

## Foundations of Empire

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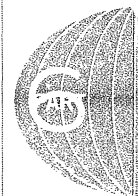
## Legacies of Imperialism

Empire and Economy

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## EYEWITNESS:

### Cecil John Rhodes Discovers Imperial Diamonds Are Forever

**F**ew Europeans had traveled to south Africa by the mid-nineteenth century, but the discovery of diamonds and rich gold deposits brought both European settlers and dramatic change to the region. European prospectors flocked to south Africa to seek their fortune.

Among the arrivals was Cecil John Rhodes, an eighteen-year-old student at Oxford University, who in 1871 went to south Africa in search of a climate that would relieve his tuberculosis. Rhodes was persistent, systematic, and ambitious. He carefully supervised African laborers who worked his claims in the diamond fields, and he bought the rights to others' claims when they looked promising. By 1889, at age thirty-five, he had almost completely monopolized diamond mining in south Africa, and he controlled 90 percent of the world's diamond production. With ample financial backing, Rhodes built up a healthy stake in the gold-mining business, although he did not seek to monopolize gold the way he did diamonds. He also entered politics, serving as prime minister (1890–1896) of the British Cape Colony.

Yet Rhodes's ambitions went far beyond business and local politics. In his vision the Cape Colony would serve as a base of operations for the extension of British control to all of Africa, from Cape to Cairo. Rhodes led the movement to enlarge the colony by absorbing territories to the north settled by Dutch farmers. Under Rhodes's guidance, the colony annexed Bechuanaland (modern Botswana) in 1885, and in 1895 it added Rhodesia (modern Zambia and Zimbabwe) to its holdings. But Rhodes's plan did not stop with Africa: he urged the expansion of the British empire until it embraced all the world, and he even hoped to bring the United States of America back into the British fold. Rhodes considered British society the most noble, moral, and honorable in the world, and he regarded imperial expansion as a duty to humankind: "We are the finest race in the world," he said in 1877, "and the more of the world we inhabit, the better it is for the human race." In his sense of superiority to other peoples as well as his restless energy, his compulsion to expand, and

his craving to extract mineral wealth from distant parts of the world, Rhodes represented well the views of European imperialists who carved the world into colonies during the nineteenth century.

Throughout history strong societies have often sought to dominate their weaker neighbors by subjecting them to imperial rule. They have built empires for various reasons: to gain control over natural resources, to subdue potential enemies, to seize wealth, to acquire territory for expansion, and to win glory. From the days of ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt to the present, imperialism has been a prominent theme of world history.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, as the Ottoman and Qing empires weakened, a handful of western European states wrote a new chapter in the history of imperialism. Strong nationalist sentiments enabled them to mobilize their populations for purposes of overseas expansion. Industrialization equipped them with the most effective tools and the most lethal weapons available anywhere in the world. Three centuries of experience with maritime trade in Asia, Africa, the Americas, and Oceania provided them with unparalleled knowledge of the world and its peoples. With those advantages, western European peoples conquered foreign armies, overpowered local rulers, and imposed their hegemony throughout the world. Toward the end of the century, the United States and Japan joined European states as new imperial powers.

The establishment of global empires had far-reaching effects. In many ways, imperialism tightened links between the world's societies. Imperial powers encouraged trade between dominant states and their overseas colonies, for example, and they organized mass migrations of laborers to work in agricultural and industrial ventures. Yet imperialism also fostered divisions between the world's peoples. Powerful tools, deadly weapons, and global hegemony tempted European peoples to consider themselves superior to their subjects throughout the world: modern racism is one of the legacies of imperialism. Another effect of imperialism was the development of nationalism in subject lands. Just as the incursion of Napoleonic armies stimulated the development of nationalism in Europe, so the imposition of foreign rule provoked nationalist responses in colonized lands. Although formal empires almost entirely dissolved in the twentieth century, the influence of global imperialism continues to shape the contemporary world.

## FOUNDATIONS OF EMPIRE

Even under the best of circumstances, campaigns to conquer foreign lands have always been dangerous and expensive ventures. They have arisen from a sense that foreign conquest is essential, and they have entailed the mobilization of political, military, and economic resources. In nineteenth-century Europe, proponents of empire advanced a variety of political, economic, and cultural arguments to justify the conquest and control of foreign lands. The imperialist ventures that they promoted enjoyed dramatic success partly because of the increasingly sophisticated technologies developed by European industry.

