

140 years since the Berlin Congress: The new Scramble for Africa—Part One

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This is the first of a three-part series. Part Two was published on January 13, 2025 and Part Three was published on January 14, 2025.

One hundred and forty years ago, the imperialist powers gathered in Berlin to formalise rules for the annexation and plunder of Africa. The Berlin Conference, held from November 1884 to February 1885, resulted in the ratification of the General Act, accelerating European colonial expansion in what is known as the Scramble for Africa. This violent process redrew Africa's borders, fractured ethnic, cultural, and linguistic landscapes, and entrenched capitalist exploitation and plundering by imperialist powers which continues to this day.

The conference, intended to regulate inter-imperialist tensions, instead intensified rivalries that culminated in the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, resulting in over 40 million deaths. Within two decades, the Second World War would erupt, claiming 70-85 million lives.

The mass anti-colonial movements that developed in the aftermath of the Second World War, together with the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, forced the major powers to retreat from direct colonial forms of rule. However, far from providing the impetus for economic development and social equality and revitalising the bankrupt capitalist nation-state system, as promised by the bourgeois nationalist forces backed by Stalinists and anti-Trotskyist Pabloite tendencies, the decades since have shown that this independence has failed to bring meaningful or lasting improvements to the lives of Africa's workers and rural masses.

The experiment with formally independent capitalist states over the past six decades has paved the way for a new Scramble for Africa as part of a re-division of the whole world between the imperialist powers.

The struggle for control of vital mineral and oil reserves, raw materials and markets, as a component part of a global struggle for hegemony between the major powers against the emerging capitalist powers: Russia, and above all China, their foremost economic competitor. The confrontation threatens to ignite a global conflict that carries the threat of nuclear war.

Today's imperialist conferences of the 21st century, in the different names of G-7, G-20, the United Nations and their ilk, are no more capable of a peaceful division of global resources among the capitalist and imperialist states than they were at Berlin 140 years ago. The only politically viable answer to the nightmarish imperialist scenario of inevitable war is the revolutionary mobilisation of the international working class on the basis of socialist policies.

The Berlin Conference

On November 15, 1884, Otto von Bismarck, chancellor of the newly-created German Empire, opened the Conference of Berlin on West Africa at his official residence in the city.

The relatively free competition which had characterised capitalist development in the 1860s was supplanted by an enormous concentration of production in the hands of factory owners, bankers and big business. The age of finance capital had arrived. Colonialism, which had been on the wane, underwent an explosive revival as the need arose for new areas in which to invest and the establishment of protected markets to consume the vast output of commodities produced by the advanced capitalist countries.

This process intensified following the economic crisis of the 1870s, marked by the Long Depression, which drove European powers to expand into new territories as a means of alleviating mounting class tensions at home. Thirteen years before the Berlin Conference, the Paris Commune of 1871—the first instance in history where the working class seized power and formed a workers' state—had terrified the European ruling class.

Declining industrial profitability and falling agricultural prices spurred a search for alternative markets, raw materials, and investment opportunities. Africa, with its abundant resources—such as rubber, gold, and ivory—and its potential as a market for European goods, was an attractive target. Amid rising competition among imperial powers, colonisation became a strategy to secure trade routes, establish economic dominance, and assert political influence in the face of rival imperialist ambitions.

Despite the veneer of civility and diplomacy, the Berlin Conference centered on a ruthless and predatory struggle among rival groups of national capitalists for the strengthening of their world economic and strategic position. It was attended by representatives from every major European imperialist power, alongside the United States, Tsarist Russia, and the Ottoman Empire.

Despite 80 percent of Africa remaining under traditional rule at the time of the conference, no Africans were present at the negotiating table. European-recognised sovereign nations like Morocco, Liberia, and Ethiopia were not invited. The Sultan of Zanzibar, who had become a pawn of British imperialism in its efforts to control the East African coast and the Western Indian Ocean against French rivals, pleaded for an invitation but was ignored by London.

