



Industrial Imperialism, the “New” Imperialism

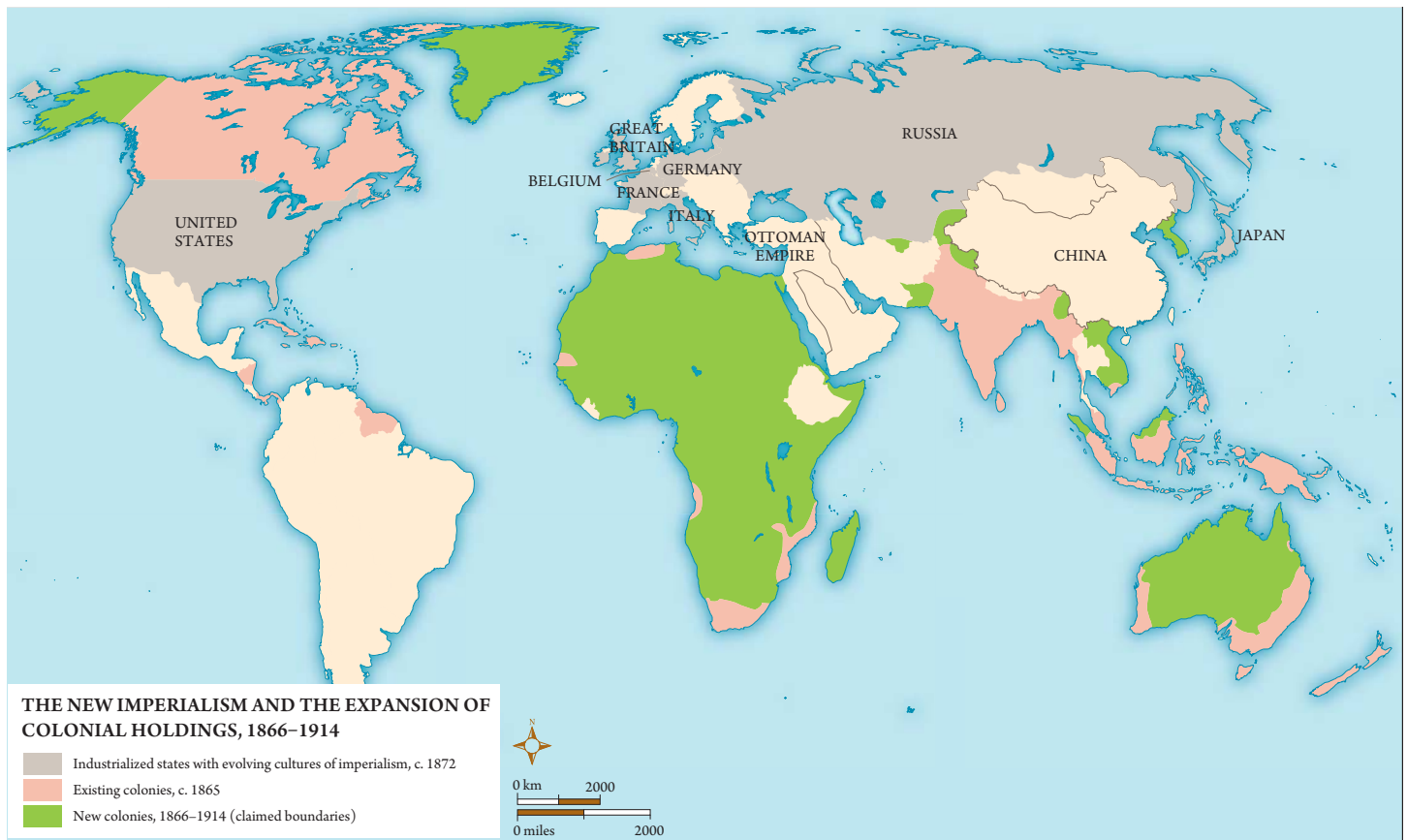
By Trevor Getz

Imperialism was only truly new 4,500 years ago (shout out to the Akkadians). But it got a surprising revival when some parts of the world industrialized. Several factors led to this “new” imperialism.

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The world in 1880 was made of both nation-states and empires. As you have already learned, once the idea of sovereignty seemed achievable, it went viral. People around the world were increasingly driven by a nationalistic feeling to have their own countries (nation-states). This meant that some empires were slowly breaking up. At the same time, many great imperial powers still held on to colonies. This was true in South Asia and the Caribbean. Nearly all the industrialized states had hit the pause button on empire expansion by this time, happy to stick with what they already had. But in 1880, that changed faster than you could say “production and distribution.”



This is a special map. It doesn't show different empires. Instead, it shows the growth of empires overall in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, something we call the “New Imperialism” By WHP, CC BY-NC 4.0.

Suddenly, vast regions of the world were colonized by empires that were, once again, growing. For instance, in 1880, the enormous continent of Africa was still mostly made up of independent states and societies. By 1914, Ethiopia and Liberia were the only two independent states left. The rest of the continent was colonized, divided between Britain, France, Germany, Portugal, Italy, Belgium, and Spain. Meanwhile, mainland southeast Asia was conquered, mostly by France. Many Pacific Islands were occupied by the United States, Japan, Germany, France, and Britain. Korea was subjugated (conquered) by Japan. This rapid expansion of colonization around 1880 is often called “New Imperialism”. What happened in the last decades of the nineteenth century to cause this rapid change?

