In last month's lecture I described the resumption of European global expansion from the 1820s to the 1870s after the fall of the first, pre-industrial and mainly American colonial empires during the previous half-century. From 1800 to 1878, some six and a half million square miles were added to Europe's overseas possessions. If you add together Europe and the other parts of the globe which European states owned or had owned in the past, you can calculate that they covered 55 per cent of the land surface of the earth in 1800. By 1878 this proportion had expanded to 67 per cent. And yet European states had no concerted ideology that impelled them to undertake this expansion, or indeed to justify it once it had taken place. In many if not most cases the expansion was piecemeal and unplanned. It was often driven by factors that European states found it difficult if not impossible to control: the activities of traders, missionaries and explorers, disrupting local indigenous political arrangements and getting into trouble with indigenous states and tribes, from which they had to be rescued; or economic policies that brought state power in to open up closed areas to free trade, mostly dominated by the British. All of this was made possible by the advent of British and European economic, technological and military superiority, against which other states found it increasingly difficult to compete. It was this unplanned, haphazard but seemingly inexorable process to which the Cambridge historian Sir John Seeley referred when he made his famous statement that 'the British Empire was acquired in a fit of absence of mind.' (1)

Yet already by the time Seeley said this, in 1883, things were beginning to change; indeed the publication of the book in which he made his claim, *The Expansion of England*, a book in which he turned from his previous preoccupation with early nineteenth-century Germany to the rise of the British Empire, was itself part of this change. Between 1878 and 1914 European empires grew even faster than they had before. Europe added more than eight million six hundred thousand square miles to its territory, which by the outbreak of the First World War covered over 84 per cent of the surface of the globe with Europe and its colonies past and present. The overwhelmingly dominant colonial power of the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century, Britain, and the second- or third-rank empires of France, Holland and Portugal, along with Russia with its massive expansion in Central and North-East Asia, had been joined by Belgium, Germany, and Italy. In the 1880s, then, Europe and the world entered what has been called the age of high imperialism.

How do we explain this change? Over the decades, beginning already in the early twentieth century, a variety of different, rival explanations has been offered. Early on, writers like Hobson, Lenin or Rosa Luxemburg sought to ascribe economic causes to the expansion of Europe. (2) They argued variously that colonies were needed, as they had not been previously, to provide raw materials for European industry, or markets for its products, or new areas in which to invest its surplus capital in an era when monopolies and cartels were ossifying European capitalist economies and reducing profit margins. Alternatively, Social Democratic historians in Germany suggested that the acquisition of colonies was used by conservative governments as a way of diverting rising working-class discontent, expressed in the growth of mass socialist parties demanding revolution and the overthrow of capitalism, into nationalist and colonialist enthusiasm. In key European countries, democratic or near-democratic franchises arrived in this period: in France there had been universal adult male suffrage since the 1850s, in Germany it came with the founding of Bismarck's North German Confederation and then the German Empire in 1871, in Britain with the Reform Acts of 1867 and above all 1884. (3) All of these developments were in this view products of the rise of industry in Europe, resulting from the fact that industrialization, urbanization, the rise of the working class and the advent of mass politics were all central features of the European scene by the end of the 1870s.

But there is a real problem of timing here. Capitalism in Europe did not reach the stage of monopolies and cartels until the 1890s or even later. There is no convincing evidence that profit margins were declining in the 1880s; on the contrary, European economies were recovering from the sharp downturn of the early-to-mid 1870s. The extension of the vote did not lead to the rise of popular pressure-groups for imperial acquisitions until after the turn of the century. In the 1880s European powers still thought they could defeat socialism through repression; in Bismarck's Germany the socialist movement was banned from 1878 to 1890 and in the early Third Republic, in the 1870s and 1880s, politics were still conducted in the aftermath of the ferocious and bloody repression of the Paris Commune in 1871. (4) Key players in the imperial game such as Italy only had a very limited electorate, and in the 1870s and early 1880s the extension of the franchise in Germany was not accompanied by the rise of mass politics, which did not come until the 1890s.

