

The Aftermath of Imperialism

20 Short, Standards-Based Activities

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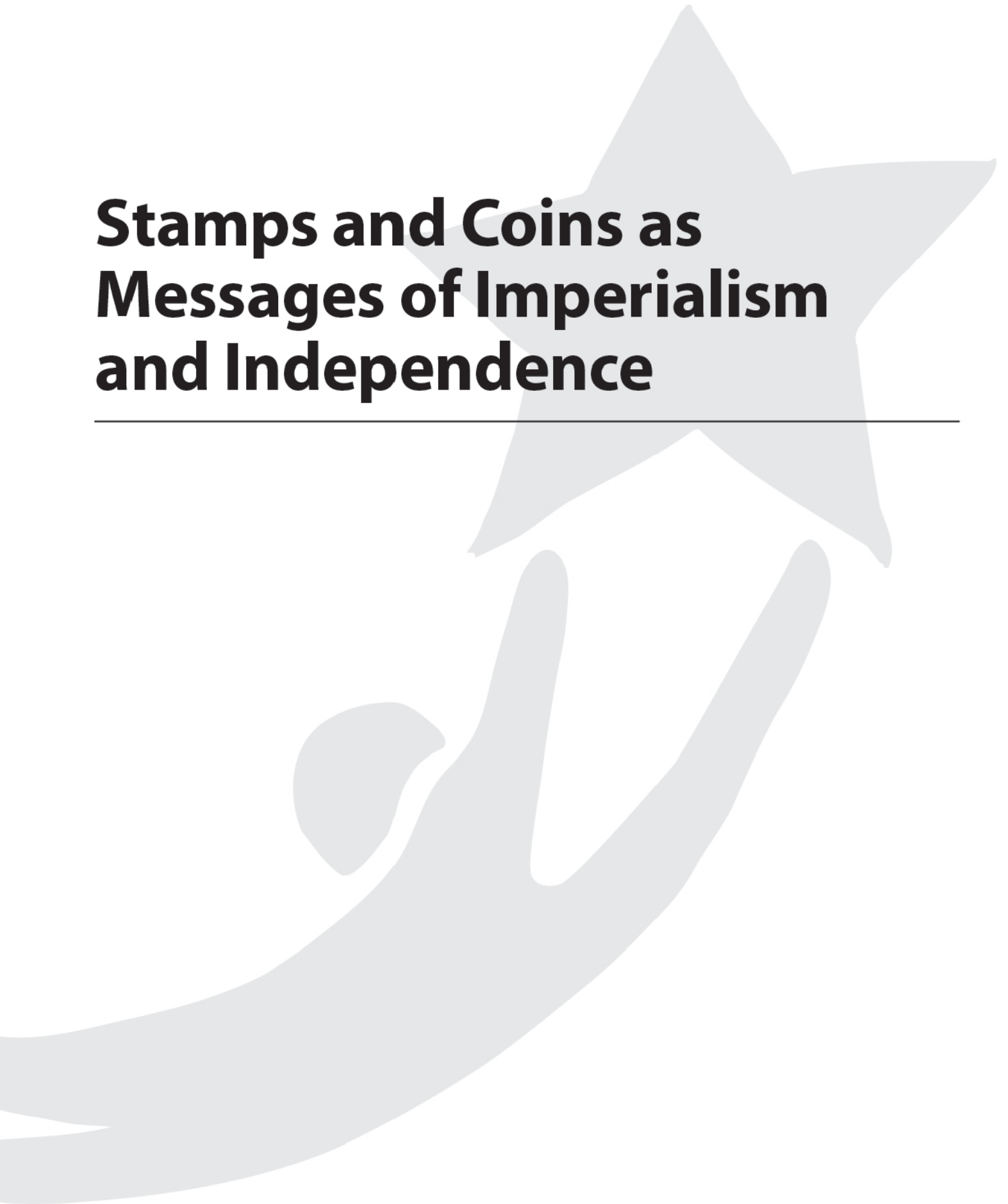
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Stamps and Coins as Messages of Imperialism and Independence



● Teacher's Guide ●

Objective

To understand the ways in which currency reflects the identity that a nation wishes to present to the world.

Duration

1 hour

Materials

Distribute copies of the **Background Essay** and the **Part One**, **Part Two**, and **Part Three** handouts to each student.

Procedure

1. Have the students read the **Background Essay** individually or in small groups.
2. Answer the questions in the handouts on stamps, coins, and paper currency.

Teacher Recommendations

1. Show as many images as you can find of stamps, coins, and paper currency from the imperial and post-imperial eras. These are widely available from stamp- and coin-collecting books and websites. If possible, bring a few of the actual items to show your students.
2. For enrichment, have students design their own imaginary currency and stamps for a newly independent country.

Background Essay

Governments choose the images that they put on their postage stamps and coins very carefully. They are a representation of the ideals of the country and contain powerful symbolism. They are the way in which the nation represents itself to the rest of the world.

In the case of the imperial powers, they wished to show their colonies as useful, productive, and important. Their money and stamps showcased the rich variety of the empire. They showed beneficial products that could not be produced at home. They often depicted contented subjects in order to show that the conquered people were happy with being under colonizers' rule. It was hoped that the colonial people and the colonizers could work together to build peace and prosperity in the colonies. The mere fact that the colonizing country's name was on so many faraway places induced national pride for the imperial powers.

If the citizens of the country could see the benefits of the empire, they were much more likely to support the costs of empire by paying their taxes and sending soldiers to fight in the country's wars. Investors could see the potential profits in building railroads, ports, factories, and other economic infrastructure, just as they had at home. The names and faces of the colonizing countries' leaders appeared on the money and stamps as benevolent monarchs over lesser local rulers, who helped the monarchs rule the empire. These images were meant to show that the colonists were part of something bigger than themselves. Through imperial governance, the natives would end their isolation and become part of the global community. Gold, silver, copper, and bronze were chosen as the metals for coinage because they represented the economic strength of the colonizing nations. Bills

and stamps often looked very similar to those of the colonizing power's homeland, thereby stressing continuity and unity. These forms of currency were often conservative in color and design, emphasizing dependability and reliability.

Once the colonies got their independence, coins and stamps were used to send an entirely different message. The new nations wanted to stress their unique cultures. They wanted to reestablish languages, traditions, and names that had been lost. Even the names and denominations of the coins would usually be changed. The new name of the country was prominently featured. The old European sovereigns were gone. They were replaced by prominent leaders of the independence movements and new presidents and prime ministers. Local heroes and cultural icons were often depicted as well. The new economy of the nation was highlighted with images of new factories, railroads, and government buildings. Traditional or local crops that promoted self-sufficiency were often shown on the money and stamps. Instead of the cash crops that were grown for export during the nation's colonial era, emphasis was now put on feeding one's own people, global competitiveness, and self-sufficiency.

Compared to the relatively drab and conservative money and stamps issued by the colonizers, these forms of exchange now featured an explosion of color and innovative graphic design. The former colonial subjects soon realized that these bold new colors and designs were also appealing to collectors in the wealthier nations of Europe and North America. A new source of income was found as governments exported fancy money and

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Handout

Background Essay

stamps that were never touched by ordinary citizens of their country. Overseas firms were hired to produce ever more dazzling products that featured vibrant colors, eye-catching designs, and popular themes such as dinosaurs, spacecraft, cartoon characters, or celebrities.

Ironically, the new countries were not able to afford the traditional banking metals of the colonial coins. Instead, they put out *clad coinage*, made of multiple layers of blends of cheaper metals such as aluminum, copper, bronze, or nickel. These coins still looked appealing, but they did not endure as well as European or American coins. As economic and political problems persisted, these currencies sometimes crashed and went through rapid devaluation. Sometimes the government repudiated the old money and simply replaced it with a new type of money.

To satisfy foreign investors, the new countries sometimes came up with fancy coins of silver or gold of exquisite quality, called *proof sets*. These perfect coins were made of highly polished metals that shone like a mirror. They were often packaged in elaborate cases with documentation singing the praises of the country and its leaders. Proof sets were produced for export only. They provided badly needed income for the country and helped to boost its international reputation. The ordinary people in these countries most likely never touched these coins and may not have even been aware that they existed. They were never released into circulation. The currency that they used on a daily basis was much plainer and they probably could not afford proof sets.



Image source: iStock.com/swisshippo

Part One: Stamps

This is the imperial postage for British Rhodesia. The colonies were named for the imperialist and diamond mine owner Cecil Rhodes. He is shown in the lower stamp. The upper stamp shows King George VI and his wife, Elizabeth Angela Marguerite Bowes-Lyon (who gave birth to Queen Elizabeth):



After independence, the country was renamed Zimbabwe in honor of an ancient cultural site, and its postage now reflected the newly independent nation:



Stamps and Coins as Messages of Imperialism and Independence

Handout

Part One: Stamps

Answer the following questions:

1. What are the differences in the content of the stamps before and after independence?
2. Why was the theme of the later stamps chosen by the nation?
3. What messages are the newly independent countries trying to communicate to their citizens and others through the images on their stamps?
4. Do you think that the production of expensive stamps for export to foreign countries was a worthwhile expenditure for the newly independent countries?