

Why was africa colonised in the years 1870-1914



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The colonisers included the vast majority of the major imperial powers of Europe - Britain, France, Russia and Germany. There are various motives for colonisation during this period and include not only the economic and political state of Europe, but also less documented reasons such as religious beliefs and feelings of social supremacy.

We shall examine each motive separately and then examine whether there was any interdependency within them. The Berlin West Africa Conference (1884-1885) saw the partitioning of Africa amongst the European nations after the speedy 'Scramble for Africa' during the period 1870-1914. The Portuguese colonised both Mozambique and Angola, in southern Africa, whilst South-western Africa, along with Tanganyika in East Africa were under German rule. The Congo was under King Leopold II's rule (eventually Belgian) and Senegal, Cameroon, and several other colonies in the western Sudan and Central Africa were gained by France. However it was Great Britain that colonised vast areas of Africa - Kenya, Uganda in East Africa, the Gold Coast (now known as Ghana) and present day Nigeria in West Africa were all under its rule.

In addition to this, the British already controlled Egypt, which they had occupied in 1882, as well as Cape Colony and Natal in South Africa. Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) came under British power through the workings of Cecil Rhodes. It can be said that the actions of the years 1870-1914 started the series of events that eventually allowed for complete partitioning of the African continent at the Berlin West Africa Conference. The most obvious reason for the colonisation of Africa by European great powers was the new ease with which this could be done. This

was derived from the great increase in the sector of industry and the move away from agriculture.

The booming steel industry led to the manufacture of steamships reinforced with iron, artillery and other weapons which enabled the swifter and further movement of colonisers and settlers. Efficient guns and hand held weapons meant that the Europeans were able to use force over the indigenous peoples. Machine guns in particular aided rapid colonisation as a fewer number of settlers were able to control a large area of land. Medical advances also aided colonisation - malaria was found to be a big problem for white settlers as they had not been there long enough to acquire immunity. Now, the discovery of quinine in the barks of Cinchona trees and mastery of its extraction allowed settlers to remain in the area they had colonised. Thus, areas previously thought inhabitable were accessible for the first time.

Discoverexamples of expressed powersCommunications were also improved during this period - telegraph poles and railways both helped in the faster movement of both ideas and goods into the new colonies once established. Technological advances meant a growing domestic urban population many of whom had relatively large disposable incomes, and so there was a greater demand for goods not found or farmed in the cold climes of Europe. Products such as tea and coffee were suddenly in demand and this rise meant that the traditional methods of trade i.

e. non-western producers supplying for western buyers, could not meet with demand. Colonialism led to European science and technology infiltrating these areas of trade leading to increased production and greater efficiency.

The new technology required materials found mainly in the remote parts of Africa and the Pacific in order to be more efficient and economical.

For example, cotton was shipped from India, and rubber from the Congo for engines and machinery. In terms of these types of good, Africa was indeed wealthy. From rubber found in the Congo, to the lucrative gold and diamonds mined in South Africa, the continent was a lucrative investment. Greater industrialisation can also lead to market saturation - indeed the requirement for new markets can also be thought of as a factor promoting colonial expansion. There are many examples where colonising countries have entered the markets of relatively 'undeveloped' country such as Africa and introduce products much cheaper than the country is able to produce itself with the condition that the coloniser 'helps themselves' to free trade. However, what were the motives behind such movement? One of the most controversial proposed reasons has been the economy.

In theory, controlling a land that is rich in cheap raw materials would mean denying it to its competitors, not to mention the fact that once manufactured, the coloniser then had a brand new market to infiltrate. This coupled with the fact that colonies seemed to be a superb area of potential investment and, in some cases, fresh for exploitation, meant that the economic argument had a strong hold. This is a view held by the liberal socialists who considered that colonisation could only be prompted by the greed of capitalists for ever cheaper materials, land and labour. However, if this was the main reason for the new imperialism, why was the Sahara Desert, a vast yet immensely barren landmass, colonised by the French? What possible economic reasons could have culminated in this event?

Indeed, another example comes from Great Britain who, in 1913, at the end of this period, still had more capital invested in the USA than in any of its colonies worldwide. Clearly capital export was not fundamentally tied to new colonisation.

There must have been additional impetus for colonisation. Let us examine the political situation in Europe in the late 19th century. The British Foreign Secretary, George Canning said in 1826, ' new worlds were being called in to redress the imbalance of the old'. This quote is apt in describing the political unrest in Europe at this time.

The German states were finally united in 1871 when Chancellor Otto van Bismark led Prussia to success through the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. This meant that Germany (Prussia) was now a large and empowered country whilst France, having been defeated by Germany and thus losing its position as a great European power, sought compensation for its wounds. Unable to occupy European countries, France was forced to seek success further a field. France already held slave-trading ports in Western Africa, namely in Senegal and Algeria, in which they now exerted their influence to extend their holdings both east and southwards. Thus, the sequence of events began which is now known as the ' scramble for Africa' began.

Chancellor Bismark was also not keen on the colonisation of distant lands so even though Germany was now a very powerful European nation, they did not gain large areas of Africa. It was only in 1881 due to pressure from businessmen and nationalists did Bismark change his policy but by this time, much of Africa had already been occupied. It is also thought the

industrialisation and uneven economic growth occurring during and before the 1870s had provoked a domestic unrest throughout Europe. The scientific socialism introduced by Karl Marx in the mid 19th century was facing some serious problems and was being undermined by reforms and revolts. As a result, government and political leaders facing serious domestic social conflicts may have tried to divert the attention to the imperial conquests in an attempt to diffuse national tensions and avoid significant domestic reform.

