

# **New Imperialism**

From the late 1800s through the early 1900s, Western Europe pursued a policy of imperialism that became known as New Imperialism. This New Imperialist Age gained its impetus from economic, military, political, humanitarian, and religious reasons, as well as from the development and acceptance of a new theory—Social Darwinism—and advances in technology.

## **Economic Reasons**

By 1870, it became necessary for European industrialized nations to expand their markets globally in order to sell products that they could not sell domestically on the continent. Businessmen and bankers had excess capital to invest, and foreign investments offered the incentive of greater profits, despite the risks. The need for cheap labor and a steady supply of raw materials, such as oil, rubber, and manganese for steel, required that the industrial nations maintain firm control over these unexplored areas. Only by directly controlling these regions, which meant setting up colonies under their direct control, could the industrial economy work effectively—or so the imperialists thought. The economic gains of the new imperialism were limited, however, because the new colonies were too poor to spend money on European goods.

## **Military and Political Reasons**

Leading European nations also felt that colonies were crucial to military power, national security, and nationalism. Military leaders claimed that a strong navy was necessary in order to become a great power. Thus, naval vessels needed military bases around the world to take on coal and supplies. Islands or harbors were seized to satisfy these needs. Colonies guaranteed the growing European navies safe harbors and coaling stations, which they needed in time of war. National security was an important reason for Great Britain's decision to occupy Egypt. Protecting the Suez Canal was vital for the British Empire. The Suez Canal, which formally opened in 1869, shortened the sea route from Europe to South Africa and East Asia. To Britain, the canal was a lifeline to India, the jewel of its empire. Many people were also convinced that the possession of colonies was an indication of a nation's greatness; colonies were status symbols. According to nineteenth-century German historian, Heinrich von Treitschke, all great nations should want to conquer barbarian nations.

## **Humanitarian and Religious Goals**

Many Westerners believed that Europe should civilize their little brothers beyond the seas. According to this view, non-whites would receive the blessings of Western civilization, including medicine, law, and Christianity. Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936) in his famous poem, "The White Man's Burden" expressed this mission in the 1890s when he prodded Europeans to take up "their moral obligation" to civilize the uncivilized. He encouraged them to "Send forth the best ye breed to serve your captives' need." Missionaries supported colonization, believing that European control would help them spread Christianity, the true religion, in Asia and Africa.

## **Social Darwinism**

In 1859, Charles Darwin (1809–1882) published *On the Origin of Species*. Darwin claimed that all life had evolved into the present state over millions of years. To explain the long slow process of evolution, Darwin put forth the theory of natural selection. Natural forces selected those with physical traits best adapted to their environment. Darwin never promoted any social ideas. The process of natural selection came to be known as survival of the fittest. The Englishman Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) was the first to apply "survival of the fittest" to human societies and nations. Social Darwinism fostered imperialistic expansion by proposing that some people were more fit (advanced) than others. The Europeans believed that they, as the white race, were dominant and that it was only natural for them to conquer the "inferior" people as nature's way of improving mankind. Thus, the conquest of inferior people was just, and the destruction of the weaker races was nature's natural law.