Was the “New Imperialism” actually new?

To discover what was new about “New Imperialism,” we first have to define the terms imperialism and colonialism. These two terms are sometimes used interchangeably, but they are actually different. Both imperialism and colonialism occur in empires.



*[At the 1884 Berlin Conference](#), European powers set the rules for colonizing Africa.
Notice that no Africans were present at this conference! Public domain.*

Empires are states made up of many communities, where one community has control over, and more rights than, the others. Imperialism is a term used to describe the ideas, beliefs, and actions that one group uses to justify its control over the others. Colonialism is the experience of the other groups who are being ruled.

Now, empires go back thousands of years in world history! They divided people into a community of citizens with rights, and communities of subjects, with few or none. They also divided their territory into multiple states and regions. These empires had one ruler or ruling body controlling these different people and regions. They did it then, and they did it again in the late nineteenth century. So, we're still not seeing the “new” part.

The empires of the “New Imperialism” were partly modeled on earlier empires. For example, Britain ran its new colonies in Africa similar to the way they had been running their massive colony in India for a century. Britain's policies for managing India were partly based on strategies the Mughal Empire had used to control India from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. One of these strategies was “indirect rule,” which refers to finding local allies and paying them to do most of the governing. The British implemented this model in their new African colonies using practices they had learned from the Mughals in India.

Some British methods of ruling the new colonies were influenced by even older policies. This included the way they ruled their North American and Caribbean colonies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries!

Nevertheless, many factors led to this unprecedented version of empire expansion after the 1880s. New technologies, ideas, and beliefs gave Europeans, and the inhabitants of a few other countries, a motive for constructing empires.

Many of these were new, and certainly their combination was new, and so we call this a “New Imperialism”.

Why did the New Imperialism happen?

In 1865, a British parliamentary committee recommended that Britain pull back from some of its colonies. By the 1880s, however, Britain was rapidly trying to build a bigger empire. Why were Britain and many other industrialized nations suddenly so eager for more colonies?

Historians look at numerous causes for this New Imperialism, not just one. These different factors play off each other in important ways. The changing elements include technology, industrialization and capitalism, racism, and nationalism, and...something else.

1. **Technology:** Before the late nineteenth century, European states (and Japan) couldn’t conquer much of the tropical world. They were held back by disease, sure. But also there were large, organized societies in many of these regions that were pretty well armed with low-tech, but effective weapons. Even if invaders had been able to take vast areas, slow communications systems would have made ruling them too difficult. But, new technologies changed this. New medicines made it possible for Europeans and white Americans to survive malaria and other tropical diseases. New weapons, such as the machine gun, gave conquerors a big military advantage. Finally, once they did seize new territory, there were new forms of communication that made it possible to govern these areas. Telegraphs, trains, and steamships reinvented communications and travel, making it much easier to rule bigger empires.
2. **Industrialization and capitalism:** The growth of factories in industrialized countries meant that their businesses had an increasing demand for raw materials. Korea, the African continent, and Southeast Asia had plenty of raw materials. Since imperialists were also capitalists, for the most part, they needed customers for all this great new stuff they were making. They went for a kind of two-for-one deal by conquering territories that could provide the raw materials they needed, and a population who would then buy their finished products.
3. **Racism:** Many misconceptions about race emerged with the Atlantic slave trade. These ideas were becoming even more solidified in this era. Many imperialists believed it was their right to rule over people they thought were inferior. Within their own societies, there was already some level of racial segregation. For example, in the United States at this time, post-slavery Jim Crow laws tried to reduce the freedoms and rights of African Americans. They then applied these inferior/superior racist ideas to people overseas. Some even justified these missions as if they were doing a favor. They viewed empire expansion as a “civilizing mission” to improve the lives of the “uncivilized” and “inferior” people they conquered.
4. **Nationalism:** Nationalism began with the idea that all people (the “nation”) should have the right to rule themselves through their own government (the “state”). This idea was twisted by some imperial nations. They believed their own nation was superior and had the right to rule over other nations (see “racism” above). Nationalism also created a competitive attitude among nations. In this era, in particular, nationalism pushed the governments of Britain, France, Germany, and other European powers to compete. This happened first in Europe, and then around the world. Nationalism motivated them to take new colonies before their competitors could.
5. **“Men-on-the-spot”:** Everything we have mentioned so far was the result of big trends in the organization of societies. The term “Men-on-the-spot” refers to events that were caused by one person or a few people. In some cases, a general or a businessman with an armed group was able to seize new territory, often because they were greedy or wanted glory and there was no one there to stop them.

Each of these factors played a role in the New Imperialism. The global trend of colonial expansion depended on a combination of these factors each time a new colony was created. For example, a typical “man-on-the-spot” likely used new weapons (technology) to conquer people he thought were inferior (racism) to expand his business (industrialism/capitalism) and be politically rewarded back home for making his country proud (nationalism).

The situation in those colonies was also influenced by local factors. How much were locals organized to resist colonialism? How did they react? What was the environment like? What did the people choose to do? As we will see soon, these issues also played a role in the New Imperialism.

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Image credits

Cover: Act of submission of Ashanti king Prempeh and his mother embracing the legs of British representatives, Governor Maxwell, Colonel Kempster and Sir Francis Scott, as a sign of humiliation. Engraving, 1901. Colored. © PHAS/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

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