The general belief was that with mass support a greater domestic prosperity and social stability would eventually result. Another great motive for colonisation is as a strategy to benefit or protect previous investments. In particular, British colonisation during the years 1870-1914 is commonly thought to be a safeguard against the sea routes to the 'Jewel in its Crown', India. After the Congress of Vienna, Britain acquired the Cape Colony in South Africa, which was a very important port on the shipping route to India. However following the building of the Suez Canal in 1867, a construction opposed by Great Britain, the route was much more direct, avoiding the Cape Colony completely.

All but the largest boats were capable of using it to travel from the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea. Britain was in danger of losing its monopoly of trade with India. As the Suez Canal was built on Egyptian territory, Britain became the biggest shareholder in the Egyptian business but the power was still held by the Suez Canal Company. However, by 1882 Britain became alarmed by a nationalist group in Egypt, which threatened the ruling Egyptian powers including the Suez Canal Company. With both its

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investments in the country and its control over the Suez Canal in jeopardy, Great Britain had no choice but to occupy the country and so hold some control over the situation.

The only other alternative would be to admit defeat, which in this case would mean not only evacuating Egypt but also endangering their Indian colony. Following the Egyptian occupation, slowly the rest of the East coast of Africa was also occupied by British colonies in order to protect the Indian Ocean sea routes. British settlers also found gold and diamonds in the interior of Africa so Great Britain's interest turned from the coast to inland areas of the continent or from strategic motives to economic ones. However, one must consider also the demography of Europe at this time. During the years of the New Imperialism, the great powers of Europe felt that they were advanced peoples.

Non-European societies were poor, ignorant and backward, if not corrupt and degraded. By contrast, western society had proved itself by its successes in technology and science. The merits of the western society were self-evident and so transmission was clearly advantageous. This opinion of the inferiority of Africans had been ingrained in the European communities by the slave trade of the previous century - over 90% of slaves were of African descent. Thus, it was the duty of the west to aid those less fortunate than themselves such as the indigenous peoples of Africa. This belief is best summarized in the poem by Rudyard Kipling - entitled 'The White Mans Burden' in which feelings of weariness at the duties given to the Europeans to improve the non-White people are expressed.

These patronising ideas were, of course, highlighted through the media coverage of the expeditions of the explorers of the time such as David Livingstone. Many felt a humanitarian pull towards colonisation in order to help these backward nations and better their circumstances by infiltration of the fruits of the western success such as laws, institutions and education. Religion also played a part - many European countries wanted to spread their beliefs and eliminate others in another attempt to better those 'less fortunate than themselves'. The Roman Catholic countries were the first to participate vigorously in this doctrinarian, however, Protestant countries soon followed suite. The actual impact of the Christian religion on the new colonies was varied. Some parts of West and South Africa fully converted to Christianity, although in regions where the missionaries attempts had been futile, the churches involved did not give up but used the involvement of the African secular state power to their advantage.

In the majority of places, the indigenous people combined the new doctrine with their existing beliefs and culture, an example being the Maya people. This fuelled the European belief that their mission was an achievable one. It is important to note however, that these ideas were seen to be a justification to the masses 'at home' rather than actually instigating the colonisation itself. These humanitarian motives were sometimes highly inconsistent with the events of the past. For example, David Livingstone in the mid 19th century brought home evidence that there was a flourishing Arab trade in Eastern and central Africa.

Great Britain then reasoned that government intervention control and eradication was the only way to make sure that the slave trade remained a

thing of the past, yet just the century before, Britain herself had been one of the main leader of this trade. Of course, in reality, Britain's increased influence over Africa meant that they were able to gain control and prevent such trade. It is important to note that the concept of a nation state as imposed by the Europeans was unfamiliar to African peoples and they did not have a system with which to unite their tribes in order to campaign for independence against the threat. In addition to this, North African governments were experiencing some instability at this time and this opened up the land for colonisation as well. Thus by the end of the year 1914, it was only Ethiopia which remained an independent state - the remaining 90% being under European rule. Great Britain was the greatest coloniser holding much of South and Eastern Africa including Gambia, Sierra Leone, Egypt, Sudan and South Africa.

However, in terms of sheer landmass, France had the largest holdings over three million square miles including Algeria, Morocco, Senegal and Western Sudan. Much of the mileage, can, however, be attributed to the Sahara Desert. The Portuguese, the Germans and the Italians also took advantage of the general partition of African territory. It is difficult to determine whether New Imperialism was a result of pure economic reasons.

Although we have explored other motives, it seems that boosting of the economy was a compelling reason for all of the great European powers - cheaper raw materials, new markets and areas to invest, all highlight the economic benefits. Of course, behind this reasoning is the fact that technology and medicine was advancing at such a previously unprecedented rate. However, it may be argued that although economic reasons provided

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the impetus for colonisation during the years of 1870-1914, the driving force behind the moves were the political and demographical instability of the domestic nation as well as its competitors. Had France not sought compensation for its defeat against Germany and not been resentful of British maritime superiority during previous years, the Scramble for Africa may not have occurred at this time or at least not as in earnest as it did. The other reasons we have explored such as religious beliefs and humanitarian causes contributed also - the fact that territory was held even after its prosperity had been lost demonstrated this. However, de-colonisation was a result of the holding of territory so suggesting that the European economical situation was the main reason for colonisation.

It is important to note that one is unable to take the events of 1870-1914 as a stand-alone period of colonisation - the Berlin West Africa Conference consolidated the way in which Africa was partitioned and gave clues as to the initial momentum behind colonisation. Simple prestige may have played a more important role than is first apparent - during the Conference many European powers again rushed to make claims to as yet un-colonised regions of Africa with little consideration as to the areas wealth in terms of materials and market. The colonisation of Africa during the years 1870-1914 can thus be said to be due to a culmination of all of the aforementioned motives with only technological advances being the initial impetus.