### Motives of Imperialism

**Modern Imperialism** The building of empires is an old story in world history. By the nineteenth century, however, European observers recognized that empires of their day were different from those of earlier times. Accordingly, about mid-century they began to speak of *imperialism*, and by the 1880s the recently coined term had made its way into popular speech and writing throughout western Europe. In contemporary usage, imperialism refers to the domination of European powers—and later the United States and Japan

as well—over subject lands in the larger world. Sometimes that domination came in the old-fashioned way, by force of arms, but often it arose from trade, investment, and business activities that enabled imperial powers to profit from subject societies and influence their affairs without going to the trouble of exercising direct political control.

**Modern Colonialism** Like the building of empires, the establishment of colonies in foreign lands is a practice dating from ancient times. In modern parlance, however, colonialism refers not just to the sending of colonists to settle new lands but also to the political, social, economic, and cultural structures that enabled imperial powers to dominate subject lands. In some lands, such as North America, Chile, Argentina, Australia, New Zealand, and south Africa, European powers established settler colonies populated largely by migrants from the home societies. Yet contemporary scholars also speak of European colonies in India, southeast Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, even though European migrants did not settle there in large numbers. European agents, officials, and businesspeople effectively turned those lands into colonies and profoundly influenced their historical development by controlling their domestic and foreign policies, integrating local economies into the net-

work of global capitalism, introducing European business techniques, transforming educational systems according to European standards, and promoting European cultural preferences.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, many Europeans came to believe that imperial expansion and colonial domination were crucial for the survival of their states and societies—and sometimes for the health of their personal fortunes as well. European merchants and entrepreneurs sometimes became fabulously wealthy from business ventures in Asia or Africa, and they argued for their home states to pursue imperialist policies partly to secure and enhance their own enterprises. After making his fortune mining diamonds and gold, for example, Cecil Rhodes (1853–1902) worked tirelessly on behalf of British imperial expansion.

**Economic Motives of Imperialism** It is not difficult to understand why entrepreneurs such as Rhodes would promote overseas expansion, but their interests alone could not have driven the vast imperialist ventures of the late nineteenth century. In fact, a wide range of motives encouraged European peoples to launch campaigns of conquest and control. Some advocates argued that imperialism was in the economic interests of European societies as well as individuals. They pointed out that overseas colonies could serve as reliable sources of raw materials not available in Europe that came into demand because of industrialization: rubber, tin, and copper were vital products, for example, and by the late nineteenth century petroleum had also become a crucial resource for industrialized lands. Rubber trees were indigenous to the Amazon River basin, but imperialists established colonial rubber plantations in the Congo River

basin and Malaya. Abundant supplies of tin were available from colonies in southeast Asia and copper in central Africa. The United States and Russia supplied most of the world's petroleum in the nineteenth century, but the oil fields of southwest Asia attracted the attention of European industrialists and imperialists alike.

Proponents of imperialism also held that colonies would consume manufactured products and provide a haven for migrants in an age of rapidly increasing European population. In fact, manufactured goods did not flow to most colonies in large quantities, and European migrants went overwhelmingly to independent states in the Americas rather than to overseas colonies. Nevertheless, arguments arising from national economic interest generated considerable support for imperialism.

**Political Motives of Imperialism** As European states extended their influence overseas, a geopolitical argument for imperialism gained prominence. Even if colonies were not economically beneficial, imperialists held, it was crucial for political and military reasons to maintain them. Some overseas colonies occupied strategic sites on the world's sea lanes, and others offered harbors or supply stations for commercial and naval ships. Advocates of imperialism sought to gain those advantages for their own states and—equally important—to deny them to rivals.

Imperialism had its uses also for domestic politics. In an age when socialists and communists directly confronted industrialists, European politicians and national leaders sought to defuse social tension and inspire patriotism by focusing public attention on foreign imperialist ventures. Cecil Rhodes himself once observed that imperialism was an attractive alternative to civil war, and the German chancellor Otto von



Cecil Rhodes resting in the goldfields of south Africa, about 1897. His dominating economic, cultural, and political influence on southern African territories for personal and British gain was a model of European imperialist values.