

The Women Warriors Who Fought Colonialism

In the 1880s, the most powerful empires in Europe were trying to grab as much land and resources as they could, and they had their sights set on Africa. But across the continent, diverse peoples resisted in ways big and small. In the West African Kingdom of Dahomey, the largest female army in history fought a fierce war against the French.

0:00

Map of Africa; hands from different countries reaching toward a world map; animated beach scene with giant white and brown hands interacting with territory flags; African man directs a European traveler; fists holding blades in the air; female African soldiers stand in formation; sign reading 'Colonialism' above two giant hands, one holding a couple the other holding gold; map highlighting European countries.

In the 1880s, the most powerful empires in Europe were trying to grab as much land and resources as they could, and they had their sights set on Africa.

But across Africa, diverse peoples resisted foreign rule in a variety of ways. They did small things, like giving fake directions so Europeans got lost. But they also fought in military campaigns. And in the West African Kingdom of Dahomey, the largest female army in history took on the French in a fierce war.

This idea of one group of people exerting dominance over another to increase their own wealth and power is known as colonialism, and it was a big thing among European powers like Britain, Portugal, France, Belgium, and Italy in the 19th century. Eventually, these empires turned their attention to the resource-rich interior of the African continent.

1:04

Map of Africa highlighting 10% then highlighting the other 90% in a different shade; colorfully clothed fists placed around the map of Africa as European hands grab at Africa; hands in military uniforms hold a 'Rules' document as guns point at them; Berlin Conference attendees listed; empty seat labeled 'Africa'; close-up of eyes angrily watching a European colonialist.

In the 1870s, only ten percent of the African continent was under control of European countries. The other ninety percent of Africa remained under indigenous rule. To Africans themselves, this meant the vast majority of the continent belonged to the diverse peoples who lived there. But to Europeans, that untouched ninety percent was a massive opportunity.

In an effort to avoid an all-out European war as empires scrambled to steal as much African land as they could, they decided to set some ground rules for claiming new territories at the Berlin Conference. In attendance: Germany, France, Great Britain, Belgium, Italy, the US, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire, among others. Notably missing: anyone from the African continent.

But Africans weren't going to sit back and let Europeans do whatever they wanted. Their land was home…and it was worth fighting for.

2:09

Map highlighting Dahomey and Benin; illustration of African village; King Agaja wearing a white robe holding a staff; hands expanding the highlighted region of Africa; African soldiers standing together below a large ruling hand; formation of female soldiers; raised hands; multiple pairs of bound hands; close-up of Agojie soldiers; Agojie soldiers holding rifles, swords, guns, and bows and arrows; women guarding a courtyard and king.

Some of the fiercest fighting of the era took place in the wealthy West African Kingdom of Dahomey, in what is now southern Benin. Dahomey was founded in the 17th century, and grew to flourish in the mid 18th century under the rule of King Agaja, who held total power over the state and ruled with one main goal: expanding its empire within Africa.

To support this goal, King Agaja, commanded an army of thousands– including hundreds of women known as the Agojie. Some of the Agojie joined Dahomey's army voluntarily, while others were forced to join after committing a crime or were kidnapped from rival African kingdoms. But together, they formed the largest all-female fighting force in history.

The Agojie were divided into highly trained regiments of riflewomen, huntresses, reapers, gunners, and archers. As protectors of Dahomey and the king himself, they were revered for their skill and bravery and lived in the palace as wives of the king, or ahosi in the Dahomean Fon language.

3:20

Warriors holding weapons beneath intense eyes then dressed in armor; African ruler and female soldiers have guns pointed at them from the

They were so fierce that the first Europeans who encountered them (and lived to tell the tale) called them Amazons because their military skill rivaled that of the famous women warriors from Greek myth.

And that skill came in handy when the Dahomey, under King Behanzin, went head-to-head with the French in 1890.

French; Map highlighting Dahomey, Egba Kingdom, Kingdom of Porto-Novo; pair of watchful eyes; map identifying Cotonou next to a soldier statue; French flag beside weapons; African soldiers; brown fist punching a French man; brown hands holding swords opposite of white hands holding advanced weapons.

By the end of the 19th century, the Dahomean army was weakened after battles with the nearby Egba kingdom, although they still posed a formidable threat. But the French had their sights set on the Dahomean land, and teamed up with one of Dahomey's enemies, the kingdom of Porto-Novo, to help them get it.

However, it was King Behanzin who decided to strike first.

On March 4th, 1890, 3,000 Dahomean troops launched an attack on the French in Cotonou. And while the French had guns and cannons, the Dahomey had something else: 1,000 Agojie warriors. The Agojie were able to break through French lines thanks to their fierce hand-to-hand combat. But as fighting drew on, even these fearsome warriors were no match for France's superior weaponry.

4:36

Bars comparing France labeled 8 and Dahomey labeled 100s with a longer bar; opposing sides drop their weapons; lush landscape with pair of white hands surveying it as female African soldier stares attentively; handshake over map of Dahomey; map showing French territory Porto-Novo and ships at Cotonou; large pairs of legs walking through an African village; attack at sunset; African King being handed a weapon.

