

# The british empire in africa

[History](#), [Empires](#)



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

The British Empire began to expand into Africa in 1880 and by 1913 the empire had control over 458 million people and 25% of the world's land. However by 1981 the British Empire had come to an end after it could no longer afford the maintenance of such a big Empire. British involvement in Africa was a period that saw many changes, some economic, some international and political changes, which in turn led to many adjustments in Africa itself. In turn these changes affected attitudes of the British government and public opinion and undoubtedly influenced key decisions about both expansion and dismantlement in Africa.

Britain's first intervention in Africa occurred in Egypt. Egypt was part of the Turkish Empire in 1882 but discontent led to national revolts that scared Britain. Following the purchase of the Suez Canal shares in 1875, British financial and trading interests had grown in the area. Britain could not allow her investments in Egypt jeopardized, as Egypt was a vital route to India. As a consequence of trying to protect these investments Britain occupied Egypt for 40 years longer than anti imperialist Gladstone had hoped. This resulted in further territorial control for Britain; unconsciously Gladstone had expanded the British Empire and ignited the change from informal rule to formal occupation in North Africa. This was all necessary as it was done to protect economic interests of the empire, as well as securing the route to India.

The expansion into the Sudan was comparable to that of Egypt as it was unintentional. Once again Britain got drawn in due to an uprising in the area. Gladstone's first initiative was to put down this unrest as he sent General Gordon who was an experienced and valued soldier to evacuate British and Egyptian nationals from the Sudan to prevent any harm from occurring to them. In spite of this General Gordon disobeyed these orders with an intention of acquiring more land for the empire, resulting in his team and himself getting slaughtered two days before a British force was sent to help them. Expansion of the empire at this point was coincidental and unanticipated as the expansion in North Africa was the outcome of an unplanned policy to exploit economic benefits and ensure stability in the regions to care for British economic interests. However it was a turning point in attitudes towards Africa as the occupation of Egypt resulted in the scramble for Africa between European powers.

Expansion remained informal . However ' Men on the spot' such as Cecil Rhodes, George Goldie and Sir William McKinnon influenced the central government and built their own success through shipping trade and selling natural resources. Britain wanted the West Coast of Africa for its palm oil. The palm oil resources of West Africa were appealing as palm oil was used as an industrial lubricant and was the base for soaps and candles. However this involvement was not one of formal rule but rather informal trade.

It is significant that Britain was only involved for economic reasons and did not possess any ideology of expanding to the west. Britain took control of West Africa simply because the region was unstable due to local resistance

and interests of other European powers. In 1885 Chamberlain sent in a British force to support George Goldie in order to secure the region for British interests against both the Ashanti and the French John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, in their review of *The Imperialism of Free Trade*, Vol. VI, no. 1 (1953) emphasise the economic importance of informal empire to the British government. Nevertheless Britain was in a dilemma, as it could no longer conform to its informal rule if other European powers established their control over West Africa. This resulted in further reluctant expansion and increased support for men on the spot, as Britain could not allow other European countries to control land in West Africa, which could threaten their trade interests. Britain was once again driven into East Africa due to trade benefits and fear of European rivals, immense competition from Germany resulted in Britain giving support for McKinnon to establish the East Africa Company to combat the German East Africa Company. The change in the government's attitudes was a result of seeking to save the empire due to the vast competition it was experiencing at the time.

Cecil Rhodes was the most dominant individual in the push for British expansion in South Africa. He was a member of the Cape parliament . It was clear that his vision was to expand the empire across all of Africa as he saw this as his sense of imperial destiny. His expansion in South Africa was well planned however this time the British government supported the expansion as Rhodes was able to persuade the British government to grant a charter to form the British African company. This was a transformation as the central government was supporting this expansion to South Africa, it was Joseph Chamberlain who encouraged Rhodes in acquiring more land. The

government actively supported him, as they needed to prevent other European power from having influence and power in the area and also they realized the massive economical benefits of South Africa.

This led to a disagreement between the Boers who were descendants of the Dutch settlers in South Africa and the British. The Boers resented the policies of Joseph Chamberlain, which they thought he would remove their chance of independence and also they loathed the British for taking their natural resources like gold and minerals. Thus with equipment from the Germans the war between the Boers and the British had flared. This war would have damaging effects on both sides as the Boers land got destroyed and many were sent to horrendous concentration camps, but the repercussions of this event would have a profound effect on the dismantling of the Empire as British view on empire changed and the general public were starting to doubt if the empire was morally good for Africa and opinions shifted away from the previous acceptance and pride felt by many in the country. The expansion into South Africa made the British Empire seem weak as she was asserting power on undeveloped people.

