1 Scientific and technological advances

It was the rapid march of scientific and technological progress in the second half of the nineteenth century which made such extensive European expansion overland and overseas possible after 1870. The construction of railways and of steamships made long journeys more feasible; the spread of the electric telegraph enabled contact to be maintained over greater distances; and important medical breakthroughs - such as the use of quinine to treat malaria - enabled explorers and missionaries to survive for longer periods in the tropical climates of Africa and Asia. By the 1870s and 1880s, therefore, the pace of exploration and of economic and humanitarian activity quickened. The construction of the Trans-Siberian railway and the possession of superior weapons and military strength enabled Russian explorers, adventurers and soldiers to expand and tighten then-hold on the vast expanses of territory east of the Ural mountains and to the north of India and China. As it became more and more feasible to join together great land-masses and to control extensive empires, being a first-rate power required a large territorial base or sizeable colonial possessions.

2 Social Darwinist beliefs

Hand in hand with these advances went the belief that European peoples were the most advanced and civilised in the world, and therefore had a duty to try to civilise and to educate the non-European natives. Charles Darwin's scientific researches were popularised and distorted to demonstrate that the laws of evolution applied to races and to nations as well as to plants and animals. The notion of the 'survival of the fittest' appeared to explain why the white races had evolved to a higher level of civilization than the yellow races, and why the brown and black races lagged far behind. Many Europeans genuinely felt that they had a 'calling' to help the less fortunate peoples of the world, and to teach them Christian values and European skills. If life was indeed a perpetual struggle for existence, nations needed to continue on their expansionist course or they would inexorably fall from the ranks of the great powers. The French political leader Jules Ferry warned his countrymen in 1885 that unless France expanded her colonial possessions, 'we shall take the broad road leading to decadence'.

3 Popular Nationalism

As states modernised and industrialised in the mid and late nineteenth century, their populations became more concentrated in urban areas and were increasingly likely to receive four or five years of elementary education. With the spread of mass literacy came the rise of a popular press and a growth in the market for adventure stories and travel books. Tales of tropical adventure provided a welcome escape from lives increasingly spent in oppressive factories and crowded homes. Colonial expansion was increasingly advocated by groups such as the Colonial League in Germany, the Union Coloniale and Comite de L'Afrique Francaise and the British Empire League. Their ideas proved popular among the new mass electorates. As governments sought to foster and to increase nationalist sentiments, colonial exploits provided one means of cementing and of intensifying them. The popular press avidly dramatised rivalries and incidents, to the point at which Lord Salisbury commented in 1901 that 'the diplomacy of nations is now conducted quite as much in the letters of special correspondents [of newspapers], as in the despatches of the foreign office'.

4 Political factors: prestige and national pride

France's defeat by Germany in the Franco-Prussian war in 1871 saw the emergence of both a united Germany and an Italian state with Rome as its new capital. Many historians have emphasised the significance of these events in the subsequent colonial expansion. When the French government, encouraged by Bismarck, stopped Italian expansion in the area by occupying Tunis in 1882, Prime Minister Gambetta declared that 'France is recovering her position as a great power'. France's bitter resentment after 1871 over the German seizure of Alsace and Lorraine, and Bismarck's attempts to lessen it by encouraging French colonial expansion in Africa and Asia, have been put forward as a reason to explain Bismarck's sudden bid for colonial possessions in 1884. Many of the areas in which the German government expressed an interest - south-west Africa, Togo and the Kameruns - were adjacent to territories in which the British Government had a particular concern. Some historians argue that Bismarck was using such colonial claims, and other colonial disputes such as Britain's occupation of Egypt in 1882, to increase Anglo-French rivalry and keep France isolated.

