THE 'SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICA'

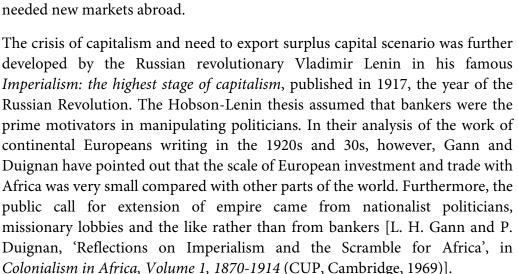The sudden rush by European nations to seize political control of the African continent in the last two decades of the nineteenth century was controversial from the start. In 1902 the British historian, economist and critic of imperialism John Atkinson Hobson presented a Marxist interpretation of the sudden upsurge in European imperialism (*Imperialism: a study*). Looking critically at both the South African (Anglo-Boer) War of 1899-1902 and the wider European 'scramble' for Africa, Hobson argued that the prime motivation for these events was a natural outcome of the development of industrial capitalism. Industrial profits during the course of the nineteenth century had produced a huge accumulation of surplus capital that was looking for new investment opportunities abroad. This was combined with a fear by industrial capitalists that home markets for selling their factory-produced consumer goods were reaching saturation point. Looking into the future, they needed new markets abroad.

The crisis of capitalism and need to export surplus capital scenario was further developed by the Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin in his famous *Imperialism: the highest stage of capitalism*, published in 1917, the year of the Russian Revolution. The Hobson-Lenin thesis assumed that bankers were the prime motivators in manipulating politicians. In their analysis of the work of continental Europeans writing in the 1920s and 30s, however, Gann and Duignan have pointed out that the scale of European investment and trade with Africa was very small compared with other parts of the world. Furthermore, the public call for extension of empire came from nationalist politicians, missionary lobbies and the like rather than from bankers [L. H. Gann and P. Duignan, 'Reflections on Imperialism and the Scramble for Africa', in *Colonialism in Africa, Volume 1, 1870-1914* (CUP, Cambridge, 1969)].

In 1953 the focus was shifted slightly with the publication of a highly influential article by John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson entitled 'The Imperialism of Free Trade' (*Economic History Review*, 2nd series, Vol. VI, No.1). In it they argued that Britain, the world's pre-eminent industrial and naval power

through the mid-nineteenth century, preached the doctrine of 'free trade' because it enabled British trade to remain dominant around much of the world, and particularly in Africa. 'Free trade' was a kind of informal British empire, with none of the governmental expense of running a formal empire. Robinson and Gallagher expanded this theme in their famous: *Africa and the Victorians: the official mind of imperialism* (Macmillan, London and New York, 1961), in which they applied it directly to the motivation for the partition of Africa.

Robinson and Gallagher argued that the aim of British politicians throughout the period of expansion in Africa after 1870 was to try and maintain this informal imperialism of free trade. Why then did Britain get so directly involved in the establishment of formal empire in Africa, in competition initially with France and then with Germany, especially as the actual scale of British trade with Africa was really very small? Robinson and Gallagher saw the answer lying in India. India was the jewel in Britain's imperial crown and all other imperial concerns were subjected to maintaining the security of Britain's route to India. At the beginning of the century this had led to the seizure of the Cape Colony and further colonial expansion in South Africa had been to secure the Cape as a permanent and stable British possession. Once the Suez Canal, linking the Mediterranean with the Red Sea, was opened in 1869, the journey by sailing ship to India was halved, and the focus of British imperialist policy shifted to Egypt. This, argued Robinson and Gallagher, was why Britain occupied Egypt in 1882: to safeguard the Suez Canal route to the East. And it was this single event, more than any other, which set off the European 'scramble' for African colonies. Once Britain was in Egypt, that country's lifeblood – the Nile – had to be protected, which involved British commitment to gaining control of Uganda and Sudan.

Robinson and Gallagher, however, have been criticised for giving too much weight to specifically British, macro-strategic concerns. Where was France in all this, and where were Germany and Belgium? Roland Oliver and John Fage, in their *A Short History of Africa* (1962), suggested that it was the unexpected intervention of Belgium and Germany between 1879 and 1885 that upset the hitherto 'balanced rivalry' of Britain and France in Africa.

But all of these explanations take a very metropolitan Eurocentric view of the surge in colonialism. Little attention is paid to the men on the spot – both European and African – who in reality played a major part in determining the precise nature and direction of the partition: Rhodes in South Africa, 'Rhodesia' and Nyasaland; Goldie in Nigeria; and De Brazza or Stanley in the Congo. The Africans who presented the strongest bar to informal European overrule, such as the Niger Delta princes, Samori's Mandinka, the Zulu of South Africa, often attracted major military focus and hence influenced the precise direction of the European push into the interior of the continent, while

other Africans chose the road of compromise and cooperation in the complex world of limited diplomatic choices in late-nineteenth century Africa. One of the more successful examples of this was the three Batswana kings who travelled to London in 1895 to successfully lobby against their 'Protectorate' (modern Botswana) being handed over Cecil Rhodes's private British South Africa Company which had so recently conquered and looted the Ndebele kingdom in 'Rhodesia' (modern Zimbabwe) [Neil Parsons, *King Khama, Emperor Joe and the Great White Queen* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1998)].

As has been pointed out by Richard Reid in his *History of Modern Africa* (Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, 2009), the rise of European racism, enhanced by technological advantage in this period, had an important role to play in the arrogant assumptions of European politicians, military officers and early colonial administrators who excused their ruthless and violent behaviour in terms of bringing 'civilized order' to a barbarous world, little imagining how their own behaviour would be viewed by generations to come.