

# The Partitioning of Africa

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## 1. Introduction

During the first phase of the colonial period, between roughly 1880 and 1914, the African continent was partitioned into more than 50 colonies. The process of carving up the continent and creating new political entities had important long-term consequences. First, European powers developed a large scale, centralized bureaucratic apparatus and established new rules and laws to govern their colonial territories. Further, they established a much firmer control of geographical boundaries than had previously existed in the region.

The creation of new geographical entities determined which previously independent states and societies would, from then on, live within the same geographical boundaries. It also determined which societies were left undivided, and which were cut across by international boundaries. And it determined the *size* of the new entities. Sometimes very large and diverse areas and peoples were incorporated into one large colony, such as Nigeria. In other instances, very small colonies were created, such as the Gambia. In order to understand why Africa was colonised at the time that it was, and how colonies were created, we need to understand the process of partitioning.

Prior to the establishment of formal control after 1880, commercial ties had connected Africa and Europe from as early as the 15<sup>th</sup> century when the Portuguese landed on the coast of West Africa. This contact intensified with the rise of the slave trade, which was at its height in the 1700s until the mid-1800s. To facilitate trade, Europeans established various coastal trading posts and forts, mostly along the West African coast, but also in Northern and Southern Africa. Over time, some of these posts developed into proto-colonies, or colony-like entities. The Cape Colony in Southern Africa for example, came under colonial control already in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century. Further, small colonial administrations were established during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century along the coast of Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana) and Algeria. Still, Africans effectively prevented Europeans from extending their presence into the hinterlands up until 1880. Hence, before the start of colonial expansion, Europeans knew very little about the continent's interior. This all changed rapidly at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the partitioning of Africa by European colonial powers. This process is also called the scramble for Africa.

The aim of this chapter is to explain how the partitioning of Africa evolved and to look at the role that both Africans and Europeans played in the process. We will start by discussing the technological factors that enabled the European powers to occupy Africa. This will be followed

by an overview of the process of partitioning. The chapter ends with a discussion of the various driving forces that have traditionally explained the partitioning of Africa.

## 2. Key factors that enabled European colonial expansion

Until well into the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, African societies successfully guarded their continent against unwelcome European invaders. However, in the decades leading up to the 1880s, a number of rapid technological developments took place that shifted the balance of power in favour of the Europeans. At the same time, European countries had been developing stronger state and administrative capacity in Europe already since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The combination of strong state capacity and technological advances enabled the Europeans, for the first time in history, to expand into the African interior. In the next section the five key factors that enabled European colonial expansion in Africa are discussed.

### *Quinine*

Until the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the disease environment in parts of Africa was exceptionally hostile to Europeans. Out of every 1000 European individuals travelling to tropical Africa between 250 and 500 would die, mostly as a result of contracting malaria. Therefore, the tropical parts of Africa were not considered a suitable or attractive place for European settlement. For Africans, malaria was often not as deadly. First, because when children survived malaria attacks, they developed natural immunity. Second, due to past exposure, malaria had caused the development of the sickle cell gene in humans which also provided some resistance to malaria. But the sickle cell trait does not provide the cure to malaria as only people that inherit one sickle cell gene from their parents are less susceptible to falling ill from malaria. In contrast, when people inherited two copies of the gene they die before reaching the adult age.

**Figure 1:** Quinine extracted from the bark of the cinchona tree



Sources: [Wikimedia Commons](#); [Wikimedia Commons](#); [Wikimedia Commons](#).

For Europeans, the deadliness of malaria was reduced with the use of the anti-malaria drug *quinine* from the 1840s onward. Quinine was extracted by grinding the dried bark of a cinchona tree (originally found in highland Peru) into a fine powder, as shown in Figure 1. This was mixed into a liquid before it could be drunk as medicine against malaria. European death rates

from tropical diseases dropped substantially in the decades following the availability of this effective treatment. Thus, it was quinine that first made possible the presence of Europeans on the western coast. Matters improved once again in 1901-02 when Europeans found out that mosquitoes were the actual source of malaria and other tropical diseases. Armed with this information they launched campaigns to distribute mosquito screens and bed nets alongside quinine to the European population mostly, which further reduced the number of deaths.

#### *Iron metallurgy: stronger and cheaper weapons*

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the technology used to produce iron improved substantially. In Africa, the most significant impact of these improvements was in the supply of better and cheaper firearms. Europeans initially held most of these weapons and, naturally, this gave them a military advantage. The development of the *Maxim-gun*, a semiautomatic weapon, later proved a crucial factor in the establishment of European military superiority. Due to its increased speed of firing, and the fact it was relatively light to carry, it became the standard machine gun of Europeans in Africa. Between 1880 and 1920, the disparity in military power between Africans and Europeans was at its height. Nevertheless, many African societies possessed firearms, sometimes in large quantities. Most guns were initially obtained in return for trading slaves. All West African states owned substantial quantities of firearms, and some states in the interior of modern Tanzania and Uganda, and Ethiopia also possessed large arsenals of weapons. However, most of these were old and heavy firearms, and rarely included machine guns. Moreover, many African armies initially lacked any training in how to handle firearms. The military advantage meant that the conquest of territory was relatively easy and comparatively cheap for Europeans.