5 Strategic motives

Some historians have stressed the importance of strategic motives, particularly in explaining Britain's role in the scramble for Africa. Some have stressed the concern of successive governments for the security of the routes to India via Suez and the Cape. The construction of the Suez Canal intensified Britain's interest in a stable regime in Egypt, and led to the occupation of that country in 1882 to quell a nationalist rising. This in turn led to French resentment and to a 'chain reaction' of rivalries and of annexations which spread to west Africa and then further south. Strategic factors were also important in explaining Japan's colonial expansion in North China in the 1890s which triggered off a very intensive period of competition in China. The Sino-Japanese war of 1894-5 over rights in Korea, and subsequent Japanese victory, led to demands by Japan for the Liaotung peninsula which contained Port Arthur. This was opposed by Russia, Germany and France in the Triple Intervention of 1895 and, in a bid to check growing Japanese influence in northern China, Russia then seized Port Arthur, Germany demanded the cession of the port of Kiaochow on the Shantung peninsula and Britain and France felt the need to claim further bases in their turn.
6 Peripheral factors

One must view late nineteenth-century imperialism not only in terms of the motives of the expansionist powers but also in terms of the situation on the ground which the Europeans had to contend with, and the local reactions which their demands caused. Native regimes, and their reactions to European demands, could decisively shape the course of imperialist advances. It was the Egyptian Khedive's weakness and mismanagement of the country's finances which precipitated a major crisis and brought the British into occupation. The weakness of China in the late nineteenth century and the expansion of Japan clearly illustrate the importance of wider world reactions to European imperialist policies. Both China and Japan faced European demands for trading concessions and for treaty ports in the mid nineteenth century. The Chinese government was unable to respond and continued European pressure caused the collapse of a regime which was already in decline. In Japan, however, a period of dramatic reforms followed, which saw the beginnings of Japanese industrialisation and the creation of a strong national army and navy. One outcome - which challenged the notion of European superiority early in the twentieth century - was Japanese victory in the Russo-Japanese war.

7 The search for markets and for raw materials

Economic factors such as these clearly played an important part in the scramble for colonial concessions and territories in the later nineteenth century. However, a range of economic issues are involved, and we must therefore separate them out and consider each one separately. The attraction of China, with its vast population of over 400 million potential customers, was certainly a strong one for the European powers. However, there was another demand generated by industrialisation - the demand for more raw materials. Cotton factories in Lancashire devoured enormous and increasing amounts of raw cotton from India and Egypt. Tyres for bicycles and wagons, and later for cars, required rubber from the Congo and the Amazon. When these areas failed to provide enough, huge rubber plantations were established in the Malay peninsula, Ceylon and the Dutch East Indies. Thus a search for raw materials, and a desire to exploit them for the sole benefit of one's own nation, undoubtedly intensified the scramble for colonial spoils after 1870. King Leopold of Belgium was in no doubt whatever that Britain and Holland had derived enormous economic advantage from their respective colonies of India and the Dutch East Indies, and that Belgium needed to stake out her own claim. Leopold worked out a strategy to acquire territory in west Africa inland from the mouth of the river Congo on behalf of Belgium. His interest in this area sparked off a rush of claims by other powers, and the subsequent Congress of Berlin in 1884-5 to deal with them.

8 Surplus capital, and imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism

In addition to the search for raw materials and for markets, many historians have drawn attention to the importance of surplus capital in fuelling expansion and imperialist policies. They argue that the profits generated by nineteenth-century industrialisation could produce higher rates of return if they were re-invested overseas rather than at home. The Russian Marxist leader, Lenin, while still in exile in Switzerland, wrote a critique in 1916, *Imperialism*, in which he defined economic imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism, the stage at which 'big monopolist combines' concentrated financial domination in a few hands. A small number of financially 'powerful' states were thus able to exercise a 'virtual monopoly' across the globe and to divide the world among themselves. However, it was the consequences of such policies that Lenin was more concerned about. As the great powers came into increasing imperialist competition for territories, the result was bound to be war. Therefore the outbreak of war in 1914 came as no surprise to Lenin. It was the inevitable outcome of capitalism in its highest phase, and was therefore 'an imperialist war'. Many historians have argued that economic imperialism, of the type described by Lenin, did increase competition after 1870 and inflame international rivalries. They cite the growing commercial competition between Britain and Germany, which intensified after 1900, and the frequent conflicts in Africa and Asia as evidence of developments which increased tensions and fuelled antagonisms. In this interpretation, economic imperialism, broadly defined, was one cause of war in 1914.

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