

History: Britain's Colonial Policies in Africa

Colonial rivalries, between the Western powers

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Global Research, September 18, 2023

Region: [Europe](#), [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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In March 1881 on the territory of present day South Africa, British military forces were defeated by Boer soldiers during the First Boer War. The Boers were white settlers who for generations had lived in southern Africa and they were mostly of Dutch or German descent.

The First Boer War was not a large conflict, involving soldiers numbering in their low thousands, but poor British command and positioning of their troops contributed to the defeat against well-organised Boer forces. Britain's small-scale colonial battles were teaching them false lessons in warfare. The military failures persisted in coming years, for which British soldiers were to pay a very high price when faced with a global war from 1914.

The Boers' victory in the First Boer War had persuaded British prime minister, William Gladstone, to recognise the statehood of the South African Republic (also called the Transvaal Republic) along with another smaller Boer territory bordering the Transvaal, the Orange Free State. These territories, located in the northern half of modern day South Africa, would be self-governed by the Boers but still under British sovereignty. London wanted to maintain its claims to the regions.

British planners were well aware of South Africa's strategic significance. The waters off its southern coastline were a trade route which allowed the Royal Navy passage to India, one of the British Empire's prized possessions. South African soil contained valuable mineral deposits such as gold and diamonds, which included the discovery on separate occasions of renowned diamonds like the Eureka, the Excelsior and the Cullinan. From the late 1860s onward, British adventurers had flocked to South African areas like Kimberley (diamonds) and Witwatersrand (gold) hoping to make their fortune.

Cecil Rhodes, a prominent English-born liberal politician and mining tycoon, became in July 1890 the prime minister of the British-controlled Cape Colony, which today lies within the southern part of South Africa. Rhodes was also the president of the British South Africa

Company, which was involved in mining and colonial activities regarding the exploitation of southern Africa's material resources.

Rhodes' actions were assisted by funding from the extremely wealthy Rothschild banking family.

Rhodes had extravagant ambitions. With Rothschild money, he wanted to construct a railway that would stretch uninterrupted from one end of the African continent to the other, from Cape Colony to Cairo. Rhodes had colonial aspirations as well. This included his intention of carving out a strip of British territory that would also run along the length of Africa.

Racism was partly behind these desires. Rhodes had said the English are "the first race in the world, and that the more of the world we inhabit, the better it is for the human race".

The black populations of Africa, comprising the vast majority of the continent's inhabitants, were not asked for their views about the Western European powers' predatory schemes in Africa.

Rhodes' aims were blocked by the existence of the South African Republic, which would not agree either to the railway or to the implementation of a strip of British territory running through Africa. Paul Kruger, the South African Republic's leader since 1883, was not against the entry of Britons to the area but he had taxed them heavily and refused to give them political rights.

Kruger was also buying weapons from the German Empire, and these arms perhaps proved of some slight use in overcoming the Rhodes-backed Jameson Raid. This was an attempt to remove Kruger's government in Pretoria, capital city of the South African Republic, and to turn the area into an outright British colony.

The Jameson Raid lasted for four days from 29 December 1895. In the end the British-led raiders, who failed to reach Pretoria, were caught in a vulnerable position out in open ground and forced to give up their assault. The raiders had brought with them significant firepower, but they were unable to deploy their weapons sufficiently because of the complete lack of cover which the terrain provided.

The failure of the Jameson Raid caused distress in London. Moreover, the British were irritated that Berlin was gaining friendly relations with the Boer government. The Germans felt they were within their rights to pursue such policies, and the question could be asked as to what right the British had to exploit Africa through colonial measures. British anger was simmering away for months, because the Germans in the mid-1890s were bankrolling the Boers' construction of a railway line, that ran from Pretoria almost 300 miles eastward to Delagoa Bay in Mozambique.

The German-funded railway line, which was finished by July 1895, provided an alternative to another railway that went through Cape Colony, overseen by Rhodes. Historian Donald J. Goodspeed wrote, "This may have been what made Rhodes decide that it was time to strike. Whatever the precipitating factor, he planned a coup d'état [Jameson Raid] that would oust the Boer government at Pretoria and replace it with one headed by his brother, Frank, the leader of the Uitlanders in the Transvaal".

The Uitlanders were workers primarily of British nationality. They had come to the South African Republic for such events as the Witwatersrand Gold Rush. It started in 1886 when gold reserves were discovered in the Witwatersrand scarp, a 35 mile long formation of rock, which sparked excitement around much of the globe. Witwatersrand would account for 50% of all of the gold mined in the world. Gold prospectors entered the South African Republic from as far away as America and Australia.

