

European Rivalry over Africa before the Second Berlin Conference (1884-1885)

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Abstract:

The European presence in Africa occupies an important place in modern historical studies because of the sensitivity and centrality of the subject. The pace of this presence accelerated during the second half of the nineteenth century, especially in the few years preceding the Second Berlin Conference (1884-1885). These developments prepared the way for the partition of the continent among the major colonial powers. This study examines European influence in Africa before the conference. It focuses on the limited European presence before 1860 and on the change in European attitudes toward inland expansion after 1876. It also considers the factors behind that change, the clash of European interests, and the beginning of the Scramble for Africa. Particular attention is given to Germany's entry into the colonial rivalry and to the development of the Congo crisis, which became a direct factor in convening the conference.

Keywords: Berlin Conference; Congo crisis; Leopold II; Africa; Stanley.

1. Introduction

European states had maintained a presence in Africa since the Age of Geographical Discovery. This presence, however, did not involve extensive penetration into the interior. It was largely confined to coasts, ports, and straits. These positions helped secure trade with other parts of the world and supported missionary activity among African peoples. The Portuguese and other Europeans followed this pattern during the early phases of their expansion.

After the Industrial Revolution, the demand for raw materials and markets became more pressing. Major European powers, and Germany in particular, came to believe that industrial and commercial growth required colonies. Such territories could supply the raw materials needed by industry and provide markets for manufactured goods. Africa therefore became an attractive field for German ambitions. This became clearer after German explorers returned from the continent and publications drew attention to Africa's wealth and resources. These developments encouraged calls for German colonies in Africa.

This new German orientation, together with French pressure over the colonization of Africa, pushed Britain to move toward the south of the continent. Britain consequently entered into rivalry with Germany in East Africa and with France in West Africa. Competition among the major powers produced serious crises that threatened direct confrontation. The Congo question, or Congo crisis, was one of the most important of these crises. It became a principal reason for convening the Second Berlin Conference of 1884-1885.

The Berlin Conference opened wider opportunities for European penetration and the extension of influence into the African interior. It was also intended to reduce the risk of conflict among the European states.

A study of European activity in Africa before the Berlin Conference raises a central question: how did European public opinion change between 1880 and 1885? Within the following twenty years, almost the entire African continent, with the exception of Ethiopia and Liberia, came under European colonial rule.

A second question concerns the locations of European influence and the degree of penetration into the continent on the eve of the Berlin Conference.

2. Reasons for the Limited European Presence in Africa until 1876

The colonial partition of Africa was preceded by geographical exploration, especially during the nineteenth century. At that time, the geography of the continent's interior was still poorly known. The sources of the major rivers, the shapes of the lakes, and the features of the mountain ranges had not yet been clearly identified. About twenty expeditions reached Africa during the first half of the nineteenth century. Their number had doubled by 1881, and rivers, lakes, and mountains were increasingly represented on maps (Savelyev & Vasilyev, n.d., p. 44).

European intervention in Africa remained limited until around 1860. Several factors explain this restricted presence:

- The African interior contained dense forests and regions where diseases and epidemics were widespread. Some travelers died as a result. European activity therefore remained concentrated on the coasts, where the slave trade was already established.
- Britain, France, and the Netherlands were occupied with consolidating their positions in Europe and in their existing overseas possessions. These included territories in the New World, New Zealand, Australia, and India. Their presence sometimes brought them into conflict with local uprisings that occurred from time to time (Faisal Muhammad Musa, 1997, p. 125).
- Europe was also dealing with internal political problems. The continent was passing through a period of change that later contributed to the emergence of nation-states.

Britain had long kept Africa within its strategic horizon. It adopted a patient policy of gradual penetration and relied on two main methods:

- Establishing friendly relations with tribal chiefs and local rulers through merchants and missionaries.
- Avoiding fixed political commitments toward African states so that Britain would not be bound by obligations toward them (Faisal Muhammad Musa, 1997, p. 126).

3. The Change in European Attitudes toward Expansion into Africa after 1876 and Its Causes

By the end of the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the major European powers, including France, Britain, Germany, and Portugal, had acquired commercial interests and exercised influence in different parts of Africa. Their direct political control, however, was still very limited.

