

# After 1850, Was British Colonial Expansion Driven More by Fear of Growing European Competition Than

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After 1850, Was British Colonial Expansion Driven More by Fear of Growing European Competition Than by Commercial Need ?

Firstly, in order to answer this question I would like to talk about the political situation, which made it possible for Britain to create new colonies. After the Napoleonic wars French seapower was shattered and Britain was left as the world's main colonial power. It was paramount in India and also well-entrenched in Australasia and southern Africa. The holding of the 'five strategic keys', Dover, Gibraltar, Alexandria, the Cape of Good Hope and Singapore enabled Britain to command the seas. After 1815 it also enjoyed the advantage of being the world's first industrial nation. So we can say that in the mid-Victorian era Britain was the dominant sea power, the leading colonial power and the world's industrial giant at the same time. But while on the one hand Britain's strength in the half-century after 1815 depended partly on its own resources, on the other hand it was also due to the weakness of its opponents.

Such weakness was unusual and proved to be only a brief hiatus. From the late nineteenth century Britain had to face a wider range of enemies, no longer confined to Europe, and with greater military strength. After 1850 Britain was driven more by fear of growing European competition than by commercial need. This led to the creation of colonies and to colonial wars that were extremely expensive.

One of Britain's most important enemies was Russia at that time. In order to prevent Russia from advancing southwards to India Britain started a war in Afghanistan (1839-42), which was a disaster for the English. Then in 1854 Britain joined the Turks against Russia in Crimea in order to stop Russian expansion into Asiatic Turkey in the Black Sea area. The reason for this policy was to keep Britain's position in India and to keep the control over the main sea trade routes. The motivation was the fear of the

rival, but it was also a commercial need to keep these positions.

Britain also had to fight local rebels in India, first there had been a war against Sikhs in the Punjab in the 1840s, then came the 'Indian Mutiny', which was a national movement against British rule, in 1857. As a result of the cruel punishment of the rebels, the relationship between the Indians and the British became hostile.

The African interests were also very important. The first stage of British South African history, after the annexation of the Cape of Good Hope during the Napoleonic wars, which became a port to service the sea route to India, was the government of the small community of Boers by British officials. After 1850 British immigrants began to arrive in such numbers as to raise problems of language, law and custom and it led to clashes between the old and new type of white society. There were two Boer wars at the end of the century and the British could defeat them only with great difficulty.

Keeping its position at the Cape of Good Hope was Britain's commercial need, but it was the fear of European competition, especially the competition of Germany, that made Britain to try to take as much land as possible during the scramble for Africa in the 1880s.

The contradiction between Britain's imperial ambitions and the liberal ideas it wished to advance elsewhere became most obvious at the invading of Egypt, which occurred because Britain wanted to protect its route to India, even though it claimed that it was to protect international shipping. Involvement in Egypt led to invasion and takeover of the Sudan in 1884.

Another reason for creating colonies was the growing concern at the rapidly increasing population of Britain. The settlement in Canada, Australia and New Zealand increased from the 1840s because there were a great number of people who found that this was the solution for the problem.

In order to answer the question, the purely economic motivations should not be exaggerated. Against the 'imperialism of free trade' recent historians have drawn attention to the 'authoritarian and ideological' feature of British imperialism, involving periods of deliberate empire-building, racist nationalism and calculated social control.

