

# History: The Making of Colonial Empires by European Powers from the Vienna Congress up to World War I (1815–1914)

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Theme: [History](#)

Global Research, September 11, 2024

*The period in the world's history from the end of the Napoleonic Wars (1815) to the beginning of the Great War (1914) is usually labeled as the "golden age" of the European imperialistic expansion and the making of the greater national states and overseas colonial empires in Africa and Asia.*

*Nevertheless, in 1815 huge territories of the world still have been unknown to Europeans, and millions of people in Africa and Asia were living their lives not influenced by European civilization.*

*Europeans even were not very familiar with China, one of the oldest, richest, and biggest civilizations globally.*

*However, only a century later, European explorers, colonists, missionaries, merchants, bankers, adventurers, soldiers, and administrators, penetrated almost all corners of the globe.*

*As a matter of fact, the people of Asia and especially Africa mainly were unable to resist colonists and to repulse the superior European technology, especially of armed forces. In Africa, for instance, on the eve of the Great War, there were only two territories free of European colonization: Liberia on the western African seacoast and Abyssinia in East Africa.*

As a historical-political phenomenon, imperialism is understood as domination or control by one state or a group of people over others.

The new phase of imperialism started in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when occupational-colonial authorities were imposed by (West) European industrial states in their competition for the colonial partition of Asia and especially Africa. At least from the Marxist viewpoint (V. I. Lenin), imperialism was an economic necessity of the industrialized capitalist economies that had the aim to offset the declining tendency of the rate of profit by exporting capital investments. The others did not understand imperialism as necessary in economic terms as it was, for instance, the case with J. A. Schumpeter who defined this phenomenon as the non-rational tendency of the state to expend as much as its power and territory. From the psychological point of view, imperialism was rooted in the minds of rulers and ruling aristocracy for the grabbing of land to become richer and politically influential. Alternative views of imperialistic policies stress the outgrowth of popular nationalism or a method to underwrite the welfare state in order to pacify the working class, personal adventurism,

civilizing mission, or finally as a consequence of international rivalry for political power and prestige. Nevertheless, the 19th-century neo-imperialism had clearly a Eurocentric focus (like the previous one too).

Actually, the process of making new imperialistic colonial empires, especially by the West European countries regarding Africa and South-East Asia including the Pacific aquatorium, occupied the time spent from 1871 to 1914.

As a matter of comparison, Africa was only under minimal (sea coast) West European colonial penetration in the years 1815–1870 as the immense portion of the continent was even not discovered by the European explorers.

The German unification in 1871 gave a new impetus to the colonization of Africa and Asia followed by the Italian desire (unified in 1861/1866) to take a part of the African colonial cake. In other words, up to 1871, the European possessions in Africa and Asia were mainly confined to trading posts and military strategic stations with the exceptions of the British possessions in (British) India, Australia, New Zealand, and Cape Colony in South Africa followed by those of Russia in Siberia, Portuguese in littoral Angola and Mozambique and of France in littoral Algeria, Senegal, and Indo-China.