#### *Steamboat*

Another important technological discovery that preceded the partitioning was the invention of the steam engine. The steam engine had transformed industrial production and the transportation of goods over land in Europe. It also revolutionised the transport of goods by sea through the dramatic reduction of transport costs and time making direct trade between Europe and Africa profitable. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, European ports – previously used for the trade of slaves and manufacturing goods – evolved into havens for the trade of manufacturing goods and tropical foodstuffs such as groundnuts, cacao, and palm oil. These steamboats, carrying goods between Africa and Europe, also transported a new generation of explorers.

The most famous of all was David Livingstone. Livingstone travelled from the UK to Africa in 1840 as a Christian missionary. His initial aim was to spread the gospel among Africans in southern Africa. During his first decade in Africa, he made three long journeys northwards which showed him the social devastations that the slave trades had caused. This convinced him that to abolish the slave trade, it was important to advance European commercial interest as an alternative to the slave trades and to evangelize African populations. His motto became ‘Christianity, Commerce and Civilization’. Livingstone believed that the key to achieving these goals was to explore Africa’s interior. In doing so, he was the first to demonstrate that quinine was the key to surviving the continent’s hostile disease environment.

### *Administrative capacity*

Improvements in the ‘technology of government administration’ also played a role in the conquest of Africa (Curtin, 1995: 401). Since the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Europeans had been strengthening their administrative powers. This development accelerated first in France, following the French revolution and during Napoleonic rule. Later also in Britain and other parts of Europe, where successive administrative reforms were implemented. As a result the major powers in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe were better able to administer an overseas empire and could set up a colonial government more efficiently than in the past. Within Europe, there was great confidence in the ability to manage and rule large overseas empires.

### *Racism, racial superiority, regeneration of African peoples*

The confidence in ruling overseas areas was part of a more general European attitude towards the world. Driven by its material prosperity and supremacy, Europe reassessed its position towards the rest of the world. This was combined with a firm belief in a ‘natural order of things’, an idea that gained prominence with the appearance of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*. Darwin’s work was understood by some to provide scientific confirmation of the supremacy of the white race. Thus, Europeans felt entitled to rule others. The conquest of the ‘backward’ races by the ‘superior’ race was seen as part of an inevitable, natural process. Racism flourished during the period, peaking between 1880 and 1920. This had a profound influence on how the colonial regimes were organised. In this view, colonisation was also seen as a form of imperial responsibility, which provided a justification for colonial conquest.

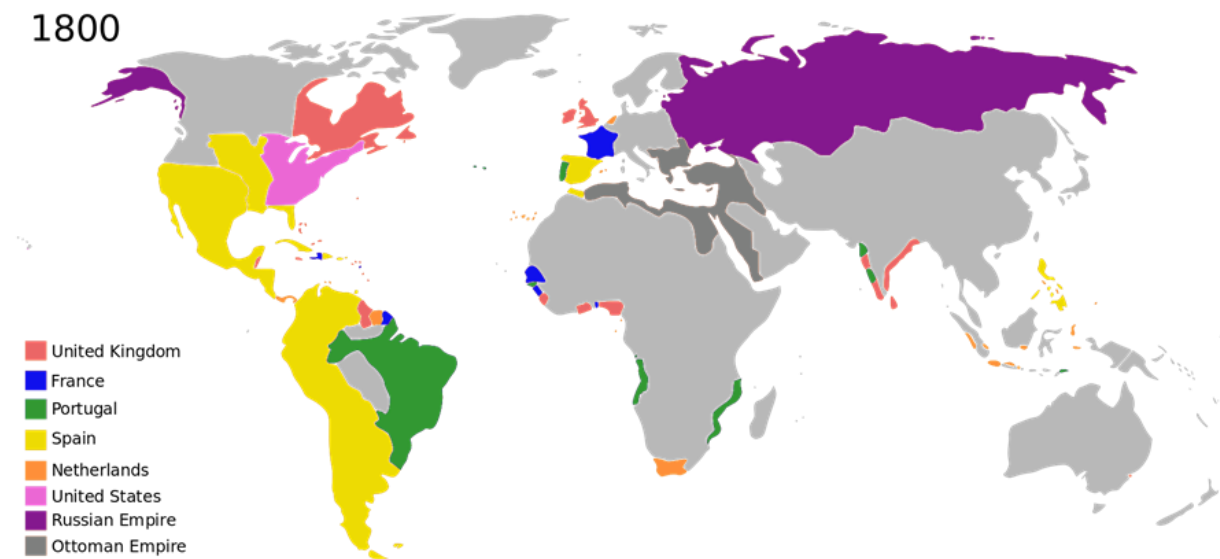
## **3. The process of colonisation**

Although the above set of factors facilitated the colonization process at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is still not straightforward to determine the moment at which partitioning officially began. It is perhaps best understood as an evolutionary development in which various African and European interests and actions interacted in what seemed an unstoppable process. What started as commercial contact led to increasing influence of European powers in various coastal regions in Africa. Map 1 indicates the regions in which European powers were present prior to the partitioning, and in which direction they advanced to seize territory.

