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Topics in West African History

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traders, mainly British, now began to develop trade with the interior along the Niger. Between 1857 and 1859, three trading stations were established on the Niger at Aboh, Onitsha and at Lokoja. The value of the produce collected at these stations increased from £1,800 in 1857 to £2,750 in 1858 and to £9,000 in 1859. The only other obstacle in the way of this developing trade was the opposition of the Africans in the Delta region, who found their profitable trade as middlemen seriously threatened. In 1861 these Africans boldly attacked the vessels going up the Niger, and the British Government in return sent a number of warships which bombarded the Delta towns responsible for the attacks and crushed their opposition. From then on till 1871, these warships were sent on annual punitive sweeps up the Niger. With the removal of this last obstacle, the volume of trade up the Niger continued to increase throughout the century.

It should be clear then that attempts were made to fill the economic vacuum created by the abolition of the slave trade and these attempts met with considerable success. By 1880, the slave trade was a thing of the past and in its place was now a thriving trade in natural products such as palm oil, palm kernels, groundnuts, cotton, gum, ivory and timber. This success did have some far-reaching social, economic and political consequences. The first and most important social effect was that instead of being a commodity himself, the African became a human being having material and spiritual needs to be satisfied. Secondly, as a result of this increasing commercial activity, two classes of Africans began to emerge, a middle class consisting of private traders and business men, and a working class consisting of people employed by the various European trading firms and companies. Economically, the effect was that more and more traders and trading companies were attracted from most of the European countries to West Africa. By 1840, over ten companies from Britain and about eight from France were operating on the west coast. From 1840 onwards, they were joined by a number of firms from Germany. By 1870, there were about six of these German firms, mainly from Hamburg, which were already monopolizing the trade in Togoland and the Cameroons. This keen rivalry was not confined to the coast. By the early 1880's, there were as many as five British and two French firms operating on the Niger. The former companies were later amalgamated into the United African company,

which was chartered in 1886 and renamed the Royal Niger Company.

The political consequences of these economic activities were also far-reaching. Like the missionaries, the European traders constantly appealed to their governments to establish peace and order and to break down the opposition of the African middlemen. It was mainly in response to such appeals that, the European governments became involved in the affairs of the African states during the nineteenth century. For instance it was mainly in the interest of the traders that the British government became involved in the Asante-Fante wars in the nineteenth century which, as we have seen, culminated in the annexation of southern Ghana in 1874. Similarly, the French annexed Porto Novo and Cotonou in the early 1880's mainly to facilitate the activities of the traders, while, as we shall see presently, appeals from German traders and missionaries from Togoland and the Cameroons gave Bismarck the excuse to annex those areas in 1884.

It should be evident from this and the previous chapter that, far from causing a withdrawal, the abolition of the slave trade and the solution of the Niger problem rather involved Europe even more deeply in the affairs of West Africa. By 1880, Europeans were not only preaching the gospel and building schools in West Africa but they were also actively trading in natural products such as palm oil, groundnuts and cotton and as a result of these activities they had even assumed direct political control over a few districts mainly along the coast.

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Despite the many activities of European missionaries and traders in West Africa between 1808 and 1880 and their consequences, there were still large areas which had not been affected socially or economically by 1880. Apart from the basins of the Niger, the Gambia and the Senegal, these activities had been mainly confined to the coast. Politically, too, though these activities had weakened or caused the disintegration of some of the empires and kingdoms of West Africa, they had not led to their complete overthrow and absorption by 1880. Most of the states which emerged on the ruins of some of these empires were still enjoying their autonomous existence, even if in some cases, a precarious one.

However, during the short period of twenty years between 1880 and 1900, European political influence was extended to every corner of West Africa and by the end of that period, only one state, Liberia, was still a sovereign and independent state. All the other kingdoms and states had become full-fledged colonies of the European powers. What brought about this loss of African independence and the establishment of European rule not only in West Africa but throughout the whole continent?

The causes were not to be found in conditions in West Africa. By 1880 some of the kingdoms and empires like Dahomey and Sokoto in Northern Nigeria, Sikasso and Samori's empire, were still stable and powerful. Even where they had declined or disintegrated by 1870, attempts were being made in the 1880's to revive their fortunes. A good example is the work of Kwaku Dua III, better known as Prempeh I, who became the Asantehene in 1888. Within a year of his accession to power, he had suppressed the Kokofu and Mampong rebellions, sent an impressive delegation to the British on the coast to ask for the return of Adansi and Kwahu to Asante, and started negotiating for the return of the Dwaben who migrated to the coast after their defeat in the civil war of 1875. By the third year of his reign, he had been able to restore some measure of unity and order and was confident of re-establishing the Asante Empire. When he was offered British protection in 1891, he refused it politely but firmly. He told the British Governor, 'My kingdom of Asante will never commit itself to any such policy, Asante must remain independent as of old, at the same time to be friendly with all white men'. (This is reminiscent of the circulars sent out by Menelik, the Emperor of Ethiopia, in that same year to the major European powers. 'I have no intention', he wrote, 'of being an indifferent spectator if far-distant Powers make their appearance with the idea of dividing Africa . . . As the Almighty has protected Ethiopia to this day, I am confident that he will protect and increase her in the future.' The Moro-Naba of Wagadu gave the same reply to the French in 1895.) If Prempeh I had been given time, there is no doubt that he would have succeeded in his efforts to revive the Asante Empire. But only five years after turning down the offer of

