

## What best explains Britain's involvement in the 'scramble for Africa'?

In between 1874 and 1902, Britain acquired 4,750,000sqm of land and 90 million people. Before this period Britain had little interest in Africa, but now she went on to claim places from Egypt to Somaliland, from Rhodesia to the Sudan. Therefore there have to be many reasons why Britain wished to partake in what became known as the 'scramble for Africa'. Some have suggested economic factors, others strategic, but in truth there are far more, and often these reasons changed during the time period. Indeed, Salisbury said in 1891 'I do not know the cause of this revolution, but there it is.' Why did it happen?

An economic argument suggests that Britain took part in the scramble in order to reap the rewards of increased trade and of the large amounts of raw materials and resources in each colony. For instance in Niger there were large amounts of rubber, coca and palm oil, all of which were impossible to come by at home. Evidence of this is shown by the fact that James Goldie, who ran the Niger Co., persuaded Britain for years to take advantage of the potential prospects in the area, and Britain finally made a sudden movement into the area. The fact that it was sudden suggests that there were economic reasons for the scramble. J.A. Hobson suggests that Britain expanded her empire in order to increase exports from home. He said that 'finance is the governor of the imperial engine, directing the energy and determining the work.' But Hobson's idea that increased exports would occur by having colonies should in retrospect be disregarded for in the 1880's exports to colonies took up 34% of Britain's exports, and in 1910 the figure was the same. This suggests that there is no need to colonise for trade. The example of South Africa gives us a good idea about Britain's priorities in Africa. She first became interested on the discovery of diamonds, which suggests that the economic argument is strong. Later she allowed the Boers to govern themselves in a protectorate, which Britain often did in Africa. Only on the discovery of gold did Britain become interested in Transvaal and Orange Free State again, and this interest in turn led to the Boer Wars. This shows that Britain was interested in the economic side of things; that she is keen to make a lot of money; but then again in between times Britain seems particularly disinterested. Therefore there is confusion as to whether Britain had real economic interests in Africa, and leads me to the conclusion that, economically, her priorities changed over time.

Fieldhouse viewed expansion in Africa as a way of stopping other countries getting land themselves, and he points out the scramble took place during a time of important European change during the period after the Franco-Prussian War. Alternatively AJP Taylor suggests that Germany was trying to prevent a Franco-British combination against Germany. By taking interest in Africa, Bismarck would provoke Britain to expand in Africa. This in turn explains another reason why Britain would want to take advantage of potential colonies. Britain is a lot smaller than Germany and France, and had a population half the size of Germany. Therefore she would be unable to compete without some extra source of revenue, resources and men. This obviously implies that by acquiring colonies not only prevents other countries from getting hold of them but also allows Britain to build up herself in all sorts of ways. This explains how strategic reasons for the scramble often incorporate economic reasons themselves.

Britain regularly took protectorates rather than outright annexation, and a reason for this is supplied by Percy Anderson, Head of the African Foreign Office in 1883. He said that 'protectorates are unwelcome burdens, but in this case, it is a question

between British protectorates, which would be unwelcome, or French protectorates, which would be fatal.' This clearly shows that while in some cases a protectorate may be more of a burden, it is still better than letting another country get hold of it, whether it be for economic or strategic reasons.

This brings me on to another point – other colonies. Britain's most important colony was India, and the easiest ways to get to India was by the Cape and by the Suez. Thus Egypt and South Africa were vitally important to Britain, and indeed Rhodes often dreamed of connecting the two together. This idea of being in as close contact to India is also made by Clement Hill, a Foreign Office official in 1884.

The idea of Africa being a source of prestige is portrayed by the words 'another bit of red on the map.' The continent may have been essentially irrelevant, but to the ordinary Briton, he would be thought to have immense pride in the fact that his country has the greatest empire in the world. During the period of the scramble, the Golden and Diamond Jubilees of Queen Victoria took place. In each case, though more so in the case of the Diamond Jubilee, the Empire was a great way of portraying the might of Queen Victoria and Britain, at a time when many exhibitions would have been put on in celebration of the Queen's reign. Colonies were also a great way of satisfying public opinion. It was politically useful in that if things were going wrong at home or an election was coming up, a great success in Africa could turn the tide of public opinion.

A more minor argument is that it was a moral mission, where Britain wished to go and civilise and introduce better ways of life to the people of Africa. Many missionaries would have gone to Africa to try and convert people, such as Dr. Livingstone. As Kipling said, it was the 'white man's burden' to help Africans. Then again Livingstone failed to convert a single person while in Africa. A more believable argument would be that the occupation of African countries was because Britain wanted to educate and introduce Christianity to these people, or so the British Government would say at home. This argument though would certainly not require such a scramble for Africa, and therefore can really be said to be a moral excuse for annexing African countries.

Finally it is necessary to address just how much the British Government actually had in Africa. It has been argued that men such as Cecil Rhodes drove British foreign policy. For instance, Sir Bartle Frere invaded Zululand without permission of the British Government. Many companies, such as the East Africa Company, took it upon themselves to acquire certain areas of land, and it was easy enough for the Government then to take control and reap their benefits once they have been won. Salisbury's two different opinions perfectly display how hard it is to understand the reasons for the scramble. In 1891 he said 'I do not know the cause of this revolution, but there it is.' Meanwhile he also said 'your empire if you mean it to live must grow, must steadily grow otherwise it will decay.' Just what role did Salisbury play in Africa at this time – were choices taken by him or men on the spot?

Robinson and Gallagher say that economic development was 'more a consequence than a motive for the scramble', and this is a statement that I would strongly agree with. It is evident that economic interests varied over time, and were particularly prominent when it suited Britain. Other than to extend one's empire in order to compete with other countries economically, there is little reason why money and trade

played a vastly important part in Britain's role in the scramble for Africa, and even this reason is vaguely strategic, for it is in relation to the growing powers of France and Germany. It must be recognised that at different time periods other factors would have been more important than those that are strategic, such as in times of trouble at home or if raw materials were found in a certain country, and therefore it would be reasonable to say that there was no one reason for the Britain's role in the scramble for Africa. But the main reasons that seem to have triggered it off are the fear of Germany and France and the importance of India, even though there were smaller reasons at the time. In between times economic discoveries of course led to there being more economic interest in Africa, and the moves of men on the spot are accountable for many of Britain's gains. But all the way through the underlying factor seems to be strategic, and as Bismarck said, 'Here is my map of Africa. France is on our west and Russia is on our east. That is my map of Africa.' What is important is other European powers, and in Britain's case the resources gained from colonies were invariably needed to keep in touch with the bigger European powers.