

The partition of Africa

Late nineteenth century: a small group of European powers became involved in a territorial partition of Africa.

Between 1880 and 1900 90 per cent of the territory of Africa was appropriated by European powers.

Britain and the partition of Africa

Before 1880 Britain's involvement in Africa was on a small scale.

In 1880 there were no plans to extend the British Empire in Africa.

Gladstone, the Prime Minister, was committed to a policy of non-intervention in colonial affairs.

But suddenly in 1882 he ordered the occupation of Egypt: this is the starting point of the partition of Africa.

The occupation and defense of Egypt

The Turkish Empire had captured Egypt in 1517. By the late nineteenth century the Ottoman Empire was in decline.

British government feared that Ottoman possessions would fall into the hands of rival European powers, threatening British interests. They wanted Egypt to be attached to the Turkish Empire.

The French took a different view.

They encouraged Egypt to break away from the Ottoman Empire and French investors poured money into the country after 1850.

An example of French investment: the Suez Canal (1869).

The completion of the Suez Canal led to a large influx of British investment.

British banks offered the Egyptian government enormous loans which were used for economic development.

Between 1863 and 1879 Egypt's foreign debt increased from 3 million to 100 million of pounds.

By 1875 Egypt had a debt crisis which seemed to lead to the country's economic collapse.

The Egyptian ruler requested the British and French governments to provide expert economic advice.

Britain sent Stephen Cave to investigate the financial state of Egypt.

Cave's report blamed Egypt's economic crisis on poor economic management and the swift rise in interest rates.

In 1878 an Anglo-French rescue plan emerged. French government officials and British financial experts would take control of the Egyptian economy.

The French would look after government expenditure; the British would raise revenue.

Emergency measures were implemented under the Anglo-French plan:

- The interest rate was reduced.
- The pay of the army, civil servants and workmen was cut.
- Sales taxes were introduced on food and goods.

It brought misery to the Egyptian people, led to unemployment, street rioting and finally a rebellion in the army.

In 1882 an Egyptian nationalist movement under the leadership of Arabi Pasha was on the verge of taking power.

The nationalists wanted an end to Turkish dominance and Anglo-French control of the economy.

A nationalist riot in Alexandria led to the death of 50 Europeans. This prompted the British government to order the formal occupation of Egypt.

By October 1882 the rebellion had been crushed.

Britain became the government of Egypt.

The British quickly ended the dual control and stayed in Egypt until 1922.

The occupation ended the French hope of dominating an independent Egypt and led to recriminations between Britain and France.

French outrage had been caused by the British decision to rule the country on its own, not by the occupation itself, which France had refused to join.

This led to a French suspicion that Britain used the nationalists to hide its desire to dominate Egypt and to freeze out France.