

The Scramble for Africa

What were the objectives of the new imperialism?

Why and how did European nations colonise Africa in the nineteenth century?

Poppy Cullen

Exam links

- AQA 1J** The British empire c.1857–1967
Edexcel paper 3, option 35.1 Britain: losing and gaining an empire, 1763–1914
OCR Y142/Y112 Britain 1900–1951
OCR Y320 From colonialism to independence: the British empire 1857–1965

The Scramble for Africa occurred in the late nineteenth century as European powers expanded their empires into Africa, dividing the continent between them. Before the Scramble, only 10% of Africa was controlled by Europeans. By 1914, the whole continent except Liberia and Ethiopia was under European control.

Before the Scramble

Before the late nineteenth century, European powers such as Britain and France had empires, meaning that they controlled large areas of territory around the world. Mostly, however, these empires did not extend very far into Africa. There were some exceptions — the British in South Africa and particularly the French

new imperialism
Describes late nineteenth century colonial expansion, in contrast to that of Spain, Portugal, England and France between 1600 and 1800.

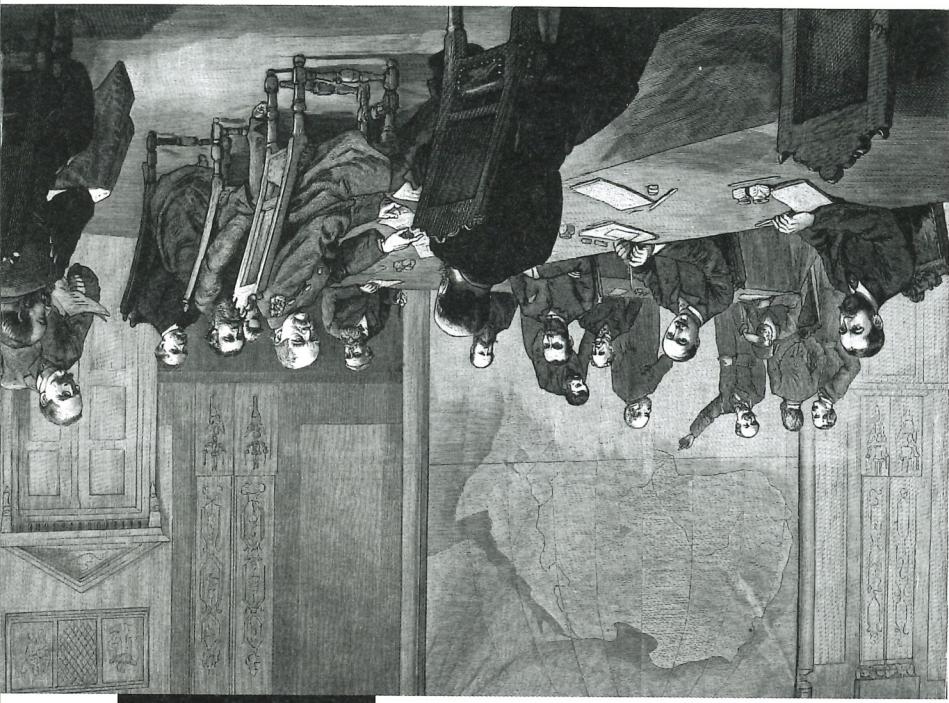
conquest of Algeria which began in 1830. Elsewhere too, there had been contact and trade for centuries, such as the slave trade in west Africa.

Nevertheless, before 1870 European powers controlled only small areas of Africa in some coastal regions, which were useful for trade and as stopping-points while at sea. Europeans in the mid-nineteenth century had a lot of racist misconceptions about Africa, often believing it to be a 'dark continent' that was mysterious, backwards and 'uncivilised'.

What was the 'Scramble for Africa'?

In the 1880s, Europeans began to extend control over Africa. This occurred very quickly, so that over only a few years, Europeans had control (at least in name) of the whole continent. This expansion of colonisation is referred to by historians as the 'partition of Africa' or the 'Scramble for Africa'. As the name 'scramble' implies, this was quick and competitive, with European powers 'scrambling' to control as much of Africa as they could before anyone else.

