

Congress of Berlin

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This year marks the centenary of the Congress of Berlin (Nov 1884 - Feb 1885). Contrary to expectation, Africa was not divided at the Congress.

The partition and colonization of Africa took place during a period before and after the Congress and is generally referred to as the Scramble for Africa. It was a period when African and European historical events were closely linked, interwoven by complex rivalries and diplomatic intrigue. It is astonishing that European powers were not drawn into war during these feverish activities.

In Europe, Britain and France were the great rival powers during the first half of the 19th century. Neither Germany nor Italy were unified states. Portugal was of minor consequence. Commercially, Britain was superior, but militarily inferior to France.

Up to 1879, a small part of Africa was under European rule. Algeria was ruled by France; in Egypt, European control had just begun. Along the coast of West Africa where Europeans had been trading for centuries, colonial administrations existed only on the British Gold Coast and in French Senegal. Angola and Mozambique were under Portuguese rule but not yet colonies. Only in South Africa had Europeans penetrated deeply into the continent. Twenty years later, European governments laid claim to the bulk of the African Continent.

Originally, the coast of Africa had been opened up by explorers, traders and missionaries. When they asked their respective governments for protection against hostile tribes or aggressive competition by traders of other nationalities, their governments initially were reluctant to assist. Colonization was looked upon as a financial drain which no government was prepared to incur.

In 1879, the comparatively peaceful coexistence of British and French interests in Africa was upset by the appearance of two European powers which previously had not made their presence felt.

The first was King Leopold II of Belgium in his personal capacity. He took a great interest in the Congo Basin in the desire to extend his personal empire. The explorer Stanley, in Leopold's employ, had explored the waterways of the Congo and had developed a land and water transport system. Through skilful diplomacy Leopold eventually succeeded in having his rule over the Congo basin internationally recognized. Britain and France as a result became uneasy about their trading interests along the Congo and Niger rivers. Neither were prepared to stand idly by watching part of the African continent being occupied by a rival.

The second European power to appear in Africa was Germany under the leadership of Bismarck. After the 1870-1 war against France, Germany united with the state of Prussia. With rapid industrialisation she became a powerful European power and began to rival Britain

commercially and to dominate France militarily.

Although reluctant at first to get involved in Africa Bismarck, in his desire to dominate European politics, was drawn into the African scramble. After winning the 1870 war against France, he wanted to distract French hostility towards Germany by his involvement with Africa.

In this context Egypt played an important role. Both England and France were in joint control of Egypt. During a revolt by the Egyptian national army, France experienced a financial crisis at home and had to pull out of the Anglo-French military action to put down the revolt. Britain acted on her own and invaded Egypt, promising to withdraw eventually. Instead Britain retained rule over Egypt until 1914. Angered by the continued British occupation of Egypt, France extended her claims in West Africa and the Congo. This suited Germany. She supported the British claims in Egypt at the price of British acquiescence in German expansion in Africa. At the same time, Germany supported French colonial activities on the West Coast of Africa in the hope of diminishing French resentment about the loss of the 1870 war.

The scramble for Africa had started. All over Europe, governments hastened to lay claim to territories on the African Continent, terrified of losing out while others gained. Trade rivalries, opposing territorial claims and navigation rights on waterways in the Congo and along the Niger caused friction amongst European powers. To regulate these matters, France and Germany jointly suggested the international Congress of Berlin and invited Great Britain, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Denmark, Holland, Russia, Sweden, Norway and Turkey.

Congress seeks to limit disputes

Principles were laid down at the Congress for the guidance of European powers in the colonization of Africa. All occupation of African coastal territories had to be effective before becoming valid — 'effective' meant having a Commissioner in authority assisted by a small army and police force. Vague historical claims no longer counted. The signatory powers of Congress had to be informed before the acquisition of new territories.

In this way it was hoped to limit future disputes about African territories which could adversely affect European relations. These rules applied to the coastal regions as most of the African interior was still largely unknown. New territorial claims were purposely excluded from the agenda. Where territorial settlement was required, it was dealt with in separate, bilateral agreements.

The congress further ensured free commerce in the Congo basin for European occupying powers. It proc-

laimed the neutrality of the Congo and safeguarded trading on both the Congo and Niger rivers. It laid down laws against slave trading.

The story of the acceleration of partition of Africa which was to follow the Congress of Berlin would fill a book, were one to go into these complex events step by step. I, therefore, shall try to mention just the main effects the partition had on the people of Africa.

Arbitrary boundaries

Politicians and diplomats drew borders while meeting in European country estates, frequently using inadequate maps. Frontiers sometimes followed lines of longitude and latitude. These arbitrary boundaries were drawn in total disregard for local circumstances, ethnic groups and their economic activities. Twelve states became landlocked; boundaries cut unnaturally across cultural groupings; Somalis were distributed among Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya and Djibouti; the Yoruba tribe was divided between Dahomey (Benin) and Nigeria; the Ewe tribe between Ghana and Togo.

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It has been said that Lord Lugard, the British Colonial Administrator determined the borders of Northern Nigeria by the distances he could walk before sitting down. Queen Victoria gave Mount Kilimanjaro to her cousin, the German Emperor William II for a birthday present. This explains why the mountain and its inhabitants is part of Tanzania, formerly Tanganyika. The ludicrous shape of the Caprivi Strip was the result of an Anglo-German agreement by which free access to the Zambesi river was granted to German S W Africa in the belief that the river would become an important artery between the interior and the Indian Ocean.

The boundaries created new nationalities, a totally new concept for the bulk of Africans. Their free movements in search of grazing and possibly employment were inhibited by the new borders. This would particularly affect them in times of drought, although frequently boundary treaties between neighbouring states assisted nomadic peoples to cross borders with their stock.

