



The Nigeria Area 1800 – 1900: A History Guide

SECTION B: THE NIGERIA AREA 1800 – 1900

This section explores a pivotal century in the history of the Nigerian area, marked by significant internal transformations (like the Sokoto Jihad and the Yoruba Wars) and the intensifying impact of European presence, leading up to the British conquest.

European Penetration and British Conquest

This term examines the deepening European presence in the Nigeria area, particularly the British, leading to the eventual conquest and establishment of colonial rule.

1. European Penetration and Impact

European activity in the Nigeria area, especially from the mid-19th century, moved beyond mere trade to active intervention.

- **European Exploration of the Interior:**
 - Following the end of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, European explorers (e.g., Mungo Park, Hugh Clapperton, Richard Lander brothers, Heinrich Barth) embarked on expeditions to map the interior, locate the source and course of the Niger River, and identify new commercial opportunities (legitimate trade).
 - **Impact:** Their reports provided valuable geographical and commercial information to European governments and trading companies, paving the way for further penetration and eventual colonization. They highlighted the region's rich resources.
- **The Suppression of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade:**
 - **Motives for Suppression:**
 - **Humanitarian Concerns:** Growing abolitionist movements in Britain and other European countries, driven by moral and religious arguments against the inhumanity of slavery.
 - **Economic Factors:** The Industrial Revolution in Europe reduced the demand for slave labor and increased the need for raw materials (e.g., palm oil) which could be produced through "legitimate" trade.
 - **Political Factors:** Britain's desire to assert its moral superiority and naval dominance.
 - **Methods of Suppression:**
 - **Naval Patrols:** The British Royal Navy deployed anti-slavery squadrons to patrol the West African coast, intercepting slave ships.

- **Treaties with African Rulers:** Britain pressured African rulers to sign treaties abolishing the slave trade in exchange for gifts or protection.
 - **Bombardment/Punitive Expeditions:** Military force was used against rulers who resisted abolition (e.g., bombardment of Lagos in 1851 leading to its annexation in 1861).
- **Impact on the Nigeria Area:**
 - **Disruption of Old Trade Patterns:** Severely affected coastal states that had thrived on the slave trade.
 - **Shift to Legitimate Trade:** Encouraged the development of trade in palm oil, palm kernels, timber, and other raw materials.
 - **Increased European Presence:** Led to more European traders, consuls, and missionaries on the coast to facilitate legitimate trade.
 - **Internal Conflicts:** Some rulers resisted abolition, leading to conflicts.
- **The Development of Commodity Trade and Rise of Consular Authority:**
 - **Commodity Trade:** The shift from slave trade to "legitimate trade" in raw materials (especially palm oil) led to the growth of new trading centers on the coast and an increase in European trading houses.
 - **Consular Authority:** British Consuls were appointed to protect British trading interests and citizens on the coast. Their authority gradually expanded, interfering in local disputes and politics, often acting as precursors to formal colonial rule (e.g., Consul for the Bight of Benin and Biafra, later Niger Coast Protectorate).
- **Christian Missionary Activities:**
 - **Arrival:** Christian missionaries (e.g., Church Missionary Society - CMS, Methodist, Baptist) arrived from the early 19th century, particularly after the abolition of the slave trade.
 - **Activities:** Established churches, schools, hospitals, and engaged in evangelism. They translated the Bible into local languages and promoted Western education.
 - **Impact:**
 - **Spread of Christianity:** Converted many, especially in the South.
 - **Introduction of Western Education:** Schools became key centers for producing educated elites who would later lead nationalist movements.
 - **Social Changes:** Challenged traditional customs (e.g., polygamy, secret societies, traditional religions), leading to social upheaval.
 - **Agents of Colonialism:** Often inadvertently paved the way for colonial rule by providing intelligence, advocating for British intervention, and undermining local authority.
- **The Activities of the Trading Companies:**
 - British trading companies (e.g., United African Company, later National African Company, eventually Royal Niger Company - RNC) grew powerful.
 - They signed "treaties" with local rulers, often exploiting language barriers and local customs, to gain exclusive trading rights and administrative control over vast territories, particularly in the Niger Delta and along the Niger River.
 - They maintained their own armed forces and imposed taxes, acting as de facto governments.
 - **Impact:** Laid the economic and administrative groundwork for formal British colonial rule, effectively monopolizing trade and undermining indigenous economic systems.