Initially, European territorial annexation advanced most rapidly in the northern and the southern parts of the continent. At South Africa’s southern tip, the Dutch had founded the Cape Colony in 1652. From the early 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the British started to take over control of this region. The discovery of diamonds and gold in the 1860s and 1870s increased the pace at which Britain annexed territory. The balance of power that had previously been established between Africans and Europeans came under pressure. The Zulu in particular, and also the Xhosa, put up such determined resistance that the British were forced to halt their expansion, at least temporarily. In 1879, the Zulu even defeated the British in the famous battle of Isandhlwana. However, some months later a reinforced British army eventually defeated and destroyed the Zulu kingdom. In the meantime, the struggle between the British and the Dutch Boers for power in the region intensified. This ultimately led to the Anglo-Boer wars at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>

century. In 1910, the British eventually defeated the Boers and established the Union of South Africa.

**Map 1:** European presence in Africa prior to the partitioning in 1800



Source: [Wikipedia](#).

In 1869 the Suez Canal, an important route towards India, was completed in Egypt. The Suez Canal connected the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea. After it's completion, ships from Europe did not have to go around the southern cape to reach the east African coast. This reduced the travel distance by ca. 7000 kilometres. In the following period the French and British presence in the area rapidly increased and they started to control Egyptian finances. In 1882, the British felt they had to defend the Suez Canal from Egyptian nationalists. Fearing that France would establish itself as Egypt's rulers, the British decided to take over control of Egypt's territory. This sparked intense competition between France and Britain over the Nile valley.

Although annexation occurred most forcefully in the northern and southern parts of Africa, there were other parts of Africa in which the pressure of competitive annexation was felt before the beginning of the partitioning. Since the 1870s, King Leopold of Belgium had been fascinated by the potential prestige and profitability of creating a Belgian empire in Africa. He was convinced that the future of the Belgian economy depended upon acquiring an overseas market and resources. In his quest to realise this he hired the American journalist and explorer Henry Morton Stanley to explore the river Congo. The goal was to obtain extensive economic concessions from local African rulers which gave an exclusive right to natural resources and trade. At the same time, a French-Italian naval officer on leave, de Brazza, had been exploring the area of Gabon and northern Congo, and signed a number of treaties with chiefs in the Congo basin in the name of France. Competitive annexation meanwhile also reached Algeria, the western Sudan, and Madagascar.

The competition between France and Britain over the Nile valley escalated in 1884, bringing both countries at the brink of war. Chancellor Bismarck of Germany began to fear that those two countries would claim all territory in Africa. Although unconvinced of the usefulness of colonies, Bismarck claimed protectorates over Togo, Cameroon, and German West Africa (now Namibia). At the same time, he called for an international conference in late 1884 to discuss the increased tensions over Africa. In what became known as the Berlin Conference<sup>1</sup>, the ground rules for the rest of the European conquest of Africa were established. At the conference, two major decisions were made: first, King Leopold's presence in the Congo Basin was recognised in return for free trade in the area; and, second, any European power could prohibit others from challenging certain territory by bringing it under effective control. Preferably, control should be established by signing treaties with African chiefs or alternatively by military conquest.

#### **4. The involvement of Africans: resistance and adaptation**

During this era of increasing intrusion by the Europeans, the invaders faced a large number of different opponents. Map 2 shows where various important political entities were located on the eve of the partitioning.

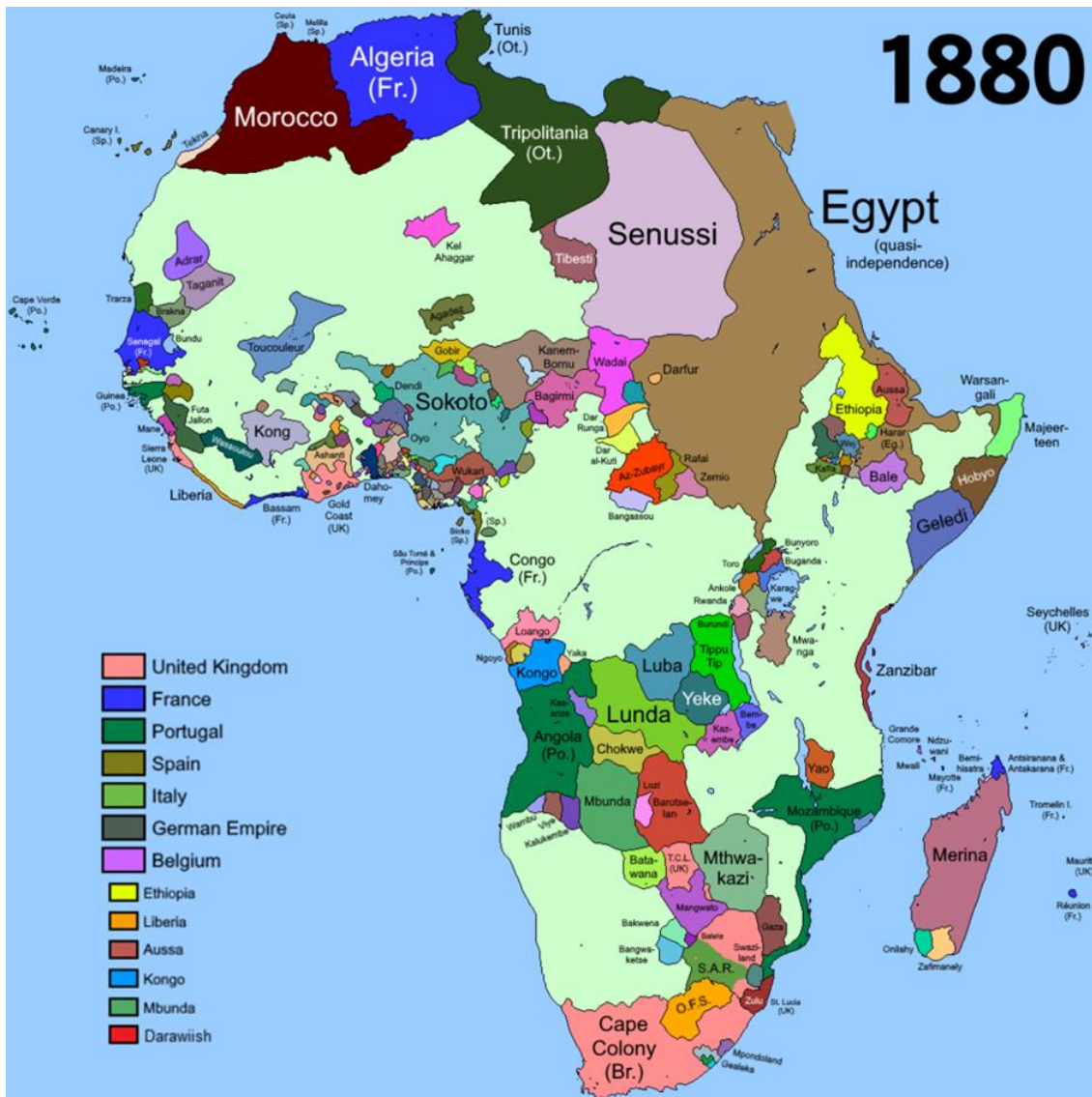
African societies were not submissive bystanders during the partitioning. Indeed, various strategies were employed to deal with the invaders. Some societies fought colonial rule from the onset and resisted until the end; other societies fought and only surrendered when defeat was inevitable; still others tried to bargain the terms of cooperation; and, finally, some societies used the colonial presence to their own strategic advantage.

