

Britain and the Scramble for East Africa

LSE's Jonas Fosslie Gjersø examines the reasons behind Britain annexation of modern-day Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda.

By the end of the 19th century, Britain had amassed an enormous colonial empire in Africa. In an almost unbroken line, it spanned from Alexandria in the north to Cape Town in the south, and was famously epitomised in the image of the Rhodes Colossus. But how did these vast territorial holdings come about, and perhaps more importantly, why did Britain partake in a scramble for what contemporaries regarded as largely 'sterile' land in modern day Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda? These are just some of the questions that imperial historians have grappled with for over a century, and, to judge by the plethora of theories, have never quite reached a consensus.

Naturally the range of explanations reflect the complexity of interests and motives prevailing during the 1880-90s, but amid the scrum one particular theory achieved prominence as a retort to the Marxist – and essentially economic – thesis set out by Hobson and Lenin. It was first enumerated by William Langer in the late 1930s, but only made famous by the Cambridge historians Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher along with Alice Denny in 1961. Robinson et al. proposed that the annexation of Uganda, and by extension the remainder of East Africa, was 'a giant footnote to Britain's empire in India.' Specifically, that Britain had colonised these territories in order to control the sources of the Nile so as to maintain its hold over Egypt, and by extension, the route to Britain's jewel in its imperial crown, India.

As anyone glancing at a map of the British Empire can tell you, their theory certainly made cartographical sense. Why else would the map be coloured pink in a trajectory



The Rhodes Colossus



following the meandering path of the Nile from its source at Lake Victoria in Central Africa to its outlet in the Mediterranean? And for what other reason would so many resources, £5 million to be precise, be expended on building a railway from Mombasa to this equatorial lake, the so-called Uganda Railway, in the 1890s if it led to nowhere terribly important? Most historians found this strategic explanation persuasive as the range of literature citing it attests. In fact, their article *The Imperialism of Free Trade* which preceded the influential *Africa and the Victorians* (republished as recently as 2015) also contains the

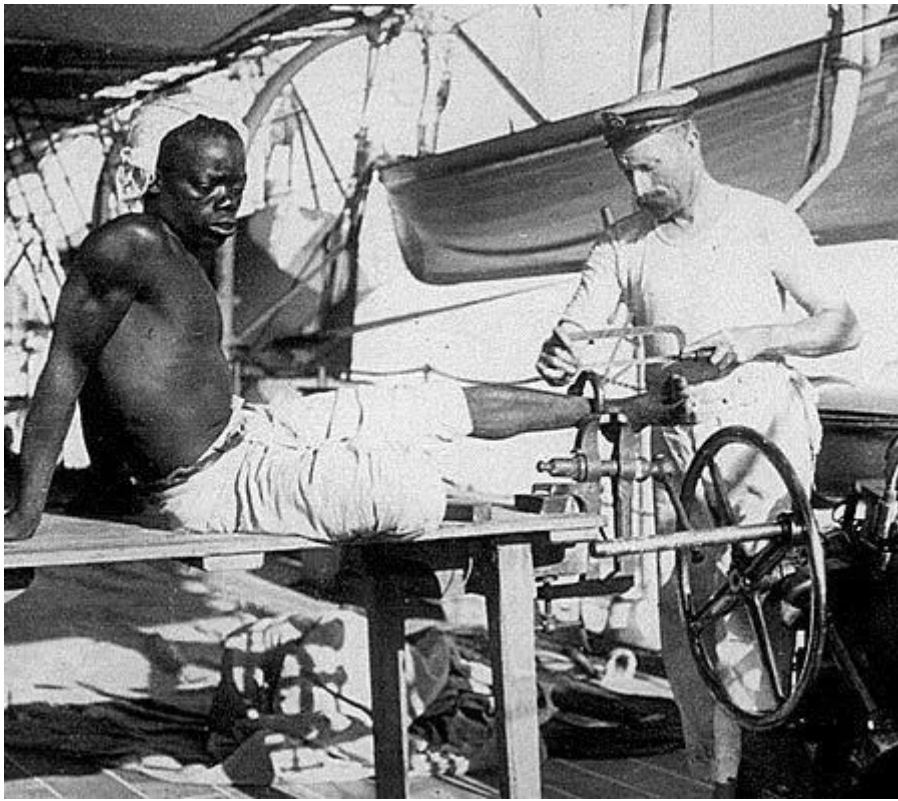
British & German Spheres of Influence, 1888 (FO 403/106, TNA) Nilotic-hypothesis and is reputedly the most cited historical article ever published.



Indian master masons constructing the Uganda Railway (CO 1069/185, TNA)

When I set out to write my masters dissertation about this largely forgotten imperial infrastructure project, I certainly had little reason to doubt the veracity of the literature. However, when I sought to verify the hypothesis in the archives, I soon encountered a problem in that the file references offered in the text were scarce, and that these scant references were often either cited out of context, or other literature which in turn cited them, a phenomenon of so-called circular referencing. So what I had expected would be a frequent discussion about the strategic importance about holding Uganda, turned out to be a chorus about British efforts at suppressing the East African slave trade, German misdeeds in their 'sphere of influence' to the south and inflated estimates over the commercial opportunities to be found in the elusive 'interior'.

However, I turned these archival setbacks to my advantage when I enrolled onto a PhD. Deciding to explore a hypothesis which better reflected the vast majority of the issues raised in the correspondence and memoranda, I, not only developed a new theory, but managed to assemble enough evidence to credibly disprove the strategic explanation. This is because I discovered that the allegedly strategic rationale for annexing East Africa was only invoked retrospectively, in order to secure funding (and indeed justify the huge cost overruns, £5m instead of the projected £1.2m) for the Uganda Railway ten years after the region had been declared a British sphere of influence.



Freeing a Slave from his Shackle on HMS 'Sphinx' off the East Coast of Africa 1907

So instead of a grand strategic vision on an inter-continental scale, I found that the main objectives for British policymakers in East Africa were threefold: to thwart the German expansion in the region; to placate the local economic interests; and perhaps most importantly, to execute British anti-slave trade policy on the cheap. By incorporating East Africa into the British Empire three birds were killed with one stone. Indeed, through putting an end to the East African slave trade – in many ways the cause célèbre of late-Victorian Britain – by boots, or rather rails on the ground, contemporaries thought that the Treasury could save some of the £100,000 it spent annually on the Royal Navy anti-slave trade squadron maintained along the coastline since the 1840s and also lay the basis of the territories' commercial development (incidentally these naval operations carried on until 1962 when Saudi Arabia finally closed its last slave market). East Africa certainly turned out to be far less 'sterile' than originally thought, as the fertile Kenyan highlands emerged as the breadbasket of the region, largely helped by the 'lunatic line' from Mombasa.

Read more about the partition of East Africa in Jonas Gjersø's open access article entitled *The Scramble for East Africa: British Motives Reconsidered, 1884-95*.

For a more light-hearted take, Jonas recommends Charles Miller's 1971 book 'The Lunatic Express: An Entertainment in Imperialism'.

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The views expressed in this post are those of the authors and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

