Colonial Rivalries

After 1870, the European nations began to acquire colonies in Asia, Africa and the Pacific. Their imperialistic activities accelerated from 1880 onwards. Between 1895 and 1905 imperialistic expansion reached its climax.

Colonial rivalry was a cause of the First World War.

First of all, colonial rivalry led to strained relations among the European powers. In Africa, all the European powers except Austria and Russia had colonies there. Thus there were many clashes among France, Britain, Germany and Italy. For example, France rivalled with Italy over Tunis and with Germany over Morocco.

Secondly, colonial rivalry led indirectly to the formation and strengthening of alliances and ententes. Italy turned to Germany and Austria when she lost Tunis to France in 1881. Russia and Britain could patch up their differences and form an entente in 1907 as a result of their mutual fear of Germany's expansionist activities in the Balkans. Russia, Britain and France could become firm friends after 1907 partly because of aggressive attitude of Germany in both the first and the second Moroccan crises.

Thirdly, colonial rivalry led to an intensification of the arms race. As mentioned earlier, in 1896 Dr. Jameson made a raid into the Dutch Republic of Transvaal in South Africa. Germany found that, without a navy, she could not send much military help to the Dutch. Shortly after the event, Admiral von Tirpitz, the German Minister of Marine, proclaimed the need of a strong navy. From 1898 onwards, Germany built more battleships.

Fourthly, colonial rivalry led to much hostility among the powers. In the first and the second Moroccan crises, war nearly resulted. France and Britain nearly came to war over their rivalry in the Sudan in 1898.

A Minor Cause

But after 1905 colonial issues became less important as the powers turned back to Europe and Europe remained their centre of rivalry. As stated earlier, from 1904 to 1907, Britain, France and Russia were able to settle their colonial disputes by the Anglo-French Entente and the Anglo-Russian Entente. By 1914 colonial disputes had greatly diminished. Thus colonial rivalry had little to do with the outbreak of the First World War.

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