In Berlin, Kaiser Wilhelm II was delighted to learn of the Jameson Raid's demise. After it ended, on 3 January 1896 the kaiser made contact with the Kruger government in Pretoria. The kaiser congratulated Kruger and his followers for defeating the Jameson Raid and for having secured the independence of the South African Republic. The kaiser hinted that Germany would have been prepared to intervene militarily on the Boers' behalf, should they have required assistance. The British did not take kindly to the suggestion.

These colonial rivalries, between the Western powers, would prove to be contributory factors that resulted in the outbreak of World War I. After the kaiser had messaged Kruger, there was talk in Berlin of sending German soldiers to Delagoa Bay east of Pretoria. This was not possible because the Royal Navy controlled the maritime routes, and the British government had since sent out a fresh naval squadron.

By the late 19th century the British Empire was, however, faced with increasing obstacles to its power. A British major-general, Horatio Kitchener, led British soldiers to conquer the Sudan in 1898, and they then advanced along the White Nile, one of the tributaries of the Nile river. To their displeasure, Kitchener's men found a French military expedition already based at the town of Fashoda, now located in South Sudan.

Neither the British nor the French were initially prepared to back down and for months through 1898 the two nations were on the brink of war. It was the French who eventually gave way in October 1898 when they chose to evacuate Fashoda. Among other reasons, this was because the Royal Navy held the upper hand out to sea and Paris was unable to supply and reinforce its troops at Fashoda. The French government, in addition, viewed its rivalry with Germany in Europe as more urgent than colonial squabbles with Britain in Africa.

The Royal Navy itself also still greatly surpassed the Imperial German Navy in size and strength. This should not have caused the Germans much concern. Germany's position in central Europe, where the country faced potential conflicts on her western and eastern borders, meant that having a powerful army was far more important to Germany than having a powerful navy.

It made sense for other major states like Russia, Britain and America to possess large navies, as those countries have extensive shorelines and needed warships to safeguard their coasts. Britain was especially reliant on foreign trade. In 1897 for example, 66% of Britain's trade came from outside of Europe, whereas 66% of Germany's trade that year came from within Europe.

The Germans couldn't really afford the luxury of having a strong army and navy. Their former chancellor, Bismarck, would never have tolerated the enlargement of the German Navy. Kaiser Wilhelm II, who assumed the throne in 1888 and was a keen amateur seafarer, developed other ideas. "I will never rest until I have raised my navy to the same level as my army", the kaiser declared in 1897. The following year he said, "Our future lies on the water". Yet Germany's future, should the nation become involved in a continental war,

surely depended on its army.

The kaiser disliked democracy but he could be sensitive to public attitudes. He was heartened to learn that there was considerable support from the German people for the naval expansion, along with Germany's continued colonial presence in parts of west and east Africa.

Later on, the British foreign secretary Edward Grey stated in 1908 that Germany had "the strongest army in the world". The German Army would most probably have been able to defeat its French and British counterparts, as was shown in 1940, but the Russian Army was much larger than anything which Germany could hope to assemble. In 1897 an official census revealed the Russian population to be at 126 million. Germany's population was over 70 million less than that figure and Russia contained greater natural resources than Germany too. A war of attrition between the Russian and German divisions would clearly favour the Russians.

While Germany was a resource-poor state, Russia could afford to have a strong army and navy, and such a policy has been within the country's interests. The German government needed to be more careful with its money but instead in 1897 the Reichstag (parliament) sanctioned an addition to the navy of seven battleships, two heavy cruisers, and seven light cruisers. The kaiser of course supported this.

For years the kaiser had attended the annual British naval exercises that took place at Spithead on the south coast of England. He often looked on with jealousy at the impressive British warships that sailed past. At the end of 1899 another naval bill was passed in the Reichstag, which allocated more enlargement of Germany's fleet over the coming 15 years. The German army high command was far from happy about this.

At the outbreak of World War I, Germany's navy was still inferior to the Russian Navy and the Royal Navy. German warships made little impact during the four years of world war, which rendered close to irrelevant the expense and effort in expanding the navy in the first place. The kaiser's pursuit of a bigger navy from the late 19th century led to further souring of relations between Germany and Britain, and encouraged the latter to seek closer ties with France, a country the British had traditionally thought to be their biggest enemy.

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This article was originally published on [Geopolitica.RU](https://www.geopolitica.ru).

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