

The Berlin Conference to Divide Africa

More Resources

Historical Context

- Boahen, A. Adu. [The Horizon History of Africa](#). United States: American Heritage Publishing Company, 1971.
"The Scramble for Africa: Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 to Divide Africa - Meeting at the Berlin residence of Chancellor Otto von Bismarck in 1884, the foreign ministers of fourteen European powers and the United States established ground rules for the future exploitation of the "dark continent." Africans were not invited or made privy to their decisions."
- de Blij, Harm J., Muller, Peter O., Nijman, Jan. [Geography: Realms, Regions, and Concepts](#). United Kingdom: Wiley, 2013.
*"**Result of Colonization** - The European colonial powers shared one objective in their African colonies, exploitation. But in the way they governed their dependencies, they reflected their differences. Some colonial powers were themselves democracies (the United Kingdom and France); others were dictatorships (Portugal, Spain). The British established a system of indirect rule over much of their domain, leaving indigenous power structure in place and making local rulers' representatives of the British Crown. This was unthinkable in the Portuguese colonies, where harsh, direct control was the rule. The French sought to create culturally assimilated elites what would represent French ideals in the colonies.*

In the Belgian Congo, however, King Leopold II, who had financed the expeditions that staked Belgium's claim in Berlin, embarked on a campaign of ruthless exploitation. His enforcers mobilized almost the entire Congolese populations to gather rubber, kill elephants for their ivory, and build public works to improve export routes. For failing to meet production quotes, entire communities were massacred. Killing and maiming became routine in a colony in which horror was the only common denominator. After the impact of the slave trade, King Leopold's reign of terror was Africa's most severe demographic disaster. By the time it ended, after a growing outcry around the world, as many as 10 million Congolese had been murdered. In 1908 the Belgium government administrators, and the Roman Catholic Church each pursued their sometimes competing interest. But no one thought to change the name of the colonial capital: it was Leopoldville until the Belgian Congo achieved independence in 1960."

“Berlin West African Conference carves Africa into spheres of control – In the second half of the nineteenth century, after more than four centuries of contact, the European powers finally laid claim to virtually all of Africa. Parts of the continent had been “explored,” but now representatives of European governments and rulers arrived to create or expand African spheres of influence for their patrons. Competition was intense. Spheres of influence began to crowd each other. It was time for negotiation, and in late 1884 a conference was convened in Berlin to sort things out. This conference laid the groundwork for the now familiar politico-geographical map of Africa.

In November 1884, the imperial chancellor and architect of the German Empire, Otto von Bismarck, convened a conference of 14 states (including the United States) to settle the political partitioning of Africa. Bismarck wanted not only to expand German spheres of influence in Africa but also to play off Germany’s colonial rivals against one another to the Germans’ advantage. Of these fourteen nations, France, Germany, Great Britain, and Portugal were the major players in the conference, controlling most of colonial Africa at the time.

The Berlin Conference was Africa’s undoing in more ways than one. The colonial powers superimposed their domains on the African Continent. By the time Africa regained its independence after the late 1950s, the realm had acquired a legacy of political fragmentation that could neither be eliminated nor made to operate satisfactorily. The African politico-geographical map is thus a permanent liability that resulted from the three months of ignorant, greedy acquisitiveness during a period when Europe’s search for minerals and markets had become insatiable.

The French dominated most of West Africa, and the British East and Southern Africa. The Belgians acquired the vast territory that became The Congo. The Germans held four colonies, one in each of the realm’s regions. The Portuguese held a small colony in West Africa and two large ones in Southern Africa. The Congo Free State, conceived as a “neutral” zone to be run by an international association in the interest of bringing science, civilization, and Christianity to the indigenes, received the Berlin Conference’s blessings. Belgium’s King Leopold II (far left) soon took control, reaping fabulous personal profits through the sale of land and development rights. Leopold exploited Congo’s resources and contributed to up to 10 million deaths. One man told the BBC: ‘He left us in poverty. He exploited our raw materials and left us with nothing.’”

- Mark Dummett, "[King Leopold's Legacy of DR Congo Violence](#)," BBC News "Of the Europeans who scrambled for control of Africa at the end of the 19th century, Belgium's King Leopold II left arguably the largest and most horrid legacy of all."
- Chamberlain, M. E.. [The Scramble for Africa](#). United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2014.
"In 1870 barely one tenth of Africa was under European control. By 1914 only about one tenth – Abyssinia (Ethiopia) and Liberia – was not."

