



Industrial Imperialism, the “New” Imperialism

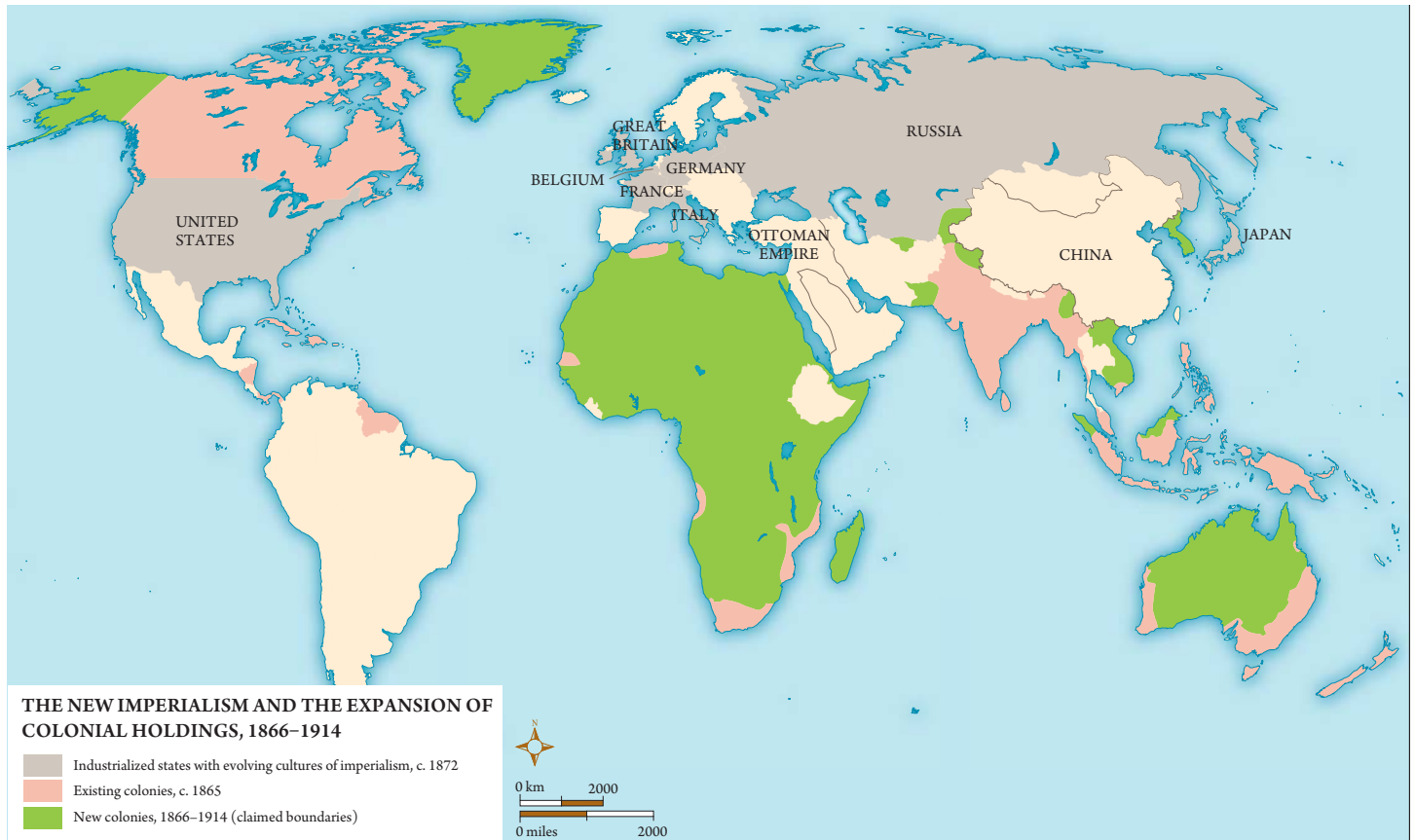
By Trevor Getz

Imperialism has existed for thousands of years. It increased 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. The idea of sovereignty (the ability to govern oneself) had spread. People around the world wanted their own countries. This meant that empires were 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 stopped empire expansion by this time. But, this all changed in 1880.



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.

New regions were colonized by European nations, the United States, and Japan. These regions include Africa, Southeast Asia, the Pacific Islands, and Korea. This age of colonization is called “New Imperialism.” What caused this rapid change?

Was the “New Imperialism” actually new?

What was new about “New Imperialism?” To understand this, we have to define two terms: imperialism and colonialism. They are sometimes used to mean the same thing. But, they are different. Both imperialism and colonialism occur in empires.

Empires are states where one community has control over other communities. Imperialism describes the ideas that one group uses to control others. Colonialism is the experience of the groups who are being ruled.



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 go back thousands of years in world history. These empires also had one ruler to control people from different areas. They would divide their territory into communities and give the people few or no rights. So, we're still not seeing the “new” part.

The empires of the “New Imperialism” were partly modeled on earlier empires. For example, British colonies in Africa were modeled after their colony in India. The strategies the British used to control India were partly based on ideas from the Mughal Empire.

Some British policies were even older. This included the way they ruled their North American and Caribbean colonies. They ruled these colonies in the 1500s and 1600s.

Why did the New Imperialism happen?

Many factors that led to these new empires. These factors include technology and industrialization and capitalism. Racism and nationalism also played a role.

1. **Technology:** It was once difficult for European states (and Japan) to conquer the tropical world. They died from diseases. Societies had low-tech, but effective weapons. Slow communication made it difficult to rule. New technologies changed this. New medicine made it possible to survive tropical diseases. New weapons made it easier to conquer. Telegraphs, trains, and steamships were invented. These made it easy to rule large empires.

2. **Industrialization and capitalism:** There was a growth of factories during the Industrial Revolution. Industrialized countries needed raw materials. Korea, Africa, and Southeast Asia had those raw materials. For the most part, imperialists were also capitalists. So, they needed customers to buy their products. They went for a kind of two-for-one deal. They conquered territories that had the raw materials they needed. The people that lived in these territories then bought their finished products.
3. **Racism:** Many imperialists thought they had a right to rule over people of other races. They saw these people as inferior. Some thought they were doing native people a favor. They thought they were “civilizing” these “uncivilized” people.
4. **Nationalism:** Nationalism is the idea that all people have the right to rule themselves. This idea could be twisted. Some countries thought they had a right to rule others. Nationalistic feelings also created competition. European powers competed with each other for new colonies.
5. **“Men-on-the-spot”:** The first four factors are all big ideas or trends. Sometimes new colonies were taken over by one man. This man or small group usually had weapons. They used these weapons to seize territory. Often they were motivated by greed or glory.

Each of these factors played a role in the New Imperialism. It was often a combination of these factors. For example, a “man-on-the-spot” likely used new weapons (technology). He conquered people he thought were inferior (racism). He used the land to make his business (industrialism/capitalism). He was then rewarded back home for making his country proud (nationalism).

The situation in these colonies was also influenced by local factors. How did locals resist colonialism? How did they react? What did the people choose to do? These issues also played a role in the New Imperialism.

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Image credits

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