

The Scramble for Status: Evaluating the Drivers of 19th-Century Imperialism

Materials Needed

- Whiteboard, large paper, or digital document for brainstorming/ranking
- Markers or pens
- "Motivation Meter" Worksheet (a simple list or graph for ranking 1-4)
- Access to brief historical definitions (optional background reading)

Learning Objectives

By the end of this 30-minute lesson, the learner will be able to:

1. Identify the four primary motivations (economic, political, religious, and social) behind European imperialism between 1870 and 1914.
2. Analyze how the expansion of industrialism drove the demand for raw materials and new global markets.
3. Evaluate and prioritize the four motivations, explaining which factors were most dominant in the era of New Imperialism.

Success Criteria

You know you are successful when you can create a ranked hierarchy (1 being most important) of the four imperial motivations and provide a specific economic or political justification for your ranking.

Lesson Structure (30 Minutes)

Part 1: Introduction (3 minutes)

Hook & Relevancy

Educator Prompt: Imagine the world is running out of lithium—the essential ingredient for every modern battery. Only two major regions still have it, and your nation is locked in an arms race with three other major world powers. If you secure those resources, your country becomes the undisputed global economic and military leader. If you fail, you become a second-tier nation. What justifies going to extreme lengths to secure that resource?

European powers faced a similar high-stakes scenario in the late 19th century. We are examining the four driving factors they used to justify taking control of nearly 80% of the world.

Part 2: Content Delivery - I Do (7 minutes)

(Tell them what you'll teach: The Four Drivers)

We are going to quickly categorize the four major drivers of the "New Imperialism" (1870–1914) into four critical categories. Note that two categories are significantly more influential than the others.

Driver 1: Economics (The Industrial Engine)

- **Need for Raw Materials & Markets:** The Industrial Revolution created machines that needed iron, rubber, cotton, oil, and more—which Europe lacked. Factories also produced more goods than Europeans could consume. Imperialism provided captive markets (people forced to buy the goods from the imperial power) and guaranteed resource supply. This was the foundation.

Driver 2: Politics (Nationalism and Prestige)

- **National Honor and Competition:** From 1870 onward, Europe was defined by intense nationalism. Imperialism became a status symbol. Countries like Germany and Italy, newly unified, wanted recognition ("A place in the sun"). Owning vast empires proved you were a "Great Power." If your rival took territory, you *had* to take territory, even if it wasn't economically valuable.

Driver 3: Exploitation (The "Civilizing Mission")

- **Humanitarianism as an Excuse:** European powers often claimed they were bringing "civilization," infrastructure (like railroads), law, and education to "less fortunate" peoples (often called the "White Man's Burden"). This was frequently a cynical cover story to make the exploitation—taking resources and wealth—seem morally acceptable back home. The true motivation was often greed masked by a sense of social duty.

Driver 4: Religion (Missionary Impulse)

- **Spread of Christianity:** Missionaries sometimes preceded or followed the armies, genuinely motivated to convert populations. While a powerful driver for individuals and organizations, this was generally the least dominant factor when determining *national* policy, often serving as a justification rather than the primary strategic reason for invasion.

Part 3: Application & Analysis - We Do (8 minutes)

Activity: Categorizing Motives (Think-Pair-Share)

Educator Guidance: Now, let's test these categories against real actions. For the following statements, decide if the core motivation is primarily economic, political, exploitation (excuse), or religious.

1. **Statement:** Britain takes control of South Africa (Cape Colony) after diamonds and gold are discovered there.
2. **Statement:** Germany annexes territory in East Africa primarily because France has just annexed large swaths of West Africa, and Germany fears falling behind.
3. **Statement:** An imperial power funds infrastructure (schools, sanitation) but ensures all major resource extraction contracts benefit companies from the home country.
4. **Statement:** A famous British general argues for annexing Sudan because "a nation that does not expand is doomed to shrink."

(Facilitate quick responses and corrections. Ensure the learner understands that #3 is a blend of the "Excuse" masking the "Economic" driver.)

Part 4: Evaluation & Prioritization - You Do (8 minutes)

Assessment Task: The Motivation Meter

Instruction: Your task is to rank the four motivations based on which factors you believe were the true engine of imperialism between 1870 and 1914. You must justify your ranking by explaining which factors provided the money (fuel) and which provided the public support (justification).

Rank (1=Most Important)	Motivation	Justification / Rationale
	Expansion of Industrialism (Economics/Raw Materials)	
	Intense Nationalism (Political/Prestige)	
	Humanitarian Excuse (Social/Exploitation)	
	Spread of Christianity (Religious/Missions)	

Success Criteria Check

The learner successfully completes the task by ranking the motivations and providing a coherent justification. (Expected rankings usually place Economics and Nationalism 1st/2nd, as they provided the strategic imperative.)

Part 5: Conclusion & Recap (4 minutes)

Closure Dialogue

Educator: Based on your ranking, which factor was the primary driver that made the whole project of imperialism necessary in the first place?

Learner Recap: Why did nationalism make imperialism competitive, even when the land wasn't economically valuable?

Key Takeaway Reinforcement: Imperialism was a highly complex endeavor driven primarily by the economic demands of the Industrial Revolution and the political competition generated by intense European nationalism. The religious and humanitarian aspects often served as convenient public justifications for fundamentally selfish goals.

Differentiation and Extension

- **Scaffolding (If struggling):** Provide sentence starters for the justification: "I rank [Factor] first because it provided the necessary [money/manpower/political will]..."
- **Extension (If successful):** Discuss how these motivations—economics, status, and veiled exploitation—still manifest in modern global power dynamics (e.g., resource wars, corporate globalization, or space colonization efforts).