**Europe Carved Up the Middle East:**

**European Imperialism in the Middle East (1700s to 1900s)**

*Challenges to Ottoman Power*

During the 1700s and 1800s, European imperialism and growing nationalism posed major challenges to the Ottoman Empire. In the midst of the French Revolution, Napoleon seized Egypt in 1798, setting in motion a century-long European scramble for the Middle East.

Egypt became the focus of imperialism rivalry between Britain and France. Both nations wanted to dominate Egypt and build a canal across the Isthmus of Suez. Whoever held the canal would control shipping and trade between Europe and Asia. The British and Ottomans joined forces to force Napoleon to retreat. French influence, however, remained strong in Egyptian culture.

In 1805, Muhammad Ali, an Albanian soldier who had fought against the French, became governor of Egypt. Officially Egypt was still a part of the Ottoman Empire. In fact, Ali pursued his own policies. Ali introduced many reforms to modernize Egypt. He invited French experts to train Egyptians in the latest European military and scientific techniques. He also introduced new farming methods, improved irrigation, and promoted the growing of cash crops such as cotton, sugar, and tobacco. Before long, cotton exports were booming, and Egypt wanted to set up factories to continue to modernize. However, Ali’s successors had to borrow money from European banks in order to pay for the modernization. The increasing debts gave France and Britain an excuse to interfere in Egypt’s internal affairs.

Without money of their own, Egypt relied more heavily on European financial backers to accomplish the modernization. During this period, the French won the right to build the Suez Canal. Faced with increasingly huge debts, the Egyptian governor sold his shares in the canal to the British. As Egypt’s financial problems worsened, Britain and France took control of its economy.

Outraged at this foreign intervention, Egyptians rebelled. British forces crushed the rebels and occupied the country in 1882. With this move the British gained full control of Egypt and the Suez Canal.

However, the French and the British were not the only challenges to Ottoman Power. Russia and Austria-Hungary nibbled away at Ottoman provinces in Europe. At the same time, nationalist groups within the empire sought independence from Ottoman rule.

The Greeks revolted and won freedom in 1832.

Egypt and Greece were only the beginning of the Ottoman Empire’s losses. Other ethnic groups won independence or at least some degree of self-rule. The Ottoman Empire lost control of Algeria in 1830, Cyprus in 1878, Crete in 1913, Bosnia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Romania in 1878, and Tunisia in 1881. The losses continued in the Twentieth Century with Bulgaria in 1908, Libya in 1912, Albania and Yemen in 1913.

Russia encouraged these groups to revolt against their Ottoman rulers. It hoped to gain more lands from a weakened Ottoman Empire. Britain and France, however, became alarmed at Russia’s ambitions. Trying to keep a balance of European power, Britain and France tried to prevent the breakup of the Ottoman Empire. Despite reform efforts of various sultans, Ottoman power continued to decline. By 1914, the Ottoman Empire was derogatorily referred to as the “sick man of Europe.” World War I proved to be final push to the crumbling empire.

*Challenges to Safavid Power*

Like the Ottomans, the rulers of Iran faced the challenges of European imperialism. Both Russia and Britain acquired spheres of influence in Iran. Both nations were competing for influence elsewhere in Asia, and each sought access to the Persian Gulf as a gateway to other lands.

During the Age of Imperialism, the shahs who ruled Iran were weak, and their governments lacked the power to resist European expansion. By the early 1900s, however, Iranian nationalists were demanding reform. In 1925, Reza Khan, an army officer supported by some nationalists, seized power. He set up the Pahlavi dynasty and made himself shah. Like nationalists leaders elsewhere, Reza Khan set out to end foreign control and create a modern industrial state. He built roads and factories, modernized the army, and reduced the power of the Muslim clergy.

Under the Pahlavis, westernization increased. In cities, men and women adopted western clothing. Women gained more freedom to move about in public. In addition, schools emphasized western courses of study, and the government used western models for its law code.

*Check your understanding:*

1 . Why were Europeans primarily interested in Ottoman territory? In Safavid territory?

2. Did any territories become “colonies” of European powers during this time? Explain.

3. Why were the Ottomans losing territory prior to World War I?

4. How were Muhammad Ali and Reza Khan similar leaders? Why do you think they had similar policies?

5. By the beginning of the Twentieth century, what noticeable effects did the Age of Imperialism have on the Middle East?