**Peter Frankopan’s ‘The Silk Roads’. Chapter 10 – The Road to Northern Europe.**

**Challenge:** Read through the part of the chapter on European empires and answer the questions in the boxes.

**The Europeans built empires that spanned continents**. Europe itself was a violent place with near-constant warfare. Feudal society glamorised the status of military prowess and this spurred innovation in military technologies that became hugely significant. European weapons, were better than anywhere else in the world, widely admired in China and feared in Africa and the Americas.

1. **Why were Europeans able to build empires?**

All this meant that when the British turned their attention to **Asia and North America**, they were off to a good start. Success stemmed from building a navy that was a model for how a good organisation should be run. It was significant too that the English chose carefully which wars to get involved with, often staying out of conflicts that were expensive and could have unexpected consequences.

1. **Where did Britain choose to build an empire?**

Although initial efforts to build up trading networks had decidedly patchy results, by around 1700 things were looking more promising. **The East India Company**, founded along similar lines to the **Dutch** equivalent, established an enviable position in **Asia**, making some of its officials exceptionally wealthy in the process. They were mocked at home for being self-made millionaires, although that said a lot about the jealousy and envy of those laughing at them.

**3. How did the East India Company become very wealthy in Asia?**

The East India Company’s methods of doing business were nothing to be proud of. Many officials behaved like hoodlums, lending money at impossibly high rates of interest and intervening in local disputes on the side of whoever paid them the most. It was hard not to try to take advantage of a world where wealth was so glorified and powerful rulers like the **Mughal Emperors** had themselves weighed on their birthdays – with gems, precious metals and other treasures which were loaded on to the scales until they were balanced.

The most notorious example of East India Company behaviour came in 1757 when an expedition led by **Robert Clive**, one of its employees, headed for Calcutta to intervene following an attack on the city by the ruler of Bengal. Clive was soon offered enormous sums to provide support for rival candidates wanting to take power. In no time, he took control of the **diwani** – the tax of the region – helped himself to the revenues of one of the most populated and economically vibrant parts of Asia, home to a textile industry that was responsible for more than half of all Britain’s imports from the east. Almost overnight, he became one of the richest men in the world.

**4. What was the diwani in Bengal, India?**

**5. How did taking over the diwani benefit Robert Clive?**

Over the course of the decade, the equivalent of tens of billions of pounds were taken from the **Bengalis** by East India Company officials. And that was not the worst part. Greed and mismanagement, coupled with a series of bad harvests, sparked famine in Bengal in which a third of the population – some 10 million people – died. Some in London were outraged that Europeans had thought only of enriching themselves as Bengalis starved to death. But Clive argued that he hard deserved to be blamed for that: after all, he told Parliament, his job was to protect and serve his shareholders of the East India Company – not the local population.

Across the **Atlantic**, many looked on in horror. The British had established a series of **13** **colonies in North America**, all of whom began to worry that they might suffer a similar fate. After all, if the British could treat people in one part of the world so badly, why not in another? When the government in **London** decided to raise taxes on the American colonies, all hell broke loose. Agitators asked how there could possibly be ‘taxation without representation’ in Parliament (those in British colonies in North America could not vote for MPs – Members of Parliament). Many thought it was wrong. Howls of anger soon led to calls to action. Leaflets were circulated accusing the East India Company of specialising in ‘Tyranny, Plunder, Oppression and Bloodshed’. And when ships pulled into **Boston harbour** carrying tea, their cargoes were tipped into the water: they would rather it went to the bottom of the sea than pay taxes to London. This was the start of a revolution – one that would lead to the declaration of the **United States of America**, and eventually independence from the British Empire on 4 July, 1776.

**6. What was the impact on Bengalis?**

The loss of 13 colonies in North America was a humiliating setback for Britain, and underlined just how important it was to keep British possessions secure. Attention turned to its position in Asia. Britain might have lost the United States, but surely it would never lose **India**?

**7. Why were the 13 states in North America unhappy with being ruled by the British?**

**8. What did they do with their tea cargoes in protest in Boston?**

**9. What did this start?**