The wealth of Africa
French West Africa
Presentation

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Did French rule in West Africa bring advantages as well as disadvantages?
AN IMAGE OF FRENCH COLONIAL RULE

What is happening on this banknote?

Source 1: French West Africa banknote. 1945
Marianne (France) with African mother and child
British Museum
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What is happening on this banknote?
What point is the banknote making?

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WHERE IS FRENCH WEST AFRICA?

France had had a trading station in Senegal since 1659, but it was not until the mid 19th century that it made any attempt to move inland and seize more territory.

The management of its colonies in West Africa differed from Britain in two major respects: it combined them into a single political and economic unit, and it tried to link this unit directly to France itself with a vision of all people in its territories as citizens of France, speaking the French language, and practising French customs.

This also meant, at least at first, replacing African chiefs with French officials.

But would this ‘direct rule’ work?

Which countries were part of French West Africa?

What would be the difficulties of controlling this area as one unit?

What would be the difficulties of linking this area to France?
HOW DID THE FRENCH GAIN CONTROL OF THEIR COLONIES?

Does this look like a traditional African dance?

Source 2: Rifle Dance in Guinea, 1880–1905
British Museum
HOW DID THE FRENCH GAIN CONTROL OF THEIR COLONIES?

Does this look like a traditional African dance?

Source 3
This is not about military conquest, but it is an essentially peaceful and civilising enterprise.
Maurice Rouvier, Minister of the Colonies, on the Senegal railway line in 1879, quoted in Newbury 1969: 264

Source 4
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 5
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

Why and how did the French try to take control of parts of West Africa?

Source 2: Rifle Dance in Guinea, 1880–1905
British Museum
HOW EFFICIENT WAS THE TRANSPORT SYSTEM?

Why might the French build railways?

Source 6: Railway station, Cotonou, Benin
British Museum
HOW EFFICIENT WAS THE TRANSPORT SYSTEM?

Why might the French build railways?

Source 7
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 8
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 9
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

What were the good points about the railways?

What were the drawbacks?

Source 6: Railway station, Cotonou, Benin
British Museum
HOW SUCCESSFUL WAS THE ECONOMY OF FRENCH WEST AFRICA?

Source 10

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

What problem is explained in Source 10?
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What problem is explained in Source 10?

How well has French West Africa done compared to Nigeria and Ghana?

How important are the population and area figures for explaining the differences between these three countries?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Area (square miles)</td>
<td>1,800,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Exports per capita ($US)</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Imports per capita ($US)</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Percentage of total population engaged in nonagricultural wage earnings</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Electricity consumption per capita (kwh)</td>
<td>7.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Road density (miles of road per thousand square miles of area)</td>
<td>27.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Number of inhabitants per automotive vehicle</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Railway density (miles of railway track per thousand square miles of area)</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Per capita passenger mile travelled on railways</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Number of inhabitants per doctor</td>
<td>33,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Percentage of school age children attending schools</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
HOW SUCCESSFUL WAS ‘DIRECT RULE’?

How might this building help Africans see themselves as part of France?

Source 12: Supreme Court, Cotonou, Benin
British Museum
HOW SUCCESSFUL WAS ‘DIRECT RULE’?

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In 1959 the French Government offered independence to all eight countries of French West Africa. Only Guinea accepted. The others voted to stay with France.

Why might these countries have chosen to stay with France?

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Source 13
Revolts 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 14
No more than 16 individuals were granted French citizenship each year between 1935 and 1949.
Coquery-Vidrovitch 2001: 285

Source 15
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

So, how successful was ‘direct rule’?

Source 12: Supreme Court, Cotonou, Benin
British Museum
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