protection, that is in 1896, he was arrested by the British and exiled to the Seychelles Islands and was not repatriated till 1924. Most of the African states did not surrender their independence. It was seized from them.

Why did the European powers decide to appropriate the entire African continent for themselves during the last two decades of the nineteenth century? The answer can be found in the economic, social and political forces operating in Europe during the second half of that century. The first economic reason was the need for new markets for surplus manufactured goods caused by the spread of the Industrial Revolution from England to France, Russia, Germany and Italy during the second half of the nineteenth century. As each country became industrialized, she began to produce far more goods than could be absorbed locally, and therefore began to look for a solution to this overproduction of goods. This was found in the imposition of high tariff duties and in the acquisition of colonies whose markets she could dominate. The demand for raw materials became also very acute and competitive and it therefore became the aim of the industrial countries to control the sources for the supply of such raw materials as cotton, rubber and minerals. Indeed, according to one American historian, Carlton Hayes, what actually started the economic push into Africa and the sunbaked islands of the Pacific 'was not so much an over-production of factory goods in Europe as an under-supply of raw materials'.

A third economic factor in the race for colonies was the investment of surplus capital. As more and more profit accumulated in the European countries, the need for new areas where surplus capital could be more profitably invested became felt and some people like Jules Ferry, the Prime Minister of France from 1880 to 1883 found the answer in the acquisition of colonies. In one of his speeches, he said, 'Colonies are for rich countries one of the most lucrative methods of investing capital . . . I say that France, which is glutted with capital and which has exported considerable quantities has an interest in looking at this side of the question . . . It is the same question as that of outlets for our manufactures.' Lenin, the great Russian leader, attributed the rise of the new imperialism solely to this need and has described imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism. However, some historians, mainly British and American, have criticized Lenin's view on the grounds that the imperial powers did not in fact invest much capital in the colonies but rather in independent countries like the United States, Brazil and Canada. Though it is true that the imperial powers invested the bulk of their capital outside their colonies, this does not prove that at the time that they were acquiring their colonies they did not hope to invest capital there. What surely happened was that having acquired these colonies, they realized that they had grossly exaggerated the investment potentialities and that they would gain more by investing elsewhere.

The political forces of the day greatly strengthened the economic forces. After the Russo-Turkish war of 1877–8 a balance of power in Europe was created which made it impossible for any European nation to expand its territories within Europe. A line of least resistance had therefore to be found. For Russia this was Central Asia; for the United States, it was the wild West; for the Western European countries, it was 'the sea and the new lands beyond'. This expansion along the line of least resistance was made almost inevitable by the second and the greatest of the operating political forces, namely the force of nationalism. Just as the second half of this century is destined to go down in history as the era of African nationalism, so the second half of the nineteenth century has gone down as the era of nationalism in Europe. That period saw the emergence of the nation-states of Germany and Italy, while in France, nationalism was aroused to a pitch of frenzy as a result of the Franco-German war of 1870–1 and the loss of Alsace and Lorraine. The rise of nationalism gave rise to the partition of Africa mainly because during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, colonies became the symbol of a nation's greatness and prestige just as atomic bombs, sputniks and moon satellites are today. The more colonies a nation-state had, the more powerful and great she was considered to be. Thus, after her humiliating defeats of 1870–1, France turned her attention overseas to demonstrate that she was still a great power. As one of her scholars proclaimed in 1882, 'Colonization is for France a question of life and death, either France will become a great African power or she will be no more than a secondary European power'. The Germans also talked of 'getting a place in the sun', while later Italy also entered the race for colonies mainly for reasons of prestige. There is a great deal of truth in the view that just as

African nationalism today is mainly responsible for the liquidation of colonialism in Africa, European nationalism partly accounts for its establishment.

Existing social factors were also important in the acquisition of colonies. The industrial revolution and the capitalist system produced not only surplus capital but also surplus working power. As more and more machines came into use, more and more people found themselves out of work. In the 1870's alone it was estimated that there were about a million paupers in England, while there were even more people in Germany and Italy without jobs. The solution to this problem was found in the acquisition of colonies where the surplus population could be settled and could maintain contacts with the mother country. Such settlements were made in North, Eastern, Central and Southern Africa but climatic conditions and mosquitoes jointly prevented such European settlements in West Africa.

