Scramble for Africa

Room 1- The “Scramble for Africa” & The Berlin Conference

Context: The “Scramble for Africa”, now sometimes referred to as the “Partition of Africa” or the “Race for Africa” by historians encompasses the rapid exploration, conquest, colonization, and partition of Africa by European powers. The Berlin Conference, held from 1884-1885 over a period of about 3 months, formalized the partitioning process. Essentially this conference gave Europeans free reign over colonizing Africa, as long as they informed each other about the boundaries they created for their empires. The key players in the subsequent division of Africa were Great Britain, France, Germany, Portugal, and Belgium (although King Leopold II who ruled Belgium established the Congo Free State as his own personal colony.)

European control of territory in Africa grew enormously in a short period of time; prior to the Berlin Conference, Europeans controlled approximately 10% of Africa primarily along the coast for trade. By the early 20th century, Europeans controlled almost 90% of Africa. Only Ethiopia and Liberia remained independent. This conquest was made possible by advanced medical knowledge, including the discovery of quinine, which helped to treat malaria, as well as new technological advancements in transportation such as the steamship and railroads.

Source: “Everyone Gets His Share”, French caricature of Bismarck dividing a cake labeled “Africa” from *L’Illustration*, 1885.



Link: [Africa Political Divisions from a 1917 Atlas](https://www.joh.cam.ac.uk/sites/default/files/images/article_images/library-political_africa_big.jpg)

Source: Hobson, John, *Imperialism, A Study*, 1902.

John Hobson was an historian, economist, writer, and journalist who wrote for the *Manchester Guardian* right before the Boer War in South Africa. His time there inspired his writings and theories of imperialism, which focused on capitalism as the driving force behind imperial expansion.

Taking the growth of Imperialism as illustrated in the recent expansion of Great Britain and of the chief continental Powers, we find the distinction between Imperialism and colonisation, set forth in the opening chapter, closely borne out by facts and figures, and warranting the following general judgments: –

First – Almost the whole of recent imperial expansion is occupied with the political absorption of tropical or sub-tropical lands in which white men will not settle with their families.

Second – Nearly all the lands are thickly peopled by “lower races.”

Thus this recent imperial expansion stands entirely distinct from the colonisation of sparsely peopled lands in temperate zones, where white colonists carry with them the modes of government, the industrial and other arts of the civilisation of the mother country. The “occupation” of these new territories is comprised in the presence of a small minority of white men, officials, traders, and industrial organisers, exercising political and economic sway over great hordes of population regarded as inferior and as incapable of exercising any considerable rights of self-government, in politics or industry.

Settler Colony Case Study: French Algeria

Settler Colonialism: French Algeria

Context: The French colonization of Algeria began in 1830 with the invasion of Algiers and lasted until Algeria won its independence in 1962. The conquest of Algeria was brutal and involved significant military force. It was not until the 1880s that Algeria transitioned itself into a settler colony of France. Significant numbers of Europeans migrated to Algeria, and not all of them were French; however, even non-French Europeans who resided in Algeria could become French citizens. Indigenous peoples were not as lucky, and were consistently treated as second-class colonial subjects. Algeria was distinct from other French colonies; instead of being considered a colony, it was thought to be an extension of France itself.

As time went on, more French and other Europeans migrated to Algeria. (By the time the war for independence began in 1954, approximately 1 million Europeans and approximately 9 million Algerians lived in Algeria.) The French were known as the *colons*, or the *pieds-noirs* (French born in Algeria) and took increasingly more land from the indigenous Algerian Muslim population, who were forcibly displaced. The indigenous populations were often mistreated; not only did they have to pay higher taxes and were subject to laws that the French themselves were not, but they also were subject to violence and aggression from the colonizers. The French

Although the French eventually gave the Muslims the opportunity to become French citizens, very few actually chose to do so because it required them to denounce the Qu’ranic Law and their faith, while adopting the French Civil Code.

Source: Nunez, Rachel, “Rethinking Universalism: Olympe Audouard, Hubertine Auclert, and the Gender Politics of the Civilizing Mission,” in *French Politics, Culture & Society*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Spring 2012).

