

New Imperialism

From the late 1800s through the early 1900s, Western Europe pursued a policy of imperialism that became known as New Imperialism. This New Imperialist Age gained its impetus from economic, military, political, humanitarian, and religious reasons, as well as from the development and acceptance of a new theory—Social Darwinism—and advances in technology.

Economic Reasons

By 1870, it became necessary for European industrialized nations to expand their markets globally in order to sell products that they could not sell domestically on the continent. Businessmen and bankers had excess capital to invest, and foreign investments offered the incentive of greater profits, despite the risks. The need for cheap labor and a steady supply of raw materials, such as oil, rubber, and manganese for steel, required that the industrial nations maintain firm control over these unexplored areas. Only by directly controlling these regions, which meant setting up colonies under their direct control, could the industrial economy work effectively—or so the imperialists thought. The economic gains of the new imperialism were limited, however, because the new colonies were too poor to spend money on European goods.

Military and Political Reasons

Leading European nations also felt that colonies were crucial to military power, national security, and nationalism. Military leaders claimed that a strong navy was necessary in order to become a great power. Thus, naval vessels needed military bases around the world to take on coal and supplies. Islands or harbors were seized to satisfy these needs. Colonies guaranteed the growing European navies safe harbors and coaling stations, which they needed in time of war. National security was an important reason for Great Britain's decision to occupy Egypt. Protecting the Suez Canal was vital for the British Empire. The **Suez Canal**, which formally opened in 1869, shortened the sea route from Europe to South Africa and East Asia. To Britain, the canal was a lifeline to India, the jewel of its empire. Many people were also convinced that the possession of colonies was an indication of a nation's greatness; colonies were status symbols. According to nineteenth-century German historian, Heinrich von Treitschke, all great nations should want to conquer barbarian nations.

Humanitarian and Religious Goals

Many Westerners believed that Europe should civilize their little brothers beyond the seas. According to this view, non-whites would receive the blessings of Western civilization, including medicine, law, and Christianity. **Rudyard Kipling** (1865–1936) in his famous poem, “The White Man's Burden” expressed this mission in the 1890s when he prodded Europeans to take up “their moral obligation” to civilize the uncivilized. He encouraged them to “Send forth the best ye breed to serve your captives' need.” Missionaries supported colonization, believing that European control would help them spread Christianity, the true religion, in Asia and Africa.

Social Darwinism

In 1859, **Charles Darwin** (1809–1882) published *On the Origin of Species*. Darwin claimed that all life had evolved into the present state over millions of years. To explain the long slow process of evolution, Darwin put forth the theory of *natural selection*. Natural forces selected those with physical traits best adapted to their environment. Darwin never promoted any social ideas. The process of natural selection came to be known as *survival of the fittest*. The Englishman Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) was the first to apply “survival of the fittest” to human societies and nations. **Social Darwinism** fostered imperialistic expansion by proposing that some people were more fit (advanced) than others. The Europeans believed that they, as the white race, were dominant and that it was only natural for them to conquer the “inferior” people as nature's way of improving mankind. Thus, the conquest of inferior people was just, and the destruction of the weaker races was nature's natural law.

Western Technology

Superior technology and improved medical knowledge helped to foster imperialism. Quinine enabled Europeans to survive tropical diseases and venture into the mosquito-infested interiors of Africa and Asia. The combination of the steamboat and the telegraph enabled the Western powers to increase their mobility and to quickly respond to any situations that threatened their dominance. The rapid-fire machine gun also gave them a military advantage and was helpful in convincing Africans and Asians to accept Western control. The following table summarizes the causes of the new imperialism:

Causes of New Imperialism			
Economic	Military/Political	Humanitarian/Religious	Technological
Need for markets	Need for military bases	White man's burden	New medicine
Raw materials	National security	Spread of Christianity	New weapons
Source of investments	Source of pride—nationalism	Social Darwinism (superiority of Western society)	Transportation

Imperialism in Africa

Africa was known as the **Dark Continent** and remained unknown to the outside world until the late nineteenth century because its interior—desert, mountains, plateaus, and jungles—discouraged exploration. Britain's occupation of Egypt and Belgium's penetration of the Congo started the race for colonial possessions in Africa.

Suez Canal

In 1875, Britain purchased a controlling interest in the **Suez Canal** from the bankrupt ruler of Egypt who was unable to repay loans that he had contracted for the canal and modernization of the country. The French, who organized the building of the Suez Canal under Ferdinand de Lesseps in 1859, owned the other shares. The Suez Canal was important because it shortened the route from Europe to South and East Asia. The canal also provided a lifeline to India, which Britain had made part of the British Empire in 1858. In 1882, Britain established a protectorate over Egypt, which meant that the government leaders were officials of the Ottoman Empire, but were really controlled by Great Britain. The British occupation of Egypt, the richest and most developed land in Africa, set off "African fever" in Europe. To ensure its domination and stability in the area, Great Britain extended its control over the Sudan as well.

Exploration of the Congo

In 1878, **Leopold II of Belgium** (b. 1835, ruled 1865–1909) sent Anglo-American newspaperman **Henry Stanley** (1841–1904), to explore the Congo and establish trade agreements with leaders in the Congo River basin. Stanley, in 1871, had "found" the great Scottish explorer and missionary **David Livingstone** (1813–1873), who had traveled throughout Africa for over thirty years. When several years passed without a word from him, it was feared that he was dead. Stanley was hired in 1869 by the *New York Herald*, an American newspaper to find Livingstone. His famous greeting, "Dr. Livingstone, I presume" became legendary, even though there is some question about its authenticity. Stanley's account of their meeting made headlines around the world and helped make him famous. Stanley eventually sold his services to Leopold II, who had formed a financial syndicate entitled **The International African Association**. A strong-willed monarch, Leopold II's intrusion into the Congo area raised questions about the political fate of Africa south of the Sahara. Other European nations were fearful that Belgium wanted to extend control over the entire area.