



## World History

Reading 1.4 – Imperialism and the Modern Era

Name:

Section:

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### The scramble begins: 1884-1886

In March 1884 Bismarck sends a secret cable to Gustav Nachtigal, a distinguished German explorer of the Sahara. It appoints him Imperial Consul-General for the west coast of Africa and instructs him to annex for the empire three regions in which settlements of German merchants are engaged in trade.

One is Togo. The next is Cameroon. And the third, much further down the coast, is Angra Pequena.

At Angra Pequena there is only a single German merchant, Heinrich Vogelsang, who has been trading there for less than a year after winning permission to do so in 1883 from the local Khoikhoi chief.

In 1883 Bismarck is so uninterested in a colonial presence in southwest Africa that he requests the British to confirm that this German outpost at Angra Pequena may rely on the protection of the Cape Colony. Yet in 1884 he sends his secret cable ordering the annexation of the region.

What changes his mind? The failure of the British government to send any reply to his query about Angra Pequena can only have been an irritation. A more likely influence is a growing enthusiasm among the German public for the idea of empire. Newspaper reports of the exploits of Stanley and Brazza prompt the fear that a great and profitable adventure is under way from which Germany, unless she hurries, may be excluded.

A word is coined in the spring of 1884 for this new mood among the German electorate - *Torschlusspanic*, 'door-closing panic', the fear of being on the outside while the door to a treasure trove is shut. From the German chancellor's point of view, there is the added appeal that involvement in Africa will help him play off against each other his two European rivals, France and Britain.

Whatever his precise motives, in the summer of 1884 Bismarck gives his own shove to the closing door. Nachtigall arrives in Cameroon and Togo with the necessary flags and proclamations in the name of the German emperor. The captain of a passing German ship does the honors in Angra Pequena (henceforth to be German South West Africa).

Even at this stage Bismarck's predatory act barely ruffles feathers in London, since the territories which he has acquired (particularly Angra Pequena) seem of little value. The British Prime Minister, William Gladstone, remarks condescendingly that he looks 'with satisfaction, sympathy and joy upon the extension of Germany in these desert places of the earth'.

But Bismarck has no intention of letting matters rest. Playing to the hilt his new imperial role, he invites the powers to a West Africa Conference in Berlin in November 1884.

In his opening address Bismarck emphasizes the philanthropic concept of colonialism, evoking the original ideal of Livingstone - now extended from two to three Cs, 'commerce, Christianity and civilization'.

In practice much of the diplomacy in Berlin centers on the problem of the great private empire which Leopold II of Belgium is trying to create in the heart of the continent. Each of the powers is terrified that this plum might fall into the lap of one of the others if it slips from Leopold's grasp. The resulting consensus, much to Leopold's relief, is acceptance of the Congo Free State (amounting to about a million square miles) as an internationally recognized kingdom under his sovereignty.

Other decisions of the conference (guarantees of free trade in the Congo, and of free navigation on the Niger

and Congo rivers) are the result of the powers jockeying to ensure that nobody wins a conclusive advantage in the coming race. But the significant underlying assumption is that Africa is about to be consumed in its entirety by Europe.

In 1886 a British colonial administrator, Harry Johnston, submits a roughly sketched map to the foreign office suggesting how the continent should be divided. Every single corner of the map is allocated to Britain, France, Portugal, Germany, Italy, Spain or Belgium. (Johnston also reveals, all too vividly, the colonial concept of how the European example is expected to improve the natives.)

### **The scramble completed: 1886-1912**

By the end of the century, a mere fifteen years after the Berlin West Africa Conference, the continent is almost entirely shared out between the European powers. All that remains are a few territories bordering the Sahara. By 1912 they too are absorbed - four (Mauritania, the Central African Republic, Chad and Morocco) by France, and Libya by Italy. During this extraordinarily rapid process of colonization, Africa has been penetrated and appropriated in three distinct geographical developments.

The earliest move after the Berlin conference is again a German initiative. It centers on east Africa, where large territories between the coast and Lake Tanganyika are rather loosely claimed by the Arab sultan of Zanzibar.

During 1884 (the year in which Bismarck claims his three West African colonies), this part of east Africa is visited by a keenly imperialist young explorer, Karl Peters - who shortly before his African trip has founded in Berlin a Society for German Colonization. Avoiding the attention of the sultan's agents, Peters persuades local chiefs to enter into vague treaties with imperial Germany.

Bismarck hears of this achievement just after the end of the Berlin conference. In his new imperialist mood, he grants a charter to Peters to establish a German protectorate in east Africa. The other European powers are astonished to discover, early in 1885, that Bismarck is already claiming a fourth slice of the continent.

As it turns out, this particular issue is resolved amicably between Germany and Britain - though with scant regard for the sultan's supposed claims. It is agreed in 1886 that the two nations' spheres of interest will be divided by a line from the coast to Lake Victoria. The German area, to the south, becomes in 1891 German East Africa (subsequently Tanganyika). It is extended further west in 1899 to include Rwanda and Burundi.

Meanwhile, north of the line, Britain establishes in 1895 the East Africa Protectorate (subsequently Kenya) and in 1896 Uganda. In 1890 the British also impose a protectorate on the sultan's rich trading island of Zanzibar.

The second of the three separate developments is the British pressure northwards up the continent from Cape Colony. Cecil Rhodes harbors the imperial fantasy of a continuous British corridor from the Cape of Good Hope to Egypt, and he makes an impressive start from the southern end - establishing Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in 1890 and Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) in 1900.

The Boer War (1899-1902) brings into British hands the intervening republics of the Orange Free State and Transvaal.

