

## CHAPTER 4

### Why did Britain want to expand its imperial influence in Africa between 1868 and 1902?

#### THE POSITION BEFORE 1880

##### Britain and Africa

Britain's possessions in Africa before 1880 were very few. The largest area of British control was in South Africa. Cape Colony was a formal British colony and Natal, on the Cape's north-eastern border, had been added in 1843. This had been done to strengthen Britain's influence in the Indian Ocean. This was useful in terms of protecting the routes to India and Australia. Britain also claimed the right to control the foreign affairs of the Boer republics of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal. In West Africa, Britain controlled a few small coastal areas consisting of Gambia, Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast and Lagos, which were formally annexed in 1861. In North and East Africa, Britain had no colonies. In the east, a trade agreement with the Sultan of Zanzibar was the extent of any British presence. The interior of Africa remained untouched by any British influence. By 1872, Cape Colony had been granted self-governing dominion status. Britain's other colonies in West Africa remained as **dependent colonies**.

#### KEY TERM

##### Dependent colonies

Colonies that were not primarily settlement colonies for British people such as Canada. Dependent colonies existed as trading or naval bases and had few British settlers. Such colonies were generally ruled directly from Britain, although India was an exception to this arrangement.

##### Britain and imperialism

Before the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Britain had no structured or official policy based upon imperial expansion. Essentially, Britain's approach to empire was founded upon two concepts: informal imperialism and formal imperialism.

##### Informal imperialism

The advantage of informal imperialism was that Britain did not need to establish territorial control. There were no direct costs to Britain in terms of establishing control over territory and maintaining that control. The primary purpose of an informal empire was to establish a purely economic influence. Britain could access profitable markets

for British manufactured goods and obtain cheap raw materials. There was no intention to rule. The process was one of economic exploitation at minimum cost. In Africa, for example, although Britain had a small territorial colonial presence, there was an extensive network of relationships with local tribal leaders established for purely economic opportunities.

**Free trade** was an important aspect of this form of imperialism. By the 1860s, free trade had been achieved and Britain was able to negotiate free trade agreements. This meant that informal imperialism could flourish. There was no need for Britain to conquer territory in order to exploit economic opportunities when free trade offered even greater opportunities at no cost.

Informal imperialism enabled Britain to exercise global commercial influence. The triumph of free trade reinforced and strengthened the commitment to an informal empire because it brought to an end the monopoly British traders had over Britain's colonial markets.

### **Formal imperialism**

Beyond the informal empire that Britain had developed, there also existed an empire based on territorial control. Those colonies that were regarded as settlements for Britons were awarded dominion status. This gave them extensive freedom for self-government while Britain retained control of their foreign policies and their defence. Dependent status was afforded to the rest.

Although the protection of the formal empire played a significant role in British foreign policy decisions before 1880, there was no determination to expand the formal empire. Economic interests were all-important to Britain. When free trade was finally achieved, it was the dependent colonies that suffered most. India, for example, was unable to introduce measures to protect its own economy. This enabled British traders to flood India with British imports. Britain's economic interests were flourishing and there was certainly no intention, before 1880, to promote further conquests in Africa.