On a general level, there certainly was a change in the international atmosphere at the end of the 1870s, when the German government ended the era of free trade by introducing import duties into Germany to protect domestic grain producers. International rivalries did intensify, as the steady expansion of European possessions overseas began to create collisions between rival European powers, for example in West Africa between the British, the French and the Belgians. The growing penetration of indigenous economies by European traders and merchants increasingly produced crises to which European powers now felt they had to respond by annexing territory. Nevertheless, when all this is said, it remains very striking how quickly, how suddenly European powers decided to divide Africa and key regions of the Pacific amongst themselves in the 1880s.

The key factor here was the foreign policy of the German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck. (5) The Iron Chancellor
was adamant that Germany did not need formal colonies for their own sake. They would, he declared, mean unnecessary trouble and expense. “I am no man for colonies”, he said. But he did think that the declaration of interests in particular potential colonies could be a useful bargaining point in the European power-game. As he said to an explorer in 1888, “Your map of Africa is really quite nice. But my map of Africa lies in Europe. Here is Russia, and here... is France, and we're in the middle — that's my map of Africa.” In 1883, Bismarck’s intervention in an already volatile colonial situation turned a set of problems into a mad scramble for territory.

It’s important to realize, however, that rivalries and interventions had been building up already over several decades. A key underlying factor here was the gradual erosion of Ottoman power, already severely dented by the French conquest of Algeria in 1830. In neighbouring Tunisia the leading, more or less autonomously governing local official, the Bey, (6) borrowed heavily from European banks to try to modernize the economy, but he proved unable to repay the debts, and in 1857 the British and French consuls, joined later by the Italians, gained the power of supervising his administration, which passed in 1869 to an international financial commission. The problem was that the Bey’s government was unable to collect even a small proportion of taxes imposed on the population, while European powers forced down Tunisian import tariffs until they were no more than three per cent. The jockeying for influence among the three powers on the commission rapidly led to conflict, as the Italians announced their intention of annexing Tunisia, prompting the French to send the Algerian army to Tunis in 1881. This led to a Muslim rebellion, which in turn led to complete French occupation (though the Bey carried on as nominal ruler) (7)

The decay of Ottoman control in North Africa opened up further sources of conflict between European powers. With relatively few resources, the desert province of Libya remained under Ottoman control throughout the century. But Egypt, far richer in resources, especially cotton, was a different matter. Under the Khedive Mehmet Ali it became independent by 1847, by which time the government was fully committed to economic modernization, importing European specialists to help it in the project. In 1854 as part of this programme, the government commissioned the former French consul Ferdinand De Lesseps to set up a company to build a canal across the Suez isthmus. (8) Employing over one and a half million workers, the construction project lasted fifteen years. The canal opened in 1869, though it was not fully completed until 1871. Crucially, it made very little money to start with, while the Khedive Ismail had invested so much in it that he was effectively bankrupted by 1878. The inevitable Debt Commission, dominated by the French and British, was set up to sort things out, and when Ismail caused problems he was deposed and replaced with a more obedient governor.

This in turn by now had become a familiar pattern sparked a widespread revolt, led by a senior officer in the Egyptian army, Colonel Urabi, resenting growing non-Muslim interference in Egyptian affairs as well as what was seen as the dictatorial behaviour of the new Khedive. (9) The revolt was put down at the Battle of Tel El-Kebir in 1882 by a British force, since the French National Assembly had refused to grant credits for a French expedition. The British were effectively drawn in to occupying Egypt on their own, and stayed not least in order to guard it against a jihad launched by the Mahdi in neighbouring Sudan, the uprising that led in 1885 to the famous incident of the death of General Gordon, whom Ismail Pasha had appointed governor of the Sudan, at the Sudanese capital Khartoum (10). The British expeditionary force sent to rescue him came too late; it withdrew, and Sudan was left alone for the time being. Egypt did not become a British colony either, but remained under the control of the Debt Commission, which now became the site of Anglo-French rivalry, frequently exploited by the Germans, who also sat on the commission.

