



What was the British Empire?

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Ages 9-14 ⌚ 5 min read

The British Empire was the largest empire in history. At its height in the early 20th century, it covered about 24% of the world's land area — roughly 35 million square kilometres — and ruled over 400 million people, about a quarter of the world's population at the time. The phrase "the sun never sets on the British Empire" was literally true: with territories spread across every time zone, it was always daytime somewhere under British rule.

How did it begin?

British imperial expansion began in the late 16th and early 17th centuries — initially through trading companies like the East India Company (founded 1600), which were given monopolies over trade in specific regions and gradually acquired military and governing powers of their own. Permanent settlements in North America, the Caribbean, and India formed the first pillars of empire.

The East India Company started as what we'd now call a corporation with a government-issued trade licence. Over 200 years, it quietly acquired its own private army (at one point larger than the British Army itself), governed vast territories, collected taxes, and effectively ran much of South Asia — for profit, for shareholders in London. It's one of history's clearest examples of a business gradually becoming a state. When the Company's rule collapsed in 1857, the British government took direct control. "Corporate empire" became Crown Empire.

What did it involve in practice?

The Empire involved both enormous transfer of wealth to Britain and significant development of infrastructure in some territories. It also involved the slave trade (Britain transported approximately 3.1 million enslaved Africans before abolition in 1807), violent conquest, famines worsened by British policy (particularly in India and Ireland), forced cultural assimilation, and the systematic exploitation of natural resources and labour. The moral legacy is genuinely contested — opinions vary widely on how to weigh economic development against exploitation and violence.

How did it end?

The First and Second World Wars hugely weakened Britain economically and morally — it was hard to argue for empire while fighting fascism. Independence movements grew across Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. India and Pakistan became independent in 1947. African nations followed through the 1950s and 60s. The Caribbean and Pacific islands through the 1960s and 70s. The last major colony, Hong Kong, was handed back to China in 1997. The Commonwealth of Nations, a voluntary association of former British territories, remains — 56 countries, sharing some institutions and history without formal political ties.