This process formed part of the new imperialism of the late nineteenth century. Several European powers were involved, including Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, Portugal and Italy. At first, their actions were largely haphazard, but they tried to organise the partition at the Berlin Conference.



The Berlin Conference of 1884–85 sought to establish rules regarding the division of Africa by European countries.

Religion and culture were also religious and cultural motives. There were Christian missionaries in Africa who wanted to expand their presence and reach more potential converts. As mentioned, there was also racism in European views. Many Europeans believed in a racial hierarchy, with white Europeans at the top and black Africans below. Some thought that their control over the continent would therefore be beneficial for Africans, and that they had a duty to civilise Africa.

Strategic motives could also be important, especially for Britain. India was the crucial part of the British empire, and the shortest route to India from Britain was through the Suez Canal in Egypt. This meant that Britain wanted to control Egypt, and to control all the countries along the Nile so that no one else could limit their access to India.

Because of the industrial revolution, European nations needed raw materials for their industries, such as copper, tin, cotton and rubber. All of these goods could be found in Africa. They also had minerals such as copper, tin, cotton and rubber. All of these goods to sell and hoped to open up new markets and to make profitable investments in Africa.

They did not know for certain that there would be other minerals to find, the belief in economic potential was key.

Untapped mineral wealth to be discovered. Although

Religion and culture

Such haste meant that areas were taken without knowing if they would be economically or otherwise valuable. There was a famous remark by a late-nineteenth-century British historian, John H. Seelye, that Britain had conquered huge parts of the world in a fit of absence of mind — meaning that they had not thought very hard about it.

Large Africa is, there was only so much to get.

Land already claimed. This encouraged countries to expand as quickly as possible and gain as much as they could at the expense of others. In spite of how

they agreed on the idea of effective occupation — if a European country had

control on the ground, then that area would belong to them. This was meant to prevent conflict over which might risk a war.

Those at the conference agreed on the idea of effective occupation — if a European country had

Africa. This was meant to stop too much competition from 13 European countries and the USA. The aim was to establish some rules to organise the division of Africa. This was to stop too much competition of

Otto von Bismarck, and attended by German chancellor

1884 to February 1885, hosted by German chancellor

This 3-month conference was held from November

The Berlin Conference

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Box 1 Cecil Rhodes

Colonisation was encouraged by 'men on the spot'. These were people who led expeditions into Africa to claim territories for their own country. One prominent 'man on the spot' was Cecil Rhodes. Rhodes moved north from South Africa into two countries which were then named after him: Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia). Rhodes aimed for British control from 'Cape to Cairo', meaning from South Africa all the way up to Egypt. Recently, there has been a backlash against him in the 'Rhodes Must Fall' movement in South Africa and Britain. This movement has aimed to remove statues of Cecil Rhodes. The movement's supporters view him as a racist, colonial expansionist.

quinine Made from the bark of the South American cinchona tree, it was one of the most effective treatments for malaria.

European advantages in the Scramble

One other reason for Europeans colonising Africa was simply that they could. Technological and medical advances made it possible for the first time. New medicines, particularly **quinine**, meant that Europeans could protect themselves from tropical diseases such as malaria. Before using quinine, malaria had often been lethal and meant that few Europeans had been able to stay in Africa for long. This is one of the most important reasons why it was in the late nineteenth century that Europeans expanded their presence in Africa.

Europeans also had technological benefits, including steamships and railways, which meant

they could penetrate further into Africa. They also had military advantages, such as the Maxim machine gun. While Africans did have guns, they were older and less sophisticated or powerful. This meant that in any battle the Europeans had a clear advantage. For example, in Omdurman in Sudan in 1898, 10,800 Sudanese were killed, while only 49 were killed on the British side.