Anglo-French clashes over these issues were exploited in 1884 by Bismarck, who backed the French to try and draw them away from thoughts of taking revenge over Germany for the loss of Alsace-Lorraine, while at the same time demonstrating to the British the desirability of being nice to the Germans by annoying or threatening them in colonial matters. In addition, there were elections to the Reichstag coming up, and Bismarck needed the support of the powerful National Liberal Party, closely allied to mercantile interests in Hamburg and elsewhere. So he began claiming colonies or rather declaring a German protectorate over key areas - Angra Pequena in South-west Africa, where the German flag was raised in May 1884, (11) Togoland and the Cameroons in July 1884, New Guinea in December 1884, and East Africa, Tanganyika, in February 1885. He also signed a treaty with the King of Samoa giving Germany preferential rights in the Kingdom over other European powers - the King thought it prudent to sign for his part when he saw a German warship at anchor off the island. Typically the moving forces on the ground were explorers – Gustav Nachtigal in West Africa (12), Carl Peters in East Africa - and traders and planters, particularly in New Guinea. But they were all there was: they were not followed by any significant involvement on the ground by the German state. In this way, the German Chancellor demonstrated that you did not need actually to occupy a territory in order to annex it; he did not even bother to send troops. This of course made annexation much easier than European states had thought.

Bismarck’s actions created something like a panic as European states rushed to annex their own territories before somebody else got there first. Other states after all had existing claims to defend. To underline his friendship with France and his new colonial policy, Bismarck agreed with the French government to call a conference in Berlin on colonial claims, which met from November 1884 to February 1885. (13) It focused almost exclusively on the Congo, where it recognized the claim of Leopold II, King of the Belgians, to annex it as personal property, as well as ratifying the French claim to the northern bank of the Congo river. Apart from this, however, it achieved nothing. Its declaration that a claim to a colony required ‘effective occupation’ was a dead letter, since it applied only to coastal areas, and its insistence on free trade along major rivers like the Congo and the Niger was more or less ignored. But by laying down ground rules for annexation the conference...
effectively declared that the scramble had begun, so it hugely stimulated further annexations.

Thus in 1885 the British declared their protectorate over the Niger Delta and authorized a new company, the Royal Niger Company, to go inland, conclude treaties with local rulers, and exercise British rule rather like the East India Company of former times. France’s rivalry with Britain, stimulated by the quarrels over Egypt, led its local administrators in West Africa to push forward with the idea of an empire stretching from Algeria to the Congo, and in 1889-90 treaties were signed with the British defining the boundaries of the two empires. All of this was effectively on paper only, since the hinterland was actually controlled by a series of large and powerful Islamic states.

The Germans by contrast were stuck with Togo and Cameroon, and with south-west Africa, since neither Bismarck nor German merchant firms had much interest in going any further. In East Africa, however, the explorer Carl Peters, (14) who had founded a Society for German Colonization and concluded treaties in its name with a variety of local rulers in 1884, blackmailed Bismarck into granting a charter for his new East Africa Company by threatening to sell his acquisitions to King Leopold. Needing the support of the National Liberals, who backed Peters, the Chancellor gave in, and soon Peters, returning to Africa in 1885, had annexed even more territory, before he was expelled from Uganda by the British. Soon, however, Peters got into even worse trouble, when the activities of his company led in 1889 to a revolt by Arab planters which the German government – supported by the British - reluctantly sent troops to suppress. This led to the declaration of German East Africa as a full colony under German state control, while at the same time Zanzibar was handed over to the British in exchange for the small North-Sea island of Heligoland, off the German coast.

