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The Scramble for Africa

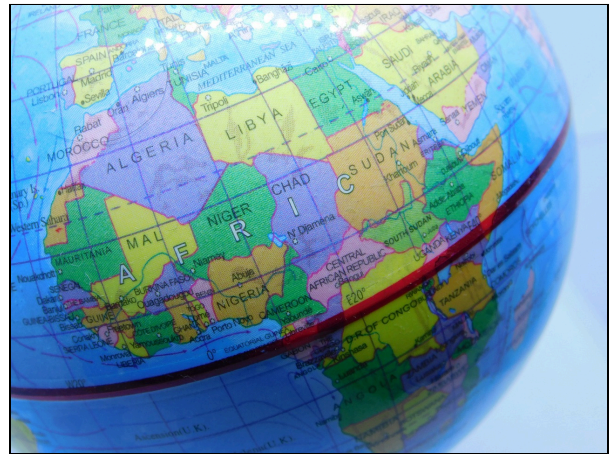
By Bakari Bosa

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Bakari Bosa is a writer and educator based in Washington, DC. In "The Scramble for Africa," he writes about the tragic and brutal history of European imperialism in Africa.

As you read, make note of the details that support the motivation of European leaders during the Scramble for Africa.

[1] Imagine a group of people getting together to decide how they were going to carve up your house. One decided to take your kitchen; another declared rights to your living room; someone else believed they ought to help themselves to a couple of your bedrooms, while the weakest was left with just your den. Sounds audacious, no doubt, but this is essentially how Europeans, between 1881 and the start of World War I in 1914, decided they would divide Africa into territories they claimed as their own. Audacity is just one of the words — among others such as exploitation and imperialism¹ — that have been used to describe the period known as the Scramble for Africa.



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In short, the Scramble for Africa was the invasion, occupation, colonization² and annexation³ of African territories by European powers. As with most major events in history, its roots are connected to past events. We could begin as early as the 15th century: the Portuguese are said to have been the first Europeans on African soil, the first to establish trade posts and settlements along the continent's coast. By the 17th century, the slave trade proliferated, and Europeans settled in large numbers along the coast of Africa where they would set up ports for the transportation of slaves to the Americas. However, European expansion beyond the coasts

1. **Imperialism** (*noun*) a system in which a country rules other countries, sometimes having used military force to get power over them
2. **Colonization** (*noun*) the act of sending people to live in and govern another country
3. **Annexation** (*noun*) possession taken of a piece of land or a country, usually by force or without permission

of Africa really began in earnest toward the end of the 18th century.

European industrialization during this period led to advancements in technology: better transportation, which meant boats could better navigate African rivers; advancements in weapons, particularly the rapid fire machine gun, which would prove effective against hostile natives; and medical advancements, particularly the development of quinine, an anti-malaria drug. Europeans were not used to the tropical conditions of Africa and would often succumb⁴ to malaria, a parasite transmitted by mosquitoes. Boats, guns, and quinine allowed Europeans to travel into the interior of Africa.

Famous European explorers began to tour Africa, and by the end of the 19th century they had traced the courses of a number of the continent's rivers, including the Nile. Two of the most well-known explorers were Dr. David Livingstone, a Scottish missionary who wanted to convert the natives he encountered to Christianity, and Henry M. Stanley, who worked for King Leopold II of Belgium and helped map areas of Southern and Central Africa.

- [5] But the penetration into Africa wasn't just about Bibles and maps. Economically, sub-Saharan Africa was attractive to Europe's ruling class. Africa represented an open market to Britain, Germany, France and other European countries. The demand for raw materials such as copper, rubber, cocoa, tea, gold and diamonds had increased in Europe. These natural resources could be found in Africa and made the continent a valuable resource. Because of this, there was political pressure, particularly in Great Britain, which already had an empire, to expand colonial territories and secure lucrative markets. Germany, under its leader Chancellor Otto von Bismark, wanted its chance to control overseas territories, and called for the Berlin Conference (1884-1885). European representatives from fourteen different countries attended this conference where, in order to avoid conflict with one another, they set out rules on the control of foreign territories. No representatives from Africa were invited.

Great Britain was a dominant force in Europe during this period. British delegates wanted to secure the southern and eastern coasts of Africa as stopover ports to Asia and Britain's Indian territory. They came away from the conference with control of Egypt, South Africa, Nigeria, and the Gold Coast (today known as Ghana). The French occupied vast areas of north and west Africa, including Cameroon, Mali and Senegal. The Germans controlled Tanzania as well as Namibia; the Italians controlled Somalia and Libya; while the Portuguese took control of Angola and Mozambique. By 1914, 90% of Africa had been divided between seven European nations with only Ethiopia and Liberia remaining independent nations.

Empires were fashionable, and European leaders, in order to justify their ambitions, tied their grand imperial ideas to a sense of duty. Each country proclaimed that they would bring trade and Christianity to the various parts of Africa as part of their civilizing⁵ mission. There was

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4. **Succumb** (*verb*) to suffer badly or die from an illness
 5. **Civilize** (*verb*) to educate a society so as to make it better, more organized, and less

hardly anything civil about it. The borders European colonizers established in Africa created arbitrary boundaries around many diverse ethnic groups and kingdoms, and the colonizers often took a “divide and rule” approach, exploiting ethnic and cultural differences between African groups. For example, in 1914, Lord Frederick Lugard governed over the newly formed British colony of Nigeria, the borders of which brought together over 250 different ethnic groups into one nation, among them the Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa group in the north. Tensions between the different groups still exist up until today. Other lasting effects of this colonization include cultural assimilation: natives in these newly colonized nations were expected to learn the language of the colonizer and adopt many of their practices. Local indigenous⁶ spiritual practices were dismissed as false and “witchcraft” by Christian missionaries. Africans were dehumanized, regarded as uncivilized, savage and brutal — racist tropes that were used by colonizers to justify the oppression of the indigenous people and the atrocities⁷ that were carried out against them. The colonizers often pressed Africans into brutal slavery to build their new colonial cities, roads, and railroads, a practice which is estimated to have resulted in the death of over five million people.