"French explorer named Savorgnan de Brazza. Nominally employed by the French government, he undertook an expedition up the Ogoue River in the 1870's. Along his journey, de Brazza concluded a series of treaties with an African chief known as Makoko. These treaties ceded large tracts of land to de Brazza, as a representative of France; yet they were vague and highly irregular, and the government decided to ignore them. However, in 1882, because of the Egypt crisis, the government of France reversed itself and publicly recognized the Makoko treaties as valid, thereby claiming a considerable amount of territory in Central Africa. It wasn't so much that the French government wanted to get back at Britain, but rather the French public, resenting the losses their country suffered to Germany and angered by the weak role France had played in Egypt, was particularly susceptible to the press campaign that de Brazza, members of the government and other interested parties waged in support of the treaties."



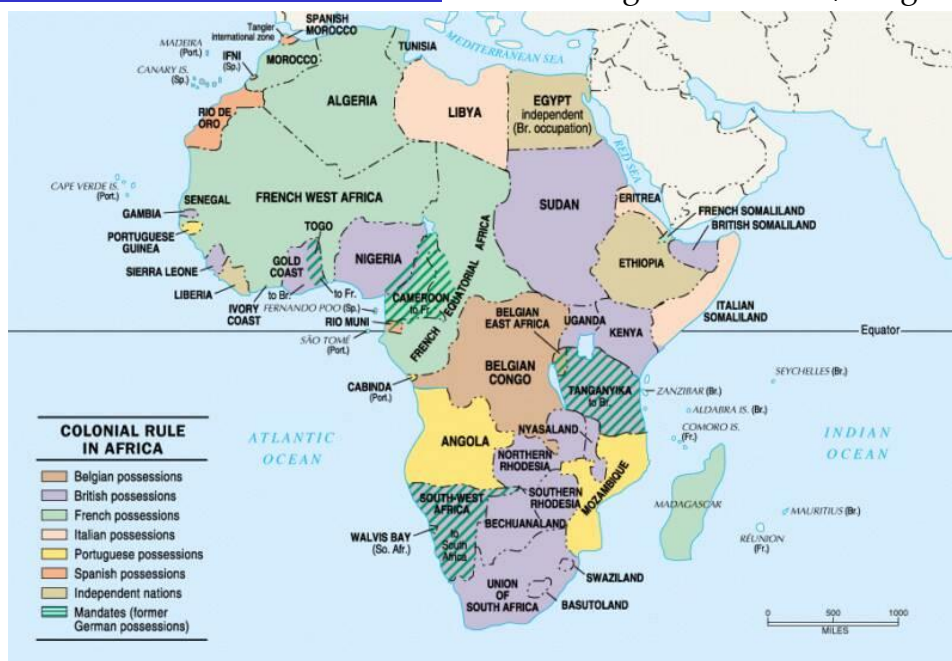
King Makoko and Queen

- Edgerton, Robert. [The Troubled Heart of Africa: A History of the Congo](#). New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002.

“Without a doubt one of the most troubled regions in Africa, the Congo has a complex, often disturbing history. Populated by several different cultures, including the Mbuti Pygmies and the Bakongo, the Congo was unknown to Europeans until Diogo Cao, a Portuguese captain, ventured into its depths in 1482. Cao and his men were treated well, and in time more Europeans followed, many of them famous explorers, such as David Livingstone and Henry Stanley. Missionaries followed as well, determined to convert the peoples of the Congo to Christianity.

King Leopold’s “ownership” of the Congo--private property until Belgium “bought” it from him in 1908--devastated the denizens by forcing them to work under conditions so horrific that the population plummeted from 20 million to 6 million in less than 30 years. The year 1960 brought Congolese independence and ultimately brought to power [Joseph-Desire Mobutu](#), who proved to be every bit as corrupt as his European predecessors. He worked hard on little, but to increase his personal fortune, which in 1984 was estimated to amount to nearly US \$4 billion, most of it in Swiss banks. Joseph Kabila, the son of Mobutu’s successor, now faces an international war and startling poverty levels. An engrossing albeit tragic history ensued.”

