Berlin Conference (1884-85)

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.

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.

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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.

Source: