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## History of Sierra Leone

### I. Early Period

Sierra Leone has been inhabited for thousands of years. Archeological evidence shows that many different tribal groups lived in the area, sometimes coexisting peacefully, sometimes warring with each other. As far as we know, no written records were kept during this very early period. Archeological evidence shows that Neolithic tools were in use, as well as agriculture, from at least 6000 years ago. West Africa had no Bronze Age, passing directly from the Neolithic to the Iron Age around 600 or 700 CE.

In 1418 Prince Henry the Navigator of Portugal founded a naval school at Cape St. Vincent in southern Portugal. From here the Portuguese launched a series of exploratory voyages. In order to reach the spice trade in Asia, the Portuguese explorers began exploring the African coast and eventually circumnavigated the continent. In 1457 Portuguese explorers reached Sierra Leone and named it “Lion Mountains,” or *Serra Lyoa*, the roots of the future nation’s name.

In the 1500s, European traders began trading with the inhabitants of Sierra Leone on a regular basis. By the 1600s the British became especially active in the area. By the 1700s, Islam was brought to Sierra Leone by Muslim traders from present-day Ghana,

and the religion became firmly established in the northern region of the area. Also, by this time the transatlantic slave trade had been established, and Sierra Leone became a source for slaves sent to the Americas. The British were especially active in the slave trade during this time. This slave trade continued in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and into the nineteenth century.

From the 1500s to the 1800s, millions of Africans were enslaved and brought across the Atlantic to America. Some of these slaves were kidnapped directly by the Europeans; most were bought by the Europeans from other, African, slave traders who had captured them from enemy tribes. The number of human beings who were enslaved or killed in the transatlantic slave trade is staggering. Millions of people were killed while being transported, in horrific conditions, across the Atlantic. There was no sanitation on the ships, and they were packed into cargo holds like cattle. Many died of starvation and disease during the crossing. The total loss of life is estimated to be approximately 20 million human beings.

Those slaves who survived the crossing were then sold. They were forced to live their entire lives treated as if they were beasts of burden. Much of the time, the labor was back-breaking and very difficult. They were whipped and beaten when they did not work hard enough. Those who attempted to escape to freedom were often hung. The economies of many European Colonies in the Caribbean and North America (and later the southern portion of the United States) were heavily dependent on this slave labor.

But changing European and American attitudes in the nineteenth century toward slavery, especially among the British, altered events in Sierra Leone. In 1807 the British

Parliament passed the Slave Trade Act, outlawing the sale and transport of slaves. In the following century the slave trade was ended, by force in many cases. In the nineteenth century many Europeans and Americans began seeing slavery as barbaric and unjust, for religious, philosophical, and even economic reasons. Abolitionist movements became increasingly powerful during this time. In 1833 another act was passed by parliament: the Slavery Abolition Act. This act not only outlawed the trading of slaves, but the holding of them as well. By 1838, all slaves in the British Empire had been emancipated.

In the United States, the Abolitionist movement attempted to bring legislation in every state to abolish slavery. By 1804 every northern state had abolished slavery. By 1808 the Federal government had, like the British parliament, outlawed international slave trading. However, the southern portion of the United States clung to the institution of slavery for several more decades. Many slaves fled north on the Underground Railroad, a network of secret routes escaped slaves could use to reach freedom. Slavery in the United States was finally ended after a bloody Civil War between the Northern States and the Southern States. The Emancipation Proclamation was issued in 1863, and the United States constitution was amended in 1865, to outlaw slavery for the entire nation.

Many abolitionists were in favor of sending freed slaves to colonize West Africa. Freed slaves had been sent to colonize Sierra Leone since 1787, when 500 former slaves, who had won their freedom by serving in the British army during the American Revolutionary War, established a settlement. They established the “Province of Freedom” near what was later to become Freetown. This settlement was unsuccessful, and many of

the colonists died the first year. A second attempt at colonization was made in 1792, when abolitionist John Clarkson and over 1000 freed slaves arrived in Sierra Leone and founded Freetown. 500 more freed slaves from Jamaica also settled in Freetown soon thereafter. This settlement was successful, and went on to be the present-day capital of modern Sierra Leone.

Freetown became a major destination for freed slaves during the 1800s. In the first half of the century, more than 50,000 former slaves were settled in Freetown. Among them were the former slaves who had won their freedom in the famous *Amistad* revolt. The town grew, expanding more and more as additional freed slave settled there. The British retained their naval base thorough the nineteenth century, and Freetown was the base for the Royal Navy's West African Squadron. The Squadron was responsible for stopping the slave trade across the Atlantic, and many of the would-be slaves who were liberated by the Squadron chose to settle in Freetown.

## II. Colonial Period

In 1896 Sierra Leone became a British Protectorate, and the colonial era in Sierra Leone officially began. However the area had been under British control long before that. Many events had led up to this development. The British government had administered Sierra Leone since the founding of the naval base in Freetown. During this time missionaries from Britain worked in Sierra Leone, setting up schools for the colony's population. The territory of Sierra Leone for most of the nineteenth century only included

Freetown and a small area around it. This all changed when the colonial scramble for Africa began at the end of the nineteenth century.

At the close of the nineteenth century, many European powers began formally annexing vast areas of Africa and adding them to their empires. Eventually the entire continent, with the exceptions of only Liberia and Ethiopia, had been colonized. Liberia was, like Sierra Leone, itself partly composed of freed slaves from America who had colonized West Africa, and had been an independent state since 1847. Ethiopia had secured its independence from colonial rule by defeating an Italian army at the battle of Adwa in 1896. The Ethiopian forces were well-equipped, armed with thousands of rifles, and shocked the Italians with their victory. Italy subsequently signed a treaty recognizing Ethiopia as an independent state. However, Ethiopia was the exception during this time, as the majority of the continent had fallen under colonial rule.

It was in this context of colonial expansion that Britain came to formally annex Sierra Leone. Worried that the French would beat them to it, the British formally took control of Sierra Leone at the end of the nineteenth century. The Protectorate was ruled by means of the administration of several small semi-autonomous regions, each subject to a colonial tax. Many of the people of Sierra Leone did not like the imposition of British authority. Especially angered were many of the tribal chiefs in the areas farther inland from Freetown. These chiefs rebelled against the imposition of taxes by the colonial government. An armed conflict known Hut Tax War was fought between British and rebel forces for two years over this issue, until it was put down in 1900.

Some infrastructure was built in the colonial period, most notably a railroad was built, and expansions of agriculture were encouraged. However, not much was done in the way of economic development during the early half of the twentieth century, and much of Sierra Leone remained relatively poor. Diamond mining, which was to have an enormous impact on Sierra Leone in the future, did not begin in earnest until the second half of the century. While British power was still concentrated mostly in Freetown, by this time the colonial administration controlled the entire country, even though tribal chiefs still held some power in the rural areas of the interior.

After the end of World War II, the British began allowing more self-government to the colony. In 1951 a new constitution was implemented, universal suffrage was established in the colony, and Sierra Leone was granted a degree of self-rule. In 1961 Sierra Leone became an independent nation.

### III. Independence

The early years of independence were marked by political instability. When Sierra Leone gained independence from the United Kingdom, the first Prime minister was Milton Margai. He was succeeded by Sir Albert Mergai. Albert Mergai was considered corrupt, and his policies were criticized as being slanted in favor of the Mende tribe. In the elections of 1967, Siaka Stevens became the next Prime minister. But his time in office was short: within hours a military coup forcibly removed him from office. In 1968 another military coup seized the government from the members of the previous coup, and the government changed hands again. In that same year, yet another coup was staged, and

the government changed hands a third time: the parliament was restored, and Siaka Stevens was re-installed as Prime minister. In following years were marked by ethnic violence and unhappiness with what was still perceived by many a corrupt government.

In 1971, Parliament voted to change the nation into a republic, and Siaka Stevens became President instead of Prime minister. Stevens kept his government in power by the firm use of force, sometimes with the assistance of foreign troops. Another coup was attempted in 1974, but failed, and the leaders were executed. In 1978 the constitution was abandoned, and a new one adopted that made Steven's party the only legal political party: Sierra Leone had become a one-party state. This party ruled into the 1990s. Stevens retired, and was succeeded by Major General Joseph Saidu Momoh, Stevens's own choice. Those who attempted to overthrow it were executed. In 1991, a multi-party system was finally established by President Momoh, at the urging of his advisors.

#### IV. Civil War

“A series of corrupt and ineffective regimes created disenchanting citizenry, opening the door to revolution and anarchy. Infrastructure was allowed to deteriorate and the army and police became bastions of patronage rather than effective forces. When foreign elements from Liberia and Libya trained and funded the RUF and its leaders, the government was too weak to respond to what should have been an easily destroyed revolt.<sup>1</sup>”

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In 1991 the Revolutionary United Front, or RUF, began a rebellion in Sierra Leone, sparking a decade long civil war. This war was brutal, and involved some of the worst atrocities and human rights violations in recent history. Entire villages were slaughtered by roving bands of fighters. Prisoner's legs and arms were hacked off in a brutal terror campaign of mutilation. Children were forced by RUG soldiers to kill their own parents in order to brutalize them; these children were then recruited into the RUF army. Child soldiers were used by both sides, the RUF and the Sierra Leonean Army. Atrocities were committed by both sides. Approximately 50,000 people lost their lives to the war, and another 500,000 were displaced from their homes.

The civil war was started when the RUF crossed into Sierra Leone from Liberia, and began attacking villages. The RUF was founded by Foday Sankoh, a former Sierra Leonean army officer, with the help of Liberian warlord Charles Taylor. Sankoh and Taylor had met previously during guerilla warfare training in Libya. In exchange for his military and logistical support he gave to the RUF, Sankoh provided Taylor with diamonds from seized mines in Sierra Leone. RUF control of diamond mining kept their rebellion financed, and perpetuated the war.

The national government was weak, and unable to handle the RUF. By 1995 RUF forces held most of the nation in their control, and were on the doorstep of Freetown. Between 1991 and 1995, several military coups were carried out by members of the military against the national government, due to frustration of over its inability to stop the RUF. In 1995 the national government finally able to drive the RUF back for a time, but only by hiring foreign mercenaries. However, the civil war continued.

In 1997, another coup took over the government, this time led by the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council, supporters of the RUF. Major General Johnny Paul Koroma, the leader of the council, took power, and became a virtual dictator. He abolished all political parties, the constitution, and freedom of speech. He even invited the RUF to join him in ruling the country. The United Nations imposed sanctions on the new government. A military force from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), led by Nigeria, was sent into Sierra Leone to stop Koroma and the RUF. Rebel and ECOWAS troops fought in Freetown, displacing thousands of residents of the city, who fled for their lives to escape the fighting. ECOWAS forces restored the republic and drove the RUF, once again, back to the countryside. In 1999 ECOWAS withdrew from Sierra Leone.

Also in 1999, an uneasy peace agreement was signed by Sankoh of the RUF and the president of Sierra Leone, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah. United Nations peacekeeping forces were sent in to restore order and to keep the peace. But RUF fighters attacked the peacekeepers, taking 500 of them hostage. The peace agreement collapsed, and the war continued. The RUF was again on the doorstep of Freetown, and were poised to take over the capitol. At this point, the United Kingdom unilaterally dispatched its own military forces to Sierra Leone. They helped to evacuate foreign nationals and to secure Freetown. Subsequently, the Sierra Leonean Army and UN Peacekeepers, led by British Forces, started a major offensive against the RUF, and finally began disarming the rebels. By 2002, most of the country had at last been pacified.

## V. Post Civil War

In 2002 elections were once again held in Sierra Leone, and President Kabbah was re-elected. Diamond production in Sierra Leone since the end of the war has increased tenfold from \$10,000,000 per year to \$100,000,000. No longer in the hands of the RUF, the diamond trade may be an economic boon of the nation, in spite of lingering corruption. Time will only tell if Sierra Leone will remain politically stable enough for infrastructure to be created, and for the economy to build itself up.

The new government, working with the United Nations, set up a court to try those responsible for the war, for war crimes, and crimes against humanity. The court was established in Freetown. Foday Sankoh was indicted, along with many other RUF leaders. In 2006, former Liberian President and warlord Charles Taylor was extradited to Sierra Leone to face charges. As of this writing, he is being held in The Hague, and his trial is just beginning. Several members Armed Forces Revolutionary Council have also been convicted by the court. Among the atrocities the defendants are charged with are: collective punishments, murder, rape, terrorism, extermination, outrages against personal dignity, enslavement, pillage, and conscripting children into armed forces.

In order to sustain the new found peace in Sierra Leone, the current democratically elected republic will have to be strong enough to provide law and order, stop rebellions, and repel foreign invaders. In an effort to secure the new government, the Sierra Leonean army is attempting to professionalize. With the help of British advisors,

they are building a professional standing army strong enough to deter any further rebellions, or attempts at destabilization by outside influences. Sierra Leone's future is uncertain. After years of civil war, and decades of political corruption, it stands in a new position. The prospects for a peaceful and democratic future for the nation are better than ever, but to sustain this peace will be a difficult task.

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