

CLASS SET – DO NOT WRITE ON
The Scramble for Africa

The Europeans were slow to seize black Africa, ruthless in doing so, harsh when they had done it—but by no means doers only of harm.

OF ALL the targets of European empire-builders, Africa was nearest; and "black Africa" among the least advanced. Yet, save for its far south, it was the last to be grabbed. Its coast had been known to Europeans for centuries and was dotted with their trading posts. But until around 1860 the interior was protected. Fevers killed off intruding white men, roads were few and cataracts blocked access by river.

Then, setting off from their enclaves along the shores, European explorers began to walk old Arab trade routes. They searched for the truth of ancient stories about the Dark Continent and the sources of its mighty rivers. By 1862 they had reached the source of the Nile. A little later, they traced the route of the Niger. They confirmed the reality of Africa's fabled riches—ivory, gold, diamonds, and emeralds, copper. Entrepreneurs also saw that, instead of buying crops like cotton or palm oil from its villagers, they could set up plantations and use cheap local labor to work them. Africa was becoming too valuable to be left to the Africans. Besides these were violent, savage and backward, in need of Christianity and civilization, were they not?

Yet, ripe for takeover as Africa was, the European grab for it was neither inevitable nor consistent. Britain at first opposed a carve-up, but ended with the richest parts: today's South Africa, Ghana and Nigeria. Belgium's King Leopold II was one of Europe's least powerful rulers. But once he had carved out the Congo basin as a personal fief, other countries were quick to stake claims. Otto von Bismarck, chancellor of the strong new Germany, put in a bid for huge chunks of East and West Africa.

Europeans, quick to fight each other at home, were loath to do so for slices of a continent that they barely knew. Besides, it would set a bad example to the natives. So in 1884 the powers met in Berlin to share Africa out. In some areas, ignorant of people and geography alike, they made frontiers simply by drawing straight lines on the map.



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The Africa they seized was technologically in the Iron Age, and politically divided into several thousand units, some based on language and culture, others on conquest, paying tribute to their conquerors. Much of the continent was in turmoil, as slaving gangs sent out by some of its own rulers spread war and sent communities fleeing.

Some Africans resisted the takeover, but the Europeans, no slouches at savage violence, most often swept their spear-wielding armies aside with the Maxim gun and repeater rifle, and brutally crushed local resistance. Much of Africa gave in without a fight, its kings signing away their sovereignty with a thumb-print. Many allied with the intruders, maybe believing that these would not stay long and would give help against some local rival. Some tried to play one set of Europeans off against another. Others were overawed by technology: the kingdoms of northern Nigeria surrendered to forces, led by a handful of white men, far smaller than their own. By 1914 Europeans ruled all of Africa, bar Liberia, the state founded by America for its ex-slaves, and Abyssinia (Ethiopia), an ancient kingdom which had fought off the Italians in 1896.

Posing as parents to Africans, Europeans counted them, taxed them and ordered their communities into tribes—or, where true tribes did not exist, invented them. Meanwhile, the best land was taken for plantations, and the minerals dug out and shipped off to be processed in Europe (a division of labor—and, inversely, of profits—which, except in South Africa, largely continues today). The storehouse was steadily exploited, but Africans saw little of its wealth.

Yet not all was oppression, nor plunder. King Leopold's arm-choppers were no improvement on the past; Christian missionaries mostly were. Europeans brought schools and hospitals; and order, and the start of modern administration, on which independent states would later be built.

Not late enough, though many colonial administrators. The European occupation of black Africa was short-lived—barely a generation in some areas. After the second world war (in which many Africans died fighting for the Allies), America wanted an end to European imperialism, and African leaders, often socialist and aided by the Soviet Union, wanted self-rule. In Algeria, Kenya and Rhodesia, white settlers tried to keep power by force, but in time lost support from “home”. White South Africans—far more numerous and longer in place—held out into the 1990s, but, facing unrest and outside pressure, had to give up.

It is too soon to draw up a balance-sheet of colonialism. Perhaps the Africans' worst loss was not of land or power but self-respect, as the newcomers taught them that their ways, cultures and gods were inferior and should be abandoned. The alien religion put in their place often caught on; but the Europeans kept their version of politics, which arguably was indeed superior, for use at home, merely chucking Africa a few tattered pretenses at it as they lowered the flag. Africa was left both psychologically and politically impoverished. Much of it still is so.

The result today is a continent of states stranded between its old ways and modernity. African rulers grabbed the European-style institutions bequeathed to them, but nearly everywhere ran them into the ground, without creating new ones based on African traditions and values. Whose fault was it? In 1998, on the 100th anniversary of the battle of Omdurman, the British ambassador to Sudan was asked if he planned to apologize to his hosts for that butchery of their Mahdist forefathers resisting invasion. “Why not?” he said, “as long as we also apologize for the roads, hospitals, schools and university; indeed for creating a country called Sudan.”

RESPONSE QUESTIONS – Use clear, complete, concise answers. Use textual evidence to support your answers.

1. What was the motivation for European powers to stake a claim in Africa? Provide at least 2 specific examples.
2. How did Africans respond to the European takeover?
3. Identify at least 3 distant legacies of European colonialism in Africa. These can be positive or negative.