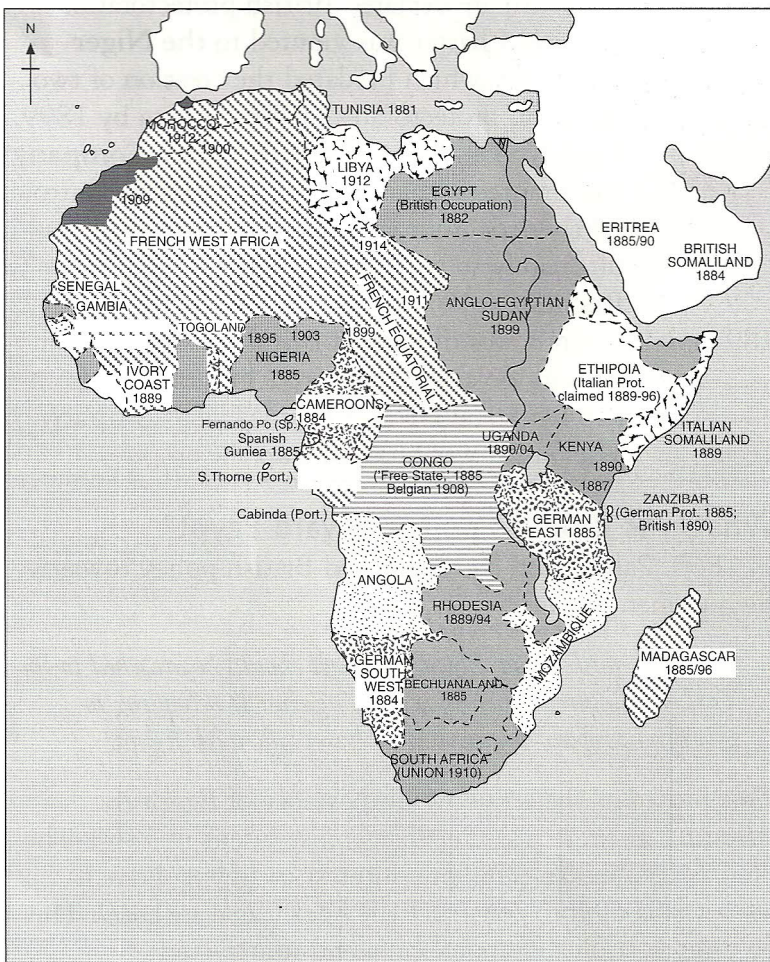
The key question becomes why did this attitude change? After 1889, there was a massive expansion of Britain's formal empire in Africa.

### **KEY TERM**

**Free trade** There was to be no government interference in trade matters. For example, government was not to introduce duties or taxes, which would protect or favour particular trade activities or industries against open competition. Essentially, trade was to function within an open and competitive market without any interference from government.



## WHAT WAS BRITAIN'S ROLE IN THE PARTITION OF AFRICA?



**Colonial Africa, 1912**

Between approximately 1880 and 1900, about 90 per cent of the continent was seized by Britain, France, Germany and Belgium. Other European states such as Portugal and Spain already had a foothold in Africa. Britain acquired the lion's share by taking about 5 million square miles of territory. France got about 3.5 million square miles, while Germany, Belgium and Italy shared a further 2.5 million square miles. The powers of Europe were greedy for African lands but for Britain this was a significant shift in policy. Gladstone, although not openly anti-imperialist, favoured a policy of colonial self-defence.

The scale and pace of Britain's expansionism may be understood through a simple timeline.

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1882	The occupation of Egypt.
1884–5	Somaliland in East Africa and Bechuanaland in the south are declared British protectorates.
1886	A Royal Charter was granted to the <b>Niger Company</b> which predated the creation of two Nigerian protectorates in West Africa by 1899.
1889	Cecil Rhodes' <b>British South Africa Company</b> was granted a charter to extend British control northwards from Bechuanaland into what was ultimately to become Northern and Southern Rhodesia.
1894–5	Uganda was declared a British possession and Britain took over direct control of Kenya from the <b>Imperial British East Africa Company</b> .
1898	The Sudan was brought into the empire.

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### What was Britain's policy toward Egypt?

In 1860, Palmerston had identified British policy towards Egypt when he said:

*What we wish about Egypt is that it should be attached to the Turkish Empire, which is security against it belonging to another European power. We wish to trade with Egypt.*

This hinted at the economic importance of Egypt to Britain, but there was no expansionist intent in 1860. The French also had an economic interest in Egypt. French money was used to construct the Suez Canal in 1869. This became the quick route to India and it attracted considerable British investment in Egypt and in the canal itself. Furthermore, Egypt produced high quality cotton, which was much sought after by British textile manufacturers.

In response to nationalist riots led by **Colonel Arabi** in June 1882, Britain invaded Egypt and by October the revolts were crushed. Although Egypt was part of the Turkish Empire, its ruler, the Khedive, Tewfik, was left merely as a figurehead. The government of Egypt devolved into British hands. The reasons for this action, particularly in view of Gladstone's reluctance to expand the British Empire, may be explained as follows.