During World War one the African colonies played a major part in the war effort and their resources were much needed by Britain. At this point there was a change within the British Empire as the value of its colonies became apparent. After WW1 the metropolitan attitudes to empire changed, as many politicians believed that the empire was solely based around economic interests and partnership. This was enforced greatly following WW1 as Britain's economic situation had worsened and national debts had increased

to a staggering \$4000 million, which meant undoubtedly the help and cooperation of the colonies was needed. At this point the empire was becoming an economic burden on the government, as the cost of war was unbearable, this contributed to the decline of the empire. WW2 had the same economic impact on the empire as it weakened it from its foundations which then resulted in Britain losing her position as world leader due to no longer being economically capable of handling such a empire.

Britain wanted to influence post war developments in Africa so that it was beneficial to metropolitan investors however this was not able to occur due to the increased nationalism in African colonies such as Kenya, where the Mau Mau rebelled against British occupation and rule. Revolts by the Mau Mau made investors in 1950 unenthusiastic about investing in the area.

Consequently this led to nationalist pressure in the push forward for independence. Robert Tignor in *Capitalism and Nationalism At the End of Empire: State and Business in Decolonizing Egypt, Nigeria, and Kenya, 1945-1963* (1998) argues that it was 'neither foreign nor local business that were key players' but this national movement that contributed to the dismantlement of the British empire. A direct impact of the economic failures experienced by Britain after the world war was that it helped fuel national movements such as the Mau Mau. As new ideas of self-determination and international climate attitude became more apparent after World War I and World War 2. This then reinforced the anti-imperial trend and encouraged growth in nationalism in Africa as the colonies began the push for independence. This then hastened the dismantlement of the British Empire.

The rate of decolonisation was drastically accelerated because of the Suez crisis of 1956. Due to Nasser nationalizing the Suez Canal Britain and France invaded Egypt with the hope of replacing Nasser and taking control of the canal. These actions had a massive backlash on British prestige as the United States condemned their actions. Subsequently it resulted in the British withdrawing from Egypt, which highlighted Britain's fragileness. This turn in the balance of power scared Eden, as he still believed there was space on the world stage for the British Empire however he was mistaken, as the Suez crisis was the last straw in British imperialism as it changed the balance of world power considerably. Britain was no longer the dominant power and consolation and approval from the United States was needed before the government could take any major decisions. This was a major blow to the empire's reputation and power, this loss of faith accelerated the dismantlement of the British Empire. This was seen through the change in politics in London as Eden resigned and a new modern Prime Minister was appointed. Harold Macmillan's modern and progressive prospective would accelerate the decolonisation of Africa, as unlike Eden he did not support imperialism and realized that the empire could no longer deliver the same economic benefits as before. Macmillan's shift in political opinion resulted in him addressing the South African parliament in 1960 with his wind of change speech. This speech would have a huge impact on the decolonisation of the empire as it was seen as an indication that the central government had accepted that Britain could no longer have imperial possessions. This was apparent in the rapid granting of independence for the African colonies.[1] Libya gained independence in 1951 and Egypt in 1952 and were the first

African nations to gain independence. In 1957 Ghana was the first country south of the Sahara to gain independence. This period in time marked a quick decolonisation as indicated by the attached map, as fourteen African countries gained their independence in 1960. By 1966, all but six African countries were independent and the dismantlement in these countries would be different as it was not rapid but prolonged. One of these countries was Zimbabwe, which was previously known as Rhodesia, it was a settler colony and the European settler community kept the mass of the population, which was African from seizing majority rule. The European settlers.

This resulted in aggressive nationalism, which was different to the rest of Africa. Subsequently it meant the prolonged granting of independence as Zimbabwe was finally independent in 1980.

Overall the view of empire among the public had changed dramatically over the hundred-year period. Attitudes had shifted from the previous patriotic view of empire to a realization that empire could not exist in the new modern world. This was a result of events such as the Wars Britain was involved in and the dramatic change in international view. It is evident that Britain did not intend on expanding the empire in 1880 and the reluctance of this expansion was apparent in the expansion into North Africa. However, once Britain realized the economic benefits of expanding their territories in Africa imperialism became much easier which then generated wide spread support for empire. Acquiring such beneficial land made Britain very weary of other countries as losing colonies in Africa would effectively result in a decrease in power and influence. This then resulted in the one major continuity in



imperial policy through out this period, which was the focus on protecting the empire's economic interests. The dismantlement of empire was fast paced as the empire had become more difficult to manage effectively. Empire was no longer being an economic benefit as it previously was in 1900, but more of an economic burden due to constantly trying to put down nationalism in Africa. The change in attitudes regarding the benefits empire in my opinion resulted in the decolonisation of these colonies and the end of an era in British rule.

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