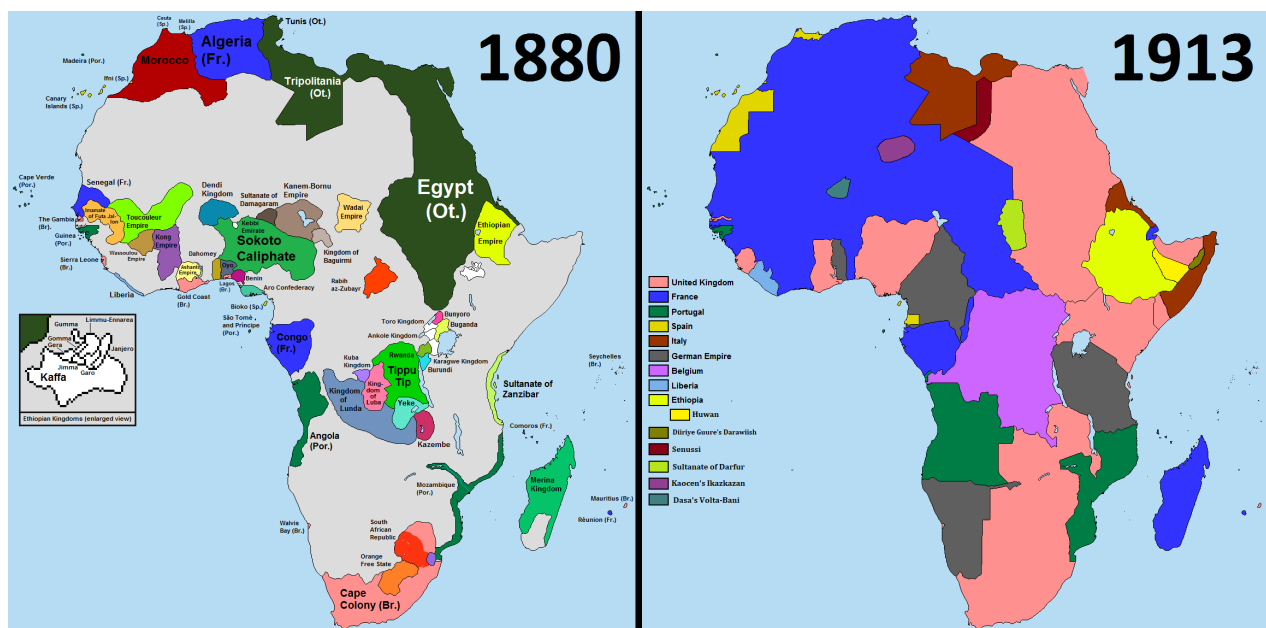


Image: Human skulls and bones in Havana Harbor, 1898. An estimated 225,000 Cubans died in Spanish concentration camps. (From the Public Domain)



On one hand, the competition for colonial possessions by the Great European Powers played a very significant influence on international relations and global politics from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries but on the other hand at least up to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century overseas empire building, in fact, lost its previous attraction. It is important to stress that several economic philosophers, like Adam Smith and those around the Manchester School, criticized the overseas empire buildings based on mercantilist justification as, for instance, in practice, British successful trade business with the USA or South America did not depend on political control and colonial politics as they were not necessary for commercial success. Furthermore, in 1852, Benjamin Disraeli (later twice British PM) thought that colonies had been millstones around the British neck. However, no one great European power after the Napoleonic Wars wanted to abandon any of their colonial possessions. Moreover, the First French Empire ceased to exist as the majority of the French pre-Napoleonic colonies became transferred to others, especially Brits. At the same time, both Spain and Portugal lost their American possessions due to the wars of independence as a consequence of their weakness at home. In other words, Spanish and Portuguese colonies in the Western hemisphere became formally independent which meant not recognizing anymore the colonial rule by Madrid and Lisbon (only Cuba remained under Spanish rule till 1898). In 1867 Russia sold to the USA its North American territory of Alaska.

However, in the 1830s, France, who had lost up to 1815 most of her first colonial empire started to gradually build up a new one firstly by the occupation of the littoral of Algeria (the rest of Algeria was occupied in the 1840s) followed by expanding her colony of Senegal in the 1850s, taking several Pacific islands and annexing Saigon in 1859. The French Indo-China was finally formed in 1893, French West Africa in 1876–1898, French Congo in 1875–1892 (part of French Equatorial Africa), Madagascar in 1895–1896, and Morocco in 1912. French Guiana was the only French colony in South America.



However, at the same time, Great Britain as well as one by one acquired new colonies and up to 1914 became the greatest Western colonial empire and the biggest one in the world's history having territorial acquisitions from Canada to New Zealand - 35 mil. sq. km. compared to the Mongol Empire (20 mil. sq. km.) and the Roman Empire (13 mil. sq. km.).

Having lost their political and colonial dominance in America since 1783 (the American Revolution and the War of Independence, 1776–1783), the British turned their colonial intentions to Asia and Africa.

After the Napoleonic Wars and the defeat of imperial France, the United Kingdom (Great Britain and Ireland) retained Cape Colony (the Cape of Good Hope) and the maritime



provinces of Ceylon from the Netherlands (Holland), Malta from the Knights of St. John, Seychelles and Mauritius from France (while France retained neighboring Réunion), and some West Indian islands from France and Spain.

The UK in the 1830s, as feared a French influence in the region, extended its claim to sovereignty over Australia and in the 1840s over New Zealand. Indian subcontinent and the lands around were the most significant British colonial possessions.

By 1858, the frontiers of British India had been formed, and it lasted until the proclamation of India's independence in 1947. The other British overseas colonies in Asia acquired in the 19<sup>th</sup> century include Singapore (1819), Malaca (1824), Hong Kong (1842), Natal (1843), Labuan (1846), Lower Burma (1852), Lagos (1861), and Sarawak (1888). All of them were, in fact, strategic points on the sea routes important for British trade, especially regarding the route to British India which was the most valuable British colonial possession. Such colonial policy of the British policymakers was grounded in the British attitude that their national prosperity depended primarily on trade within the global framework.



Areas of the world that were part of the British Empire with current British Overseas Territories underlined in red. Mandates and protected states are shown in a lighter shade. (Licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

There were two methods that London used to safeguard British maritime trade lines: either by influence or by direct political/military intervention/occupation. In fact, the Brits transformed up to WWI the whole area of the Indian Ocean into the British Indian Ocean Empire controlling all the trade routes of the Indian Ocean from South Africa to Hong Kong and from Aden to West Australia.

