

## Africa's undoing 130 years ago: A Brief History of the Berlin Conference



**European powers justified dividing a continent among themselves without considering the desires of the indigenous peoples.**

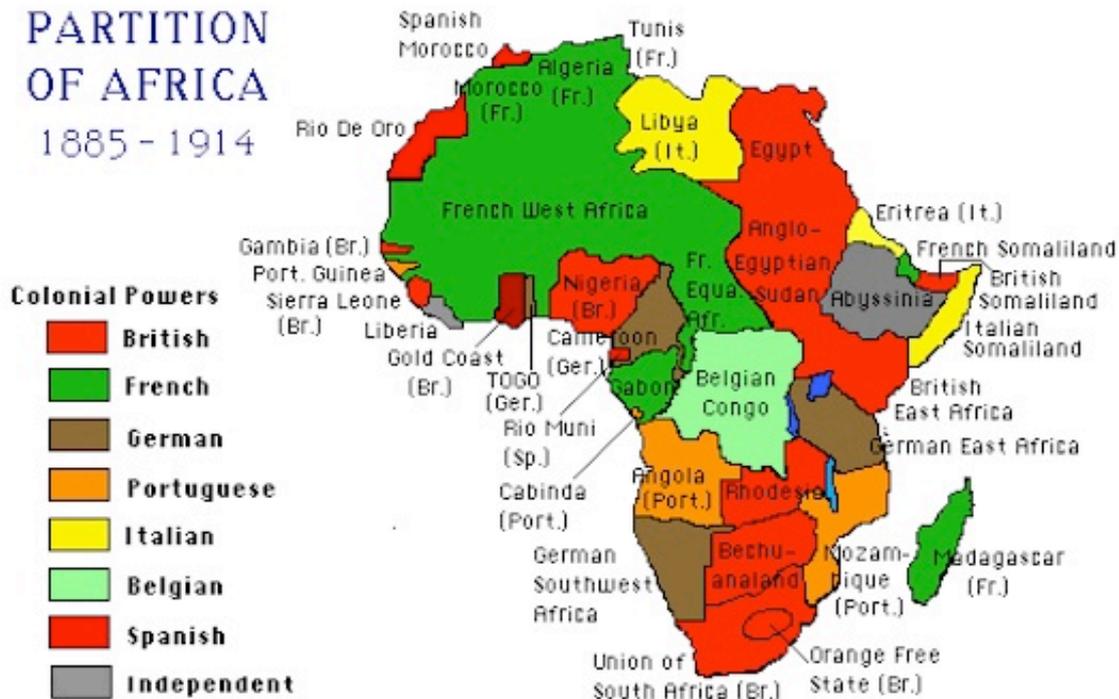
The Berlin Conference was Africa's undoing in more ways than one. The colonial powers superimposed their domains on the African continent. By the time independence returned to Africa in 1950, the realm had acquired a legacy of political fragmentation that could neither be eliminated nor made to operate satisfactorily. (de Blij, p.340)



In 1884 at the request of Portugal, German chancellor Otto von Bismarck called together the major western powers of the world to negotiate questions and end confusion over the control of Africa. Bismarck appreciated the opportunity to expand Germany's sphere of influence over Africa and desired to force Germany's rivals to struggle with one another for territory.

At the time of the conference, 80% of Africa remained under traditional and local control. What ultimately resulted was a hodgepodge of geometric boundaries that divided Africa into fifty irregular countries. This new map of the continent was superimposed over the one thousand indigenous cultures and regions of Africa. The new countries lacked rhyme or reason and divided coherent groups of people and merged together disparate groups who really did not get along.

Fourteen countries were represented by a plethora of ambassadors when the conference opened in Berlin on November 15, 1884. The countries represented at the time included Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden-Norway (unified from 1814-1905), Turkey, and the United States of America. Of these fourteen nations, France, Germany, Great Britain, and Portugal were the major players in the conference, controlling most of colonial Africa at the time.



The initial task of the conference was to agree that the Congo River and Niger River mouths and basins would be considered neutral and open to trade. Despite its neutrality, part of the Congo Basin became a personal kingdom for Belgium's King Leopold II and under his rule, over half of the region's population died.

At the time of the conference, only the coastal areas of Africa were colonized by the European powers. At the Berlin Conference the European colonial powers scrambled to gain control over the interior of the continent. The conference lasted until February 26, 1885 - a three month period where colonial powers haggled over geometric boundaries in the interior of the continent, disregarding the cultural and linguistic boundaries already established by the indigenous African population.