- Hackett, Neil J., Jewsbury, George F., Edgar, Robert R., Molony, Barbara. [Civilizations Past and Present to 1650](#). United Kingdom: Pearson/Longman, 2007.



“After colonial rule was firmly established in Africa, the only change in possessions came after World War I. Germany’s four colonies were placed under the League of Nations, which established a mandate system for other colonizers to administer the territories.”

- Hochschild, Adam. King [Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa](#). United States: HarperCollins, 1999.

“A superb, engrossing chronicle focuses on one of the great, horrifying and nearly forgotten crimes of the century: greedy Belgian King Leopold II’s rape of the Congo, the vast colony he seized as his private fiefdom in 1885. Until 1909, he used his mercenary army to force slaves into mines and rubber plantations, burn villages, mete out sadistic punishments, including dismemberment, and commit mass murder. The hero of Hochschild’s highly personal, even gossipy narrative is Liverpool shipping agent Edmund Morel, who, having stumbled on evidence of Leopold’s atrocities, became an investigative journalist and launched an international Congo reform movement with support from Mark Twain, Booker T. Washington and Arthur Conan Doyle. Other pivotal figures include Joseph Conrad, whose disgust with Leopold’s “civilizing mission” led to Heart of Darkness; and black American journalist George Washington Williams, who wrote the first systematic indictment of Leopold’s colonial regime in 1890. Hochschild (The Unquiet Ghost) documents the machinations of Leopold, who won over President Chester A. Arthur and bribed a U.S. senator to derail Congo protest resolutions. He also draws provocative parallels between Leopold’s predatory one-man rule and the strongarm tactics of Mobutu Sese Seko, who ruled the successor state of Zaire. But most of all it is a story of the bestiality of one challenged by the heroism of many in an increasingly democratic world. 30 illustrations.”

Text of Conference Document

Convention Revising the General Act of Berlin, February 26,1885, and the General Act and Declaration of Brussels, July 2,1890

The American Journal of International Law, Vol. 15, No. 4, Supplement: Official Documents (Oct., 1921), 314-321.

Signed at Saint-Germain-en-Laye, September 10, 1919. (Translation.)

Whereas the General Act of the African Conference, signed at Berlin on February 26,1885, was primarily intended to demonstrate the agreement of the Powers with regard to the general principles which should guide their commercial and civilising action in the little-known or inadequately organised regions of a continent where slavery and the slave trade still flourished; and

Whereas by the Brussels Declaration of July 2, 1890, it was found necessary to modify, for a provisional period of fifteen years the system of free imports established for twenty years by Article 4 of the said Act, and since that date no agreement has been entered into, notwithstanding the provisions of the said Act and Declaration; and

Whereas the territories in question are now under the control of recognised authorities, are provided with administrative institutions suitable to the local conditions, and the evolution of the native populations continues to make progress.

Wishing to ensure by arrangements suitable to modern requirements the application of the general principles of civilisation established by the Acts of Berlin and Brussels.

Who, after having communicated their full powers recognised in good and due form,

Have agreed as follows:

ARTICLE 1.

The Signatory Powers undertake to maintain between their respective nationals and those of States, Members of the League of Nations, which may adhere to the present Convention a complete commercial equality in the territories under their authority within the area denned by Article 1 of the General Act of Berlin of February 26, 1885, set out in the Annex hereto, but subject to the reservation specified in the final paragraph of that article.

ANNEX.

Article 1 of the General Act of Berlin of February 26, 1885.

The trade of all nations shall enjoy complete freedom:

1. **In all the regions forming the basin of the Congo and its outlets.** This basin is bounded by the watersheds (or mountain ridges) of the adjacent basins, namely in particular, those of the Niari, the Ogowe, the Shari, and the Nile, on the north; by the eastern watershed line of the affluents of Lake Tanganyika on the east; and by the watersheds of the basins of the Zambesi and the Loge on the south. It therefore comprises all the regions watered by the Congo and its affluents, including Lake Tanganyika, with its eastern tributaries.

2. In the maritime zone extending along the Atlantic Ocean from the parallel situated in 2° 30' of south latitude to the mouth of the Loge.