The need felt by some Europeans to stop the internal slave trade and to spread civilization and education in the less developed countries through colonization is often stated as another, and indeed, according to some historians such as Carrington and Cohen, the main reason, for the partition of Africa. If this were true, the partition of Africa would surely have taken place in the 1840's and 1850's following cries for protection by the missionaries and the moving appeals of David Livingstone. Moreover, the virtual absence of humanitarian questions at the Berlin Conference held from 1884 to 1885 and the fact that between 1900 and 1945 relatively little was done to promote the welfare and education of the Africans in the colonies belies the humanitarian and disinterested motive underlying the partition of Africa. The real decisive considerations were neither philanthropic nor disinterested but rather arose from the selfish economic, political and social needs of the European powers.

This virtually inevitable race for colonies began in West Africa, not in 1882 or 1884 as is generally supposed, but rather in 1879 when King Leopold of the Belgians and France sent out Stanley and de Brazza to conclude treaties with the rulers of the Congo basin. As this area had hitherto been the exclusive preserve of the Portuguese, the sudden intrusion of these powers alarmed them. Britain also felt her hitherto unchallenged position in the regions of the Bights of Benin and Biafra threatened by French activities in Porto Novo and on the Niger in the early 1880's. It was to forestall the French and Leopold II that the British supported the Portuguese on the Congo issue, and at the same time dispatched Hewett in May 1884 to declare a protectorate over the modern southern districts of Nigeria. The scramble was well on the way. When Hewett arrived on the west coast in July, he had to double up his speed because he found that Germany, which had not so far been reckoned with, had entered the race by her annexation of Togoland in June and the Cameroons a week before his arrival.

Historians have been arguing about the reasons Bismarck, the Chancellor or Prime Minister of Germany, had for plunging Germany into the scramble for colonies in 1884. Many have maintained that his reasons were purely diplomatic—to quarrel with Britain in order to win the friendship of France. But this is unreasonable. If Bismarck had wanted to quarrel with Britain, he could have done so more readily over Egypt. But even when he entered the race, he was still supporting Britain on the Egyptian crisis. Secondly, if he really wanted to provoke Britain into a quarrel over the west coast, he would surely have annexed areas in which Britain had clearly established interests, like southern Ghana or the Niger delta. But Bismarck left these areas alone. He entered the race because by the 1880's the pressure being brought to bear upon him by the Chambers of Commerce particularly that of Hamburg, by merchants such as S. C. Godeffroy and Adolf Woermann, and bankers such as Von Hansemann and Bleichroder had become very great. Further appeals also kept coming in from German traders and missionaries on the west coast for protection. All that Bismarck waited for was a favourable occasion when he could carry the whole of the German public with him. Britain's refusal to extend protection to the German traders in South West Africa, and her failure even to reply to his repeated appeals, gave him this opportunity, and in March 1884 he extended protection to the German traders and annexed the region in April, and in May he sent an envoy, Nachtigal, with secret instructions to annex the Cameroons.

Thus, with France, Germany, Britain and Portugal all very actively staking out claims on the west coast, the scramble for Africa had reached an advanced stage by July 1884. It was to lay down rules to govern this race and to avoid the possibility of an

open conflict that an international conference was held in Berlin from 15 November 1884 to 30 January 1885 under the chairmanship of Bismarck. On 26 February 1885 the Berlin Act was signed. This Act stipulated, among others, that any power which wanted to claim any territory should notify the other signatory powers 'in order to enable them, if need be, to make good any claims of their own', that any such annexations should be followed by effective occupation before they became valid, that there should be freedom of trade in the Congo basin and freedom of navigation on the Congo and the Niger Rivers. During and after the Conference, the European powers sent out more envoys and soldiers who, by persuasion or force or bribery, got African rulers to sign agreements, in which they ceded away, in some cases innocently, their territories. Most of these rulers later realized the full significance of these agreements and rose up in rebellion. But such rebellions were crushed and the rulers were either killed or exiled. Others, like Lat-Dior, Samori Toure, Ba Bemba and Behanzin put up resistance right from the beginning but they failed to maintain their independence. Lat-Dior of Cayor resisted the French till he was killed in 1885. Samori Toure defended his huge empire stretching from Boure to northern Ghana from 1891 until 1898 when he was captured and deported to Gabon where he died in 1900. Ba Bemba of Sikasso also bravely stood up against the French and in 1894 he killed himself when he found the odds too heavy against him 'preferant le suicide au deshonneur'. Behanzin, the King of Dahomey, opposed the French from 1892 to 1894 when he was arrested and imprisoned and then deported first to Martinique and then to Algeria where he died in 1906. Similarly, it took the British a substantial part of the first decade of this century to suppress the resistance in Bornu and the Fulani emirates of Northern Nigeria.

Thus by 1900 practically the whole of West Africa, and indeed, of the entire African continent, had been appropriated by European nations to meet their selfish economic, political and social ends.