The situation began to change because of three major developments between 1876 and 1880. The first was the renewed interest in Africa shown by the Duke of Brabant after he became King Leopold II of the Belgians in 1865 (see Appendix 1). The Brussels Geographical Conference was the clearest expression of this interest (UNESCO, 1996, pp. 47-48).

The Brussels Geographical Conference

King Leopold visited London in 1876 and met as many geographers and explorers as possible. After this visit, he issued invitations from Brussels for an international geographical conference. He also organized a broad publicity campaign in the Belgian press. The campaign presented his initiative as an important personal undertaking and was intended to attract the attention of journalists and

writers (Rajab Muhammad, 1997, p. 345). European states sent political representatives, and many explorers and geographers also participated (Yahya, 1990, p. 379).

The conference was held in Brussels from 12 to 19 September 1876. Delegates represented Germany, Austria-Hungary, Britain, France, Italy, and Russia. One of the first measures proposed for achieving the conference's goals was the establishment of permanent stations at several points in Africa. These stations were intended to assist travelers. They were to contain maps, medicines, and other equipment needed by explorers. The International African Association later emerged as a concrete outcome of the conference (Rajab Muhammad, 1997, pp. 345-346).

After the conference, Leopold's exploitative intentions soon became clearer. They began to overshadow the humanitarian and civilizing aims that he had emphasized in Brussels. He gradually transformed the association into the Committee for Studies of the Upper Congo (Le Comité d'étude du Haut-Congo). This body became the nucleus of an organization intended to exploit the region (Rajab Muhammad, 1997, p. 346).

The conference also led Leopold to contract Henry Morton Stanley (see Appendix 2) in 1879 to explore the Congo on behalf of the association. These activities eventually contributed to the establishment of the Congo Free State.

The second sequence of developments involved Portuguese activity from 1876 onward. Portugal was displeased because it had been invited to the Brussels Conference only after hesitation. It therefore sent expeditions from that year onward. By 1880, these campaigns had resulted in the annexation to the Portuguese Crown of semi-independent estates in Mozambique controlled by Portuguese Africans. In this sense, the European race for Africa had already begun for Portugal and King Leopold by 1876 (UNESCO, 1996, p. 48).

The third and final factor was the expansionist trend that became a feature of French colonial policy between 1879 and 1880. It appeared in the Anglo-French dual control of Egypt in 1879, in the dispatch of de Brazza to the Congo (see Appendix 3), and in the revival of French colonial initiatives in Tunisia and Madagascar (UNESCO, 1996, p. 48).

Taken together, these European moves in Africa between 1876 and 1880 showed that the major powers had become increasingly committed to colonial expansion and to establishing formal political control over African territories (UNESCO, 1996, p. 48).

4. The Clash of European Interests in Africa and the Beginning of the Scramble

4.1. Division of Spheres of Influence

The main colonial powers during this period were France, Britain, and Portugal. Portugal claimed authority over large areas of Africa, but its effective occupation of these territories was limited. Britain favored Portuguese control over a strip extending from approximately 12 degrees 5 minutes to 8 degrees south, including the mouth of the Congo River. The Congo Free State had not yet come into existence (Ibrahim & al-Jamal, 1998, p. 46).

France had established itself in Algeria during the first half of the nineteenth century. It later sought a foothold on the western coast of Africa. French ambitions then expanded toward the Niger and Gabon, while the search for new territories also led France to extend its influence over Madagascar (Haridi, 2008, pp. 115-116).

Britain exercised practical control over parts of southern Africa as far as the Orange River and Delagoa Bay. It was also preparing to extend its control over Bechuanaland. On the western coast, Britain retained four colonies. It also held areas of influence in the Matabele kingdom in central Africa and maintained influence in Zanzibar in the east (Ibrahim & al-Jamal, 1998, p. 46).

Italy hoped to gain control of Libya, while Italian merchants were active in parts of Abyssinia. Spain, by contrast, did not possess a firm foothold on the coast of the western Sudan despite making claims to some areas there.

The year 1880 was a decisive moment in the history of Italian colonial expansion. The Italians established their first firm position in Africa at Assab Bay, north of Obock, on the Red Sea coast. France had already taken Obock. Italy also looked toward Tunisia, but the French occupation frustrated this plan. Italian attention then shifted toward Abyssinia and East Africa (Ibrahim & al-Jamal, 1998, p. 46).

