

## Why Did Europe Colonize Africa?

The 1880s mark the beginning of the colonial period in African history. While Europeans and Africans had established relationships in a variety of settings for centuries, the 1880s mark a major turning point in European attitudes toward Africa. Three primary developments explain increased European involvement in Africa. You have explored these developments in previous material. Here, we will reconsider some of this information and expand our understanding of the rationale for Europe's colonization of Africa. For decades, scholars have scoured through various historical documentation attempting to find a definitive answer to the question posed above: Why did Europe colonize Africa? We will find that in all probability there is no one definitive answer to this question. Rather, we can presume that a combination of factors featured prominently in the decision-making processes of those Europeans responsible for the colonization of the continent. While one or two factors might have been dominant in those decision-making processes, it would be unwise to discount other possible explanations.

To recapture the primary developments that account for Europe's increased involvement in Africa, we review the role of Christianity, medicinal and technological advances, and the lure of capitalist gains. First, Europe experienced a Christian revival in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Missionaries began to focus on the large working class with the goal of bringing spiritual salvation to the workers and their families. The bible was made available to workers. Due to their large successes, missionaries began to look beyond Europe. Missions were established all over Africa. Missionaries did not serve as direct agents of European imperialism, yet they drew European governments deeper into Africa. In their efforts to preach Christianity, to bring western-style education to Africa and to ingrain monogamy in African societies, missionaries often felt threatened by warfare within Africa. Hence, missionaries called on European governments for protection and intervention. In Malawi, for example, missionaries encouraged the British government, through a series of letters, to put down the slave trade. The British government intervened in the 1880s. Yet the motivation for Great Britain to send troops and become involved in the region was not really the lingering slave trade in Malawi. Great Britain was concerned with the presence of the Portuguese in Mozambique. The letters of the missionaries merely served as a convenient excuse to enter the region and establish British interests.

Second, European medicinal discoveries and technological advances paved the way for Europeans to penetrate the African continent much more deeply and effectively. The discovery of quinine as a prophylactic drastically reduced the number of Europeans succumbing to malaria in Africa. For centuries, malaria, and to a lesser degree yellow fever, had thwarted European attempts at exploring the continent and establishing a firmer foothold in Africa. With quinine as an explicit part of each European's travel kit, considerations of life and death due to disease no longer impeded European intentions vis-à-vis Africa. Such medicinal developments were complemented by technological advances. Specifically, advances in metallurgy and weapons technology provided



Europe with advantages that proved crucial in European imperial ventures in Africa and Asia. Superior weapons technology certainly did not forestall opposition, but it clearly provided Europe with an edge that facilitated the realization of Europe's objectives. Both medicinal discoveries and technological advances reflect the novelties in manufacturing and engineering so characteristic of the industrial revolution. Third, the relationship between expeditions of exploration and capitalism cannot be overlooked. For centuries, European explorers have traveled throughout the African continent in their attempts to discover new things and to chart the African continent. Explorers of note include David Livingstone, Mungo Park, Richard Francis Burton, and Henry Morgan Stanley. To find the source of the Nile river was for decades the goal of many adventurers; John Henning Speke became the first European to correctly identify Lake Victoria as the source of the Nile. From 1788 to 1877, an explosion of such exploration tours took place. Great Britain's Royal Geographic Society sponsored many expeditions and became a focal point for discussing the findings of the explorers through discourse, publications, and lectures. Upon the explorers' return to Europe, they described to European audiences what they saw and experienced and, most importantly, talked of great riches. It is important to realize that these explorers had immense freedom in relating their travel accounts. After all, they were the first to travel through Africa. Their travel accounts, consequently, tended to stretch the truth and exaggerate. Nonetheless, their stories greatly stimulated European interest in Africa as they implied great trade opportunities.

These three developments are clearly significant for any attempt to answer the overarching question of why Europe colonized Africa. But these developments alone are lacking in their ability to provide satisfactory answers. Missionaries' zeal for spreading the Christian faith accounts for the activities of missionaries in Africa but does not have much explanatory clout with respect to European states' conquest of Africa. Likewise, simply because Europeans could now travel throughout Africa without easily succumbing to malaria does not explain the colonial intentions of European powers. Possessing superior weapons also does not account for their actual use in colonial conquests. Being fascinated by the travel narratives of European explorers who traveled through Africa, indubitably, does not lead to the colonization of an entire continent. Where to go from here? Various scholars have put forward their theories attempting to explain why Europe conquered Africa. Here, we will consider a small sampling of such attempts.

