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CASE STUDY 2 BACKGROUND: THE RISE OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE IN AFRICA

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The rise of the British empire in Africa



The British empire in Africa was established at a later date than their territories in some other parts of the world. British contact with Africa became large scale from about 1740 onwards. British traders could make huge profits by exchanging manufactured goods for slaves in Africa, and then selling slaves in the West Indies and in North America. They increased their profits further by bringing sugar, tobacco and cotton back to Britain. You can find out more about the slave trade in our [slavery snapshot](#).

Image 1



A British view of the Gold Coast and Slave Coast areas of West Africa in the 1860s when Britain was beginning to take control of these areas
(PRO ref: CO 700 Gold Coast 7)

Slavery was abolished in Britain in 1807 and so Britain's relationship with Africa changed. Britain followed its tried and tested method of allying with local rulers and then joining in conflicts between its allies and their enemies. In the process, the British gained increasing influence in West Africa and particularly in North Africa. In 1844 Britain took control of the Gold Coast of West Africa. At the same time explorers, traders and missionaries like David Livingstone were coming into contact with new African peoples and opening up trade routes as well as establishing political alliances.

From about 1870 to about 1900 Britain took control of increasingly large areas of West and North Africa. West Africa was a valuable source of gold and other trading goods. By the 1890s much of the coastal area of West Africa, and the lands which now form the state of Nigeria, were under British control. In the 1880s Britain took control of Egypt. North Africa was important because it was on the trade route between Britain and its most valuable territory – India.

Image 2



African troops who fought for the British against the Zulus in 1879
(PRO ref: COPY 1/47 f78)

British control also steadily increased in South Africa. Britain took control of the Cape of Good Hope in 1795. It was a key point on the sea route between Britain and India. In the 1830s and 1840s Britain became increasingly involved in controlling a larger area of southern Africa. This process speeded up in the 1870s and 1880s when gold and diamonds were found in South Africa. The British came into conflict with the Boers (white Africans descended from European settlers). This eventually resulted in the Boer War of 1899-1902, and total British control of the country which today is South Africa.

Image 3



British artillery being used in the Boer War, 1900
(PRO ref: COPY 1/445 f15)

Links



The National Archives

<http://www.pro.gov.uk/pathways/census/events/britain3.htm>

Outline of British rule in Africa - part of the National Archives Britain in 1901 site

Cape Connected

<http://www.capetown.at/heritage/>

This site on Cape Town, South Africa includes an outline of the British era

BRITISH EMPIRE

The rise of the British empire – Africa



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Background source one

A British view of the Gold Coast and Slave Coast areas of West Africa in the 1860s when Britain was beginning to take control of these areas

(PRO ref: CO 700 Gold Coast 7)



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Background source two

African troops who fought for the British against the Zulus in 1879

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Background source three

British artillery being used in the Boer War, 1900

(PRO ref: COPY 1/445 f15)



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