

The American Historical Review v.86 n.5 (December 1981), pp. 1166-1167. Review of:

SYLVIA M. JACOBS. *The African Nexus: Black American Perspectives on the European Partitioning of Africa, 1880- 1920*. (Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies, number 55.) Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press. 1981. Pp. xiv, 311. \$27.50.

This book makes a significant contribution to black history by focusing on Afro-American reactions to European imperialism. Nineteenth-century blacks were interested in their ancestral fatherland, but negative images absorbed from whites produced ambivalent reactions among educated blacks. Having imbibed Victorian notions of "civilization," these black journalists, clergy, educators, and other professionals initially supported European involvement in Africa. They were convinced that conversion to Christianity and Westernization was necessary before Africa could rise economically and politically. After the 1880s, however, several events led to a change of attitudes, so that by World War I most black spokespersons were anti-imperialist.

Sylvia M. Jacobs makes especially good use of black newspapers, church records, and diplomatic correspondence to prove her thesis. The poor organization of the book, however, obscures major points. What is obviously missing is the hand of a good editor. Chapter 3 jumps in disarray from one person to another. Chapters 4 through 10 are awkwardly divided according to geography, with too much detail provided on European actions rather than on Afro-American attitudes. Chapters on East and North Africa are especially in need of condensing. This topic is admittedly difficult to organize, but since Jacobs suggests that black Americans only gradually turned away from imperialism, it is up to her to clarify the chronology of that change.

Reorganized into a chronological pattern, the growing Afro-American objection to European expansion becomes clear. First, in the 1880s and 1890s black United States diplomats began protesting British and French encroachments upon Liberia, which was an important symbol of black self-government. In 1896 Ethiopia, the other major independent black nation, was threatened by Italy. Afro-Americans exhibited pride that Ethiopia militarily repulsed the imperialists. Next, Jacobs brilliantly argues that black disillusionment with the American takeover in the Philippines marked the turning point in black attitudes toward imperialism. Black troops in the Philippines after 1898 observed that colonial control in practice led to racist exploitation rather than humanitarian uplift. Concurrently, the Anglo-Boer War publicized European racism, since British attempts to placate white settlers after 1902 led to increasing segregation and restrictions on Afro-American churches in South Africa.

It gradually dawned on black Americans that European control more likely held Africans down rather than benefited them. Nothing illustrated this more clearly than King Leopold's atrocities in the Congo. From 1904 to 1908, Afro-Americans exerted pressure on the United States to ask for reforms. That effort was followed by another successful black American initiative in 1911 to get the government to ensure Liberian independence. Thus, by 1914 Afro-American comments on Africa were largely anti-colonial, and blacks used World War I as an

opportunity to attack German imperialism. Black journalists, educators, clergy, and the NAACP proposed an international commission to administer liberated German colonies while preparing them for self-government. More activists saw the status of black people in America and in Africa as inevitably tied together, as stronger bonds of Pan-Africanism emerged.

This is a well-researched study, with only one notable factual error (on page 143, African Methodist Episcopal Bishop Henry Turner did not visit South Africa until 1898). Although disorganization detracts from the book's readability and Jacobs underestimates the role of Westernized Africans in influencing black Americans, her ideas and research place her in the front rank of Pan-African historians.

WALTER L. WILLIAMS    University of Cincinnati