Meanwhile, stories of Peters’s scandalous behaviour had begun to reach Germany: a scandal erupted in 1892 when it became known that he had had one of his African mistresses, Jogodja, hanged when he discovered she was having an affair with his manservant Mabruk; he was hanged too, and both their home villages were razed to the ground. This too led to a local revolt, which German troops were brought in to suppress; Peters was recalled and in 1897 dishonourably discharged from government service with the loss of his pension rights; he escaped criminal prosecution by fleeing to London. A convinced racist and Social Darwinist, Peters later became a hero to the Nazis, who honoured him with a propaganda film made at the beginning of the Second World War, a film that of course conveniently ignored his many crimes and cruelties and presented him as a standard-bearer for German civilization in Africa. (15)

The exchange of Zanzibar for Heligoland reflected a major British concern that the new route to India via the Suez Canal should be properly protected by a string of British possessions along the East African coast. Coaling stations were also vital for the ships passing to or from India via the Suez Canal. In 1886 and 1890 the exchange was underpinned by British recognition of German East Africa in exchange for German recognition of British control over Uganda and in effect the rest of East Africa north of Mozambique, in Portuguese hands since the early 16th century. But the British too had to contend with an imperial adventurer, in the shape of Cecil Rhodes. Sent from England to South Africa as a child to improve his health, Rhodes became a businessman who by the end of the 1880s had bought up all the diamond mines in South Africa and acquired an effective monopoly on the world’s diamond supplies. He began pushing northwards from South Africa, obtaining mining concessions from local potentates. But his ambitions were not just economic. Rhodes was a convinced imperialist; he believed in the superiority of what he called the Anglo-Saxon race – amongst whom he included the Germans – over all others, and he wanted Anglo-Saxon rule over East and Central Africa to stretch from Cairo to the Cape. (16) But he wanted these colonies to have a large measure of self-government and opposed what he saw as excessive interference from London. These views helped him become Prime Minister of the Cape Colony in 1890, gaining the support of Boer settlers by passing legislation to force Africans off their land. The British government was happy enough to allow his British South Africa Company to occupy and control major areas of Central Africa, where missionaries were getting into difficulties, and by 1894 protectorates had been declared over much of the region.

The other European power with an interest in Africa was Italy. Backed by Germany, the Italians acquired territory in the horn of Africa to give them ports where Italian ships could refuel before or after negotiating the Suez Canal. Later on, as we’ll see in my next lecture, Italy tried to establish imperial control in other parts of north-east Africa, but in the 1880s they had no real interest in genuine colonies. So the partition of Africa by the end of the decade was very largely a partition on paper only, reflected not least in the many artificial straight-line boundaries between the colonies, protectorates and spheres of influence of the various European powers. (17) There were Spanish, Portuguese and Italian possessions deriving largely from trading or coaling stations, there were large areas of the Sahara and equatorial west and central Africa claimed by France, Eastern and southern Africa belonged mostly to the British and the Germans. Only Abyssinia and the free state of Liberia, founded by returning freed slaves from the USA, remained independent. Minor adjustments remained: between the French and British in northern Nigeria and on the Upper Nile at Fashoda in 1898, for example, where a military clash between the two powers was a distinct possibility until the French, feeling very much the inferior power, prudently withdrew in the face of superior British forces; (18) and in northern Africa, where Italy agreed with France on the settlement of claims in Tripoli (Libya) and Morocco in 1900. But to all intents and purposes the Scramble for Africa was over by the middle of the 1890s.

The Scramble for Africa was paralleled by a similar rush for influence and control in Asia and the Pacific, sparked in much the same way by Bismarck’s claim over territory, namely New Guinea and the islands dubbed by the
In other parts of the region, European commercial penetration of Indo-China brought in French troops to combat banditry and nascent nationalist uprisings in 1885-6, bringing Annam, Tongking and Cambodia together with the existing colony of Cochin-China into a single French possession ruled by a governor-general. This sparked the British occupation of Upper Burma in 1885, with the independent kingdom of Siam being retained as a kind of buffer zone. Similarly the French and British were rivals in the island of Madagascar, where growing clashes produced a kind of stand-off resolved in 1890 by British recognition of a French protectorate. So by this time the rapid expansion of European empires was more or less complete. (19)

There was one major part of the world, however, that did not come under direct European rule, and that was China. The Chinese Empire was generally thought in Europe to be decaying and ripe for annexation. It had failed to resist European penetration during the Opium Wars. As these wars suggested, it was rich, populous, and promising in terms of economic exploitation and investment. From 1850 to 1864 China had been convulsed by an effective civil war, the Taiping Rebellion, which caused the death of up to 20 million people. It had recovered, but not before losing control over Manchuria to the Russians. From 1875 China was ruled by the Empress Dowager, through her son, whom she had placed under house arrest when he began supporting men who wanted to reform the Empire and its institutions along Western lines. (20)

As this suggests, she was deeply conservative; contrasting strongly with her Japanese equivalent, the Meiji Emperor, who was ‘restored’ in a conflict between 1866 and 1870 by reformers who wanted to centralize Japan’s government and consciously adopt western industry, technology and institutions to prevent partition or conquest by western powers: a policy symbolized in 1870 by the teenage emperor extending a formal welcome to western representatives, formally banned from Japan during previous centuries. (21) Japanese emissaries set forth across the world to learn and import western industrial, educational and political ways; and in an astonishingly short period of time, Japan was well on the way to becoming a major economic and above all military power, not only capable of defending itself against foreign incursions but also increasingly keen to join in the imperial scramble for territory itself. The first opportunity presented itself in Korea, described by a German military adviser to the Japanese government as a ‘dagger pointing at the heart of Japan’. Nominally independent, Korea had for a long time been under Chinese control, and when disturbances broke out in 1894 the Chinese sent an army to put them down; this was considered an affront as well as a threat by Japan, which then sent an invasion force that quickly defeated the inferior, poorly equipped and badly organized Chinese forces, and drawing attention to the growth of Japanese military might in the West, as seen in this Punch cartoon of Japan defeating the much larger Chinese empire. (22) The Koreans and Chinese were forced to recognise the transfer of Korea to the Japanese sphere of influence, leading eventually to its annexation in 1910.

All this made European powers view China as ripe for exploitation. Defeat by Japan surely meant the Empire was now in its final stages of dissolution. So European powers now took a strong interest in carving up the Chinese empire, as contemporaries were well aware. But economic interests were still paramount. What the European powers wanted above all was free access to Chinese markets, and the best way to do this in their view was through taking out 99-year leases on what were called ‘Treaty Ports’. These were extraterritorial, or in other words not subject to Chinese law and Chinese courts, they were free-trade ports or charged such low tariffs as to make little real difference; and they were bases for permitted activities by Christian missionaries. The first of these ports were taken out by the British after the Opium Wars, but after 1895 there was a massive expansion of the system until the number of treaty ports reached more than 80. (23) In addition to ports held by the British such as Hong Kong and Shanghai, there were ports leased to the French, the Russians, the Germans and the Italians. Concessions were taken out by the Japanese, the United States, Portugal, Belgium and even Leopold II’s Congo Free State. Often several different European powers shared the same port, as for example in Tientsin. (24) China seemed up for grabs and as the treaty ports extended their influence into the hinterland, partition looked like being the next step.

The rapid penetration of China by European powers inevitably led to a violent reaction. A nationalist movement quickly emerged, known as the Society of Righteous and Harmonious Fists, or Boxers for short, dedicated to reversing the unequal treaties, curbing the activities of missionaries and opium traders, and reducing the activities of the Europeans or even eliminating them altogether. This was a millenarian movement, whose followers believed that if they trained themselves rigorously they would be joined by mass armies of spirits who would expel the foreigners from China. (25) After initial hesitation the Dowager Empress threw the weight of her regime behind them, and they laid siege to the Legation Quarter of Beijing. More than two thousand Chinese Christians were put to death across China, and a number of European missionaries, merchants and officials killed, quickly becoming known as the Chinese Martyrs. (26)