Germany opposed colonial projects until the later decades of the nineteenth century. Its national unification had been delayed and, according to the source, was not achieved until 1870. Germany therefore entered the colonial competition later than the other major powers (Ibrahim & al-Jamal, 1998, p. 47).

4.2. The Beginning of the European Scramble for Africa

Belgium Enters the Colonial Rivalry

Belgium entered the colonial competition when Stanley established several stations for King Leopold after the creation of the international organization for the exploration of Africa in 1880. Leopold's intentions, and his transformation of the international body into a private organization, caused other states to view these efforts with suspicion. They feared that the project aimed to control the resources of the Congo River basin (Haridi, 2008, p. 116).

Leopold's removal of the association's international character and its conversion into a distinctly Belgian project became a final spark for European colonial expansion in Africa. European states began to compete more openly for African territories (Ibrahim & al-Jamal, 2002, p. 114). The same competition for colonial interests also helped accelerate the French occupation of Tunisia in 1881 and the British occupation of Egypt in 1882 (al-Anbari, 2011, p. 699).

Robinson argued that the partition of tropical Africa during this period was rooted largely in the Egyptian crisis. In his view, the scramble intensified when Britain entered Egypt. After the British established themselves in Cairo, other European powers expanded their colonial activity in Africa. Eventually, almost no part of the continent remained untouched by colonial intervention. Britain's stated aim in occupying Egypt was to secure Egypt, the Mediterranean, and the East. The occupation of Egypt therefore increased the anxiety of the other powers and drew Africa more fully into European rivalry. In this interpretation, the occupation of Egypt gave the signal for the colonial scramble (Ibrahim & al-Jamal, 1998, p. 47).

Portugal became concerned by Stanley's activities and feared that it would lose the Congo, which it had regarded as a special possession since the time of Diogo Cao (see Appendix 4). At the same time, France, through de Brazza, had acquired knowledge of the Ogooue River and its surrounding areas. The question then became: who would control the mouths of the Congo - France, Portugal, or the King of Belgium? Britain sided with Portugal in this dispute. Its principal concern was freedom of trade, and it feared the high customs tariffs that France imposed on British goods (Ki-Zerbo, 1994, p. 714).

These tensions contributed to the Scramble for Africa and to the effort by each European state to control the largest possible share of the continent. France opposed further foreign expansion in West Africa after its significant advance in Senegal. The British government also opposed forms of expansion that could not cover their administrative costs. Nevertheless, the colonial powers continued

to spend heavily on Africa. Mutual suspicion encouraged each power to expand because it feared losing markets to its rivals (Ibrahim & al-Jamal, 1998, p. 47).

This was the broader setting of the European colonial struggle in Africa. Each colonial state sought to control as much African territory as possible. Germany then intensified the competition over Africa, its resources, and its markets. This occurred in the context of the Industrial Revolution, which had increased the demand for raw materials and markets (al-Anbari, 2011, p. 699).

5. Germany Enters the Colonial Competition and the Congo Crisis Develops before the Second Berlin Conference (1884-1885)

5.1. Germany Enters the Colonial Competition

Germany entered the colonial rivalry comparatively late because its national unification had also been delayed. Unification was completed in 1871 after the wars commonly known as the Wars of Unification: against Denmark in 1864, Austria in 1866, and France in 1870. German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck (see Appendix 5) initially believed that colonies would create more problems than benefits for Germany. During the 1880s, however, he abruptly changed his position. Historians have linked this shift to the emergence of a German colonial lobby. This lobby was concerned that many Germans were emigrating to the New World, especially to the United States. Such emigration was viewed as a loss for Germany. As a result, the idea of establishing German colonies in Africa gained support (Bekai, 2009, pp. 110-112).

Bismarck eventually changed his political position and joined the colonial competition. Germany declared protectorates over areas where German missionary associations were active, including Togo, Cameroon, and South West Africa. The source also states that Germany proclaimed protection and sovereignty over the Sultanate of Zanzibar. This development created an overlap between German and British influence in East Africa (McEvedy, 1997, p. 190).

Another reason for Germany's entry into the colonial struggle was the emergence of a colonial association in Berlin known as the German Colonial Society. Karl Peters was among its most prominent founders (see Appendix 6). The society sought to pressure the German government to compete for colonies, especially in East Africa. This pressure grew as the activities of German merchants and adventurers increased, particularly those from Bremen and Hamburg (Bekai, 2009, pp. 109-110).