The northern boundary will follow the parallel situated in 2° 30' from the coast to the point where it meets the geographical basin of the Congo, avoiding the basin of the Ogowe, to which the provisions of the present Act do not apply.

The southern boundary will follow the course of the Loge to its source, and thence pass eastwards till it joins the geographical basin of the Congo.

3. In the zone stretching eastwards from the Congo Basin as above defined, to the Indian Ocean from 5° of north latitude to the mouth of the Zambesi in the south, from which point the line of demarcation will ascend the Zambesi to 5 miles above its confluence with the Shire, and then follow the watershed between the affluents of Lake Nyassa and those of the Zambesi, till at last it reaches the watershed between the waters of the Zambesi and the Congo.

It is expressly recognised that in extending the principle of free trade to this eastern zone, the Conference Powers only undertake engagements for themselves, and that in the territories belonging to an independent Sovereign State this principle shall only be applicable in so far as it is approved by such State. But the Powers agree to use their good offices with the Governments established on the African shore of the Indian Ocean for the purpose of obtaining such approval, and in any case of securing the most favourable conditions to the transit (traffic) of all nations.

ARTICLE 2.

Merchandise belonging to the nationals of the Signatory Powers, and to those of States, Members of the League of Nations, which may adhere to the present Convention, shall have free access to the interior of the regions specified in Article 1. No differential treatment shall be imposed upon the said merchandise on importation or exportation, the transit remaining free from all duties, taxes or dues, other than those collected for services rendered.

Vessels flying the flag of any of the said Powers shall also have access to all the coast and to all maritime ports in the territories specified in Article 1; they shall be subject to no differential treatment.

Subject to these provisions, the States concerned reserve to themselves complete liberty of action as to the customs and navigation regulations and tariffs to be applied in their territories.

ARTICLE 3.

In the territories specified in Article 1 and placed under the authority of one of the Signatory Powers, the nationals of those Powers, or of States, Members of the League of Nations, which may adhere to the present Convention shall, subject only to the limitations necessary for the maintenance of public security and order, enjoy without distinction the same treatment and the same rights as the nationals of the Power exercising authority in the territory, with regard to the protection of their persons and effects, with regard to the acquisition and transmission of their movable and real property, and with regard to the exercise of their professions.

ARTICLE 4.

Each State reserves the right to dispose freely of its property and to grant concessions for the development of the natural resources of the territory, but no regulations on these matters shall admit of any differential treatment between the nationals of the Signatory Powers and of States, Members of the League of Nations, which may adhere to the present Convention.

ARTICLE 5.

Subject to the provisions of the present chapter, the navigation of the Niger, of its branches and outlets, and of all the rivers, and of their branches and outlets, within the territories specified in Article 1, as well as of the lakes situated within those territories, shall be entirely free for merchant vessels and for the transport of goods and passengers.

Craft of every kind belonging to the nationals of the Signatory Powers and of States, Members of the League of Nations, which may adhere to the present Convention shall be treated in all respects on a footing of perfect equality.

ARTICLE 6.

The navigation shall not be subject to any restriction or dues based on the mere fact of navigation.

It shall not be exposed to any obligation in regard to landing, station, or depot, or for breaking bulk or for compulsory entry into port.

No maritime or river toll, based on the mere fact of navigation, shall be levied on vessels, nor shall any transit duty be levied on goods on board. Only such taxes or duties shall be collected as may be an equivalent for services rendered to navigation itself. The tariff of these taxes or duties shall not admit of any differential treatment.

ARTICLE 7.

The affluents of the rivers and lakes specified in Article 5 shall in all respects be subject to the same rules as the rivers or lakes of which they are tributaries.

The roads, railways or lateral canals which may be constructed with the special object of obviating the innavigability or correcting the imperfections of the water route on certain sections of the rivers and lakes specified in Article 5, their affluents, branches and outlets, shall be considered, in their quality of means of communication, as dependencies of these rivers and lakes, and shall be equally open to the traffic of the nationals of the Signatory Powers and of the States, Members of the League of Nations, which may adhere to the present Convention.

On these roads, railways and canals only such tolls shall be collected as are calculated on the cost of construction, maintenance and management, and on the profits reasonably accruing to the undertaking. As regards the tariff of these tolls, the nationals of the Signatory Powers and of States, Members of the League of Nations, which may adhere to the present Convention, shall be treated on a footing of perfect equality.