King Leopold II was perhaps the most brutal and notorious leader of a colony. As a monarch he had no real influence in Belgium, but he believed that ruling over territory in Africa would give him more power and riches. Although the Belgian government had no interest in colonialism, Leopold II had his eyes set on the Congo and hired Stanley in 1878 to establish posts and make treaties with the chiefs, many of whom did not realize what they were signing. By the time Bismark called for the Berlin Conference, Leopold II had secured the Congo River basin, promising to suppress the east African slave trade, promote free trade and execute humanitarian⁸ policies. It was agreed at the conference that he would be granted the territory as its sole ruler. Leopold II would have his personal Congo Free state, and declared himself as its “King Sovereign.”⁹

King Leopold acquired the Congo just as widespread use of bicycles and the invention of automobiles created a growing demand for rubber. Despite his pledge to end slavery, Leopold’s colonial chiefs and commanders forced the natives to meet this demand by extracting rubber from trees in inhumane conditions. If they did not make quotas they were severely punished: whipped, imprisoned, mutilated and even killed. Leopold’s Belgian and native enforcers flogged, imprisoned, starved, or massacred entire villages that failed to meet production quotas. The abuse, mutilations, and other atrocities reduced the number of the Congolese from an estimated 20 million in 1876 to 8.5 million in 1911.

primitive or savage

6. originating or occurring naturally in a particular place; native

7. **Atrocity** (*noun*) a shockingly cruel, violent, or evil act

8. **Humanitarian** (*adjective*) concerned with or intended to improve human welfare and happiness

9. A “King Sovereign” is an independent ruler with unlimited power.

[10] Of course, the natives didn't take all of this lying down; there were many acts of resistance. Abyssinia, known today as Ethiopia, was able to successfully defeat the Italian army during the battle of Adwa in 1896. But this was a rare success. Native resistance was often suppressed, as their weaponry was no match for the colonizers' rapid-fire Maxim machine gun. For example, the British businessman Cecil Rhodes, founder of the De Beers diamond company, ordered his soldiers into the Southern African region of Matabeleland in order to secure the territory. Because the soldiers had the Maxim machine gun, it took just 700 of them to defeat 5,000 native Ndebele warriors during the First Matabele War (1893-1894).

This age of imperialism has recorded unspeakable acts of savagery carried out by colonial armies and their native enforcers. The Germans evicted the Herero and Nama people from their lands, threatening them with death. The order was later withdrawn on orders from Berlin, but eight out of ten Herero were killed before they reached their new destination. Stories of these and other abominations were gradually appearing in European newspapers and providing ammunition for human rights and religious groups that were agitating against the African colonization. Leopold and his peers kept denying the atrocities, but the invention of the roll-film camera by Kodak enabled many reformers to capture photographic evidence. Horrific images emerged of dismembered bodies and handless Congolese men, women and children.

In November 1908, Leopold yielded to widespread public condemnation of his reign in Africa and turned over his territory to the Belgian government, which annexed it and stopped the horrors. It was the start of the crumbling of "The New Imperialism," a process that was greatly accelerated by U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. His insistence on including freedom for colonies in the 1941 Atlantic Charter, a document describing the Allied aims in World War II, helped persuade Britain, France and other countries to give up their holdings in Africa. By 1961, almost all of the major European colonies in Africa achieved their independence, and since the 1970s, the continent has been self-ruled.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. **What is the central idea of the text?**
 - A. The main motivation for European colonization in Africa was to spread Christianity.
 - B. While it was challenging, African nations were able to resist imperialist forces.
 - C. European countries went to brutal lengths to secure their wealth in Africa.
 - D. Attempts to self-rule led to serious struggles for most African nations.

2. **What connection does the author draw between technology and the end of colonization in Africa?**
 - A. The creation of new technologies meant that Europeans no longer needed raw materials from Africa.
 - B. African peoples developed their own technology that enabled them to defeat the Europeans in battle.
 - C. The atrocities of the Europeans were captured in photographs that turned public opinion against colonization.
 - D. Under Franklin Roosevelt, Americans used military technology to force Europeans to give up their African colonies.

3. **How does the author use paragraph 9 to refine their ideas?**
 - A. It supports the idea that King Leopold was inhumane.
 - B. It highlights the ways Africans fought back against oppression.
 - C. It shows how bicycles and automobiles helped Europeans colonize Africa.
 - D. It demonstrates how colonization contributed to slavery in Europe and the United States.

4. **What is the author's main purpose in the passage?**
 - A. to demonstrate the key role Franklin Delano Roosevelt played in ending imperialism in Africa
 - B. to explain the factors contributing to the Scramble for Africa as well as its end
 - C. to question the morality of European leaders during the Scramble for Africa
 - D. to highlight the cruelty and oppression caused by King Leopold II

5. **How does the author's discussion of King Leopold II contribute to the development of ideas in the text? Use evidence from the text to support your response.**

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. In the text, the author quotes King Leopold, who said that European countries should "open to civilization the only part of our globe which it has not yet penetrated, [and] to pierce the darkness in which entire populations are enveloped." What did King Leopold most likely mean by the word "civilization"?
2. How does the Scramble for Africa compare to the European colonization of America?
3. In your opinion, is it fair for one country to come into another and take their resources in times of peace? What about in times of war? Why or why not?
4. Can you think of recent conflicts in Africa that you can trace back to the Scramble for Africa? How do you think these conflicts might have been avoided once African countries gained their independence?