Eight foreign nations involved in the conflict agreed that action was necessary and sent a heavily armed force of 20,000 to Beijing to recapture the city; for the Americans, this was the first step onto the world stage they would occupy for so much of the century; for the Japanese, the first step towards international recognition as a great power. British and Japanese troops fought side-by-side in the major engagements of the campaign (27) The victorious troops of all armies looted and pillaged on a massive scale, and there were said to have been mass
rapes of Chinese women in the occupied city. Boxers or men thought to be Boxers were summarily executed, especially by the Japanese. (28) The Germans arrived too late to take part in the fighting, but did their share of the looting all the same. As they embarked at Bremerhaven for the long journey, Kaiser Wilhelm II told them: ‘No quarter will be given! Prisoners will not be taken! …just as a thousand years ago the Huns under their King Attila made a name for themselves, one that even today makes them seem mighty in history and legend, may the name German be affirmed by you in such a way in China that no Chinese will ever again dare to look askance at a German.’ The speech, or rather the comparison with the Hun, was to come back to haunt him in the First World War.

The Allies imposed on the Imperial Government financial reparations that would have taken until the end of the 1920s to repay. But the long-predicted carve-up of China never happened. (29) The European powers had received quite a shock from the uprising. If this was the reaction provoked by mere treaty-ports, what might happen if they tried to take over the whole country? Any further territorial advances seemed ill-advised in the circumstances. In addition, two of the powers involved, Russia and Japan, were serious rivals for territorial gains in Manchuria, where more than a quarter of foreign investments were held, and a peaceful agreement over partition was out of the question: indeed the two states went to war over it in 1905. Even had they agreed between themselves, the other states were unlikely to have allowed them to divide the best parts between themselves. The Imperial government had in fact held together, and it was more profitable to continue lending it money at high interest rates than to invest large sums in trying to defeat it and take over its business. The Imperial tax collection service seemed a cheaper and more acceptable vehicle for putting the debt repayments together than a European tax collection service such as had been run by the old British East India Company. So the USA proposed an open-door policy, which everyone apart from the Russians accepted, and in the meantime the powers concluded a series of bilateral treaties promising not to acquire any further territory in China. (30) In 1902 the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, which committed Britain to remaining neutral if Japan was attacked by another power or to joining with the Japanese if two other powers were involved, was widely celebrated in the UK and presented to the electorate as a classic example of the wisdom of Conservative foreign policy. By 1906 the Russo-Japanese War, in which Britain duly remained neutral, had put the Russians out of the reckoning in China, along with their allies the French, and the British, Germans and Americans remained content with more economic penetration. For the Chinese, the humiliation was too much to bear; in 1911 the Qing dynasty was overthrown in a revolution and on 1 January 1912 the Chinese Republic was declared, beginning the long and arduous road to national recovery. (31)

China was in the end, therefore, something of a stand-off between European powers and a potential object of colonization. Elsewhere in the world, European powers were even forced to retreat. Unrest in Cuba, the rise of a nationalist movement, and reports of atrocities committed by its Spanish rulers trying to retain control over Spain’s most valuable overseas possession, brought the USA into a war with Spain in 1898 that resulted not only in Cuba being ceded – if only temporarily – to the Americans but also to a US takeover of Puerto Rico, and, in the Pacific, the Philippines and Guam. This marked the definitive arrival of the USA on the scene as a world power, celebrated quite self-consciously in cartoons and articles across the States. (32) But it was also the effective end of the Spanish empire in the Pacific at least: and indeed Spain now actually sold the Caroline, Mariana and Pelew Islands to Germany, though Germany had initially wanted to acquire the Philippines. This shakeup was completed by the division of Samoa by Germany and America in return for British disengagement and acquisition of Tonga, some small German islands in the Solomons, and disputed areas in west Africa: all that was left of the once huge Spanish empire was Spanish Morocco, West Africa and Guinea, the Spanish Sahara and the Canary Islands. The final demise of the Spanish empire administered a tremendous shock to the Spanish political system, despite economic gains in the form of the repatriation of investments from Cuba; the consequences were to work themselves through in the following decades up to the 1930s. Meanwhile the Americans, characteristically, claimed they had acquired all this territory not for money or glory but for humanity, a claim that was to repeated many times later on in the century. (33)

