



Africa c.1880



Africa c.1914

Introduction

In the 40 years after 1870 European countries expanded their existing colonial empires by over 10 million square miles and acquired in the process up to 150 million new subjects, about a tenth of the world's population at that time. They also established spheres of influence in China and in Latin America, and were joined in their search for concessions and economic privileges by the newly unified states of Germany and Italy, and by the United States and Japan. In the 36 years after 1878, Europe and the United States acquired about 17.4 per cent of the world's land surface at an average rate of some 240,000 square miles a year.

The issue historians have debated ever since is: what factor, or combination of factors, triggered off such a massive and rapid expansion? Was this, more modern, phase of imperialist expansion - the age-old phenomenon of stronger powers wanting to dominate weaker ones? Or was there something new about it, connected with industrialisation and the development of capitalist economies? Some commentators at the time, and others since, have called it 'economic' imperialism and sought to explain it in terms of a search by industrialising powers for raw materials, for new markets, and for lucrative investment opportunities. More recent historians have stressed political rather than economic causes, and the importance of the spread of mass nationalism and a popular press. Other historians argue that one set of factors cannot satisfactorily explain such a complex phenomenon, and that different combinations of factors were at work in different parts of the globe. In recent years, a considerable amount of research has focused on the societies and peoples of Africa and Asia themselves, and has argued that their different responses to European expansion were significant in shaping the process. Clearly this new and explosive phase of European imperialism was a complex phenomenon which cannot be explained in simple terms.

(Culpin and Henig – *Modern Europe 1870-1945* pp. 56-7)

Activities

1. The introduction above is a description of the 'new imperialism' of the late 19th century. What, therefore, is imperialism?
2. Compare and contrast the two maps. Identify at least one similarity between the two maps and four significant differences.
3. Summarise in your own words how different historians have attempted to explain the reasons for the new imperialism.