



Victorian Times :

The British Empire

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1. Historical Background.

As one can imagine, the British empire didn't fall from the sky at some point long ago in history. It took a long time to develop until it could be considered to be the largest empire that ever existed.

According to historians, the beginning of both colonization and the development of the British empire can be found at the end of the 15th century, when Henry VII followed the example of Columbus to search for a seaway to India. His sailors discovered an island in the Canadian area, which they named "Newfoundland".



Even though the British were unable to set up a constant colony during his reign, Henry VII is considered to be the founding father of British colonization and of the Royal Navy, which established to further voyages of discovery during his era.

Because of the war with Spain, which was caused by the Reformation, Queen Elisabeth, who succeeded Henry VII, was unable to start any attempts at colonization as Britain had no capacities in the first half of the 16th century. As peace was declared, Queen Elisabeth could set her navy's focus on expeditions of discoveries. This increased Britain's naval power and, in 1585, it brought the first official Colony to the kingdom. It was called Roanoak and the territory around it was called Virginia, in honor of Queen Elisabeth, the Virgin Queen. These attempts at colonization failed, as it was not possible to support the colonies properly with food and medicine.

In the following century, from 1600 to 1700, the British empire mushroomed with several changes of its monarchs. In the early 17th century, the East India Trading Company was established and the trade in India began. Moreover, the "Act of Union" took place. It symbolizes the union between Scotland and England, and from then on historians talked about "the British Kingdom". Furthermore, triangular trade was

set up during this century.



Triangular trade brought wealth to Britain as they exported manufactured goods, like guns, beer and luxuries to African colonies to get slaves, gold and spices for them. These were important to the American colonies, where slaves farmed cotton, tobacco and sugar, which were imported to Britain again.

From the beginning of the 18th century the British empire claimed the title as the leading instance in colonization worldwide, as Britain was able to accomplish its interests against the Spanish in the Caribbean and the French in America and Canada.

Moreover, the British were able to take over the Indian government in 1757, as the East India Trading Company's influence was big enough to make India become a British colony. Things turned bad for the British empire, as the 13 American colonies gained independence from British rule in 1776.

2. The Victorian era

Queen Victoria, who succeeded the British throne in 1837 was the first female monarch in Britain after the royal dynasty of Hannover, which forbade women to succeed the throne. Furthermore, she was the first representative monarch, as the dynasty of Hannover increased the people's demand for a right to make decisions, independent from their monarchs. As this caused the development of the House of Parliament, Queen Victoria could not make political decisions without first discussing them with the parliament.

2.1 Victoria's foreign policy (conflicts of the British empire)

Oriental crisis

The oriental crisis was rather a conflict between France and the Osmanian empire but it was important for the British from the point of view of reducing a rival's influence on local governments and inhabitants. The main conflict was caused by the fact, that France supported Egypt, which was a rebelling part of the Osmanian empire. As the rebellion failed, the French influence experienced a sharp decrease.

Crimean war

The Crimean war was the only war during Victoria's reign, that put Britain in direct conflict with other great power states like Russia in this case. The war took place at the Black Sea, as Russia tried to get control over the colonization contest by getting colonies for itself. Both French and British governments were afraid of Russian domination and decided to go to war to launch a preventive strike, that should keep Russia from developing any power in colonization. The conflicts led Russia into the situation, of not being able to start any attempts of colonization at all, as they were obviously defeated.

Division of Canada

As Canada had been divided and shared between both French and British governments, the only question was when the troubles would begin. The British minorities, which inhabited French-governed lower Canada started to rebel, which strained the relationship between lower Canada and upper Canada, which belonged to Britain and gained Independence in 1841.

The American Civil War

Officially, Britain never participated in the civil war. In fact, they almost intervened and supported the southern states.

Scramble for Africa

The struggle for Africa is divided into two conflicts. First, there is the dispute for the Suez Canal and the second one is the fight against natives, who were called "Boers".