The Berlin conference managed to form a set of rules for the “orderly extension of European influence” in Africa. First, the fourteen nations agreed there would be freedom of trade and navigation in the Congo Basin. Second, they agreed that any power that annexed territory or established a protectorate from that day forward would let every other country know

immediately. At the same time, that country was responsible for establishing political stability, thereby guaranteeing effective occupation of those regions. They also agreed to put a stop to the slave trade, that “these territories may not serve as a market or means of transit for the trade in slaves, of whatever race they may be”

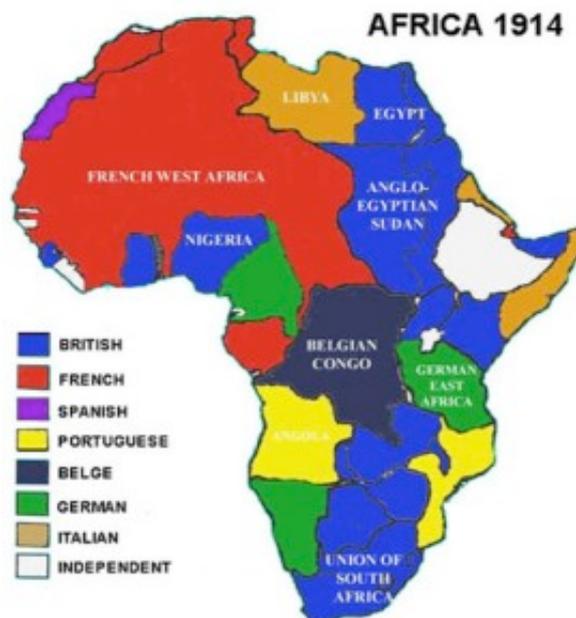
Following the conference, the give and take continued. By 1914, the conference participants had fully divided Africa among themselves into fifty countries.

Major colonial holdings included:

- Great Britain desired a Cape-to-Cairo collection of colonies and almost succeeded though their control of Egypt, Sudan (Anglo-Egyptian Sudan), Uganda, Kenya (British East Africa), South Africa, and Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Botswana (Rhodesia). The British also controlled Nigeria and Ghana (Gold Coast).
- France took much of western Africa, from Mauritania to Chad (French West Africa) and Gabon and the Republic of Congo (French Equatorial Africa).
- Belgium and King Leopold II controlled the Democratic Republic of Congo (Belgian Congo).
- Portugal took Mozambique in the east and Angola in the west.
- Italy's holdings were Somalia (Italian Somaliland) and a portion of Ethiopia.
- Germany took Namibia (German Southwest Africa) and Tanzania (German East Africa).
- Spain claimed the smallest territory - Equatorial Guinea (Rio Muni).

de Blij, H.J. and Peter O. Muller Geography: Realms, Regions, and Concepts. John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997.

The National Geographic Desk Reference. National Geographic, 1999.



Because of its size, surface features, climate, resources, and strategic importance, Africa became a prime candidate for conquest by ambitious European empires. Although Africa is physically remote from the power centers of Europe, North America, and Asia, it is surrounded by water and can therefore be reached easily from the other continents. This meant that the

Europeans needed to establish rules for dealing with one another if they were to avoid constant bloodshed and competition for African resources. The Berlin Conference established those ground rules.

By the mid-nineteenth century, Europeans had established colonies all along the African coast and competed for control. The push for overseas territories was made even more intense by the Industrial Revolution and the need for cheap labor, raw material, and new markets. The competition between the Europeans often lead to violent conflict.

The conference was held in Berlin between November 15, 1884 and November 26, 1885, under the leadership of German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck. Although controlling the slave trade and promoting humanitarian idealism were promoted as the focus of the conference, the conference only passed empty resolutions about the ending of slave trade and providing for the welfare of Africa. In truth, the result of the Conference was a method of dividing the continent of Africa between the European powers.

Article 34 of the Berlin Act states that any European nation that took possession of an African coast, or named themselves as “protectorate” of one, had to inform the other powers of the Berlin Act of this action. If this was not done then their claim would not be recognized. This article introduced the “spheres of influence” doctrine, the control of a coast also meant that they would control the hinterland to an almost unlimited distance.

Article 35 determined that in order to occupy a coastal possession, the nation also had to prove that they controlled sufficient authority there to protect existing rights such as freedom of trade and transit. This was called the doctrine of “effective occupation” and it made the conquest of Africa a less bloody process.

The Berlin Act was an important change in international affairs. It created the rules for “effective occupation” of conquered lands, ensuring that the division of Africa would take place without war among the European powers. Through the Berlin Act, the European powers justified dividing a continent among themselves without considering the desires of the indigenous peoples.

While this appears extremely arrogant to us now, it seemed to them to be the obvious extension of their imperialism. The Berlin Conference is one of the most clear examples of the assumptions and preconceptions of this era, and its effects on Africa can still be seen today.

source: <http://teacherweb.ftl.pinecrest.edu/snyderd/MWH/Projects/mun-bc/History.htm>