The wealth of Africa
French West Africa

Students’ worksheets

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FRENCH WEST AFRICA

1854 – France expands in Senegal interior

1895 – Federation of French West Africa established Senegal, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Soudan (Mali)

1904 – Dahomey joins FFWA

1920 – Mauretania joins FFWA

1921 – Upper Volta joins FFWA

1926 – Niger joins FFWA

1946 – Africans allowed to stand for election to French Assembly and Senate

1958 – Federation of French West Africa dissolved

French settlement in West Africa began as early as the 17th century, with a trading post on the coast of Senegal. From the 1850s, earlier than most other European powers, France began colonising inland. The methods by which it gained new territory were varied.

Source 1
By the 1850s ministers were talking hopefully of an immense French empire in north-west Africa, embracing both Algeria and Senegal with the fabled city of Timbuktu as the lynch-pin between the two.
Newbury 1969: 255

Source 2
‘This is not about military conquest, but it is an essentially peaceful and civilising enterprise which will link our Algerian possessions with the Niger delta and will become, through trade between Africa and Europe, an essentially French route to the great benefit of our influence and our commerce.’
Maurice Rouvier, Minister of the Colonies, on the Senegal railway in June 1879, quoted in Newbury 1969: 264

Source 3
Desbordes [military commander] did not want negotiations at all. From the start he proposed and prepared for war, accepting this as an inevitable consequence of the French advance. In July 1881 he called for the capture of Segu; in January 1882 he again urged the immediate occupation of Bamako.
Newbury 1969: 266

Source 4
Since the beginning of the century, their objective had been to exploit the riches of the far interior, to open new outlets for French manufacturers, and so to further the cause of civilisation and humanity... which could not be better served than by the peaceful victories of commerce and industry.
Newbury 1969: 255

Source 5
The military in each colony were undertaking campaigns without permission from Paris, and Governors of neighbouring territories squabbled with each other.
Crowder 1968: 176–177

Questions
1. What does source 6 suggest about how the French got their colonies?
2. What other means did the French use to gain control of areas?
3. How well organised does this seem to have been?
SHEET 2: HOW IMPORTANT WERE THE CHIEFS TO FRENCH COLONIAL RULE?

Unlike the British, the French wanted to control their colonies directly from Paris. They felt this meant destroying the power of traditional chiefs and replacing them with French officials and their own appointed chiefs.

Source 1
Between 1895 and 1914, the Government General regularly attacked the continuing institution of aristocratic rule in the form of hereditary chiefs.
Conklin 1998: 425–426

Source 2
There emerged a general approach to the government of West Africa: the replacement of the traditional chiefs by a new group who would be loyal to the French; and the break-up of traditional political units into smaller units... This led to considerable social dislocation and certainly did not create [a] stable society...
Crowder 1968: 175

Source 3
The agents for the collection of the taxes imposed by the French administration were the chiefs. They were also responsible for raising forced labour for work on the roads, railways and even European plantations and for providing carriers for the administration and for ensuring the forced cultivation of certain cash crops.
Crowder 1968: 187

Source 4
Revols triggered during World War I by the recruitment of African soldiers for duty in France, and a continuing demand by the educated African elite for political equality with French citizens, made clear to the colonial government that it had made a mistake in removing authority from the chiefs and maintaining all power in its own hands.
Conklin 1997: 59–60

Source 5
It was now argued that African society could better progress if chiefs were kept in office, where they would be regularly consulted, as well as trained, by the French. Thanks to their education, these chiefs could in turn ‘civilize’ the rural masses under their influence, whom the chiefs would also represent.
Conklin 1997: 60

Source 6
In fact, France’s change of plan was motivated more by a desire to keep in check the educated African elite, and to regain authority among their subjects, than by any real interest in African civilisations or democracy.
Conklin 1997: 61

Questions
1. What was French policy towards the chiefs before 1914?
2. Why did it change?
3. How much did the French need the chiefs?
SHEET 3: HOW SUCCESSFUL WAS FRANCE’S ADMINISTRATIVE POLICY?

France’s policy of making its African subjects loyal citizens of the French Empire was not desired by all. These sources show some of the difficulties that French administrators faced, and whether France was really committed to granting citizenship to Africans.

Source 1
In 1899, a French colonial commander complained to his superiors that he had fallen victim to a massive campaign of deceptions and lies built by the local interpreter and chief. They had used their positions to levy fines, imprison opponents, confiscate cattle and sheep and take women as wives without making the necessary bride-wealth payments.
Osborn 2003: 29–30

Source 2
In 1909 there were only 190 primary schools in French West Africa with 10,000 pupils.
Crowder 1968: 283

Source 3
...they will need some time to understand that we rob them and kill them to teach them to live an increasingly human life... The native submits. But in his eyes we came, officials and traders alike, to live at his expense; we put a tax on his goods to teach him humanity. We upset his institutions and in the guise of justice we meddle with his customs – the native does not like us; he is afraid of us.
Felix Chautemps, former Minister for the Colonies, in 1913, quoted in Crowder 1968: 187

Source 4
The most obvious characteristic of our colonial administration is the instability at every stage of both men and matters... In the colonies lieutenant-governors succeed each other with a worrying rapidity, each one bringing his own ideas and his methods of administration and colonisation... Each Commandant du Cercle has his own policy, his chiefs, his projects for roads and agricultural development. This all passes before the eyes of the native like a kaleidoscope of which each new image is accompanied by additional burdens.
French politician Henri Cosnier in 1918, quoted in Crowder 1968: 174

Source 5
Naturalisation policy in French West Africa became so restrictive that no more than 16 individuals were granted French citizenship each year between 1935 and 1949.
Coquery-Vidrovitch 2001: 285

Questions
1. What problems did French officials face in governing?
2. Could France have done more to make itself popular?
3. What else did these people suffer?
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**SHEET 4: HOW DID THE FRENCH Try TO KICK-START THE ECONOMY IN THEIR COLONIES?**

The French faced the same problems as the British in trying to make their colonies pay for themselves, rather than depend on the mother country. See what techniques they used to get the colonial economies working.