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<sup>1</sup> The official name of the 1884-85 Conference in Berlin was the 'West Africa Conference'.



**Map 2:** Political entities prior to the partitioning in 1880



Source: [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Map_of_Africa_in_1880).

Menelik II, Emperor of Ethiopia, shown in Figure 2, employed the ‘fight from the onset’ strategy most successfully. In the famous battle of Adwa, in 1896, Ethiopia defeated the Italian invaders and escaped colonial rule, with the exception of the brief Italian occupation between 1935–1941.

Other African states did not escape colonial rule, but some managed to survive within the colonial structure. Various African rulers managed to retain their power by timely surrender and collaboration with the Europeans. For example, in northern Nigeria, Rwanda, and Burundi, the old ruling class remained in power throughout colonial times. In northern Nigeria for example, the Sokoto Caliphate and British colonial authorities forged an alliance after the Caliphate was integrated into the British empire. This allowed the Sokoto Caliphate to keep its authority over its subjects.

**Figure 2:** Emperor Menelik II of Ethiopia (1844-1913)



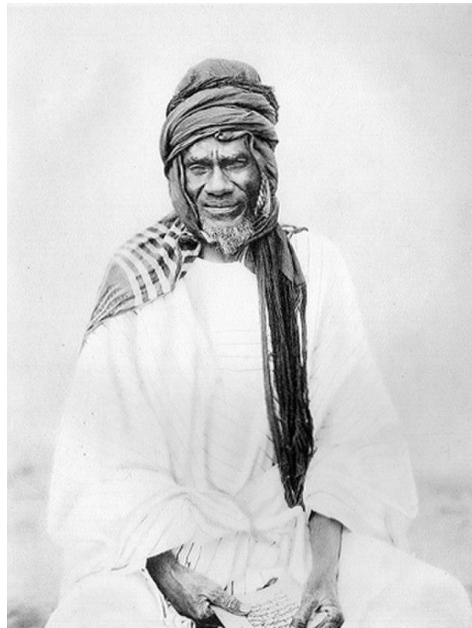
Source: [Wikipedia](#).

Given that the Europeans had more and lighter weapons which they could operate more quickly, one of the defence strategies employed by African societies was guerrilla warfare. This proved a very effective strategy, occupying European troops for years. However, these tactics were not broadly applied, as most local economies could not afford this kind of warfare: feeding and supporting a full-time army was often beyond their economic means. Moreover, the guerrilla tactics could even ruin their economic capacity. For example, Samori (ruling the Madinke empire in western Africa), shown in Figure 3, employed scorched earth tactics. While very effective in slowing the advance of the French, these tactics also destroyed the region's agricultural resources. This put at risk the Madinke empire's ability to feed and support its own communities and army.

In other areas, African societies exploited local rivalries and used the European presence to their own advantage. When the British tried to establish influence over the Buganda Kingdom (in present day Uganda) and the surrounding areas, the Buganda elite used the British assistance to strengthen its own position. During the early 1890s, the Buganda elite offered both military and political assistance to the British in the subjugation of surrounding and rival kingdoms such as the Toro, the Bunyoro and the Ankole (all in present-day Uganda). In return, they received a favoured status within the protectorate.



**Figure 3:** Samori Toure (1828-1898), ruler of the Mandinke empire in western Africa



Source: [Wikipedia](#).