ARTICLE 8.

Each of the Signatory Powers shall remain free to establish the rules which it may consider expedient for the purpose of ensuring the safety and control of navigation, on the understanding that these rules shall facilitate, as far as possible, the circulation of merchant vessels.

ARTICLE 9.

In such sections of the rivers and of their affluents, as well as on such lakes as are not necessarily utilised by more than one riverain State, the Governments exercising authority shall remain free to establish such systems as may be required for the maintenance of public safety and order, and for other necessities of the work of civilisation and colonisation; but the regulations shall not admit of any differential treatment between vessels or between nationals of the Signatory Powers and of States, Members of the League of Nations, which may adhere to the present Convention.

ARTICLE 10.

The Signatory Powers recognise the obligation to maintain in the regions subject to their jurisdiction an authority and police forces sufficient to ensure protection of persons and of property and, if necessary, freedom of trade and of transit.

ARTICLE 11.

The Signatory Powers exercising sovereign rights or authority in African territories will continue to watch over the preservation of the native populations and to supervise the improvement of the conditions of their moral and material well-being. They will, in particular, endeavour to secure the complete suppression of slavery in all its forms and of the slave trade by land and sea.

They will protect and favour, without distinction of nationality or of religion, the religious, scientific or charitable institutions and undertakings created and organized by the nationals of the other Signatory Powers and of States, Members of the League of Nations, which may adhere to the present Convention, **which aim at leading the natives in the path of progress and civilisation**. Scientific missions, their property and their collections, shall likewise be the objects of special solicitude.

Freedom of conscience and the free exercise of all forms of religion are expressly guaranteed to all nationals of the Signatory Powers and to those under the jurisdiction of States, Members of the League of Nations, which may become parties to the present Convention. Similarly, missionaries shall have the right to enter into, and to travel and reside in, African territory with a view to prosecuting their calling.

The application of the provisions of the two preceding paragraphs shall be subject only to such restrictions as may be necessary for the maintenance of public security and order, or as may result from the enforcement of the constitutional law of any of the Powers exercising authority in African territories.

ARTICLE 12.

The Signatory Powers agree that if any dispute whatever should arise between them relating to the application of the present Convention which cannot be settled by negotiation, this dispute shall be submitted to an arbitral tribunal in conformity with the provisions of the Covenant of the League of Nations.

ARTICLE 13.

Except in so far as the stipulations contained in Article 1 of the present Convention are concerned, the General Act of Berlin of 26th February, 1885, and the General Act of Brussels of 2nd July, 1890, with the accompanying Declaration of equal date, shall be considered as abrogated, in so far as they are binding between the Powers which are Parties to the present Convention.

ARTICLE 14.

States exercising authority over African territories, and other States, Members of the League of Nations, which were parties either to the Act of Berlin or to the Act of Brussels or the Declaration annexed thereto, may adhere to the present Convention. The Signatory Powers will use their best endeavours to obtain the adhesion of these States.

This adhesion shall be notified through the diplomatic channel to the Government of the French Republic, and by it to all the Signatory or adhering States. The adhesion will come into force from the date of its notification to the French Government.

ARTICLE 15.

The Signatory Powers will reassemble at the expiration of ten years from the coming into force of the present Convention, in order to introduce into it such modifications as experience may have shown to be necessary.

The present Convention shall be ratified as soon as possible.

Each Power will address its ratification to the French Government, which will inform all the other Signatory Powers. The ratifications will remain deposited in the archives of the French Government.

The present Convention will come into force for each Signatory Power from the date of the deposit of its ratification, and from that moment that Power will be bound in respect of other Powers which have already deposited their ratifications.

On the coming into force of the present Convention, the French Government will transmit a certified copy to the Powers which, under the

Treaties of Peace, have undertaken to accept and observe it. The names of these Powers will be notified to the States which adhere.

In faith whereof the above-named Plenipotentiaries have signed the present Convention.

Done at Saint-Germain-en-Laye, the 10th day of September, 1919, in a single copy, which will remain deposited in the archives of the Government of the French Republic, and of which authenticated copies will be sent to each of the Signatory Powers.