

"Expansion Was Everything": Europe's Colonization of Africa

By Facing History, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.03.17

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French and German commissioners operating in the swamp forests of the Lobaye valley to establish new Franco-German borders in Congo. Image from the public domain

In the late 1800s, English businessman Cecil Rhodes made a fortune by claiming huge tracts of land in South Africa that were rich in gold and diamonds. Rhodes brutally exploited the labor of the local population, who he considered to be members of an inferior race. Thousands died as a result of the labor practices his businesses used in Africa. In his later years, he wrote that "the world is nearly all parceled out, and what there is left of it is being divided up, conquered and colonized. To think of these stars that you see overhead at night, these vast worlds which we can never reach, I would annex the planets if I could; I often think of that. It makes me sad to see them so clear and yet so far."

Rhodes was an imperialist, and to an imperialist, "expansion was everything." Imperialism is the policy of expanding the rule of a nation or empire over foreign countries by force. In the 1800s, European nations acquired great wealth and power from both the natural resources of the lands they conquered and the forced labor of the people from whom they took the land. Imperialists justified their conquests with racist ideas about the inferiority of nonwhite people.

Jules Ferry felt Europeans were the superior race

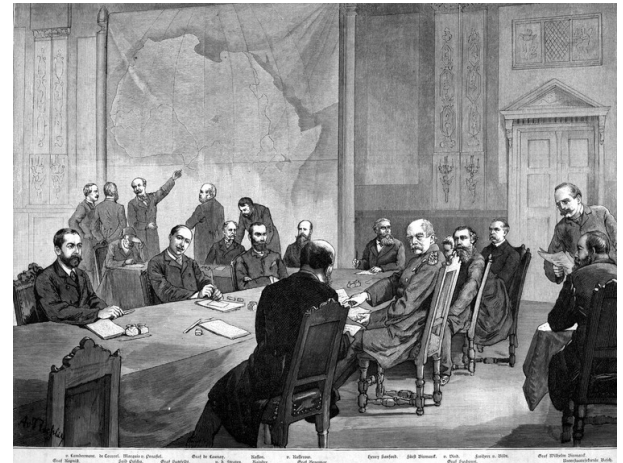
France too had its imperialists. In a speech to the French Chamber of Deputies in 1884, Jules Ferry, who twice served as prime minister of France, said:

"Gentlemen, we must speak more loudly and more honestly! We must say openly that indeed the higher races have a right over the lower races. ... I repeat, that the superior races have a right because they have a duty. They have the duty to civilize the inferior races. ... In the history of earlier centuries these duties, gentlemen, have often been misunderstood, and certainly when the Spanish soldiers and explorers introduced slavery into Central America, they did not fulfill their duty as men of a higher race. ... But in our time, I maintain that European nations acquit themselves with generosity, with grandeur, and with the sincerity of this superior civilizing duty."



The Congress of Berlin

A few months later, France took part in an international meeting known as the Congress of Berlin. It was called by Otto von Bismarck, then chancellor of Germany, and was attended by 15 nations. They came to establish rules for dividing up Africa — the only large landmass Europeans had not yet fully colonized. By agreeing to abide by those rules, the group hoped to avoid a war in Europe. They paid little or no attention to the effects of their decisions on Africans. The results of their efforts can be seen in the following maps. The first shows Africa in 1880, before the Congress of Berlin, while the second map shows the continent in 1913.

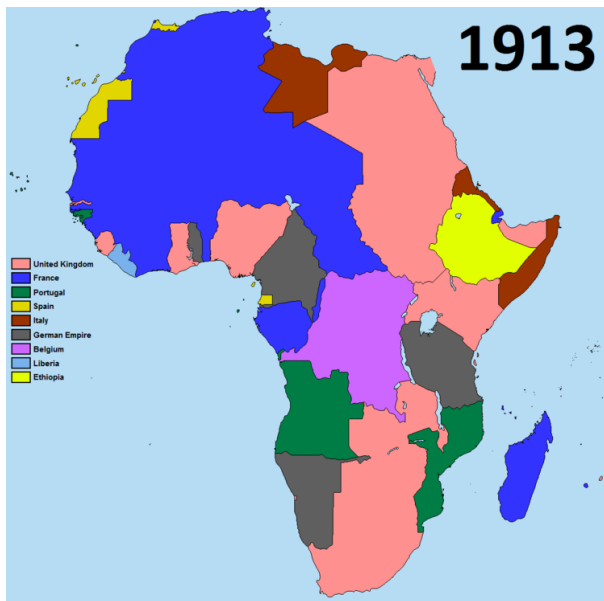


At the Congress of Berlin in 1884, 15 European powers divided Africa among themselves. By 1914, these imperial powers had fully colonized the continent, and were exploiting its people and resources.

W.E.B. Du Bois describes the theft of Africa's land

In 1915, the African-American scholar and activist W.E.B. Du Bois summed up Europe's African land grab. His article was published in the Atlantic Monthly magazine:

"The methods by which this continent has been stolen have been contemptible and dishonest beyond expression. Lying treaties, rivers of rum, murder, assassination, mutilation, rape and torture have marked the progress of Englishman, German, Frenchman and Belgian on the dark continent. The only way in which the world has been able to endure the horrible tale is by



deliberately stopping its ears and changing the subject of conversation while the devilry went on."

The theft of Africa's land began after explorer Henry Stanley mapped out much of Central Africa during the 1870s. Stanley's explorations made the riches of Central Africa seem accessible for the first time.

The first country to take advantage of the new possibilities was Belgium, which in 1885 established a colony in Africa, the Congo Free State. Belgium's King Leopold promised that Belgian colonial rulers would bring peace, Christianity and new wealth to their African subjects. Instead, Du Bois wrote, they brought "murder, mutilation and downright robbery."

As brutal as it was, Belgian rule was only the latest chapter in a long history of African suffering that began with the slave trade. "That sinister traffic, on which the British Empire and the American Republic were largely built, cost black Africa no less than 100,000,000 souls," Du Bois wrote. Slavery destroyed Africa's "political and social life," Du Bois said, and left the continent in a state of helplessness that later made it easy for Europeans to grab Africa's riches.

Europeans saw Africans as almost subhuman

The slave trade also shaped Europeans' low opinion of Africans, who were seen as primitive and almost subhuman. Blackness became "synonymous with inferiority," Du Bois wrote, and Africa became "another name for bestiality and barbarism." These prejudices later made it easier for Europeans to justify their takeover of Africa.



While Stanley's explorations led to the scramble for Africa, "the cause lay deeper," Du Bois wrote. England was already in Africa well before the 1870s because of the slave trade and was "half

consciously groping toward the new Imperialism." France had been humiliated by the loss of its European empire, and was beginning to dream of a "new northern African empire." Germany was shut out of the Americas by the United States, so it was starting to look to Africa as a place to establish colonies of its own. Portugal was beginning to dream of reestablishing its once-mighty empire.

The late-19th-century rush to grab African territory brought dramatic and rapid change. Whereas in 1875 only 10 percent of Africa was under European control, by 1900 virtually all of the continent was ruled by European powers.