Europeans also exploited local rivalries. When rival states did not combine forces to meet the invaders, the Europeans would face one opponent at a time. For example, the British in Western Africa first fought the Yoruba, in 1892-93. Then they fought the centralised state of Benin, in 1897. And, finally, in a longer war they took on the Sokoto Caliphate in northern Nigeria. Due to pressure from various sides, every emirate (province) of the original Caliphate had to fight alone which was much easier for the British. Eventually the whole Caliphate fell in 1903. Similarly, the French exploited the rivalry between the Tukolor and the Mandinke empires when they extended their presence into the western savannah (coming from Senegal). The French first made a series of treaties with both the Tukolor and Mandinke. The rulers of the empires saw these treaties as guarantees against French attacks. The Tukolor even helped the French in their campaign against other societies in the region. Yet, only a few years later, the French still attacked both empires, conquering the Mandinke in 1893 and the Tukolor by 1898. The Portuguese also exploited intra-African conflicts and increased their influence on modern Mozambique and Angola by letting African armies do the fighting. In Angola, however, the Portuguese themselves also had to face those armies and it was not until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the Portuguese could claim control over the territory.

Some of the most successful challenges to colonial rule came from various stateless societies. These societies had no central authority that could function as a main contact for negotiation or, indeed, that could formally surrender. For example, in fighting the Igbo of Southern Nigeria, the British had to defeat many different subgroups. When they had conquered one area, other subgroups rose to resistance again and the British had to redirect their campaigns. As a result, it took the British until 1910 before they could declare victory over the Igbo society in Nigeria. Similarly it took them years to conquer the subgroups of the Tiv of the Benue valley. The

French, in turn, needed 20 years to subjugate the array of decentralised communities in the forests of the Cote d'Ivoire.

Not all areas became the subject of battles. The Europeans obtained many regions through treaties with African chiefs. The African chiefs typically regarded these treaties as pacts of friendship. Or they considered them as safeguards from attack. The Europeans, meanwhile, took these treaties back to Europe as proof of their effective occupation of a territory. As described in section three above, King Leopold hired the explorer Stanley to explore the Congo river and to obtain extensive economic concessions from local African rulers. During the Conference of Berlin these treaties formed the basis upon which King Leopold claimed the area of the Congo Free State. At the same time de Brazza, who explored the area of Gabon and northern Congo and signed a number of treaties with chiefs in the Congo basin did the same for France. He founded Brazzaville in 1880, and thereby gave France a gateway to the heart of Africa. And in Eastern Africa, Karl Peters signed treaties with African chiefs on behalf of Germany. In 1885 Germany declared the protectorate over Tanganyika (now Tanzania).

Another form of European occupation was giving the rights to rule an area to private companies. These companies acquired territories both by signing treaties with local rulers and by fighting. In the lower Niger, the Royal Niger Company ruled on behalf of the British government, and the Imperial British East Africa Company was active in the area north of Lake Victoria and in British East Africa (later Kenya). In Tanganyika the German East Africa Company was given the responsibility of ruling the area on behalf of Germany. And in Southern Africa, the British South African Company (BSAC) occupied territory initially in Shona territory and later also defeated the Ndebele kingdom. Both areas became part of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). Later, the BSAC would also occupy the territory of modern Malawi.

In many areas, the rule of these companies was met with fierce resistance and European governments were forced to take over. In Tanganyika, a number of serious uprisings against the German East Africa Company forced the German government to send in reinforcements and take over direct control in 1889. Nevertheless, fighting in the area continued. The Hehe in the south fought until the end of the 1890s, and the Maasai resisted German rule in the north. The most famous resistance in the area, the Maji Maji revolt, was launched in 1905. This was an armed rebellion of Africans against German colonial rule in German East Africa (modern-day Tanzania). The uprising was triggered by the resistance against a policy of the Germans that forced Africans to grow cotton for German colonial export. In Rhodesia, after an initial defeat the Shona and the Ndebele rose in resistance to colonial rule under the BSAC. The uprising was so fierce that the colonists were nearly fought off the territory. Only when the BSAC received reinforcements from the Cape Colony ruled by the British did the revolt end.

The era of partitioning officially ended in the early 1900s. Yet, some areas were never really controlled by colonial governments – such as parts of Central Africa. In other regions, such as Angola and Somalia, resistance continued for at least another decade. Moreover, it took until the 1920s to settle all the colonial boundaries. The boundary between Nigeria and Cameroon, for example, was subject to various negotiations, as were the borders between Ghana and Togo,

and between Kenya and Tanzania. The British sought information on indigenous settlement patterns and on several occasions tried to adjust the border to reunite political groups as it understood them. The border between Ghana and Togo was redrawn a number of times after World War I to reunify the states of the Dagomba and the Mamprusi which had originally been partitioned in the north. In other instances claims for reunification, from the Ewe for example, were dismissed.