Events in Africa

Events in Africa also prompted the Scramble. Africans, especially those who lived near the coast, had been trading with European merchants for generations. Some were very successful, and so one argument is that Europeans took control to keep more of the profits for themselves. Political stability was also under threat because trade relationships were changing as the slave trade diminished. This could encourage Europeans to take over. For example when Egypt, which had been very profitable and successful, could no longer pay its debts, Britain and France used that as a pretext to expand their control. Following more riots, British troops occupied Egypt.

How were Africans involved?

Much of the Scramble was decided in Europe, but this does not mean that we should see the situation only from the European point of view, or that Africans were not involved. It is also worth remembering that most of those who did the actual fighting for European control were black Africans paid by Europeans. Some Africans saw benefits in working with Europeans.

The 'scramble' to claim land often resulted in violent confrontations with indigenous people



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African ways of life, bringing in wage labour, taxes and controls, although of course colonialism did not change everything. African economies did not become providers of raw materials and markets for European goods. This continues to shape the world today almost identical to those the Europeans drew up in the nineteenth century. Yet these did not really fit the situation on the ground and were drawn in the most important consequences is seen in the borders of Africa. If you look at the maps of the continent, it is clear that the borders of countries today are almost identical to those the Europeans drew up in the nineteenth century. Yet these did not really fit the situation on the ground and were drawn in Europe. Africans were not much involved in these decisions. The straight lines on the map of Africa show that the borders were drawn without regard to the geography, politics, languages or cultures that were actually found in Africa. So one of the most significant outcomes is that the countries which we know today were in most cases created by Europeans in the scramble for Africa.

Africa: At: www.tinyurl.com/27az09v6.
**New World Encyclopedia entry on the Scramble for Africa by the New
World Encyclopedia and uses study material on the scramble
for Africa from St John's College, Cambridge: www.tinyurl.com/y66yfhsq.**

Further reading



Africa, 1885
diamond mine in South
Africa, 1885
white overseers at a
diamond mine in South
Africa, 1885

- One of the most obvious consequences was that Europeans now ruled Africa. However, occupation on a map did not necessarily mean that the impact was immediate. Given that the impact of European colonisation in Africa, their conquest was not always obvious to those living in more isolated places. It was only some years later that the outcome of conquest became fully apparent. Often it was not until around the First World War that there was coordinated rule in the colonies.

Africa, and in some places even later. This influenced colonial rule lasted until the 1960s in most of Africa, and in some places even later. This influenced European actions?

1 What do you think were the main motivations for European actions?

2 How might African history have been different without the Scramble for Africa?

3 Why do you think the borders drawn by Europeans in the Scramble have mostly remained until today?

4 How much does racism explain the Scramble?

Exam-style questions

- 1 What do you think were the main motivations for

- ## 2 How might African history have been different

- in the Scramble have mostly remained until today?

- #### 4 How much does racism explain the Scramble?

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Colonial rule lasted until the 1960s in most of Africa, and in some places even later. This influenced its end.

Consequences

Elsewhere, Africans signed treaties with Europeans. These in effect recognised European control over land. But there were issues with these treaties. Some Africans were clearly coerced or offered false promises. There were also issues of translation, as few Europeans knew African languages (and vice versa). African ideas of land-ownership were often different from European ideas, and for many in Africa land was not owned, in the same way as in Europe. Therefore, these treaties could mean different things to those who signed them.

The partition of Africa was a drawn-out process, and lasted until the First World War. Italy invaded Libya in 1911, and France put a military protectorate over Morocco in 1912. These events are often viewed as a lasting legacy of the Scramble for Africa.

They could benefit through trade, employment or by using the Europeans as allies against local enemies. In some places, Africans fiercely resisted European control. One key example is the battle of Adwa in Ethiopia in 1896, when Ethiopian emperor Menelik II was victorious over the Italian army. This was the only successful case of a war which stopped European colonisation — Ethiopia remained independent. But elsewhere too there was armed resistance to European occupation, such as in Tanganyika (modern Tanzania) and Southern Rhodesia (modern Zimbabwe). In these cases, the Europeans won. Germany colonised Tanganyika and Britain colonised Southern Rhodesia. However, they were forced to make some concessions