Undoubtedly the greatest humiliation suffered by a European state in the quest for empire, however, was experienced by the Italians in Ethiopia. Europeans might have had an ambivalent attitude to China, recognizing the depth and sophistication of Chinese civilization alongside the weakness of the Chinese state, but no such reservations were brought to bear on Africa, which was universally despised as backward and uncivilized in late nineteenth-century Europe. Italy had already taken control of parts of the horn of Africa and in the 1890s sought to extend its influence over Ethiopia, where the warlord Menelik II, (34) after conquering the provinces of Tigre and Amhara, had declared himself Emperor in 1889 and concluded a treaty of friendship with the Italians, whose territory was on his doorstep. Unfortunately the treaty said different things in Italian and Amharic; not merely a fault of translation but a difference of substance, since while the Italian version gave them control of Ethiopia, the Amharic version merely said that Menelik could use Italian diplomats in his foreign policy if he wanted to. (35) After this was discovered, disputes over the treaty intensified until Menelik formally repudiated it in 1893, after which he began stockpiling modern European weaponry, some of it bought from the Italians themselves, and sent a delegation to St Petersburg, resulting in the attachment of Russian military advisers to the Ethiopian army. In 1894 the Italians duly began military action, which escalated until on 1 March 1896 a major battle was fought at Adowa.

15,000 Italian troops, many of them raw conscripts, equipped with outdated guns and footwear that soon cut up on the rough rocky terrain, advanced in three columns that soon became separated because the Italians did not have proper maps. They were met by nearly 100,000 Ethiopian troops, raised under the feudal system,
supplied with modern rifles, and aided by 42 Russian field guns specially adapted for mountain terrain, or even according to another account Maxim gund acquired from the French. (36) One of the Italian columns retreated in the wrong direction and became trapped in a ravine, where the Ethiopian cavalry slaughtered them in their thousands, egged on by cries of ‘reap, reap!’ from their commander. At a crucial moment Menelik brought in 25,000 fresh reserves and surrounded the other two columns, forcing them to retreat with heavy losses. Altogether 7,000 Italian troops and askaris – Eritrean troops - were killed, 3,000 taken prisoner, and the rest abandoned the field of battle, along with 11,000 rifles, all their artillery, and most of their supplies. The Italian prisoners were treated well, but 800 of the Eritrean askaris were condemned as traitors by the Ethiopians, who chopped off their right hands and left feet on the battlefield. The Italians were forced to recognize Ethiopian independence; Menelik was satisfied, and preferred cautiously not to follow up his victory or provoke retaliation by advancing into Eritrea. In Italy, people ripped up railway lines in case the government sent reinforcements, and pelted Prime Minister Crispi’s house with rocks until he was forced to resign. It was a national trauma. Italy was exposed to universal ridicule. (37) Writers and political thinkers like Pareto launched a furious critique of the indecisiveness and incompetence of parliamentary government and advocated a national rebirth under authoritarian rule; in little over two decades, Mussolini was in power, and in 1935 he avenged the defeat at Adowa by invading Ethiopia once more, this time defeating the Emperor’s troops from a safe distance with poison gas bombs dropped from aeroplanes.

In the meantime, however, liberal-nationalists in Italy were determined to demonstrate their country’s colonial credentials by expanding elsewhere. Their chance came in 1911, when an international crisis broke out over the nominally independent Sultanate of Morocco, where France had succeeded in getting international acceptance of its influence in view of increasing disorder was threatening the stability of its neighbouring colony of Algeria. German objections in 1906 backfired, effectively reinforcing this situation. (38) In 1911 the Sultan appealed for French military assistance in putting down a rebellion, and when the Germans sent a gunboat to Agadir in order to force a climbdown, the British intervened on the French side and forced Germany to accept a French protectorate over Morocco in return for a transfer of territory from the French Congo to the German colony of Cameroon. The Italian government saw its chance and invaded Libya, declaring war on the territory’s nominal sovereign power, the Ottoman Empire. The war was notable for the first example of aerial reconnaissance and aerial bombardment, by the Italians, who also for the first time in history deployed armoured cars. Nobody was injured by the bombs, but it was a significant precedent.