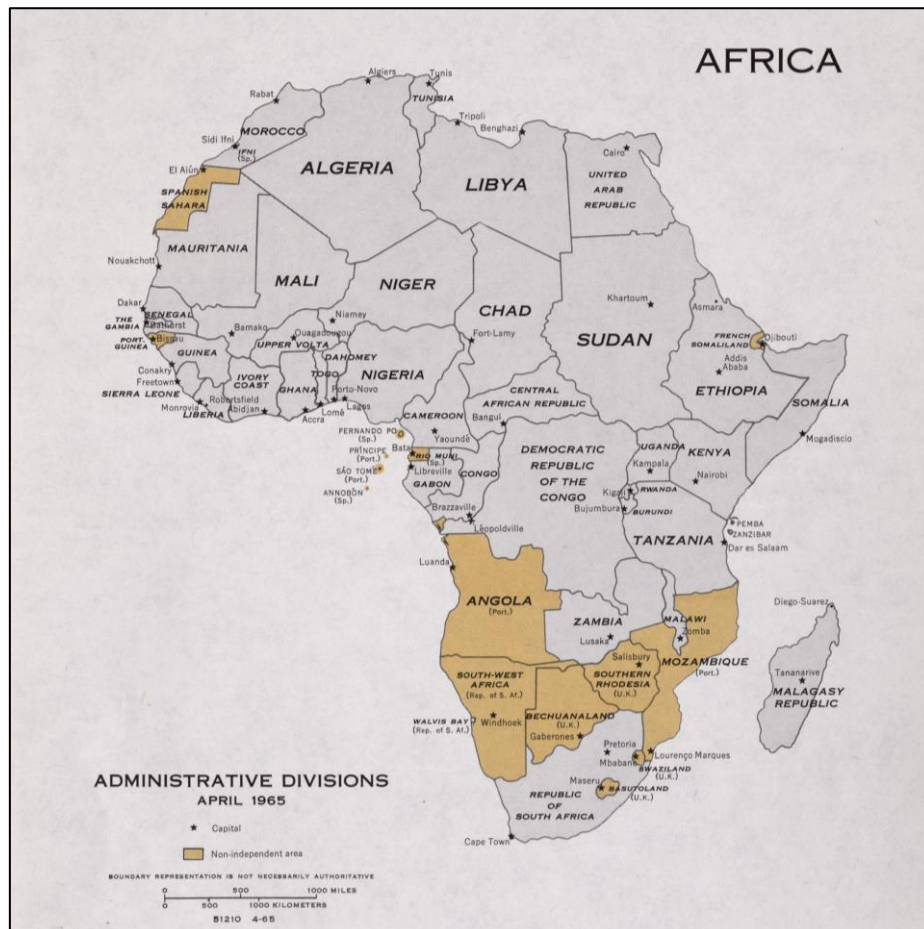
**Map 3:** Africa in 1914



*Source:* Frankema, Williamson and Woltjer (2018: 260).

When the partitioning was completed the British possessed African territories stretching from Egypt to South Africa, divided only by German East Africa. In West Africa, British diplomacy initially proved no match for French military action in the upper Niger basin. France extended its rule from Senegal far into Central Africa. Still, the British claimed the Niger river mouth, and a substantial part of the hinterland to form present Nigeria. Looking at the map of West Africa it is clear that the British carved out the areas that were most suitable for international trade, but they left large parts of the West African interior to the French. In East Africa, however, the British claimed large parts of the hinterland. Finally, Portugal obtained large territories on both the East and West coast of the African continent.

**Map 4:** Africa in 1965



Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#).

## 5. Theories on the colonisation of Africa

Now that we understand the major technological factors that enabled the colonial conquest, and how the process of partitioning unfolded, we can turn to the question of *why* Africa was colonised. In the literature various, sometimes conflicting, explanations are offered. In the remainder of this chapter we will discuss the most important theories, and evaluate their validity in the light of the process of partitioning discussed above.

### *The African dimension*

The African Dimension theory focuses on the role of Africans in the partitioning of Africa. It suggests that the European colonial conquest was provoked by two related phenomena. The first was the abolition of the slave trade. This enforced a shift to legitimate trade, primarily of cash crops. As a result both exports and imports began to decline. The indigenous rulers that had become rich through predatory activities such as the slave trade, adopted reactionary attitudes. They started to resist increasing European influence. Their resistance, in turn, provoked European reactions and ultimately hastened the actual military conquest.

The second phenomenon was that during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, instability increased due to conflicts between those African elites that exercised informal European control, and the African movements that opposed European incursion. Opposition movements used imported weapons to fight the old elite. As these weapons became more widely available, more people became involved in the struggle for power. Thus, local conflict and instability intensified. This instability was not only bad for trade, but it also created a possible foothold for European rivals. These developments also advanced European military conquest.

How well does this theory explain what happened during the partitioning of Africa? The explanation focusing on opposition movements turning against the old elite originates from an analysis of the Egyptian developments during the 1880s. Hence it fits that situation well. It can also to some extent explain what happened in Tunisia and Zanzibar. Yet, it is only partially applicable to Anglo-Boer relations in South Africa, and it cannot explain the battles between the Zulu and the Xhosa and the British. Moreover, it cannot explain the French expansion in the Niger Sudan, as the Muslim states usually went to great lengths to avoid war. Furthermore, the exploratory and treaty signing activities employed by Leopold and de Brazza in the Congo basin do not fit this theory well. Finally, the territory acquired by Italy in Somalia, and by Germany in West and East Africa formed part of areas where the informal influence had actually been British, not German or Italian.