The third great colonial movement through the continent is that of the French in northwest Africa. France becomes the only European power to achieve a vast contiguous African empire, stretching all the way from the Mediterranean down to the Bight of Benin and the estuary of the Congo.

Ten French sub-Saharan colonies are added to the earlier Ivory Coast and Senegal. They range from Gabon in

1886 to Chad and the Central African Republic in 1910. Eight of these are grouped administratively as French West Africa and four as French Equatorial Africa.

### **German Africa: 1884-1919**

The German empire in Africa, more rapidly assembled than any other, is the first to be dismantled. It is also marred by two of the worst atrocities carried out by any of the colonial powers.

From Bismarck's initial interest in the continent, in 1884, only a few years elapse before German control is established in four widely separated regions of the continent – in Togo, Cameroon and Namibia down the west coast, and in present-day Tanzania in east Africa. Namibia and Tanzania are the sites of the atrocities, at the hands of von Trotha in 1904 and of von Götzen in 1905.

World War I is the reason for the sudden end of the German empire in Africa. From the outbreak of the war, in 1914, all the German territories are under threat from troops in neighboring French and British colonies. By early in 1916 the whole of German Africa is in allied hands.

At the treaty of Versailles, in 1919, Germany gives up all her imperial claims. The League of Nations subsequently hands responsibility to France (part of Togo, part of Cameroon), to Britain (the other part of these and Tanzania), to Belgium (Ruanda-Urundi) and to South Africa (Namibia). With these dispensations the European presence in Africa is finalized for the last years of colonialism and the subsequent struggle for independence.

### **The struggle for independence: to 1980**

The colonial domination of Africa by Europe lasts less than a century. In the early part of this period there are frequent uprisings against the intruders in regions of the interior, where colonial rule is not yet fully established or where forced labor is imposed on tribes which find the strength to resist.

The harsh reality of the forced labor employed in many European enterprises (in effect slavery under another name) causes outrage among liberal circles when detailed accounts are published in Europe. The scandals arising from Belgian and French practices in the Congo and Chad are notorious but not isolated examples.

In most regions African resentment of the colonial presence first develops into political agitation in the period between the world wars. These are the formative years of the politicians who will eventually lead their countries into independence in the decades after World War II.

The colonial powers vary in their readiness to relinquish control. France seems at first the most willing, giving real power to African politicians in an across-the-board gesture in 1946, but subsequently the French strongly resist change in Tunisia, Morocco and above all Algeria. Portugal, the pioneer of colonialism in Africa, fights hardest to retain a foothold in the continent - sustaining brutal and costly wars on several fronts until 1975.

Britain follows a middle path, ostensibly appreciative of African aspirations but instinctively seeking compromises which will preserve something of the status quo. Nevertheless the pressure for change in the more developed British colonies proves irresistible. Ghana becomes, in 1957, the first colony in sub-Saharan Africa to win independence under African rule.

The European settlers in one British colony strongly resist the continent-wide trend towards majority rule. The British government finds itself in direct conflict with British settlers after Ian Smith proclaims, in 1965, an

independent Rhodesia under white minority rule.

It takes fourteen years before the rebellion in Rhodesia finally collapses, in 1979. Elections follow in 1980 and the colony is transformed into Zimbabwe- the last African nation to become independent (three years after tiny Djibouti), though South Africa is the last to achieve majority rule (in 1994).

The African continent thus returns to independence as a group of modern nations, defined by boundaries agreed between the colonial powers. In many cases these boundaries slice through tribal territories, creating difficulties between neighboring regimes. In another way, too, influences from outside Africa profoundly affect the newly independent nations, for their freedom coincides with the Cold War.

### **Cold War and after: 1945-2000**

The emerging African nations both benefit from and are harmed by the global competition between the USA and the USSR in the decades after World War II. The chess game of the Cold War makes each superpower eager to acquire client states.

The advantage of this to new and impoverished African nations is that subsidies are easily available in return for unquestioning allegiance and internal suppression of the opposing ideology, whether it be communism or capitalism. The disadvantage is that many unscrupulous dictators in the continent are kept in power by this patronage, enjoying an unchallenged license to line the pockets of their family and entourage.

This broad generalization overlooks many and varied exceptions. Several responsible African rulers manage to pursue very effectively their own chosen course while supping quite closely with one devil or the other - Nasser for example in Egypt, or Nyerere in Tanzania.

Equally, several brutal tyrants thrive for a while without the benefit of Cold War aid. Bokassa does so in the Central African Republic (with perverse encouragement from France), while Amin survives for eight years in Uganda without outside support.

The end of the Cold War, in 1989, has a profound effect in Africa. The western nations, no longer needing to support client dictators in the fight against communism, divert their attention to another shibboleth of the free world - the introduction of democracy.

From the early 1990s aid to Africa increasingly comes with a proviso - the legitimization of political parties and the holding of free elections. Almost everywhere in the continent these terms are ostensibly complied with. In many of the resulting elections opposition parties back out at the last moment, observers report widespread fraud, and presidents and their parties are returned with extraordinarily high percentages of the vote. Even so, the overall trend is towards greater legitimacy.

But in terms of human misery the last two decades of the century are bleak ones for Africa. Famine prevails in many parts (the Ethiopian disaster of 1984 being the best known only because it is the first to be widely reported). Brutal civil wars result in massacre and mutilation and millions of refugees (in the 1990s Angola is just one example among many). In 1994 the small republic of Rwanda is the scene of perhaps the most violent spasm of genocide in human history. And among all this, AIDS devastates Africa as nowhere else in the world.

The continent enters the third millennium free but tormented.

*Gascoigne, Bamber. "History of Sub-Saharan Africa." History of Sub-Saharan Africa. HistoryWorld.net, n.d. Web. 17 June 2014.*