- **Impact of European Activities on the Coast and the Hinterland:**
 - **Coastal Areas:** Experienced direct and immediate impact – economic transformation (shift to legitimate trade), increased European presence, growth of new coastal elites, direct annexation (e.g., Lagos Colony), and eventual loss of sovereignty.
 - **Hinterland:** Indirect impact initially, often through slave raids fueled by the trade, later through the demand for palm oil and other resources. Eventually, the expansion of trading company influence and missionary activities extended European reach deeper into the interior. The eventual British conquest brought the full impact of European rule.

2. British Conquest of the Nigeria Area

By the late 19th century, Britain decided to formally conquer and administer the territories that would become Nigeria, driven by various motives.

- **Motives for the Conquest:**
 - **Economic Motives:**
 - **Raw Materials:** Demand for raw materials for British industries (e.g., palm oil, rubber, tin, cotton).
 - **Markets:** Desire for exclusive markets for British manufactured goods.
 - **Investment Opportunities:** To create avenues for British capital investment.
 - **Control of Trade Routes:** To secure existing trade routes and create new ones.
 - **Political/Strategic Motives:**
 - **Inter-European Rivalry (Scramble for Africa):** Competition with other European powers (France, Germany) to acquire colonies and expand empires, fueled by nationalism and the Berlin Conference (1884-85) which formalized the partition of Africa.
 - **Prestige and Power:** To enhance national prestige and global power.
 - **Protection of Trading Interests:** To safeguard the interests of British traders and companies (like the RNC).
 - **Humanitarian/Religious Motives (often used as justification):**
 - To suppress the remaining slave trade (though legitimate trade was the primary driver).
 - To spread Christianity and "civilization."
 - To end "barbaric" practices (e.g., human sacrifice, tribal wars).
- **Methods of the Conquest and its Result:**
 - **Treaties:** British agents (consuls, company representatives) signed treaties with local rulers, often deceptive or misunderstood by the African signatories, granting trade monopolies and territorial rights. These treaties were later used to legitimize annexation.
 - **Punitive Expeditions:** Military expeditions were launched against communities and rulers who resisted British influence, challenged treaties, or obstructed trade (e.g., the bombardment of Lagos, the Benin Expedition of 1897, numerous campaigns in the Niger Delta and against the Aro Confederacy).
 - **Naval Blockades:** Used to enforce trade policies and weaken resistance (e.g., Opobo).

- **Company Forces:** Trading companies like the Royal Niger Company (with their own armed forces like the Constabulary) played a major role in conquering territories and establishing administrative control before direct British government takeover.
- **Direct Military Confrontation:** Full-scale military campaigns were waged against larger, more organized states like the Sokoto Caliphate and other Northern Emirates.
- **Results:** By the early 20th century, almost all of what is now Nigeria had been brought under British control, through a combination of treaties and military force. This led to the creation of the Lagos Colony, the Southern Protectorate, and the Northern Protectorate, eventually leading to the Amalgamation of 1914.
- **Resistance to and Aftermath of the Conquest:**
 - **Forms of Resistance:**
 - **Direct Military Resistance:** Many communities and states fought bravely against the British (e.g., Jaja of Opobo, Nana Olomu of Ebrohimi, Oba Ovonramwen of Benin, the Emirs of Kano and Sokoto, the Aro Confederacy, various groups in the Middle Belt and Tivland).
 - **Diplomatic Resistance:** Some rulers tried to resist through negotiations, appeals to other European powers, or by refusing to sign treaties.
 - **Passive Resistance:** Non-cooperation, refusal to pay taxes, migration.
 - **Religious/Spiritual Resistance:** Some resistance movements were led by religious figures who invoked spiritual powers.
 - **Aftermath of Resistance:**
 - Most resistance movements were eventually crushed due to the British's superior firepower (Maxim guns), organization, and internal divisions among Nigerian polities.
 - Leaders of resistance were often exiled, imprisoned, or killed.
 - Conquered territories were then brought under formal British colonial administration (either directly or through indirect rule).
 - The defeat of these independent polities marked the end of an era of sovereign African states and the beginning of formal colonial rule.