

Industrial Rivalries And The Partition Of The World, c. 1870-1914

The spread of the Industrial Revolution from the British Isles to Continental Europe and North America greatly increased the already considerable advantages the Western powers possessed in manufacturing capacity and the ability to wage war relative to all other peoples and civilizations. These advantages resulted in ever higher levels of European - and American - involvement in the outside world and culminated in the virtually unchallenged domination of the globe by the Western powers by the last decades of the 19th century. Beginning in the 1870s, the Europeans indulged in an orgy of overseas conquests that reduced most of Africa, Asia, and the Pacific Ocean region to colonial possessions by the time of the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. During each year of that time period, an area larger than France was added to the empires of the different Western powers. By 1914 Europe and its colonial possessions occupied over 80 percent of the inhabitable lands of the earth. Areas not annexed directly, such as China and Persia, were forcibly "opened" to European trade and investment, and divided into informal "spheres of influence" of the various Western nations. The remaking of the world economic order to industrial Europe's specifications was completed. According to the new global division of labor, Europe and increasingly North America provided finance and machine capital, entrepreneurial and managerial talent, and manufactured goods. The rest of the world provided raw materials for Europe's factories, cheap labor, and abundant, if not always fertile, land. Thus, it was not without reason that the Europeans ultimately came to regard themselves as the "lords of humankind."

Though science and industry gave the Europeans the capacity to run roughshod over the rest of the world, they also heightened economic competition and political rivalries between the European powers. In the first half of the 19th century industrial Britain, with its seemingly insurmountable naval superiority, was left alone to dominate overseas trade and empire building. By the last decades of the century, Belgium, France, and especially Germany and the United States were challenging Britain's industrial supremacy and actively building (or in the case of France, adding to) colonial empires of their own. Many of the political leaders of these expansive nations viewed the possession of colonies as an essential attribute of states that aspired to great-power status. Colonies were also seen as insurance against raw material shortages and the loss of overseas market outlets to European or North American rivals.

Quarrels over the division of the colonial spoils were cited by those who sought to justify the arms buildup and general militarism of the age. Colonial rivalries greatly intensified the growing tension and paranoia that dominated great power interaction in the decades before World War I. As Europe divided into armed camps, successive crises over control of the Sudan, Morocco, and the Balkans (which the great powers treated very much like colonies) had much to do with the alliances that formed and the crisis mentality that contributed so much to the outbreak of the conflict in August, 1914.

Motives Behind The Global Scramble For Colonies

Through much of the 20th century, historians have argued about the reasons for the unprecedented drive for colonial expansion that seized Europe and, to a lesser extent, the United States in the last decades of the 19th century. The majority of those engaged in this often heated debate have tended to join one of two camps: those who favor a political explanation for the outburst of territorial aggrandizement, and those who argue that it was fundamentally economic in origin. The truth may well be found by combining the two views - by recognizing that political leaders, not just businessmen, had to take into account economic concerns when deciding to intervene in disputes or to annex territories in Africa, Asia, or the South Pacific. The British obsession with protecting strategic overseas naval stations, such as those in Malaya and in South Africa, for example, was linked to an underlying perception of growing threats to their Indian Empire. That empire was in turn more than just their "garrison in the east" and largest colonial possession. It was a major source of raw materials for British industries and a key outlet for both British manufactured goods and British overseas investment. Thus, political and economic motives were often impossible to separate; doing so unnecessarily oversimplifies and distorts our understanding of the forces behind the scramble for empire in the late 19th century.

It would also be a mistake to see a complete break between the pattern of European colonial expansion before and after 1870. Though a good deal more territory was annexed per year after that date, there were numerous colonial wars and additions to both the British and French empires all through the middle decades of the 19th century. One of the key differences between the two periods was that before 1870, Britain had only a weak France with which to compete in the outside world. This meant that the British were less likely than at the end of the century to be pushed into full-scale invasions and annexations because they feared that another European power was about to seize potentially valuable colonies. It also allowed the British to rely heavily on threats and gunboat raids rather than outright conquest to bring African kings or Asian emperors into line. With its "white" settler colonies (Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) and India, plus enclaves in Africa and Southeast Asia, the British already had all the empire they could handle. Most British

politicians were cautious about or firmly opposed to adding more colonies. The British were wary of French advances in various parts of the globe, which were usually made to restore France's great-power standing following setbacks in Europe. But the French were far too weak economically and too politically divided to contest Britain's naval mastery or its standing as the greatest colonial power.

