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The industrial revolution was the force behind the New Imperialism

by Deyna Parvanova

(Honors History 1120)

New Imperialism is a period of colonial expansion by European powers, the United States, and the Empire of Japan during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Europe had colonies scattered all over the world before that, but at that time the amount of influence Europe had on these regions was minimal. Things changed at the end of the 19th century to a more aggressive and extensive form of imperialism. In this ‘New Imperialism,’ European countries took over most of the rest of the world between the years 1870 and 1914, and had formal political, economic and social control over the new territories.

What was the force behind this New Imperialism?

The industrial revolution was the force behind this New Imperialism, as it created not only the need for Europe to expand, but the power to successfully take and profitably maintain so many colonies overseas.

The industrial revolution created the need for Europe to take over colonies around the world. An empire always wants to add colonies as a measure of national greatness, but now there was an additional push to conquer new territories. Because the Industrial Revolution increased the production capacity of Western states astronomically, there was an enormous hunger for raw materials to satisfy demands. Thus, the Western powers sought colonies where raw materials were abundant and where they could be appropriated at little to no cost. Of course, their eyes were on Africa, which was rich in oil, ivory, rubber, wood, cotton, cocoa beans, copper, gold, iron, cobalt, diamonds, etc.

The American Civil War created a shortage of cotton supply. This prompted the main purchasers of cotton, Britain and France, to turn to Egyptian cotton. With the ending of slavery in 1865, there was not enough labor to plow, seed, prune, and harvest the cotton in the South. *With hundreds of thousands of workers finding employment in textile mills, these supplies and outlets were crucial to securing the social stability of European and North American societies. To maintain an industry so important required a global reconstruction of the empire of cotton; a search for innovative combination of land, labor, capital, and state power* (Empire of Cotton). The cotton industry needed a new source of raw material supply and labor. The Western countries looked at western Africa, India, and China for that.

Additionally, the colonies gave the Western powers a ready-made market for their goods, as the colonized people were left with little to no legal recourse to produce their own finished products. Asia’s textile markets were vast, and winning them was the grand prize for European imperialism. India, in particular, became a huge market. It was the most important customer for British manufacturers. Africa too was seen as a place to sell products. *There are 40,000,000 of naked people beyond that gateway, and the cotton spinners of Manchester are waiting to clothe them* (King Leopold’s Ghost), said Henry Stanley to the Manchester Chamber of Commerce in 1884 on behalf of Belgian King Leopold’s International Association of the Congo.

The Industrial Revolution increased production capacity drastically. A bigger demand for these products had to be generated. Controlling the rest of the world gave the option to suppress their capability of producing goods and created a market outlet for their own products. The stirring race and hunger for colonization is best described in a diamond magnate Cecil Rhodes’ words *I would annex the planets if I could* (King’s Leopold Ghost).

The industrial revolution gave Europe the capability to take over so much of the world very quickly. The Western powers used their superior weapons and powerful iron warships to conquer much of the world, especially lands in Africa and Asia. In 1800, Europe controlled 35 percent of the world's land surface; by 1914, they controlled 84 percent. Western imperialism placed millions of black and brown people under the control of white people. *The tools were critical, for they would soon allow a few thousand white men working for the king to dominate some twenty million Africans* (King Leopold's Ghost). Thanks to the Industrial Revolution, Europeans had an advantage in the quality of their weapons and military training, and took advantage of the decline of the great empires in Asia and Africa. The Maxim gun, an early edition of the machine gun, was far superior to the native tribes' muskets or spears. *As the poet Hilaire Belloc wrote: Whatever happens, we have got the Maxim gun, and they have not* (King Leopold's Ghost).

The heavily armed ships with hulls of iron and steam-powered engines could navigate the non-tidal sections of rivers, allowing access inland. *The steamboat was an instrument of colonization throughout the nineteenth century, serving everyone from British on the Ganges in India to the Russians on the Ob and Irtysh in Siberia* (King Leopold's Ghost) and on the Missouri River in the United States.

There were also new advancements in medicine, allowing (to an extent) Europeans to better survive malaria and yellow fever. Africa, especially the western regions, was known as the 'White Man's Grave' and years earlier only one in ten men could survive. With the new medicine to combat malaria, European explorers could venture much deeper into Africa, and therefore make more accurate maps for future Europeans arriving on the continent. Also, armies now suffered much less attrition damage when moving through the African land. Therefore, larger armies could arrive in Africa to effectively dominate the local cultures and peoples.

Also, tonic went well with gin! It was discovered that quinine (made from a cinchona bark) is a powerful medicine that not only treats malaria but also prevents it. Quinine was so bitter, though, that British officials stationed in India and other tropical posts took to mixing the powder with soda and sugar. "Tonic water," of a sort, was born. Schweppes' introduced in 1870 "Indian Quinine Tonic," a product specifically aimed for the British who were overseas and had to take a preventative dose of quinine daily (Schweppes.eu). It was only natural that at some point during this time someone would combine his daily dose of protective quinine tonic with a shot (or two) of gin. Rather than knock back a bitter glass of tonic in the morning, why not enjoy it in the afternoon with a healthy gin ration? The gin and tonic was born - and started saving lives.

Without the innovations of the Industrial Revolution, the Imperialistic powers would not be able to penetrate deeply in the colonial countries. Their access would be limited to the ports.