### KEY ORGANISATIONS

#### The Niger Company,

**1886** The company was founded by George Goldie. In 1886 its Charter granted it the right to trade in all the territory in the basin of the river Niger. It established a monopoly, which froze out French and German trading interests in the region, and thereby secured British influence.

#### The British South Africa Company, 1889

This was a trading company established in 1889 under the influence of Cecil Rhodes. By 1900 it administered both Southern and Northern Rhodesia. This control continued until 1923 and 1924 respectively.

#### The Imperial British East Africa Company, 1887

This was another trading company established to exploit the potential for trade with Africa. The company was formed in 1887 and was granted a Charter in 1888.

### KEY PERSON

#### Colonel Arabi (1839-

**1911)** Ahmed Arabi was an Egyptian soldier and a nationalist leader. He established a nationalist government in Egypt in 1881 and was subsequently defeated by Britain at Tel-el-Kebir in 1882. He was exiled to Ceylon but was granted a pardon in 1901.



- Economic – Britain had significant financial investments in Egypt and these needed to be protected; trade with Egypt was vital for the British economy.
- Imperial – The Suez Canal was the route to India. It represented a vital trade route and was of supreme importance strategically. Britain had to control the canal as a means of protecting India and all the economic advantages for Britain that India offered.
- Political – Egyptian nationalism would have freed Egypt from the control of Turkey and enabled Egypt to form alliances with European states. Britain's greatest fear was that French influence in Egypt would increase. This could have threatened not only Britain's economic interests in Egypt but also the route to India.

This initial act of imperial expansionism in Africa was the outcome not of a planned policy to exploit the opportunity to intervene, but of simple economic priorities. Stability in the Eastern Mediterranean was essential for British economic interests and that priority had not changed through this occupation.

However, the occupation may be regarded as a turning point in European attitudes towards Africa. It was after this occupation that the scramble for African lands by European powers began in earnest.

### **How did British influence in West Africa develop?**

Britain already had a colonial presence in West Africa by 1880 in the shape of Gambia, Sierra Leone and the Gold Coast, and a foothold in Nigeria at Lagos, acquired in 1861. The attraction of Nigeria lay in the palm oil trade. Palm oil was used as an industrial lubricant and as the base for making soap and candles. This economic enterprise was based not on formal colonial control but through the trade networks characteristic of the 'informal empire'. It was dominated by the Royal Niger Company.

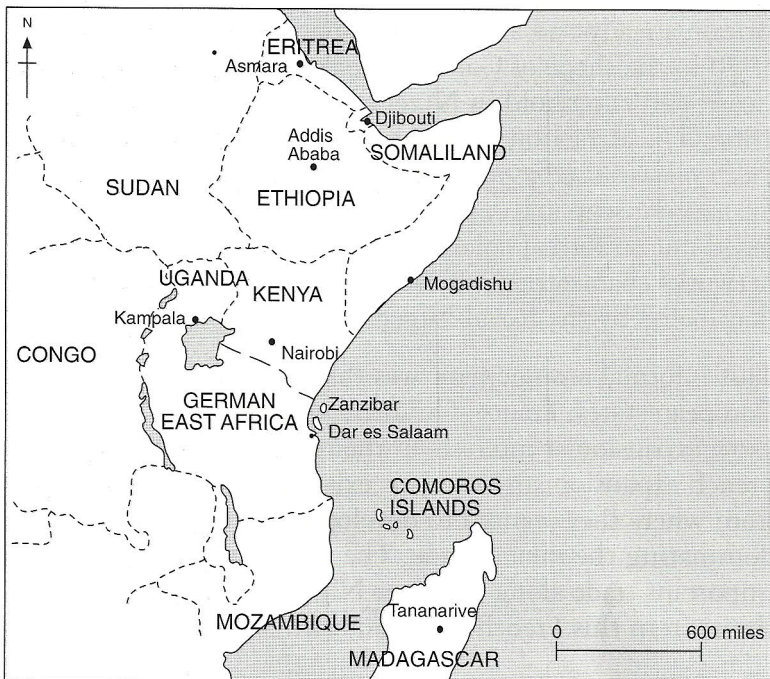
This informal arrangement was threatened when other European states, France, Germany and Belgium, began to show expansionist interests in the region. The base of French expansionism was their existing colony at Senegal from where they wanted to develop a West African Empire dominating the inland trade. The danger was that the important trade along the river Niger would be under threat from this French expansionism.