Once Germany was united in 1871, and the German Empire and the United States began to pass Britain as industrial powers, the situation was significantly altered. India and the rest of the empire were now seen as essential to Britain's maintenance of its great-power standing. British politicians worried that if Britain stood still while the rest of the powers built up overseas empires, it would soon be supplanted as the number one naval and colonial power. The concern here was economic as well as strategic. The last decades of the 19th century were a period of recurring economic depressions in Europe and the United States. The leaders of the newly industrialized nations had little experience in handling the overproduction and unemployment that came with each of these economic crises. They were understandably deeply concerned about the social unrest and in some cases what appeared to them to be stirrings of revolution, that each phase of depression engendered. Some political theorists argued that as destinations to which unemployed workers might migrate and as potential markets for surplus goods, colonial possessions could serve as safety valves to release the pressure built up in times of industrial slumps.

Thus, although a colony seemed to be of little economic value when it was annexed, it could prove a valuable asset later on. Industrial Europe's growing need for raw materials gave added credence to this line of reasoning. Each power felt compelled to conquer and annex vast territories - which often consisted of scantily populated, arid lands - because it feared that otherwise a rival would take them. In letting a competitor grab what might prove to be a mineral-rich colony, Britain or Germany might be foreclosing on its future chances to remain a global power.

Competition among the great powers had much to do with another major cause of the late 19th-century scramble for colonial possessions. Britain's successful application of gunboat diplomacy and indirect control over African and Asian kingdoms in the early 19th century depended heavily on the existence of reasonably strong African and Asian leaders who could enforce the demands made by the Europeans. With the intensification of European rivalries in the late 19th century, these leaders attempted to play the powers off each other. This reduced the value of their cooperation and often prompted one of the powers to invade their lands, remove them from power, and find less troublesome collaborators. In addition, in many areas, but particularly in Africa, decades and even centuries of European economic penetration and political interference resulted in the disintegration of indigenous governments and societies as a whole. Lack of a local center of power through which to exert their control as well as threats by growing social dislocations in areas where one or more of the powers had a strong strategic or economic stake caused European policymakers to conclude that military intervention and formal annexation were their only option.

As these motives suggest, in the era of the scramble for colonial possessions, political leaders in Europe played a much more prominent role in decisions to annex overseas territories than they had earlier, even in the first half of the 19th century. In part, this was due to improved communications. Telegraphs and railways not only made it possible to transmit orders from the capitals of Europe to men-on-the-spot in the tropics much more rapidly, they allowed ministers in Europe to play a much more active role in the ongoing governance of the colonies. More than politicians were involved in late 19th-century decisions to add to the colonial empires. The jingoistic "penny" press and the extension of the vote to the lower middle and working classes through much of industrial Europe and in the United States made public opinion a major factor in foreign policy. Though stalwart explorers might on their own initiative make treaties with local African or Asian potentates who assigned their lands to France or Germany, these annexations had to be ratified by the home government. In most cases, ratification meant fierce parliamentary debates that often spilled over into press wars and popular demonstrations. Empires were no longer the personal projects of private trading concerns and ambitious individuals; they were the property and pride of the nations of Europe and North America.

Unequal Combat: Colonial Wars And The Apex Of Imperialism

Industrial change not only justified the Europeans' grab for colonial possessions, it made them much easier to acquire. By the last decades of the 19th century, scientific discoveries and technological innovations had catapulted the Europeans far ahead of all other peoples in the capacity to wage war. The Europeans could tap mineral resources that most peoples did not even know existed, and European chemists mixed ever more deadly explosives. Advances in metallurgy made possible the mass production of light and mobile artillery pieces that rendered suicidal the massed cavalry or infantry charges that were the mainstay of Asian and African armies. Advances in artillery were matched by great improvements in hand arms. Much more accurate and faster firing, breech-loading rifles replaced the clumsy muzzle-loading muskets of the first phase of empire building. By the 1880s, after decades of experimentation, the machine gun had become an effective battlefield weapon. Railroads gave the Europeans the mobility of the swiftest African or Asian horsemen as well as the ability to supply large armies in the field for extended periods of time. On the sea, Europe's already formidable advantages were awesomely increased by industrial transformations. After the opening of

the Suez canal in 1869, steam power supplanted the sail, iron hulls replaced wood, and massive guns, capable of hitting enemy vessels miles away, were introduced into the fleets of the great powers.