Hubertine Auclert revealed the ways in which the civilizing mission concealed the oppression of women in France and chauvinistic attitudes towards other peoples…. She pointed out the hypocrisy of French claims to superior civilization: only "when Frenchmen will treat women more humanely than Arabs treat them” she noted, "can they talk of going to civilize the savages….”

Arriving in Algeria in 1888 with her husband, who had received a judicial post there, Auclert was shocked to find a “race tortured by hunger.” Rather than bringing the benefits of civilization to the Arabs, the *colons*, supported by French colonial administrators, swindled the Arabs out of their lands, subjected them to the draconian *code de l’indigenat*, and deprived them of any meaningful representatoin in government….

“It is in seeing racial prejudice dominate everythig in Algeria,” she argued, “that one better understands the absurdity of sexual prejudice.” As was the case for French women, being deprived of political rights prevented Arabs from defending their interests. Thus she proposed the same solution for the problem of inequality in Algeria as she had for the problem of sexual inequality in France: “In order to be able to exist individually and collectively, in order to be in a position to defend their person and their goods, it is indispensible that the natives of Algeria be armed with the ballot.” Appointing herself as the spokesperson for Arab interests, she declared that “once [French women] have their part of power, they will oblige Arabs to go learn our language in school, will impose our laws on them, and in thus helping France to assimilate the inhabitants of our African colony, they will really conquer Algeria….”

Not only did Auclert present other racial groups as opponents of feminist claims, but she also tended to see the emancipation of women and of other races as an either/or proposition. The fact that black men in parts of France’s overseas empire possessed political rights while white women in the metropole did not infuriated her. “Certainly we applaud the assimilation of blacks to whites,” she noted in an 1899 article. But was it logical to give the vote to “savage blacks,” “who are not interested in our ideas or affairs,” while denying it to “cultured white women of the metropole?”

Economic Imperialism Case Study: Belgian Congo

Source: Excerpt from Article 11 of the General Act of Berlin of February 26, 1885.

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,

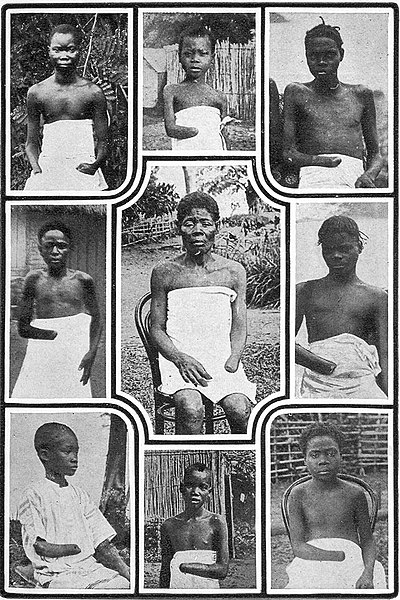
scientific or charitable institutions and undertakings created and organized by the

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.

Mutilated Congolese people from the Belgian Congo. King Leopold II of Belgium personally owned the “Congo Free State” and was responsible for the deaths of millions of Congolese as a result of inhumane mistreatment of them as part of their forced labor to produce rubber. If villages did not meet quotas or opposed the colonial government in some other way, one of the punishments was amputation of limbs.

Source: Wikimedia Commons

Source: French, Howard, “Confronting Belgium’s Colonial Legacy”, *Foreign Policy*, June 6, 2022.

Leopold’s posturing against slavery did not prevent him from taking over this territorial bonanza as his private property, under the cruelly ironic name of the Congo Free State, and imposing a regime of forced labor for the purpose of harvesting hundreds of thousands of pounds of ivory as well as one of the successor commodities to sugar in Europe’s drive toward industrialization and wealth: rubber. In the pursuit of rubber production, Leopold’s Congolese subjects were ferociously overworked and mistreated. Female villagers were routinely held hostage, for example, to force men to cull rubber from wild trees in the dense forest, and those who did not meet their production quota frequently had a hand publicly amputated as punishment. In the space of three decades at the end of the 19th century, the Congo went from being one of the places in the world least explored by outsiders to one of the most brutally exploited.

In time, this produced an international scandal that required Leopold to surrender personal control of the Congo to the Belgian state, but as many as 10 million inhabitants of the territory were killed outright or driven to early deaths by the dire conditions that prevailed during and immediately after his rule. The Belgian state ruled the Congo very differently but also catastrophically, extracting enormous wealth from its colony while investing little.

