The Scramble and Partition of Africa – summary of causes.

The scramble for Africa, also known as the Race for Africa, was the rush or hurry for African territories by European powers. These European powers rushed for African territories due to several reasons. These causes can be categorized into economic, social, political and humanitarian/social reasons. Partitioning is simply the division/sharing of African land among European powers.

Reasons for the Scramble for Africa

1.        Economic Reasons

(a) Need for Raw Materials

 Due to the Industrial Revolution in Europe, production with the help of machines increased. European demand for raw materials such as palm oil, copper, rubber, cocoa, and gold increased. Africa was seen as being capable of supplying the needed raw materials. As a result, European powers partitioned Africa in order to secure some territories in order to provide a constant supply of raw materials to their industries in Europe.

(b) Need for Market for their Finished Products

With the help of machines during the Industrial Revolution, more goods were produced in the European industries but the local consumption was the same. This meant that not all the goods produced in Europe were locally sold and used in Europe. Therefore, European powers had to look for other areas were they could go and sell their surplus products. Africa was found suitable for this reason. This was because Africa did not have industries to produce these goods.

(c) Need to Invest Abroad

The Industrial Revolution had made many European businessmen very rich by 1880. Many of these had accumulated surplus capital which they wanted to invest abroad for profit because profit had fallen in their respective countries due to the high cost of labor. Therefore, they believed that Africa could provide them with cheap labor. Thus, they started encouraging their home governments to acquire colonies in Africa.

(d) Need to Protect their Trading Companies

Before 1800, many European countries had allowed the formation of companies to promote overseas trade. Examples of these companies include the British Royal Niger Company in West Africa, the British South African company (B.S.A.C.) in South Africa, the Imperial British East Africa and the Germany East African Company in Tanganyika. The second half of the 19th century saw stiff competition among these companies. As a result, these companies were forced to ask their home governments to take over certain African areas where they could enjoy the trade monopoly.

 2. Polilitical reasons

 (a) Balance of Power

After the Berlin Congress was held and the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-78 thereafter, European nations realized that there was no power in Europe which was more powerful than the others. This meant that no country in Europe could expand its sphere within Europe without risking a major war. These powers therefore turned to Africa were there was no resistance.

(b) Prestige

Due to the rise of nationalism, many Europeans had developed strong pride and patriotism and loyalty for their countries. They wanted to promote the status of their countries’ position in the world. The possession of a large overseas empire became a symbol of braveness. The more colonies a country had, the more powerful it was considered to be, or rather, considered it to be. For example, when France was defeated in 1871, she lost her two provinces of Alsace and Lorraine to Germany. Hence, France turned to Africa for colonies were there was no resistance. Other Europeans obtained colonies for personal glory. For example, king Leopold of Belgium acquired the Congo Free State and treated it as a personal farm. This encouraged other Europeans to do the same elsewhere in Africa.

(c) Source for Soldiers

Other European nations obtained colonies in Africa so as to provide a source and base for troops. For example, France obtained Senegal and Britain obtained South Africa and used Africans from these territories to fight on their respective sides during the First World War.

(d) Strategic Purposes

Other parts in Africa were obtained by European powers because of their strategic positions. Areas like Egypt, Morocco, Mozambique, Angola, and the cape were obtained to control trade in times of peace and war. Britain’s interest in Egypt was the Suez Canal. This provided a faster sea route to India

   3. Social reasons

(a) Need to Settle Surplus Population

It is important to understand that because of the new machines that were now being used during the Industrial Revolution, many people lost employment in Europe because it was the newly invented machines that were doing their work now. Because of the unemployment due to the Industrial Revolution, European countries obtained colonies in Africa to settle their surplus unemployed population. Nigeria, Rhodesia and Kenya were obtained for this purpose.

(c) Need to Spread Christianity and Combat Diseases

This was another reason that led to the partition of Africa. Some Europeans decided to obtain colonies in Africa so as to convert the Africans into Christianity, introduce modern society and ‘civilise’ them. On the other hand, colonies were obtained so that some Europeans who had certain illnesses could come and live where the climate was favourable.

(b) Need to end Slave Trade

Britain took the lead in fighting against slave trade by passing a law in 1807. In 1833 the British government again passed the Emancipation act by which slavery was abolished through out the British Empire. Many European nations had done the same. However, slave trade continued and other methods had failed.