

The partition of Africa: West Africa

The British government viewed West Africa with detachment once the slave trade was outlawed.

In 1865 a parliamentary selected committee suggested that there should be no further colonial expansion in the region.

The only British interest in the area was linked to the trade in palm oil, used as an industrial lubricant and for the manufacture of soap.

George Goldie was the leading British supplier of palm oil.

But it was not Goldie or the British government who were leading forces in the partition of West Africa.

France, Germany and Belgium all played an important role.

The French moved inland from Senegal and wanted to create a West African Empire.

King Leopold of Belgium signed treaties with several West African rulers and set up the Congo Free State.

The arrival of King Leopold alarmed France who moved inland from Gabon to create the French Congo.

British were worried about French and Belgian ambitions and signed a treaty with Portugal (1884) which recognised the right of Portugal to the mouth of Congo River.

Germany complicated the situation and seized Togoland and the Cameroons.

The German Chancellor, Bismark, suggested that the European powers should settle their differences over territory peacefully by agreement.

In 1884 representatives of the major European powers met in Berlin.

A treaty was signed in 1885 agreed that:

- there should be free trade in the Congo basin
- Recognised British economic interests on the Niger.
- Laid down ground rules for future annexations.

Now the only thing to do for a European power after grabbing land was to inform the other Europeans powers that they took the land. This arrangement speeded up the partition.

East Africa

The partition of East Africa involved Britain, Germany and Italy.

The major British interest in the area was trade with Zanzibar.

The leading man behind British expansion in the region was Sir William McKinnon.

He believed that East Africa had great economic potential.

McKinnon set up the Imperial British East Africa Company to attract investment.

In 1884 Karl Peters, a German explorer, founded the German East Africa Company.

Between 1885 and 1895 East Africa was divided by agreement into British and German spheres of influence.

Italy captured Eritrea in 1882 and a large part of Somalia in 1889.

In 1896 Italy attacked Abyssinia and was defeated.

It was the only occasion on which a European country had been defeated by an African state.

Southern Africa

The Partition of southern Africa involved the British and the Boer.

Cecil Rhodes arrived in South Africa in 1870 and made a fortune from diamond mining.

He developed a big idea for the expansion of the British Empire.

He said: «I contend that we are the first race of the world and that the more of the world we inhabit the better it is for the human race.»

Standing in the way of Rhodes' dream were the independent Boer republics.

The Boers in their desire for land came into conflict with many African tribes. The most important were the Zulus.

Frightened by the Zulus, the Boers asked for British protection.

In 1877 Britain took control of the Transvaal and sent an ultimatum to the Zulus: disband their army or face war.

In 1879 the Zulus were defeated.

Now Transvaal asked Britain to restore its independence.

Britain refused.

Transvaal attacked and defeated British forces in 1881. Gladstone's government agreed to restore control over domestic affairs to the Transvaal. In Britain's understanding of the situation, this didn't mean independence, as the agreement signed in 1882 and 1884 had left room for Britain to intervene in the domestic affairs.

The discovery of gold and diamonds in Cape Colony and in the Boer republics changed everything.

The Germans took greater interest in southern Africa.

In the early 1890s Cecil Rhodes expanded British rule.

By 1895 he was ready to deal with the Boer republics.

In 1895 Rhodes supported an armed coup aimed at seizing control of the Transvaal. He left the planning to Dr Jameson, an old friend.

The Boers had little difficulty in defeating his forces.

The incident was a deep humiliation for the British government.

The Colonial Secretary and the Prime Minister were forced to deny any knowledge of the raid.

In 1897 Sir Alfred Milner was appointed British High Commisssioner for South Africa. He was supposed to be a peacemaker but actually he was to play a leading role in the events which led to the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902.