For the Italians, the war was by no means a walkover. Initial setbacks prompted the Italians to send reinforcements until their forces numbered 150,000, while the Turks recruited Arab auxiliaries but still failed to muster more than around 30,000 men. Gradually superior Italian numbers and weaponry drove the Turks back. More importantly, however, an Italian fleet annihilated the Turkish navy off Beirut, and the Italians occupied the Dodecanese islands in the Aegean Sea. The Ottoman government, already in serious difficulties at home, sued for peace, and the Treaty of Ouchy gave Italy control over Libya in return for the islands’ return, though this part of the agreement was not honoured by the Italians and in fact did not happen until the end of the Second World War. (39)

The defeat of the Turks by the Italians in 1911-12 convinced the Balkan nations that the time had come to gain independence from the Ottomans, and sparked the outbreak of the First Balkan War. This did in fact herald the final dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, though the process got swallowed up in the wider conflict of World War I, which it did a great deal to bring about. By 1914, therefore, the process of colonial acquisition was more or less complete, leaving hardly any part of the world untouched. Only parts of Arabia, China, Ethiopia, Mongolia, Persia, Siam and Tibet had never experienced European rule. Taken together, the colonial possessions of Europe and the USA included 57 per cent of the world’s population, What had led to this unprecedentedly unequal global balance of power?

The most obvious answer is the industrial revolution – the freeing of power from natural sources of energy and the development of steam power and later the internal combustion engine, backed by continued scientific advances in navigation and above all improvements in military technology. The imbalance of forces by the end of the century was starkly illustrated by the Battle of Omdurman, where an Anglo-Egyptian army led by Kitchener defeated a Sudanese Mahdist force, in what was little more than a massacre: (40) 23,000 Sudanese were killed or wounded, while the dead and injured on the British side numbered no more than 430. If an indigenous state wanted to defeat a European invasion it had to follow the example of Ethiopia or Japan and acquire European weaponry and military hardware itself. Modern weaponry was in turn the produce of the great leap forward of European prosperity and industry, science and technology in comparison to other parts of the world.

Yet far from being inevitable after 1500, this global imbalance did not really take hold until the second half of the nineteenth century. It was the product not just of technological superiority but also of European peace. Things might have been very different had the European nations carried on fighting each other and exporting their conflicts to other parts of the globe, as they did before 1815. Peace, underpinned by British naval hegemony, allowed the spread of communications networks, telegraph cables, sea-lanes and trade routes, and intercontinental railways, leading to further economic development and a dense network of rapid imperial communications. Global trade expanded almost exponentially under these conditions, in a way that would have been impossible if the major industrializing states had been fighting one another. Mass European migration to the Americas and other parts of the world helped build a globalized economy of which Europe and the USA were the main beneficiaries.
European states were also politically better organized and more effective in mobilizing their resources – a statement that applies even to Italy when compared with, say, the Ottoman Empire. A state like China or Ethiopia could only resist European conquest if it was not riven by deep internal religious conflicts, if it had an effective and centralized administrative system, and above all if it had a functioning system of internal communication. Such states were few and far between. And if Europe had acquired new colonial territories in the first half of the nineteenth century in a fit of absence of mind, to quote Sir John Seeley, the same was no longer true by 1900. Everywhere, beginning in the 1880s, European states became hungry for colonies. A world of global empires was created as a result, a world in which European states freely exchanged territories between each other separated by whole continents and thousands of miles of ocean. Yet it was also a world to a large extent of merely formal control. In some areas, most notably India, European control reached a high degree of effectiveness by the second half of the century. Elsewhere, above all in Africa, it existed on paper only, except along a thin strip of coastline. How paper control was converted into real control, and what methods European states used to achieve this, will be the subject of my next lecture, which will be on 24th January next year.

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