Similar region pressure came in 1885 when the Belgians set up the Congo Free State in order to exploit the thriving rubber trade there. Not only were British economic interests beginning to be threatened, but there was also the issue of international rivalry. If other European powers began to establish extensive territorial control in West Africa, Britain could not simply ignore this and maintain its informal empire strategy. In 1884, the situation was further complicated when Germany seized Togoland and the Cameroons.

In 1885, a conference in Berlin agreed that there should be free trade in the Congo basin and recognised British interests along the River Niger. Significantly, there was also agreement reached about the process of annexation of territory in West Africa in the future. Out of this agreement emerged the British colony of Nigeria.

The motivating force in British West African colonisation lay typically in economic interests but, perhaps more importantly, in Britain's determination not to allow other European states to grab land that might threaten this trade. The West African experience set the ground rules for imperialism in the region.

### What were British interests in East Africa?



### KEY PLACE

**The Congo Free State, 1885–1908** This was a private kingdom owned by King Leopold II of Belgium. It included the entire area now known as Zaire. In 1908, it became part of Belgium's formal empire and was known from then on as the Belgian Congo.

East Africa, c.1895



In East Africa, as in the north in Egypt, there were vital British interests at stake. The island of Zanzibar imported significant quantities of manufactured goods from Britain and India, and its total import and export trade was measured at about £2 million. It was a major trading point for the East African interior from which came ivory and leather goods and into which went textiles from Manchester, brass from Birmingham and Sheffield steel.

Britain's primary interest was trade and East Africa had huge economic potential for future development but this did not equate to formal colonisation. The critical factor came when German and French explorers became interested in the area. This raised the prospect of a major threat to British trade and the creation of a French or German naval base on the coast, which might threaten the routes to India and the Far East. However, it was Germany who seized the initiative when **Otto von Bismarck** announced the creation of a German protectorate in East Africa.

## KEY PERSON

### **Otto von Bismarck**

**(1815-98)** In 1847 he became a member of the Prussian parliament and then the Prime Minister of Prussia between 1862 and 1890. He was the first Chancellor of the newly created German Empire in 1871, a post he held until 1890. His main priority was to strengthen Germany, particularly through alliances with Russia and Austria.

A diplomatic agreement was reached in 1886 to divide East Africa into British and German spheres of interest, but the agreement appeared to offer greater economic opportunities to the Germans than to the British. In early 1888, Sir William MacKinnon launched the Imperial British East Africa Company, backed by investors such as the Manchester cotton manufacturer James Hutton, the brewer Henry Younger and the shipping magnate George Mackenzie. It was pressure from MacKinnon's company that finally established a British presence of any scale in East Africa. The British expanded into Uganda, Kenya, Zanzibar and Somaliland.

The key factors in British colonialism in East Africa were:

- the economic importance of the area and the pressure put on the government to protect and expand the economic opportunities
- a determination to resist any imbalance in the land grabbing. If Germany expanded its influence in the area, then so must Britain. It was, however, significant that Lord Salisbury was reluctant to establish formal British control and preferred the diplomatic approach.

There was also a strong feeling in government at this time that it was not the role of government to provide capital investment in any economic enterprises. That was the role of entrepreneurs. Again, this underlined the reluctance of British political leaders to commit to a formal occupation of territory until the initial stages had been backed by economic aid from private groups.

### WHO WAS TO CONTROL SOUTHERN AFRICA: BRITISH OR BOERS?

The development of British imperialism in Southern Africa was intimately bound up with the **Boer settlers** in the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. Relations between the British and the Boers had never been good, but, in 1877, the Boers turned to Britain for help against an uprising by the Zulu tribes in the Transvaal. Britain was willing to help because this was seen as an opportunity to consolidate British rule in Southern Africa. The British defeated the Zulus and annexed the Transvaal.