#### *Political and strategic theories*

Among the most powerful imperialist theories are the political and strategic explanations for the partitioning. The start of the partitioning of Africa is often associated with how the balance of power within Europe evolved during that period. Wars and rivalries between European nations had brought the balance of power in Europe under pressure. Any actions by one European nation required an immediate response from other countries to keep the balance. In order to preserve the power and diplomatic balance at home, European powers felt that carving up the African continent to settle conflicting interests in Africa was the only option. In this process, European did not form one homogenous group, but instead acted often individually and focussed on their own self-interest.

The desire to own African colonies was also a matter of European national *prestige*. The French, for example, had lost territory during a war with Germany and sought to compensate for that loss in Africa. The Portuguese, having had historic connections to Africa dating back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, felt the British ignored their 'historic claim' on Africa. In response, they started claiming control over very extensive territories both on the west and east coast of the continent. Finally, Germany's chancellor, Bismarck was frustrated with British behaviour in Africa. The British policy at the time was to exclude other powers from any political influence over territories, even when the British did not occupy or had any legal claim themselves. Moreover, due to the intensifying competition between France and Britain after the events in Egypt, Germany was worried it could lose out in claiming territory in Africa. In response, Bismarck claimed territory in West Africa and at the same time organised the Berlin Conference. Finally, even the British, whose dominance in the world had started to decline during the 1880s, began to become deeply concerned about their national prestige and credibility as a great power.

In addition to national prestige, personal prestige was also involved. European's in Africa, as 'men on the spot', sought to extend control, for their own esteem, to further their own career, or for the prestige of the country they served. This often happened independently of the desires of the country they served. It was especially relevant for the Niger and Sudan region where troops were staffed at outposts that had survived from the slave trade era. Without clear missions and lacking regular communication with their home country in Europe, these troops grew increasingly anxious and restless. Combined with military supremacy, thus having the power to simply overtake neighbours, it was tempting to annex alien societies across the frontier. In various cases, they started to conquer land on their own. A well-known case is de Brazza's exploring activities in the Congo Basin, which he embarked upon on his own initiative. There were also 'men-on-the-spot' in the Gold Coast, Senegal, and South Africa who worked on their own initiatives because they felt that the governments at home were too slow or ignorant of what was happening on the ground. This uncontrolled occupation of territory, which in some cases mounted to the occupation of significant areas, is often cited as one of the triggers for competitive European annexation.

The need to protect strategic European interests was another factor driving the partitioning of Africa. The global strategy view of imperialism argues that the partitioning of Africa originated from proto-nationalist movements within Africa that were threatening European interests elsewhere. In 1880, the British were not particularly interested in acquiring territory in Africa as they were preoccupied with protecting the empire they already had in India. Thus, in 1882, they engaged in military action to defend the Suez Canal, a key route towards India, from Egyptian nationalists. However, this explanation seems too circumstantial to the two cases of Egypt and South Africa, to be generally applicable to explain the grand partitioning of Africa.

The main criticism of this theory is that for European rivalries, prestige, and strategy to be convincing explanations for the partitioning, there must have been something (economically) valuable at stake. Why would European countries quarrel over land if there were nothing to be gained from it in economic terms? Hence, the underlying notion in Europe during the run-up to the partitioning was that there was at least some (potential) gain to be made.

### *Economic theory*

The (potential) economic gain from acquiring colonies has indeed been very powerful in explaining the rapid expansion of European countries into Africa after 1880. According to this theory of imperialism, Europe needed Africa for new markets for selling their industrial products, for obtaining raw materials for production and for investing their surplus capital (an argument often associated with work of Hobson, and later Lenin).

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe underwent rapid industrialisation. However, at the end of the century Western Europe in particular found itself in a long depression, leading to decreased consumption and overproduction. Instead of reducing production, industrialists looked for new markets. In the same vein, the factories needed raw materials for production. And finally, European capital owners were looking for a field for investment of surplus capital. For the first time, Africa was considered an important factor for the development of European economies.



At this time, when Europe found itself in the depression described above, the reports of explorers on the African continent that reached Europe never failed to emphasise the riches of the continent. By the 1880s, the general belief in Europe was that Africa was '[...] the world's last great untapped reservoir of markets, resources and possible investment opportunities [.]' (Sanderson 1985: 103). Yet, Europe's commercial interests in Africa were still mainly limited to certain areas in the West coast. Actual trade between the continents represented only a fraction of the total trade for most European countries. So it was the potential, rather than the actual gain, that made Africa so attractive and motivated the partitioning.

Finally, the idea that there was a need to invest excess capital has lost its explanatory power during recent decades as it is became clear that investments outside South Africa and Egypt were marginal. The precise timing of the partitioning is thus hard to explain by theory. Why did the partitioning not occur a few years earlier or later? For Britain, which was really the only industrialised power in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it would have been sufficient to maintain an informal empire in Africa. France and Germany, which were only starting to industrialize in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, had not experienced significant problems in growth that needed to be solved by the establishment of an African empire. And Portugal, a country with great colonial ambitions, was a pre-industrial power in the 1880s and yet took control over very extensive territories in West and East Africa that, for long, remained a heavy burden on the country's underdeveloped economy.