**Source 1**
The main aim seems to have been the maximum profit for the least input, even if this would reduce long-term profits by exhausting the resources on which these depended. The money raised was done so at the expense of the new African taxpayer who was often subjected to compulsory labour for the government, forced cultivation of crops, and in certain cases was forced to work for European firms.
Crowder 1968: 176

**Source 2**
All Africans were subject to taxation by the French, but since many lived on land that produced no cash crops and taxation had to be paid in five-franc pieces rather than cowries or kind, the young men were forced to migrate to regions where there was a shortage of labour for the cultivation of cash crops.
Crowder 1968: 337

**Source 3**
For a token of 50 francs, for example the station chief hands the African 50 grams of lead, or 50 beads, or 50 nails, etc., so that the African understands the relative value of the token.

French efforts show African people the value of the tokens they issued, in Gabon, described in Zay 1892: 250

**Source 5**
The idea that seems the best for achieving the employment of native labour would be to impose on the blacks relatively high taxes... If they didn’t pay they would be sentenced to forced labour.

Duchene report to the International Colonial Congress (1900), quoted in Crowder 1968: 186

**Source 6**
In 1904, the Ministry of Colonies decided to group the richer with the poorer territories into one administrative unit –the federation of French West Africa. By making the richer areas pay for the poorer, the federation could become self-sufficient. The richer territories did not like this at all.
Berg 1960: 402

**Questions**

1. What does source 1 show about France’s attitude towards her colonies?
2. Is this attitude supported by sources 2 & 5?
3. What ideas for stimulating the economy of the colonies are shown in the sources on this sheet?
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SHEET 5: HOW EFFECTIVE WAS THE TRANSPORT SYSTEM IN FRENCH WEST AFRICA?

Like the British, the French realised that one of the keys to improving the colonial economy was a good transport system that would enable people and produce to travel easily between the interior and the ports. See how successful they were.

Source 1
The general increase in economic production in the Ivory Coast and the development of new products are often put down to the stimulating effect of the railway. Likewise, railways played a big part in the expansion of peanut production in Senegal.
Thomas 1957: 15

Source 3
It was estimated that human porterage [carrying] in French West Africa cost between 1fr50 and 2fr50 per kilometre tonne. The railway reduced this cost to a minimum of 0.08 centimes on the Dakar-St Louis line and a maximum of 0.42 centimes on the Kayes-Bamako line.
Harrison 1974: 521

Source 5
In 1956, French West Africa had less than 1,500 miles of paved roads as against Ghana’s 1,650 miles and Nigeria’s 3,400 miles.
Berg 1960: 394

Source 8
The railway network in French West Africa was built not to tie the territories together but to draw the products of the interior to the seaports. Railways run from each main port into the interior, and end there, unconnected with the others. The road system which might bind the various spokes together has in fact never done so.
Berg 1960: 401

Questions
1. What different methods of transport are shown in the pictures?
2. Why did the French encourage some types of transport?
3. How successful was the transport system in French West Africa?
Sheet 6: To what extent did French rule bring advantages for people in French West Africa?

French politicians often pointed to the peaceful end of their colonies in West Africa as evidence of how successful they had been. See if these sources agree with this assessment.

Source 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>French West Africa</th>
<th>Nigeria</th>
<th>Ghana</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population (millions)</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area (square miles)</td>
<td>1,800,000</td>
<td>373,000</td>
<td>78,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of inhabitants per doctor</td>
<td>33,000</td>
<td>54,000</td>
<td>25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of school-age children attending school</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comparisons of French West Africa with two British colonies
Berg 1960: 393

Source 2

French West Africa is heavily dependent upon agricultural exports and many areas have only one or two products, which can meet disaster when world prices or marketing conditions take a turn for the worse. For Senegal and Mali, peanuts and peanut products account for about 90% of the total commerce, and 93% in Niger. In Guinea, bananas and oil palms furnish about 92% of agricultural exports. But in the Ivory Coast, with an economy based upon coffee, cacao, wood, bananas and oil palms, there is a degree of diversification.
Thomas 1957: 15

Source 3

Very few Africans received the benefit of a colonial education. Students were required to speak French, and all local languages were forbidden, which resulted in large numbers failing to achieve any kind of literacy.
Grier 1999: 319

Source 4

Broadly speaking, direct taxation appears to have almost trebled throughout French West Africa in the first decade of the century... It is also clear that this level of taxation was a source of great hardship.
Harrison 1974: 506

Questions

1. What benefits for African people in French West Africa do these sources show?
2. What were the disadvantages?
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