### WHY DID THE FIRST BOER WAR BREAK OUT IN 1881?

In an attempt to restore their independence, the Boers successfully attacked British forces at Majuba Hill in 1881. Gladstone, reluctant to be involved in a colonial war, agreed to the Pretoria Convention. Britain's determination to control Southern Africa was reflected in the fact that at the Convention the Transvaal was forced to accept British **suzerainty**. In the face of continued Boer objections, the suzerainty was withdrawn through the **Treaty of London** in 1884. In effect, the Transvaal was left to control its own affairs except in matters of foreign policy. This was a vital form of control for Britain because it placed important constraints on the Transvaal's ability to form links with Britain's European rivals, particularly Germany. The situation was to be transformed from 1886 when gold was discovered in the Transvaal. The Boers were farmers not miners, but they wanted to exploit this new-found wealth. Miners and traders flooded into the Transvaal from abroad. The Boers called them '**uitlanders**' or outsiders. This opened up opportunities for one of the most influential figures in British colonial expansion in Africa from the 1880s, Cecil Rhodes.

### KEY PEOPLE

**Boer settlers** These were the descendents of the first Dutch settlers on the Cape. In order to escape British control and preserve the independence of their culture and church, they had embarked on a 'trek' northwards where they established two new settlements of Transvaal and the Orange Free State. These were recognised as independent Boer republics in 1854.

### KEY TERM

**Suzerainty** The right of a state to hold nominal control over the affairs of another state. The Transvaal did not have complete independence from British control under this agreement.

### KEY TREATY

**The Treaty of London, 1884** This treaty effectively recognised the independence of the Transvaal.

### KEY PEOPLE

**Uitlanders** This was the term used by the Boers in the Transvaal and the Orange Free State to describe new immigrants in the 19th century who came to exploit the gold and diamond riches in the region.



## KEY PERSON

### **Cecil Rhodes (1853–1902)**

Rhodes went to Africa at the age of seventeen and became a millionaire through diamond and gold mining enterprises. By the mid-1880s, he was committed to the idea of creating a great British Empire in Africa. In 1889, he founded the British South Africa Company and used this trading organisation to push British control northwards from Cape Colony. In 1890, he established Southern Rhodesia, a territory named after himself. This was pushed further north the following year. Rhodes' personal dream was to establish a railway under British control and running through British colonies, from Cairo to the Cape. He was a ruthless imperialist whose actions frequently caused major problems for the British government and contributed significantly to the outbreak of the Second Anglo-Boer War in 1899.

## KEY EVENT

### **The Matabele War, 1893–**

**94** Jameson led a raid against Matabeleland. About 50 whites were killed in the conflict. The war lasted only 3 months and resulted in a victory for Jameson by January 1894. The outcome strengthened colonial imperialism in southern Africa.

## WHAT PART DID CECIL RHODES PLAY?

Although British governments did not always share Cecil Rhodes' commitment to a continent wide empire in Africa, they did see him as a vital component in protecting Britain's influence in Southern Africa.

By 1884, it was becoming increasingly clear that Boer settlers were penetrating onto Bechuanaland. There was the possibility that the Boers might link up with German colonists who were settling in what was to become German South West Africa. This could have led to the isolation of British controlled Southern Africa from the supposedly mineral rich Zambesia to the north. The possibility of a German-Transvaal alliance was of great concern to Britain at this time. Rhodes not only saw the opportunity for colonial expansion but also for the expansion of his own personal wealth if he could access the economic potential in the Zambesia region. Bechuanaland was crucial in this process. In December 1884, Britain declared Bechuanaland a British protectorate.

In 1881, Rhodes had become a member of the Cape parliament and he had commented: 'Africa is still lying ready for us. It is our duty to take it.' In 1889, he secured a charter for his British South Africa Company (BSAC). Rhodes knew that he could exploit the government's attitude of empire by using his company to administer and control new territories on behalf of the British government. Rhodes' position was strengthened still further when he became Prime Minister of Cape Colony in 1890. The BSAC functioned, in practice, like an independent colonising organisation. It had received rights for farming and mining in Mashonaland. Attempts by the native population to challenge the company resulted in the **Matabele War** of 1893–4.