The dazzling array of new weaponry with which the Europeans set out on their expeditions to the Indian frontiers or the African "bush" made the wars of colonial conquest very lopsided affairs. This was particularly true when the Europeans encountered resistance from peoples, such as those in the interior of Africa or the Pacific islands, who had been cut off from most preindustrial advances in technology and thus fought the European machine guns with spears, arrows, and leather shields. One African leader, whose people struggled with little hope to halt the German advance into East Africa, resorted to natural imagery to account for the power of the invaders' weapons:

On Monday we heard a shuddering like Leviathan, the voice of many cannon; we heard the roar like waves of the rocks and rumble like thunder in the rains. We heard a crashing like elephants or monsters and our hearts melted at the number of shells. We knew that we were hearing the battle of Pangani; the guns were like a hurricane in our ears.

Not even peoples with advanced preindustrial technology and sophisticated military organization, such as the Chinese and Vietnamese, could stand against, or really comprehend, the fearful killing devices of the Europeans. In advising the Vietnamese emperor to give in to European demands, one of his officials, who had led the fight against the French invaders, warned:

Nobody can resist them. They go where they choose. . . . Under heaven, everything is feasible to them, save only the matter of life and death.

Despite the odds against them, African and Asian peoples often fiercely resisted the imposition of colonial rule. West African leaders, such as Samory and Ahmadou Sekou, held back the European advance for decades, and when rulers, such as the Vietnamese emperors, refused to fight, local officials organized guerrilla resistance in defense of the traditional regime. Martial peoples, such as the Zulus in South Africa, had the courage and discipline to face and defeat sizeable British forces in set piece (or conventional and critical) battles, such as that at Isandhlwana in 1879. But conventional resistance eventually ended in defeat: The guerrilla bands in Vietnam were eventually run to the ground; even at Isandhlwana, 3000 Zulus lost their lives in the massacre of 800 British and 500 African troops. In addition, within days of the Zulu victory, a tiny force of 120 British troops held off an army of three or four thousand Zulus. Given the European advantages in conventional battles, guerrilla resistance, sabotage, and, in some cases, banditry proved the most effective means of fighting the Europeans' attempts to assert political control. Religious leaders were often in the forefront of these struggles. The magic potions and divine assistance they offered for the protection of their followers seemed to be the only way to offset the demoralizing killing power of the Europeans' weapons.

However admirable the courage of those who resisted the European advance and despite temporary setbacks, by the eve of World War I in 1914 there was very little of the earth left for the Europeans to conquer. Excepting Ethiopia, all of Africa had been divided between the European powers. Maps of the continent became a patchwork of colors - red for Great Britain, green for France, blue for Germany, and so on. In Southeast Asia, only Siam remained independent, in part because Britain and France could not decide which of them should have it. The Americans had replaced the Spanish as the colonial overlords of the Philippines, and the Dutch were completing the conquest of the "outer islands" of the Indonesian archipelago. Even the island clusters of the Pacific had been divided among the hungry industrial powers. China, Persia, and the Middle East had not yet been occupied, but many believed that the "informal" political and economic influences the European powers exerted in these areas were the prelude to formal annexation.

What was perhaps most striking was how easy this division of the world had been. There had been prolonged resistance in desolate places, such as the Sudan and the rain forests of Vietnam, but overall the Europeans had conquered most of the earth in a matter of decades with a remarkably low level of expense and loss of European lives. They had divided the world with little thought for the reactions of the peoples who came under their rule. European leaders quarreled and bargained at green, felt-topped tables in Paris or Berlin over lands they scarcely knew anything about. It was like a colossal game of Diplomacy or Risk, with armies and fleets moved, and colonies won, lost, and traded at the gaming tables of the European diplomats. To expand on an image offered by the arch-imperialist King Leopold of the Belgians, industrial technology had turned the world into a giant gâteau, or cake, to be sliced up and divided between the European powers.

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