

Imperialism

Politics



The rationale behind the British, French, German and Italy's imperial expansion into Africa is the of debate. Some political historians argue the rationale to be purely economic, while others insist that it was primarily political. The colonial powers themselves sought to explain their actions in ethical and moral terms. Within the context of this particular explanation, they were motivated by the imperatives of penetrating the darkness that was Africa through the extension of knowledge, education, religion and civilization (Roshwald, 1994). Needless to say, the aforementioned explanation has been largely dismissed as baseless and little more than a transparent attempt to legitimize the overt exploitation of an entire continent and population. Indeed, a critical analysis of available facts indicates that imperial expansion was initially motivated by economic considerations but soon assumed a political rationale.

Imperialism was initiated by economic imperatives. By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a number of British and European companies had begun to expand abroad, chief amongst which was the East India Company (Penrose, 1975). These companies, all of whom represented the economic interest of the British and European elite and ruling classes, were eventually confronted by local and national resistance to their interests. In order to secure the interests of these companies and, in turn, that of the governing elite, Britain initiated the phenomenon of colonialism (Penrose, 1975).

Through the economic, political and military domination of foreign territories, Britain position itself to secure and promote the interests of the companies in question.

Just as imperialism was instigated by economic imperatives, expansion into Africa was motivated by the bid for economic growth and the accumulation

of wealth. As Western European nations, chief amongst which was Britain, experienced economic growth and increased productivity levels, they confronted two imperatives. The first was the expansion of the available market for their goods and the second was the creation of a source for cheap raw materials. Africa, not to mention India of course, was identified as the ideal answer to both of these needs. It had plentiful of raw materials and through outright political and economic domination, Britain could both control the price of these raw materials and guarantee a monopoly for its manufactured goods (Penrose, 1975). It is in direct response to these economic needs that Britain penetrated Africa.

Imperialism soon acquired a political rationale, however. As the British Empire grew, so did Britain's power and, of course, its status amongst other European nations. To counter the ever-growing British political and economic might, it was contingent upon other European powers to embark upon empire-building (Roshwald, 1994). It is precisely with this in mind that France and, later, Germany and Italy, engaged in empire-building, inciting the so-called scramble for Africa. The implication here is that even though imperialism was a primarily economic phenomenon, it gradually acquired a political rationale.

Proceeding from the above argued, it is apparent the economic considerations constituted the primary rationale for imperialism. As imperialism directly contributed to the increasing economic, hence, political power of the imperial nation, it was impossible for France, Germany or Italy to watch Britain's power grow as they remained passive. It was, thus, that they similarly embarked upon empire-building. In other words, there was a political rationale to imperialism. That being said, however, the economic

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motive superseded all others and, accordingly, emerges as the primary rationale for the colonisation of Africa.

Bibliography

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