German colonial policy aimed to achieve two principal goals:

- To develop Germany along the model of the major Anglophone states and settler societies, such as the United States, Australia, and South Africa.
- To obtain raw materials from controlled colonies so that Germany could reduce its dependence on imports from other imperial powers, especially France and Britain (Bekai, 2009, pp. 153-154).

5.2. The Development of the Congo Question before the Berlin Conference

France considered the claims of the International Association excessive and believed that the organization sought vast and virtually unlimited territories in Africa. One of the leading French agents was Savorgnan de Brazza, an Italian who had acquired French nationality (Bouaziz, 2009, p. 18). Between 1875 and 1878, he began exploratory activity north of the Congo and concluded a number of friendly agreements with tribal chiefs. These agreements were then used to establish French control. He continued expanding in the area until 1880. In this way, de Brazza laid the foundations for the French settlements of Congo-Brazzaville and Gabon (al-Qawzi, 2006, p. 11).

Stanley, meanwhile, had placed territories on both banks of the river under his authority. In 1881, he reached a French military post. The territorial rivalry between the two explorers, each trying to move faster than the other, almost produced a diplomatic confrontation between Belgium and France. Through negotiation, King Leopold eventually obtained a promise from the French government in October 1882 not to obstruct the activities of the International Association. A second promise followed in April 1884, when France agreed to recognize the territories occupied by the association (Yahya, n.d., p. 384).

5.3. The Anglo-Portuguese Treaty

The Franco-Belgian race for the Congo attracted the attention of the other European powers. Portugal began to assert its own claim on the grounds that Portuguese explorers had discovered the mouth of the Congo in the fifteenth century (Dhihni, 1988, p. 70). Britain also sought a countermeasure to Leopold's project and opened negotiations with Portugal. The two countries reached an agreement in which Britain recognized a Portuguese right to occupy the Congo region (Ibrahim & al-Jamal, 2002, p. 137).

The treaty was signed in London on 26 February 1884. It invoked Portugal's old proprietary claims over the African coastal zone between approximately 12 degrees and 8 degrees south (Le Brun & Renau, 1886, p. 257). Britain negotiated with Portugal in order to take joint action against Leopold's project of removing the association's international character and turning it into a Belgian enterprise. Britain regarded recognition of Portuguese rights in the Congo as a preliminary step toward extending British influence over the area. Although the treaty formally concerned Britain and Portugal, its effects also involved other powers, including France and the International Association of the Congo. Its scope later extended to several European states (Ibrahim & al-Jamal, 1998, p. 48).

Intervention by the British Parliament and parliamentary opposition to the treaty prevented Britain and Portugal from achieving these ambitions (al-Anbari, 2011, p. 698).

The rapprochement between Britain and Portugal encouraged a counter-rapprochement between Germany and France. Its purpose was to oppose the Anglo-Portuguese alignment. This process created different diplomatic groupings within Europe. These groupings did not remain passive. They competed over conflicting colonial interests in Africa (al-Anbari, 2011, p. 698).

When Portugal felt that its position was weakening, it adopted the idea of an international conference to discuss the dispute. Bismarck seized the opportunity and called for an international conference in Berlin. Its purpose was to prevent an international clash caused by intense rivalry among the European powers. The conference was held in Berlin from 15 November 1884 to 26 February 1885. It lasted for more than three months and was described by the cited source as exceptionally long in duration (Ki-Zerbo, 1994, p. 714).

6. Conclusion

The study leads to several main conclusions:

- The advance and scramble for Africa can be viewed from several angles. From the perspective of the sequence of events, France may be regarded as having initiated the process. The study suggests that this may have been a reaction to the severe French defeat in 1870, when Germany occupied French territory. This defeat may have encouraged a more aggressive French policy in different parts of the world, including Africa.
- From a diplomatic perspective, Britain was the power that most clearly overturned the existing balance.

- On the eve of the Berlin Conference, only about one-tenth of Africa was under European occupation, and even this control was often imprecise. Within approximately twenty years, Europeans occupied almost all of the remaining continent.
- The Berlin Conference can be regarded as an important turning point, and a dangerous new stage, in the history of the European presence in Africa.
- The European colonial race for Africa, which became especially visible during the 1870s, was accompanied by intensified exploration. Expeditions identified the sources of rivers, lakes, and mountain systems. They also produced more detailed maps. These developments were aided by the technological advances that followed the Industrial Revolution.

