

IN CONTEXT

FOCUS

The "scramble for Africa"

BEFORE

1830 France begins occupation of Algeria.

1853–56 David Livingstone crosses Central Africa.

1862 John Speke discovers the source of the Nile.

1879 H. M. Stanley is hired by Leopold II to survey the Congo.

1882 Britain takes over nominally Ottoman-ruled Egypt.

AFTER

1886–94 German territories in East Africa are established.

1890 The Anglo-French Convention grants France control of the Sahara.

1891–93 Cecil Rhodes brings Southern and Northern Rhodesia under British rule.

1899–1902 Boer War sees Britain wrest control of Orange Free State and Transvaal.

IF I COULD, I WOULD ANNEX OTHER PLANETS

THE BERLIN CONFERENCE (1884)

The **interior of Africa** is revealed by European exploration. Its **commercial possibilities** are alluring.

Unremitting competition between Europe's **colonial powers** sparks a sudden "scramble for Africa."

Europe takes full advantage of its **financial and military superiority** to impose itself on Africa.

At the Berlin Conference, new colonial possessions are created, supposedly in the interests of Christianity and "civilization."

By 1913, only **Liberia and Ethiopia** remain fully independent.

The Berlin Conference did not precipitate the sudden European takeover of Africa after 1880 but, rather, confirmed Europe's self-asserted right to impose itself on a continent deemed backward, ignorant, and savage. Called by Otto von Bismarck, Germany's chancellor,

the conference was held over the winter of 1884–85 and attended by representatives from 14 countries. It was intended in part to legitimize a more or less enforced subjection of Africa and, by setting agreed rules of colonization, to avoid conflict between Europe's colonial powers, France and Britain most obviously.

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It was also seen as a way to end the slave trade, not least by the actions of Christian missionaries. At the same time, it paved the way for Germany and Belgium, two nations with no history of colonial rule, to become major imperial powers. For Germany, this was little more than a logical next step in its challenge to Britain and France. If they could boast vast colonial possessions, Germany felt it should, too.

The European takeover

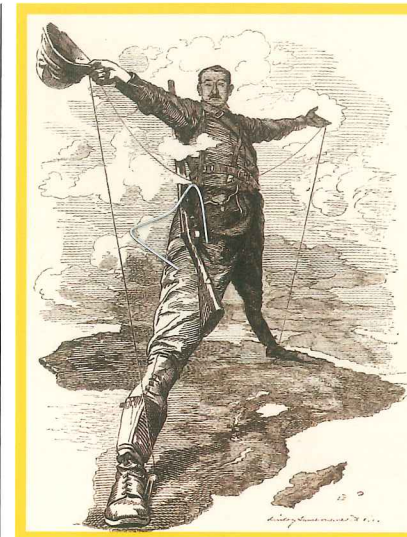
Before colonization, Africa possessed a variety of states and territories, some quite precisely defined, some amorphously tribal—there was an extreme contrast between the sophistication of Egypt, for example, and the Congo in tropical Africa. At the same time, much of the north was Muslim. The first European holdings in Africa were coastal trading forts, sustained by gold and the slave trade. The interior remained impenetrable, but as it was revealed from the early 1800s, European control of Africa gained momentum.

The subsequent heightening of tensions resulted in the near-complete reduction of Africa to European rule. African colonies were essentially artificial creations, lines drawn on maps to suit the colonizing powers. They took no notice of local histories and cultures, and any local resistance to colonization was invariably crushed by military means.

Belgian and German rule

In 1885, Leopold II, the King of the Belgians, proclaimed the establishment of the Congo Free State, an area 76 times larger than Belgium. Presented as a model colony, dedicated to humanitarian ends and free trade, in reality it was anything but.

Treated by Leopold II as his personal possession, the Congo witnessed brutalities on a near-genocidal scale. The exact numbers can never be known, but it is believed that between 2 million and 10 million Congolese died. Conditions in German southwest Africa, suddenly taken over after



Cecil Rhodes, portrayed in this Victorian cartoon as a giant straddling the entire African continent, was a great believer in colonization for the benefit of the British Empire.

1884 and today part of Namibia, were equally brutal. The true price of the riches produced by Africa for its European masters—ivory, rubber, gold, and diamonds—was extraordinary suffering. ■

Cecil Rhodes



There was no more ardent exponent of British imperial rule in Africa than Cecil Rhodes (1853–1902), financier, statesman, and relentless imperialist. He envisaged a continuous body of British colonies that would run north and south across Africa, linking the two strategically vital extremities of Africa: Cape Town and Cairo. Having made his fortune mining and selling diamonds in South Africa, he dedicated the rest of his life to this audacious vision. He was able to carve out new British territories in Northern Rhodesia (now part of

Zambia) and Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), which were both named after him. As the prime minister of Britain's Cape Colony from 1890, his relentless scheming to topple the Boer republics led to his eventual political demise in 1895. He remains perhaps the most striking example of the unashamed imperialist, not just permanently ready to extend British colonial control, but convinced that it was his duty to do so in the interests of what seemed to him a self-evident European fitness to rule.