#### *Civilisation/Christianity*

In many regions, formal colonisation of Africa was preceded by and to a large extent coincided with the increase in missionary activities. It is sometimes suggested that the activities of the missionaries were responsible for starting the partitioning of Africa. But although Christian missionaries were often the first Europeans to enter a region, the eventual coloniser was often from a different country than the missionaries. Only in a few cases is there a clear connection between pre-colonial missionary activity and subsequent colonial occupation. In the case of the Buganda kingdom, the British government was initially very reluctant to annex the kingdom. The costs were considered too high. However, the missionaries demanded annexation because without formal occupation they feared expulsion from the area where they had established themselves. The missionaries won the bid for the public opinion and the British government, although not keen, permitted the annexation of the Buganda Kingdom and its surrounding areas, which later would become the Uganda Protectorate. In Nyasaland (now Malawi), again, the British government was averse to occupying the area because the only convenient access to the sea was through Portuguese Mozambique. Yet, the British government was afraid of becoming unpopular in Scotland, an important region in the northern part of Great Britain, if they allowed the Scottish missionary presence in the area be taken over by Portuguese Catholics. Thus, eventually the British occupied the area.

Generally, the direct missionary influence on partitioning was limited. It has been argued, however, that Christianity invoked a broader missionary and humanitarian impulse within European society that aimed to enlighten and civilise the African peoples. Moreover,

missionaries supported colonialism out of the conviction that European control would facilitate missionary activity in Africa. So while the missionaries probably did not actually cause the partitioning, their support for colonialism certainly played a vital role in legitimising colonial occupation among Europeans.

To summarise, it seems that some explanations are applicable to certain regions and periods while others seem more adequate for other cases. Together, the combination of all these motives seem to be exhaustive in explaining the partitioning of Africa. There is no agreement in the literature as to which is the most important, although the combination of strategic/political and economic theories seem to prevail. Together, these factors constituted a series of triggers. If one of the triggers had not gone off, a combination of the others may well have sufficed to bring about the same result. How the eventual partitioning evolved was the result of the interplay between European objectives and actions, and African reactions and adaptation strategies.

## **6. Conclusion**

As we have seen, medical innovations made the presence of Europeans in Africa possible, and European military superiority enabled the relatively rapid partitioning of Africa. But there is no one clear reason *why* Europe colonised Africa in the first place. A combination of motives ranging from economic gain and national prestige to African provocation all interacted in what became an unstoppable process. How this process subsequently evolved was in turn shaped by a combination of actions and reactions of both Africans and Europeans.

The conquest initially developed most rapidly in both North and South Africa, for historical reasons, but also because the environment was less hostile for Europeans. Within a few decades the entire continent was under colonial rule. Even though the number of Europeans that eventually went to Africa to settle was very low, the colonial period had major consequences. European powers carved up the continent, established nation-states and started to develop national economies. However, as there were so few Europeans actually there, it was the Africans that worked in construction, agriculture, and industry. Hence it was the Africans that built up the colonial states, and paid the taxes to maintain them.

Most African countries became independent halfway through the 20<sup>th</sup> century and kept the same boundaries that were drawn during the partition. The creation of these countries had important long-term consequences. It determined not only the location, shape, and size of nations but also which societies, from then on, shared the same nationality. Hence the creation of countries during colonial times decided the geographical and ethnic basis of African countries today.

## Study questions

1. Name three technological developments that enabled the European partitioning of Africa.
2. In which African regions did the annexation of territory initially develop most rapidly, and why?
3. Name two strategies employed by African societies to confront European invaders. Can you give an example of societies that followed those strategies?
4. Give two explanations for why Europe colonised Africa. Which one seems the most convincing to you?
5. Name some of the long-term consequences of the partition. Can you give an example of how it affects your life today?

## Discussion exercise

Divide class in sub-groups of three to five students. Let each group discuss what they believe to be the three most important long-term consequences of colonial rule in their country and rank these in order of importance. One student per group will be asked to present the list and offer a short discussion of the arguments in support of this list.

## Suggested readings

- Curtin, P.D., S. Feierman, L. Thompson and J. Vansina (1988) *African History*, New York: Longman, chapter 15 – 17, pp. 398-468.
- Iliffe, J. (1995) *Africans, The History of a Continent*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, chapter 9 and 10, pp. 193 -250.
- Lonsdale, J. (1985). The European Scramble and Conquest in African History. In R. Oliver & G. N. Sanderson (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Africa*, Vol. 6, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 680–766.
- Frankema, E., J. G. Williamson, and P.J. Woltjer (2018) An Economic Rationale for the West African Scramble? The Commercial Transition and the Commodity Price Boom of 1835-1885, *Journal of Economic History* 78(1): 231-267.
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- Pakenham, T. (1991) *The Scramble for Africa: 1876-1912*. London: Orion Publishing Group, Ltd.
- Reid, R.J. (2009) *A History of Modern Africa, 1800 to the Present*, West Sussex: Wiley and Sons, ltd., part III and IV, pp. 111 – 198.
- Sanderson, G. N. (1985) The European Partitioning of Africa: Origins and Dynamics, in: R. Oliver and G. N. Sanderson (eds.) *The Cambridge History of Africa: Volume 6: From 1870-1905*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 96-158.
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## About the author



**Jutta Bolt** is Professor in Global Economic History at the University of Groningen and Lund University. Her research focusses on long-term comparative economic and social development patterns, with a special focus on Africa. Current research projects include understanding long-term disease patterns in Africa (Wallenberg Academy Fellowship extension grant), understanding the historical origins of present-day income inequality in Africa and studying the historical development of local and central government capacity in Africa.