The industrial revolution gave Europe the power to efficiently maintain and profit from so many colonies around the world. Humans had never gone faster than horses could carry them, but now steam-powered trains and ships moved people and goods faster and cheaper than ever before. The impact of infrastructure projects was staggering. *A journey on a steamer from Bombay to Liverpool was accomplished in twenty-one days thanks to the newly opened Suez Canal* (Empire of Cotton). Railroads were built and penetrated rural areas. In Asia and Africa, the "great transformation" reached, for the first time, into areas remote from port cities. Thanks to the telegraph, orders could be wired and received over great distances in a short amount of time.

Industrial capitalism brought a new form of global economic integration. The rising power of manufacturers, and the particular form of capital they controlled, created a relationship between capital and territory as well as the people who dwelled on it, and allowed for new ways to mobilize their labor. *New form of labor, including new forms of coercion, violence, and expropriation, spread over the globe* (Empire of Cotton). At the Berlin Conference of 1884 and again at the Brussels Conference of 1889-1890, the European powers set out rules for claiming territory in Africa and agreed on the duties of a colonizing power: preventing Africans from trading in slaves, arms, or

liquor. Africans were perceived as disorderly and incapable of self-control or economic progress, and Europeans were viewed as responsible and disciplined.

Because of growing racism, or the belief that one race was superior to another because they were more technologically advanced, many Europeans and Americans felt they had the right to dominate people of other races. *To Europeans, Africans were inferior beings: lazy, uncivilized, little better than animals* (King Leopold's Ghost). In fact, they were treated and put to work like animals. Some were brought to fair exhibitions and displayed as animals in zoos along with monkeys. Many of the natives were illiterate and like the Congo case, the Congolese had no written language. The only way to hear their stories is from notes written by colonizers and settlers or missionaries like the Swedish missionary C.N. Borrisson. An imprisoned woman told him about the soldiers' attitude: *Whether they cut off our heads or that of a chicken it is all the same to them . . .* (King Leopold's Ghost). The rage of racism and brutality were constantly there.

Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement wrote John Stuart Mill, the great philosopher of human freedom in *On Liberty* (King Leopold's Ghost). The colonial powers used various administrative systems (direct and indirect) to facilitate control and economic exploitation, but no matter the system they were all alien, authoritative, and bureaucratic, and distorted the local political and social organizations. Along with this, they undermined their moral authority and political legitimacy as governing structures.

The most frightful and terrifying story is probably of the Congo, where the framework of control was from the military. *After all, without armed forces, you cannot make man leave their homes and families and carry sixty-five-pound loads for weeks or months* (King Leopold's Ghost). Massive amounts of deaths happened as a result of the forced labor system. Leopold's army mutilated or killed any African who did not produce enough of the coveted, profitable resources. The Europeans burned African villages, farmland, and rainforest, and held women as hostages until rubber and mineral quotas were met. Due to this brutality and European diseases, the native population dwindled by approximately ten million people in the Congo alone.

In cotton producing countries, as the prices of cotton were going down but food prices up, starvation and famine were widely spread. In India alone, *the British medical journal The Lancet estimated that famine death during 1890 totaled 19 million, . . . people died like flies* (Empire of Cotton). The situation was no different within the rest of the colonies.

Europe grew rich thanks to the Industrial Revolution and diverged from the rest of the world by stemming their development and natural evolution. Imperialistic powers collected large fortunes from their colonies, all obtained from low paid or free labor and natural resources, but left the local population without any means of support. The subsistence agriculture in the colonized countries was destroyed. When the European powers stepped up their colonization of Africa in the 19th century, they caused tremendous harm to traditional farming and herding practices. For centuries, local farmers had adapted to changing environmental conditions. The Europeans considered such farming techniques wasteful and unsuited to the export crops they hoped to cultivate. Throughout the African continent, the imperialists grabbed the chosen lands and reoriented production towards cash crops for export: like cotton, coffee, sugar cane, and cocoa. One immediate result was that food production for the poor majority was neglected.

At the same time, large-scale export agriculture led to massive environmental degradation. Western commercial interests cleared millions of acres of brush and trees for plantation agriculture. This removed a source of organic replenishment. In addition, intensive commercial farming of cotton, peanuts, tobacco, and other crops leached nutrients from the soil. Soil erosion, deforestation, and the expansion of desert resulted. Farmers were pushed on to more marginal lands that became overgrazed and overexploited.

The industrial revolution increased production capacity and efficiency in western countries. The greater power to produce more created their need for raw materials which resulted in the

necessity of a bigger market to sell their products. Industrial Revolution innovations such as the steam-powered ships and trains along with the staggering infrastructure projects like the Suez Canal and railroads allowed for fast and cheap transportation of products and people around the world. This technological improvement gave them an ever-increasing advantage over the rest of the world. New sophisticated weapons gave their army the opportunity to conquer less developed countries at a faster rate. The Telegraph facilitated communications between the motherland and colonies. New medical advancements also helped European travelers and armies survive otherwise deadly diseases. Without the industrial revolution, such atrocities committed by the Europeans would not have occurred the same way and the world would not be what it is today. The technical advantages of the Industrial Revolution gave the Europeans the belief that they are above the other races. Thus, this transformed into racism. As a consequence of this superiority, unremitting despotism came as a natural (or no compunction) form of control by the colonizers, which allowed them to profitably maintain so many colonies overseas. The industrial revolution helped the European countries accumulate more capital and become wealthier while subjugating the rest of the world under their control. Having this slave-master relationship, vital resources were snatched away from them making their society crumble for life.

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