Global history from 1871 to 1914 experienced European neo-imperialistic competition in Asia and Africa for grabbing land, natural resources, markets, and outlets to invest financial capital. Consequently, a huge portion of the globe passed under European control. However, many of the possible areas for colonization were already pre-empted. Furthermore, the 1823 Monroe Doctrine of "Americas to Americans" discouraged further (West) European military-political involvement within the framework of the Western hemisphere (from Canada to Patagonia including the islands from the Caribbean to North Brazil) that meant latecomers

(Italy and Germany) had to build up their colonial empires in Africa, the Pacific, or China. The list was, however, entered with old imperialists like Great Britain, France, and Portugal, while the USA became one of the latest latecomers by taking Spanish colonies (Cuba, Philippines) or the Hawaiian Islands as a consequence of the 1898 Spanish-American War. A newly great Pacific power became Japan taking Formosa (Taiwan) in 1895 and Korea in 1910 but penetrating into the Chinese mainland as well. At the same time, the southern portion of Central Europe (Mittel Europa) together with the Balkans, experienced the creation of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Therefore, Austria-Hungary and Russia were the only European empires which did not have any overseas colonies.

Almost among all the old great trading countries, the Netherlands remained content with its very prosperous and existing colonial empire in the East Indies (Indonesia). France, after the unification of Germany in 1871 up to the beginning of the Great War in 1914, built up its overseas colonial empire by growing around 6,5 million sq. km. heaving nearly 47 million inhabitants. The French new colonial empire, created after the Napoleonic Wars, was chiefly in North and West Africa and Indo-China, where Laos and Tongking were added to Cambodia and Cochin China. France, as well as occupied Madagascar and several Pacific islands.

Among all colonial latecomers, united Germany was the most successful in building up the overseas colonial empire (followed by the USA, Japan, Belgium, and Italy). Germany acquired an empire of 1,6 million sq. km. of territory with around 14 million colonial inhabitants in German Southwest Africa (1884), Togoland (1884), the Cameroons (1884), German East Africa (1886), and the Pacific islands (1882–1899). Italy took Eritrea (1889), Italian Somaliland (1893), and Libya (1912), but was abortive to take Abyssinia (The First Italo-Ethiopian War in 1895–1896). Italian colonies existed only in Africa. The Belgian king Leopold II (1865–1909) received international recognition for his own private colony named Congo Free State in 1885 (2,600,000 sq. km.) that in 1908 became Belgian Congo where Belgian occupation authorities committed terrible atrocities connected with the forced labor and brutal administration during the barbaric exploitation of the natural resources.

The old colonial power of Portugal extended her African colonial possessions in Angola and Portuguese East Africa (Mozambique), but did not succeed in including the land between them due to the British colonial penetration from South Africa which separated these two Portuguese possessions.

Great Britain, together with France, made the greatest territorial acquisitions in Africa controlling Lower and Upper Nigeria (1884), British East Africa (Kenya, 1886), South Rhodesia (1890), North Rhodesia (1891), Egypt (1882), and Anglo-Egyptian Sudan (1898). In the Pacific, Great Britain took Fiji (1874), parts of Borneo (Brunei, 1881 and Sarawak, 1888), Papua New Guinea (1906), and some islands. The British Empire added 88 million people and in 1914 exercised authority over a 1/5 of the global mass land and a ¼ of its inhabitants.

While the African continent was almost completely colonized and partitioned, China succeeded in avoiding classical colonization and partition nevertheless being under strong Western political, economic, and financial influence and even control. Russia joined the other (West) European great powers in competing for influence in Asia.

The Russian land empire in Central Asia and Siberia enormously grew since the 1860s.



It is estimated that over 7 million Russian citizens emigrated from the European parts of Russia across the Ural Mt. to Asiatic Russian possessions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and up to WWI.

China experienced during the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century up to 1914 the policy of “soft imperialism” practiced by the Western colonial powers in the form of the “battle of the concessions” (similar to the Ottoman Empire as well) when the leading neo-imperialistic countries fought for commercial advantage followed by financial and railway concessions.



There was a proposal to divide the territory of China into three influential zones: northern (including Outer Mongolia) under Russian influence, central as neutral (buffer zone), and southern (including Tibet) under British influence. The same was done but realized into practice in 1907 concerning the territory of Persia. However, China as a state was stronger by having more centralized political-administrative power compared to the African case, and, therefore, Chinese central authorities succeeded in keeping the Western direct colonial influence at the seacoast, at least up to the Great War.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, undoubtedly the UK formed the largest empire ever seen. In the early 1890s in Great Britain, an idea of “imperial preference” was born rooted in a geopolitical vision of enduring a British overseas colonial empire. In other words, it was proposed that the UK and its colonial possessions should create a single autarkic economy imposing tariffs against the rest of the world while extending preferential rates to one another. This “imperial preference” system was partially applied to the self-governing dominions following the Ottawa Conference of 1932. However, the system gradually declined after WWII for the reason that changing trade patterns reduced the significance of intra-Commonwealth commerce and due to the British membership to the EFTA.

Nonetheless, after the Great War, regardless of the very fact that the overseas empire of the UK grew in size and number of inhabitants due to the addition of the pre-war African and Pacific colonies of the German Second Empire, the imperialistic land-grabbing was in principle no longer acceptable politics in the international relations as the global politics was at least supposed to be conducted within the security framework build-up by the League of Nations (which member was not the USA – a country that initiated that idea).

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*Featured image: A 1670 illustration of African slaves working in 17th-century colonial Virginia in British America (From the Public Domain)*

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