Even today, some Belgians deny this history or try to downplay it, saying they created many roads in the colony as well as schools and hospitals. What they decline to acknowledge in making specious arguments like these is that the limited construction that was done was carried out not through investment but again through the forced labor of Africans, and almost none of Belgium’s colonial subjects in the Congo were provided even secondary education…. Belgium didn’t generate its first comprehensive development plan for the colony until 1949, just over 10 years before Congo gained independence.

Source: Conrad, Joseph, *Heart of Darkness*, 1902.

Joseph Conrad was

A slight clinking behind me made me turn my head. Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path. They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps. Black rags were wound round their loins, and the short ends behind waggled to and fro like tails. I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope; each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking. Another report from the cliff made me think suddenly of that ship of war I had seen firing into a continent. It was the same kind of ominous voice; but these men could by no stretch of imagination be called enemies. They were called criminals, and the outraged law, like the bursting shells had come to them, an insoluble mystery from the sea. All their meager breasts panted together, the violently dilated nostrils quivered, the eyes stared stonily up-hill. They passed me within six inches, without a glance, with that complete, deathlike indifference of unhappy savages. Behind this raw matter one of the reclaimed, the product of the new forces at work, strolled despondently, carrying a rifle by its middle. He had a uniform jacket with one button off, and seeing a white man on the path, hoisted his weapon to his shoulder with alacrity. This was simple prudence, white men being so much alike at a distance that he could not tell who I might be. He was speedily reassured, and with a large, white, rascally grin, and a glance at his charge, seemed to take me into partnership in his exalted trust. After all, I was also a part of the great cause of these high and just proceedings.

Source: Casement, Roger, *Correspondence and Report from His Majesty's Consul at Boma Respecting the Administration of the Independent State of the Congo,* 1904

The chief of the P\* post told me that a similar alarm reigned almost everywhere in the country behind his station, and that when he went on the most peaceful missions only a few miles from his house the villages were generally emptied of all human beings when he entered them, and it was impossible in the majority of cases to get into touch with the people in their own homes. It was not so in all cases, he said, and he instanced certain villages where he could go certain of a friendly reception, but with the majority, he said, he had found it quite impossible to ever find them “at home.” He gave, as an explanation, when I asked for the reason of this fear of the white man, that as these people were great savages, and knew themselves how many crimes they had committed, they doubtless feared that the white man of the Government was coming to punish their misconduct. He added that they had undoubtedly had an “awful past” at the hands of some of the officials who had preceded him in the local administration, and that it would take time for confidence to be restored. Men, he said, still came to him whose hands had been cut off by the Government soldiers during those evil days, and he said there were still many victims of this species of mutilation in the surrounding country. Two cases of the kind came to my actual notice while I was in the lake. One, a young man, both of whose hands had been beaten off with the butt ends of rifles against a tree, the other a young lad of 11 or 12 years of age, whose right hand was cut off at the wrist. This boy described the circumstances of his mutilation, and, in answer to my inquiry, said that although wounded at the time he was perfectly sensible of the severing of his wrist, but lay still fearing that if he moved he would be killed. In both these cases the Government soldiers had been accompanied by white officers whose names were given to me. Of six natives (one a girl, three little boys, one youth, and one old woman) who had been mutilated in this way during the rubber régime, all except one were dead at the date of my visit. The old woman had died at the beginning of this year, and her niece described to me how the act of mutilation in her case had been accomplished. The day I left Lake Mantumba five men whose hands had been cut off came to the village of T\* across the lake to see me, but hearing that I had already gone away they returned to their homes. A messenger came in to tell me, and I sent to T\* to find them, but they had then dispersed. Three of them subsequently returned, but too late for me to see them. These were some of those, I presume, to whom the official had referred, for they came from the country in the vicinity of P\* station. Statements of this character, made both by the two mutilated persons I saw and by others who had witnessed this form of mutilation in the past, are appended

Dehumanization of the "uncivilized": Human Zoos

[Exhibited in Life & Death: Western Imperialism and the Exhibition of Colonised Bodies](https://sacredfootsteps.com/2021/06/21/exhibited-in-life-and-death-western-imperialism-and-the-exhibition-of-colonised-bodies/)