When the conflict, which came to be known as the First Franco-Dahomean War, was over, France had lost only eight soldiers while the Dahomey lost hundreds.

And although the first conflict was over, neither country was secure. The French still had their eye on all that Dahomean land, and for the kingdom of Dahomey, the French were still far too close for comfort.

So, in a half-hearted effort to limit future conflict, the French and Dahomeans signed an agreement in which Dahomey acknowledged official French control of Porto Novo. It also gave France the right to occupy and trade in Cotonou, although technical sovereignty would go to Dahomey.

Despite the agreement, the French still walked around Cotonou like they owned the place. And the Dahomeans kept raiding villages in French territory. King Behanzin even bought weapons from German manufacturers via northern trade routes, so he would be ready for the seemingly inevitable next fight with the French.

5:43

Map showing Dahomey and other areas between profiles of an African and white man; soldier statue moving from Dahomey to Porto-Novo on a map; document labeled 'Declaration of War' with guns pointed at it; soldier statue moving back to Dahomey; African female soldiers running with weapons raised; pool of blood amongst brown arms and weapons; French soldiers firing weapons; French troops at nighttime watching a village burn; African soldiers watching their village on fire.

In other words: no one was really trying very hard to keep the peace.

And it wasn't long until these tensions boiled over. In March of 1892, Dahomean forces raided several villages near the Frenchified Porto Novo, and the French parliament retaliated by declaring war on Dahomey, officially kicking off the Second Franco-Dahomean War. And this time, they were prepared for the fearless Agojie warriors.

The French invaded Dahomey from their hold on the coast, marching north toward the capital city of Abomey. The Dahomeans, armed with their German guns, launched their counterattack, using the same swift frontal assault that worked last time.

This time, though, it didn't go so well.

The Dahomey army suffered devastating losses, and the French marched on to Abomey, fighting the Dahomean resistance from town to town. But when they arrived at the capital, they found that King Behanzin and his remaining troops had set the city on fire and disappeared into the countryside, where they regrouped in hopes of maintaining control of the Abomey Plateau– the last remaining land in Dahomey control.

6:58

White fist slams near the map of Dahomey then scribbles over it in

This was the last straw for the French. In 1893, the French government greenlit the total destruction of the Dahomean kingdom to stamp out any possibility of resistance. And so began the third and final Franco-Dahomean War. The French hit the coast with 3,000 soldiers ready for a fight…but this time, they didn't get

red; soldiers exiting ship near a tropical coastline; King holding hand out in surrender with his soldiers behind him; sign welcoming visitors to Dahomey Village with female warriors beneath it and Europeans watching them on display; white hand erasing most of Dahomey on a map; silhouettes inside of a hut.

one. After holding out for years, King Behanzin and his officials surrendered their kingdom and sovereignty to the French colonizers.

The French exiled King Behanzin to the West Indies and sent dozens of the captured Agojie warriors back to Europe, where they were shown off on an exhibition that toured through major cities. These fierce warriors, who bravely fought European colonizers to protect their homeland, were paraded around in the equivalent of a human zoo.

The French also tried to erase every inch of the Dahomean legacy in Africa itself–including the Agojie. The former warriors who weren't shipped off to Europe were denied any role in public life.

8:12

Burning of a warrior statue; close-up of an African being hushed by a white finger; Agojie warrior swinging a sword then standing in front of a group of Africans; a brown hand blocking and tossing a large foot; colorfully clothed fists placed around the map of Africa; map of Africa with most of it darkened; dropping of a sword.

And to make sure the Agojie's incredible story didn't inspire rebellious behavior, the French destroyed artifacts and suppressed oral traditions in the region that celebrated the Agojie and their bravery.

And while the powerful Agojie were unique, their story was all too common.

People across the continent resisted European colonizers, fighting to keep their land, traditions, and culture. But by 1914, all of the African continent was under European control, aside from modern day Liberia and Ethiopia.

And for Africans, the suffering didn't end when the wars did.

8:53

White hand holding puppet strings; violence against Africans; European hands taking gems from an African hand; small scarred hand nesting in a large scarred hand; various European hands releasing the map of Africa as the map turns green; large statue of an African figure holding a staff against a blue sky as white birds fly by; close-up of one of the statue's eye; African child and woman stand watching the statue.

Under the control of European empires, people across Africa were exploited, murdered, and mutilated. They were forced to extract natural resources for colonizers to make European empires wealthier while their own nations were decimated.

And the effects of that exploitation echoed across generations, up to the present day. While the era of explicit European colonial rule ended decades ago, we're still reckoning with the horrific impacts of the scramble for Africa today.

European colonization tried to erase entire African civilizations, cultures, and languages, and it derailed economic development across the continent. But colonizers also tried to erase African history, like that of the fearless Agojie warriors who fought to protect their kingdom.