

# The colonisation to decolonisation



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

How far do you agree that changing attitudes to Empire within Britain explain both the expansion and dismantling of British Imperial power in Africa?

The years 1870-1980 marked the drastic change from the colonisation to decolonisation. Britain's imperial power began in 1870 through which they had managed to conquer over 5 million square miles of land. The expansion of empire was one which was caused by international rivalry and the continuous attitude in Britain, taking decision which would benefit empire. However this all came to an end in 1957 when Britain's first colony gained independence. The turning point towards decolonisation unarguably is World War 2 but the main cause was economic failure. Britain was no longer able to afford such a large empire.

Britain's involvement in North Africa was a great scramble between both Britain and France, in order to gain Egypt. Britain became aware of the fact that in the late-nineteenth century the decline in the Ottoman Empire may lead to all its possession in North Africa falling in to the hands of rival European powers. In 1860 Palmerstone summed up British policy towards empire by stating: 'we do not want to have Egypt... what we wish about Egypt is that it should be attached to the Turkish Empire, which is security against its belonging to another European power'.<sup>[1]</sup> This made it evident that Britain did not really need to include Africa into the British Empire, but it was the threat of competition that instigated Britain to keep Egypt away from the reach of other European powers. What this suggested was that, it was international rivalry which caused Britain's involvement in North Africa. If France did not show such a keen interest then Britain would never have

decided to break in. Although it has been argued that there was a strong Anglo- British relationship for much of this period, it all came to an end by 1882 when Britain became 'the government of Egypt' [2]and an end was put to their dual control. Britain's change in becoming the government of Egypt came upon as in 1882 there was an Egyptian nationalist movement, at one stage law and order in Egypt had virtually collapsed. It was the riot in Alexandria which caused the death of 50 Europeans which prompted the British government to order the formal occupation of Egypt. It was evident from this that attitudes were not changing in Britain, Britain always did what they found to benefit them economically and got involved which they continued to do with the help of imperial rivalry.

International rivalry was unarguably one of the major factors which caused Britain to penetrate Africa. The colonisation of Africa from other European powers was seen as an attempt to emulate Britain's rise in Great power, something which Britain clearly objected to. From 1882, as the partition of Egypt took action and other European interest began, Britain did not hesitate to do the same. However other factors such as 'men on the spot' have been argued on numerous accounts as being the reason for British involvement. Men like Cecil Rhodes in South Africa, Peter and McKinnon in East Africa, and George Goldie in West Africa stand as an example of such a situation. It has been debated quite often that if it wasn't for these men Britain would not have gotten involved in Africa. Yet in reality it was evident that Britain had no great involvement in any colony, until they were aware of other European powers involvement.

West Africa was a group of colonies in which Britain's involvement was partially due to international rivalry. Britain's informal arrangement in West Africa was threatened by the involvement of France, Germany and Belgium. France's decision to expand was due to their already existing colony at Senegal. There was more pressure on Britain when in 1885 King Leopold of the Belgians set up the Congo Free State in order to exploit the rubber free industry. Furthermore in 1884 Germany's seizure of Togoland and the Cameroons complicated the situation. To settle the matter and to ease tensions between all participating countries, Germany, France and Britain decided to confer in the Berlin conference of 1884. The treaty, which was then signed in 1885, stated that there should be free trade in the Congo basin. The treaty took into consideration the interest Britain held in Niger, and laid down future annexation of territory in Africa. After the conference, in order for any European power to grab land, it was necessary that all the other European powers were informed of the claim they had on it. This made it evident that attitudes in Britain were not changing it was a continuing process as Britain would and always have taken actions which would be to an economic benefit. In addition to this it was there 'determination not to allow other European states to grab land that might threaten their trade' increased. Again this showed that there were not any major changes in attitude as Britain was always most likely to do what was in their economic and here it was to prevent other colonies from taking something which was of value to them.

