COLONIAL EXPANSION: Was the British Empire 'one of history's **Bad Things'**?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

At its height, the British Empire was the largest in history. By 1783, Britain had a large empire with colonies in America and the West Indies. This 'first British Empire' came to an end after the American Revolution. But in the 19th century, the strength of the British navy led to the British building a second worldwide empire, consisting of India and colonies in Africa.

SECONDARY INTERPRETATION/ DEBATE ABOUT PERIOD

"The costs of the British Empire had, in fact, substantially outweighed its benefits. **The Empire had, after all, been one of history's Bad Things."**
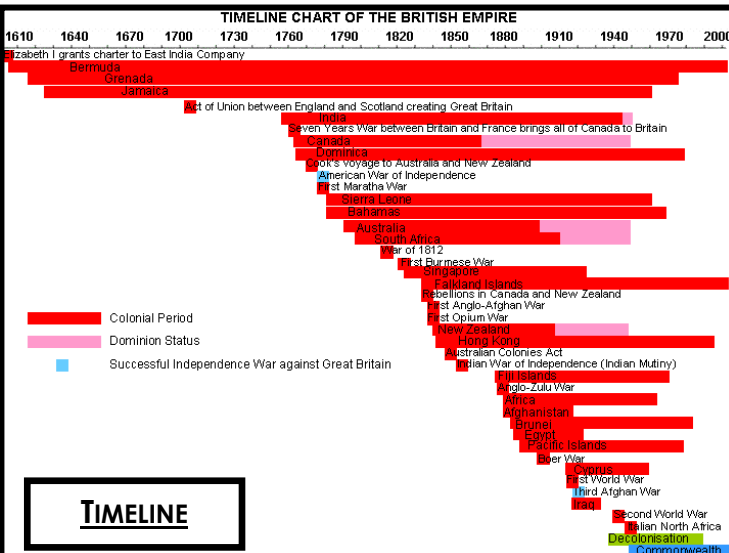
Niall Ferguson, 'Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World'

KEY KNOWLEDGE 1: *What, and where, was the British Empire?*

- The British Empire covered 25% of the world's land, spanning three centuries, controlling a number of countries around the world, called colonies. During Britain's 'imperial century' (1815-1914), the Empire expanded vastly in India & Africa.
- Trade was vital for the Empire, with Britain importing products like spices, textiles, diamonds, tea, sugar, tobacco, coffee…

KEY KNOWLEDGE 2: *What was the British Raj?*

- India— called 'the jewel in the Crown' due its plentiful resources which made it the most valuable colony.
- In the 17th century the East India Trading Company set up trading posts in India, eventually taking greater political power which was transferred to the British Crown in 1858.
- This led to changes in governance as well as economic, legal, cultural changes. India fought for Britain in WW1, hoping to be rewarded with self-governance. This didn't happen.
- Amritsar Massacre 1919— British opened fire on Indians celebrating a festival/ peacefully protesting. Led to more Indians wanting independence from Britain.

KEY KNOWLEDGE 3: *Was the British Empire a force for good or bad?*

- 'Benefits 'of Empire— better infrastructure, education, democracy, cultural exchange (food/ language)
- 'Costs' of Empire—slavery, used violence to forcibly take power, disease, concentration camps, discouraged local customs & religions in favour of British customs & Christianity.

TIMELINE CHART OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

Colonial Period
Dominion Status
Successful Independence War against Great Britain

TIMELINE

KEYWORDS

Empire
Colonies
Trade
Import
Slavery
British Raj
Commonwealth
East India Trading Company