Appendices

Appendix 1. Leopold II

Leopold II, whose full name was Leopold Louis Philippe Marie Victor, was born in Brussels on 9 April 1835 and died in Belgium on 7 December 1909. He became King of Belgium in 1865 and remained on the throne until his death. During his reign, Belgium became a major economic power and one of the leading colonial states. He was also known for his political intelligence and abilities. See:

Jean-Pierre Nzeza Kabu Zex-Kongo. (2018). Leopold II le plus drand chef d'etat de l'histoire du Congo. L'Harmattan, pp. 21-22.

Wesling, Henri. (2002). Le partage de l'Afrique 1890-1914. Paris: Donoile, p. 851.

Appendix 2. Henry Morton Stanley

Henry Morton Stanley was born in Wales, Britain, in 1841 and died in 1904. He traveled to the United States in 1858 and became a naturalized American citizen. He worked first as a journalist and later became an explorer. His first major African journey was undertaken in search of David Livingstone, whom he found near Lake Tanganyika in 1871. Stanley then returned to Britain and undertook another African expedition between 1874 and 1877, reaching the mouth of the Congo River. He later accepted an invitation from King Leopold II of Belgium to lead another expedition to Africa between 1879 and 1884. This expedition helped lay the foundations of the Congo Free State. The state received international recognition in 1885 and was placed under the authority of Leopold II. Stanley also played a prominent role in the Second Berlin Conference and helped secure support for Leopold's projects in the Congo. His final African expedition took place between 1887 and 1889, during which he identified Lake Edward. See:

Munir al-Baalbaki. (1992). Mu'jam A'lam al-Mawrid [Al-Mawrid Biographical Dictionary] (1st ed.). Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Ilm lil-Malayin, p. 234.

Mirvat Amin al-Shabrawi. (n.d.). Iktishafat Ghayyarat Majra al-Tarikh [Discoveries That Changed the Course of History], pp. 34-35.

Appendix 3. Savorgnan de Brazza

Pierre Paul Francois Camille Savorgnan de Brazza (1852-1905) was an Italian explorer who became a naturalized French citizen. He worked for the Geographical Society of Paris and contributed to the French advance toward the Congo River. His activities helped establish French colonies in Central Africa. See:

Charles Vernes. (1887). La France au Congo et Savorgnan de Brazza. Paris: Librairie Fischbacher, pp. 8-13.

D. Neuville & Ch. Breard. (1884). Les voyages de Savorgnan de Brazza: Ogooue et Congo (1875-1882). Paris, pp. 47-51.

Appendix 4. Diogo Cao

Diogo Cao (1440-1486) was a Portuguese explorer and is described in the source as the first European to enter the Congo region. He also explored the western coast of Africa. He made two voyages to the continent. The first took place in 1482, when he reached the mouth of the Congo River. The second took place between 1484 and 1486. See:

Ngimbi Kalumvueziko. (2013). Congo-Zaire: Le destin tragique d'une nation. L'Harmattan, pp. 19-21.

Appendix 5. Otto von Bismarck

Otto von Bismarck (April 1815-July 1898) was a prominent Prussian and German political figure. He entered politics in 1846 and served as Minister-President of Prussia from 1862 to 1890. He supervised the unification of the German states and the establishment of the German Empire, also known as the Second Reich. After its creation in 1871, he became its first chancellor. His ideas had a major influence on German domestic and foreign policy, and he became known as the Iron Chancellor. See: Alfred Michiels. (1871). Le comte de Bismarck: Biographie, sa politique. Paris: E-Dentu, Libraire-Editeur, pp. 8-9.

Fritz Stem, coldand born. (1997). Bismarck burling of the Germany empire. New York: cnopf, p. 2.

Appendix 6. Karl Peters

Karl Peters (1856-1918) was a German journalist, explorer, and politician. He played a prominent role in the establishment of German colonies in East Africa and contributed to the growing competition among European powers in Africa. Peters also helped establish a German colonial association in 1884. See:

Arafa Mahmud Muhammad Mustafa. (2019). "The Zanzibar-Heligoland Treaty of 1890 and Its Repercussions for East Africa and Western Europe." Al-Mu'arrikh al-Misri [The Egyptian Historian], Part II, no. 55, pp. 388-432.

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