The partition of East Africa was another 'men on the spot factor', in which the Britain played no apparent part up until the partition. The main man on the

spot here was Sir William McKinnon who built his success through shipping trade. McKinnon believed that East Africa had enormous economic potential. McKinnon set up the Imperial British East Africa Company to attract investment. He was faced by a German explorer Karl Peters, who in competition founded the German East Africa Company. Unlike McKinnon Peters had backing for his efforts from Bismarck. When Britain gained knowledge of Germany's intervention, equal support was given to McKinnon. As a result of such rivalry East Africa was split in to a British and German division between 1885 and 1895. Although the partition of Africa was greatly seen as a 'men on the spot factor', it was clear that Britain did not play a part in East Africa until Germany's intervention, although McKinnon was there from before he had not had full support of the government. This suggests that imperial rivalry was the main factor. Equally it shows that attitudes in Britain were changing Britain was no longer laid back about the partition of Africa. From this is possible to draw out that Britain did not want a long commitment or even to invest in East Africa it as they found it to be worthless. It is evident that there was still a continuity of Britain only becoming involved due to imperial rivalry, and making sure they had the prestige of the largest Empire.

The process of decolonisation is one which begun after world war two. After war Britain was under enormous debts and believed that it was unable to deliver the empire with economic advantages as what it had done before the war, the war had changed Britain's status from a 'creditor to a debtor'[4] , so decided it best to let go. Again the process of decolonisation was not a change in attitudes but a continuous process which was undergone taking in

account the strategic and economic advantages of such a large Empire. The scramble of Africa by 1980 had come to an end.

The Suez crisis is another factor which I believe lead to decolonisation.

Britain was already vulnerable after world war two and the economy was heavily crippled thus when in 1957 Nasser's decision to nationalise was something which enhanced British economic issues. It was evident after this that Britain had become weaker than ever and would have to let go of the empire in order to still consolidate what it already had. This again makes it evident that it was not changing attitudes but a continuous decision taken by elites in Britain in to do what was economically beneficial for themselves.

In addition to this McMillan's wind of speech in 1960 is seen to have marked a change, that the process of decolonisation would begin soon. " The winds of change is blowing through the continent and whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact" McMillan's speech suggested that there was an evident increase in nationalism which could not be ignored. This also suggested that Britain by all means had understood that there was a rise in patriotism and were economically unstable to put up a fight to try and control this. However it has been commented by Darwin that 'decolonisation was the continuation of empire by another means' it is possible to judge from this that decolonisation was a continuous decision made to benefit Britain as always.

Furthermore The Mau Mau rebellion in 1952 in Kenya was a major nationalist up rise, in which there was an urgent push for independence. Britain at this stage for forced to increase its military commitment in Kenya. But still were

not willing to consider independence for Kenya[5]. This suggested that although there was a rise in nationalism Britain were not by any means going to back down on what they had, it was simply due the economic crisis they had faced which forced them to let go.

1957 marked the first independence of any African colony: Ghana. Ghana's rise in nationalism has been much argued a reason as to why Britain granted them independent easily. Similar to Kenya it was evident Britain was economically crippled by war and had to focus more at home in order to bring Britain's strength back.

To conclude it was evident that the process of colonisation was due to Britain's fear of international rivalry, Britain could not face losing something of great importance to them to a rival. In addition to this decolonisation was the continuous decision made by elites in order to favour the economic status of Britain. Similarly the process of decolonisation was due to Britain's economic crisis, it was evident after world war two and the Suez Crisis that Britain's economy had been crippled and were no longer able to afford a large Empire, and thus decolonisation began.

1. The British Empire 1815-1914 McDonough 2008.
2. The British empire 1815-1914 McDonough 2008.
3. British imperial and foreign policy John Aldred pg 5.
4. The British Empire 1815-1914 McDonough 2008.
5. British Imperial and Foreign Policy 1846-1980 John Aldred.