Some scholars (for example, V.I. Lenin<sup>1</sup> in 1917) argue that economics was the sole determining factor. They contend that the capitalist systems within Europe produced more than what was consumed by Europeans. Consumer goods remained on the shelves as the working masses could not afford to buy them. Instead of reducing production in the industrial sector (or reducing prices or paying higher wages to the working class), industrialists and bankers tried to find new markets. They pressured governments to turn to Africa so that European manufacturers could avail themselves of the raw materials from Africa and simultaneously open up new markets for their

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<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, 1917, *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, first published in pamphlet form in Petrograd, Russia.



manufactured products. Or, as some have pointed out, such capitalists ventured into Africa, engaged in various enterprises, and called on European governments to intervene in order to create a more European-friendly business environment or to simply bail out the European business people from their failed ventures. Economic explanations continue to play an important role in African history's attempt at finding answers. However, there are distinct problems associated with this approach. Colonies, after all, were very expensive to establish and maintain. Simply because European powers were developing the economic potentials of their colonies does not mean that the colonies were established for that purpose. The economic exploitation of the colonies might have occurred in order to cover the expense of maintaining the colonies in the first place and to meet debt obligations incurred by European states during the world wars. What emerges is an unclear picture of causation.

Other scholars (for example, Robinson and Gallagher<sup>2</sup> in 1961) considered geopolitical strategy a more decisive factor. Great Britain was interested in preserving its status as the economic giant. Free trade was instrumental to Great Britain's economic status. A series of events (e.g. crisis in South Africa 1877–1881, crisis in Egypt 1882, French efforts to create colonies) caused worries for the British government. According to Robinson and Gallagher, the British felt compelled to seek colonies and to create trading monopolies in order to maintain their status. In short, the creation of colonies was a direct consequence of prior arrangements in the realm of commerce collapsing or being threatened and thereby jeopardizing Great Britain's status.

Another theory was advanced by Brunschwig<sup>3</sup> in 1964. While his explanation also is geopolitical in nature, he emphasized prestige over economic reasons. He estimated that France had no compelling reasons whatsoever to have colonies. Unlike Great Britain or Germany, no discernible economic benefit was to be gained from African colonies for France. Hence, Brunschwig believed that France was most concerned with prestige. It wanted to be seen as a big player on the global scene, therefore the need for colonies.

Yet other scholars argue that the impetus for European imperialism in Africa did not stem from factors within Europe. Kanya-Forstner<sup>4</sup> (1969), for example, contended that the impetus came from the “men on the spot.” He argued that we should focus on Europeans already in Africa to explain why Europe colonized Africa. The prime example is the actions of a small French military regiment in Senegal in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. The troops staffed outposts which were left over from the slave trade era. Without frequent communication from France and without a clear mission the troops grew more and more anxious and restless. Eventually they began launching attacks on African villages and conquered land on their own accord. The French government was initially unaware of these undertakings. Yet these types of actions made it possible for European governments to recognize the potential ease with which their empires could

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<sup>2</sup> Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher, 1961, *Africa and the Victorians*, London: Macmillan.

<sup>3</sup> Henri Brunschwig, 1964, *French Colonialism, 1871-1914: Myths and Realities*, New York: Praeger.

<sup>4</sup> A.S. Kanya-Forstner, 1969, *The Conquest of the Western Sudan: A Study in French Military Imperialism*, London: Cambridge University Press.



be extended.

The explanations for Europe's colonization of Africa, then, are as diverse and manifold as the conjectures of history will allow. It is likely that each supposition contains some elements of reality and holds some explanatory power. However, it is probably the combination of several suppositions that is best suited to capture the motivating factors. It becomes us to bear in mind that the conquest of Africa was not carried out by a monolithic entity with a single set of objectives. Consequently, the question "Why did Europe colonize Africa?" demands a thorough exploration of all factors, domestic and foreign, influencing a particular state's conquest in a particular part of the African continent.