The Suez Canal was constructed by the French to reduce the travel all around Africa to be able to be in a better position for trade with far eastern countries.



Scramble for Africa

First, the British cared less about the construction of the Canal. But afterwards they noticed the huge advantage of the short way through the Mediterranean Sea and claimed the Canal. To avoid a war, diplomats of both countries decided to declare the Canal to be neutral territory, so no one might be "In charge" of it. In spite of this arrangement, Britain was the unofficial owner of the Canal, as they had better relationships with the natives than the French had.

The second conflict in Africa that occurred, was the war with the natives around the Cape colony in the south of the continent. First, they were discriminated against by the British. Later they were forced deeper and deeper into the deserts of the continent, as they rebelled. The rebellion had no success and from then on, the Boers are not mentioned any more.

The Opium Wars

The last conflict of the British empire that will be mentioned here is both Opium War I and II. Trading with far east powers like China was difficult, as Europeans were welcome in a limited amount of harbours and didn't receive the respectful behaviour they expected. The next issue was, that large parts of the Chinese population were not interested in the goods from Europe, while Europeans were very interested in silk and other Asian products. The only interesting good seemed to be opium, which has been forbidden by the Chinese government very rapidly. As European traders still brought opium to China, the government burned a lot of the illegal merchandise and that led to Opium War I. Opium War II resulted from the conditions the British offered to the Chinese. They demanded to abrogate the limitation of harbours the Europeans were allowed to trade with. The Chinese rebelled against these conditions and this rebellion is considered as Opium War II today.

2.2 Domestic policy (London during the Victorian era)

Administration

As the population of Britain still had to cope with the disappointment of the royal dynasty of Hannover, Queen Victoria became the first representative monarch through the process of democratization. Democratization not only caused several election law reformations, it also formed the basis of the democratic system of the Houses of Parliament, that is still used in Britain. During the reign of Victoria, the aristocracy lost a lot of their privileges and, in 1872, secret elections were established. These are two positive results of democratization.

Society

During the era of Queen Victoria, the population has been doubled. This indicates a good living conditions, even though the city was as dirty as it was 200 years before. The society, which was divided into aristocrats, the middle class and workers, was made up of two thirds workers. In fact, there was no middle class, as the inhabitants of Britain tried to assimilate their living standard to that of the aristocrats.

Economy

As the 19th century was the century of the industrial revolution, the invention of the steam engine brought Britain a huge technological advantage. The fact that Britain kept the technology of the steam engine, which was the key for their occurring wealth for themselves, meant that Britain could experience an economy boom with the export of manufactured goods. During this time of economic progress, the large scale production that is known today developed. The focus lay on wool and coal. The best example for the mushrooming infrastructure is the railway system that developed from 1800 and measured 10000 kilometers of railway after 50 years.

3. Conclusion

Every time I think about the British Empire, I am amazed by the fact, that such a small country like England was able to conquer almost a quarter of the world. To my mind, the era of Queen Victoria was one of the most important centuries for the development of our modern infrastructure, political system and living conditions, as democratization could achieve equality of rights and, which is the most important point to me, the British empire established the fundamentals of today's globalization.

Even though the positive aspects might seem to dominate, the bad or at least questionable ones have to be mentioned. Of course bringing technology and important goods like medicine is good. But bringing it with violence, to promote democracy and Christianity all over the world is nothing that could be called "good" without asking whether the aim justifies the way of achieving it. With the example of India it becomes obvious, that the British were unethical in some ways. Violating people to get control over others cannot be evaluated as good or modern.

This conflict is the only thing that keeps me from considering the British Empire to be something completely great. Without the British empire, people would be far behind in the area of both political systems and technology of infrastructure. It is questionable whether the world would be as far developed as it is today and whether globalization, which as well has its advantages and disadvantages, would be as far developed as nowadays. All in all I am convinced, that no opinion about the empire could be predicted without moral and ethical conflicts. Everyone should create his or her own opinion about colonization as the path to globalization and international teamwork.