

Imperialism

Central Historical Question:

How have “civilized” nations been able to justify their occupation of the territories of other people, and why has that argument stood the test of time?

Document #1 Prince Leopold, heir to the throne of Belgium & future King 1861

Surrounded by the sea, Holland, Prussia and France, our frontiers can never be extended in Europe. The universe lies in front of us; steam and electricity have made distances disappear, all the unappropriated lands on the surface of the globe may become the field of our operations and of our resources

Since history teaches us that colonies are useful, that they play a great part in that which makes up the power and prosperity of states, let us strive to get on in our turn. Let us see where there are unoccupied lands.

Where are to be found peoples to civilize, to lead to progress in every sense, meanwhile assuring ourselves the opportunity to prove to the world that Belgians also are an imperial people capable of dominating and enlightening others.

Document #2 Eugène-Melchior de Vogüé, *The Master of the Seas* Paris, 1903

The great states of Europe are dividing up the other continents of Africa and Asia in the same manner they would divide such countries as Italy or Poland.

What used to be a European balance of power is now a world balance of power, but it is subject to the same laws, and any country that does not wish to become less important must obtain as much new territory relatively as our rivals are doing.

Document #3 Martial Henri Merlin, governor of French Equatorial Africa

We went to new territories. We went there by virtue of the right of a civilized, fully developed race to occupy territories which have been left fallow by backward peoples who are plunged into barbarism and unable to develop the wealth of their land.

What we exercised is a right, and if anyone denies this, you should firmly maintain that it is a right.

We are entitled to go out to these peoples and occupy their territories.

Document #4 E.D. Morel, The Black Man's Burden: The White Man in Africa from the Fifteen Century to World War I (1920)

For three centuries the white man seized and enslaved millions of Africans and transported them, with every circumstance of ferocious cruelty, across the seas. Still the African survived and, in his land of exile, multiplied exceedingly.

But what the partial occupation of his soil by the white man has failed to do; what dividing us into European "spheres of influence" has failed to do; what the maxim and the rifle, the slave gang, labor in the bowels of the earth and the lash, have failed to do; what your diseases have failed to do; what even the oversea slave trade failed to do, the power of modern capitalistic exploitation, assisted by modern engines of destruction, may yet succeed in accomplishing.

For from the evils of these things, scientifically applied and enforced, there is no escape for the African. Its destructive effects are permanent. It kills the body and the soul. It breaks the spirit. It wrecks his country, uproots him from the land, invades his family life, destroys his natural pursuits and occupations and claims his whole time. The white man has enslaved him in his own home.