overseas territories in this treaty.
- Explain ONE reason a historian might argue that the political effects shown in this source were less significant than the economic effects of imperialism from 1750 to 1900.

SAQ Set 2 — Source 2: *Poverty of India*

- Identify ONE claim Naoroji makes about British rule in India.
- Explain ONE way Naoroji uses evidence to argue that imperialism had serious economic effects.
- Explain ONE reason a historian might argue that the economic effects described in this source were more significant than the political effects of imperialism from 1750 to 1900.

SAQ Set 3 — Non-stimulus SAQ (Comparison)

- Identify ONE similarity between the effects of imperialism in two different regions during the period 1750–1900.
- Explain ONE difference between a political effect of imperialism and a social effect of imperialism during this period.
- Explain ONE reason a historian might judge one of those effects to be more historically significant than the other.

Primary Source Citations

- *Treaty of Peace Between the United States and Spain*, 1898, Yale Avalon Project, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/sp1898.asp
- Dadabhai Naoroji, *Poverty of India*, Wikisource page 15, [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Page:Poverty_of_India._Papers_and_statistics_\(IA_povertyofindiapa00naorrich\).pdf/15](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Page:Poverty_of_India._Papers_and_statistics_(IA_povertyofindiapa00naorrich).pdf/15) ; page 16, [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Page:Poverty_of_India._Papers_and_statistics_\(IA_povertyofindiapa00naorrich\).pdf/16](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Page:Poverty_of_India._Papers_and_statistics_(IA_povertyofindiapa00naorrich).pdf/16)