Often boundary negotiators in Europe made provision for a demarcation commission to be sent to the area in question as they were aware of their inadequate knowledge of local circumstances. They were given authority to deviate from the treaty line to consider villagers' needs. There was at least an attempt to respect local needs. But this was minor tinkering after all the major decisions had been taken in Europe.

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Friendly chiefs

European administration and its occupying forces were initially small. They avoided coming into contact with unfriendly tribes, seeking out friendly chiefs who frequently signed away stretches of land, unaware of the consequences. When collisions became unavoidable, superiority of European weapons soon settled the score. At times, colonial forces aided by native allies harassed resisting tribes by seizing their cattle or burning down their villages until their rule was recognised.

Later, different European colonisers also collided in their scramble for Africa. Only international diplomacy averted a war.

In Europe, however, the initial excitement about the partition of Africa soon died down. The European powers lost interest in their new colonies. What mattered to them at first were possessions, not the development of the colonies.

The aim of the European powers was that the colonies should be self-supporting to avoid as much as possible grants-in-aid which could burden the European taxpayer. Their first task, therefore, was the imposing of headtaxes and custom duties by initially encouraging the people to grow economic crops on their own land or to encourage European settlers to come to Africa to establish plantations (rubber, coffee, cotton) or to develop private mining industries where the Africans could work as wage labourers. Gradually, the colonies became more and more financially independent and greater stress was laid on their development.

The impact of colonization on the population varied from area to area and colony to colony. In general it can be said that some chiefs cooperated by working hand in hand with the colonial powers, signing treaties and concessions and giving away land and mineral rights for personal gain and favour. Others lost their land to commercial companies which snatched large stretches of land.

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Although some farmers were left in possession of their cultivated land, they often were surprised to find their fallow land which they had intended to cultivate the following season sold by their chief without their knowledge. They became squatters on their own land and were frequently forced to move to 'Native Reserves'. Over the years, all African societies lost their sovereignty and were over-ruled by the colonial governments. Their local chiefs became subordinate to the District Officer. Criminals were no longer brought to the chief's court, but before the courts of the colonial power.

More and more demands were made on African labour to build roads, to carry loads of building materials and to trade goods. As taxes had to be paid the people were obliged to work. At first, taxes could be paid in kind, later in unfamiliar coins. Their chiefs could no longer protect them against these demands.

Much later, during the years between the first and sec-

and world wars, it is interesting to note that the colonial policies of Britain developed in fundamentally different ways from the colonial powers of the continent. Theoretically, France, Belgium, Portugal and Italy followed a doctrine of assimilation, allowing those colonial subjects who had reached a certain economic and educational level to consider themselves as citizens of the mother country rather than as colonial subjects. They had the right to be represented in the metropolitan (home) government. The inhabitants were considered citizens of France, Belgium, Portugal and Italy.

Britain, on the other hand, followed a line of decentralization. She did not consider Africans to be Britons. Her colonial subjects were to 'develop on their own lines'. British settlers in East and Central Africa were supposed gradually to control colonial governments and to develop together with their subjects a politically independent colony. In practical terms, this idea was an illusion. As the European settlers were so thinly spread over vast areas and so heavily outnumbered, the maintenance of political control independent of British imperial power was unrealistic.

Christianity and education

During the colonization of Africa, Christian missions and western education played a vital role. In Europe, many young men and women were driven by idealism to serve the 'backward' people of Africa. Missions were given financial support by their churches and a network of village schools all over Africa was established where children received basic instruction in reading, writing and arithmetic as well as religion. The brighter pupils were singled out to become teachers. Some educated men felt at home in the new colonial world. From their ranks would come the clerks and skilled craftsmen who were in demand for further development of the colonies, particularly when they spoke a European language. The ambitious found well-paid employment with the authorities. The missions made good colonial citizens of them and brought them into contact with the new world.

Ironically though, in years to come, from these very missions would emerge a new opposition to colonialism. This did not necessarily mean that those opposed to colonialism wanted to revert to pre-colonial tribalism. Frequently they were disenchanted by the chasm which existed between Christianity and the behaviour of so-called Christian colonisers. Some joined established Churches where they found employment in the hope that they and their children might occupy positions of control one day. (Change from within). Others disagreed, wanting to found their own churches as an ultimate challenge to colonial authority. Their goal was to have Christian churches under African leadership and future states governed along Western opposed to traditional lines. These were the first African nationalists. They wanted to run their own lives under their own authority.

It is worth mentioning that primary education in the Congo which in 1908 has ceased to be the private possession of King Leopold II due to financial mismanagement and extreme exploitation, was the best amongst the colonies.

Later, after the first world war, secondary education came to African colonies — with the exception of the Congo.

Also of interest is the fact that the migrant labourers employed on the mines in Katanga were the only migrant labourers encouraged to bring their families with them. In this way a stabilised labour force came into being, where the sons followed in the occupational footsteps of their fathers.

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The early African nationalists

To return to the early African nationalists: neither missionaries nor settlers nor colonial governments were aware of the endeavours of some of the African elite to run their own affairs. The Europeans felt themselves in total control and wrote off the emerging intelligentsia as a unrepresentative minority. Lord Lugard referred to them as 'trousered Blacks' from whose influence the ordinary people had to be protected. From their ranks emerged men like Luthuli, Seme, Sobukwe.

The colonialists felt secure in their belief that the foundations they were laying would last a thousand years. In fact they lasted a mere 70 years, a lifespan, before decolonisation began in tropical Africa. During these short 70 years, the African people were brought into contact with the western world, an influence which will be of lasting effect.

The significance of the Congress of Berlin lay in the fact that rules applied to the bulk of Africa were made by European statesmen in Europe and were influenced greatly by European power-politics.

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