The Rise and Fall of the Cape-to-Cairo Railroad, 1890-1935

I am currently researching a little-known topic in late 19th and early 20th century British colonial history: the rise and fall of the Cape to Cairo railroad project, and especially the reasons behind its failure.

In the 1890’s Cecil Rhodes dreamt of building a railroad that traversed the entire continent of Africa, north to south. Initially the British public, government and press displayed great enthusiasm for building the railway. Once the project began to stall in 1902, however, support at all levels began to wane. Railroad construction proceeded in fits and spurts over the next decade, but eventually the project slipped out of the British public’s consciousness and it was essentially dead by 1930.

My initial hypothesis, after conducting preliminary research, was that the government and the people were against paying the huge sums of money necessary to build a railroad through the Central African jungles and Sudanese desert.

However, further research contradicted this view and placed the blame mainly on Britain’s imperial rival, Germany, for obstructionism. As I continued my research, especially with new primary sources, my interpretive viewpoint began to shift again into its current construct. Basically, my argument is that the British government and Rhodes had fundamentally different views on how and where to build the
railroad due to their shared greed, and this, combined with post-1902 public apathy, undermined the motivation for the project and made it seem no longer important to complete. The British government refused to negotiate with other colonial powers on behalf on the railway, and Rhodes failed to maximize the amount of British territory he incorporated in charting his ideal route. The biggest issue with my research has been the use of British newspapers as a proxy for public sentiment and the recent discovery of bribes and “donations” from Rhodes to many editors compromising their objectivity, thus making the next step to examine the viewpoints of the global press.