Not only was Rhodes motivated by economic greed and a sense of imperial destiny, but also a profoundly racist approach towards Africans. At the age of 23, Rhodes had written:

*Why should we not form a secret society with but one object, the furtherance of the British Empire and the bringing of the whole uncivilised world under British rule, for making the Anglo-Saxon race but one empire.*

There was considerable support for these views in Britain and within the government.

By 1895, Rhodes' company had eliminated all effective opposition to his control of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. The only barrier to his dream of British supremacy in Southern Africa was the Transvaal. The Boers were interested in the creation of a federation of South African states, of which the Transvaal would become a leading power. There was a fear in Britain that such a union might be too weak to resist German influence in the region. For Britain, a major strategic issue was emerging. Britain needed a reason to attack the Transvaal. Ostensibly, this was the treatment of British nationals working in the Transvaal who were regarded as second-class citizens. The Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, gave his secret blessing to what was to become a disastrous raid against the Transvaal.

### THE JAMESON RAID, 1895

With the support of Cecil Rhodes, the chief administrator of the BSAC, **Dr Starr Jameson** and about 500 troops launched an attack on the Transvaal hoping to generate an armed uprising amongst the uitlanders against the Boers. The raid was a disaster: there was no uprising. Rhodes resigned as Cape Prime Minister and the Boers were convinced of Britain's involvement in the affair. The raid put the Transvaal and Britain on a collision course because one of them now had to establish its superiority in South Africa. As one South African commented: 'The ambition of the Transvaal to become the rising power in the land is beyond doubt and I don't think we shall all quiet down again until the question is settled one way or another.' The issue finally came to a head in 1899.

### THE SECOND BOER WAR, 1899–1902

The issue was who was to control South Africa, the British or the Boers? Although the Transvaal had huge economic resources in the form of diamonds and gold, the primary concern for Britain was one of strategic importance. The Cape had to be free from Boer threats and the Boer links to Germany. The Cape was a vital strategic factor in Britain's security because it controlled a route to India.

#### KEY PERSON

##### **Dr Starr Jameson**

**(1853–1917)** He was a British colonial administrator who led the Jameson Raid from Mafeking into the Transvaal. He was briefly imprisoned for this. On his return to South Africa he eventually succeeded Cecil Rhodes as leader of the Progressive Party of Cape Colony. He was Prime Minister of Cape Colony between 1904 and 1908.



Chamberlain certainly regarded the freedom of the Boers to control their own domestic affairs as weakening Britain's power. For Chamberlain Britain must have complete control in order to protect its interests. Chamberlain was fundamentally in favour of expanding Britain's empire. Stability in Europe had ended and it was up to Britain to promote its own power through imperial expansionism. Consolidating British control of Southern Africa was part of Chamberlain's strategy to achieve this vision.

## KEY PERSON

**Alfred Milner (1854-1925)** He was a British colonial administrator and the Governor of Cape Colony between 1897 and 1901. From 1902 he became Governor of the Transvaal and the Orange River after their annexation. He was created a Viscount in 1902 for services in the Boer War. In 1916 he served in Lloyd George's war cabinet and from 1919 until 1921 he was Colonial Secretary.

The governor of Cape Colony, **Alfred Milner**, negotiated with the Boers but, in October 1899, war broke out and lasted until May 1902. The war ended with the Peace of Vereeniging. The Boer republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State were annexed and their peoples became part of the British Empire. In 1907, the two former republics became self-governing colonies.

## SUMMARY QUESTIONS

- 1 Why did Britain take part in the 'scramble for Africa'?
- 2 How far did Britain's approach to imperialism change after about 1880?
- 3 Assess the importance of economic factors influencing Britain's attitude towards imperial expansion in Africa after 1880.
- 4 How important were the Boers as a factor in British interests in Southern Africa after 1880?