Initially, the aim of the conference was not the immediate partition of Africa, but as Nigerian historian Godfrey Uzoigwe states in , "It nevertheless ended up disposing of territory, passing resolutions

pertaining to the free navigation of the Niger, the Benue, and their affluents; and laying down the rules to be observed in future with regard to the occupation of territory on the coasts of Africa.”^[1]

The conference’s proceedings, discussion and conclusions made clear that the continent’s rich resources and human labour were to be exploited for profits. Its mountains, lakes, rivers, canals and coastlines were now geostrategic enclaves in the competition for world hegemony. Even the most remote regions acquired a strategic significance which often outweighed their immediate economic importance.

British Prime Minister Lord Salisbury cynically admitted, “We have been engaged in drawing lines up maps where no white man’s foot ever trod; we have been giving away mountains and rivers and lakes to each other, only hindered by the small impediment that we never knew exactly where the mountains and rivers and lakes were.”^[2]

The imperialist powers adopted the “General Act of the Berlin Conference”. Two of its articles were to play a devastating role in the carve up. Article 34 was the “doctrine of spheres of influence”, which stipulated that any European nation which wanted to take possession of an African coast or declared “protectorate” must notify other signatories of the Berlin Act to have this ratified.

Article 35 was the “doctrine of effective occupation” which stipulated that the imperialist occupiers had to demonstrate possession of a territory, or “authority” to “protect existing rights, and as the case maybe, freedom of trade and of transit under the conditions agreed upon”. This principle was to become the catalyst for military conquest of the African continent.

The agreement was signed and ratified by 13 of the 14 nations present—excluding the United States—establishing the framework for the conquest, partition, and exploitation of Africa, a continent of over 28 million square kilometres. The US chose not to sign the Act, preoccupied with its own continental expansion and ethnic cleansing of the Native American population, addressing the challenges of industrial expansion following the post-Civil War Reconstruction period, and upholding the Monroe Doctrine across South America—soon to become a tool to impose its own form of semi-colonial dominance in the region.

Washington, however, was deeply involved in the proceedings. It attempted to push for an “open door” policy of free trade that would secure its access to markets controlled by others—a strategy of imperialist exploitation that would later be imposed on China. The US also played a pivotal role in supporting Belgium’s establishment of the Congo Free State under King Leopold II, whose brutal regime resulted in the deaths of an estimated five to eight million Congolese through forced labour and systematic terror.

In popular presentations, the Berlin Conference initiated the Scramble for Africa. However, the conference did not begin the partition of Africa but only laid down a few rules to govern the plunder process already in full swing. France occupied Tunisia in 1881 and Guinea in 1884. In 1882, British troops invaded Egypt, which at that time was officially part of the Ottoman Empire. Italy subdued parts of Eritrea in 1870 and 1882. In April 1884, the German Reich annexed German Southwest Africa (today Namibia), moving into Togo and Cameroon in July of the same year.

In less than three decades after the conference, with the sole exception of Liberia and Ethiopia, 90 percent of the continent, a fifth of the planet’s surface, was carved up into around 40 colonial territories by five major imperialist powers. France held a dominant position in West Africa, Britain predominated in eastern and southern

Africa, while Belgium secured the vast territory of the Congo. Germany took over what today is Namibia, Cameron, Tanzania, Burundi and Rwanda. The Portuguese established themselves in today’s Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique and Angola. Spain, which had lost most of its dominions in South America, secured parts of Morocco and Equatorial Guinea.

Uzoigwe describes the unpreceded consequences of the Conference: “what is most remarkable about our period is the co-ordinated manner, speed and comparative ease—from the European point of view—with which this was accomplished. Nothing like that had ever happened before.”^[3]

A week before the conference closed after 104 days on February 26, 1885, Nigeria’s *Lagos Observer* declared, “the world had, perhaps, never witnessed a robbery on so large a scale.”^[4]

To be continued

Godfrey. N. Uzoigwe, “European partition and conquest of Africa: An Overview” in *General history of Africa, VII: Africa under colonial domination, 1880-1935* (1985), p.29. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000184296>

Lord Salisbury quoted in Anene, J.C, ‘The International Boundaries of Nigeria, 1885-1960’ (London, The Framework of an Emergent African Nation, Longman Press, 1970), p.3.

Godfrey N. Uzoigwe, *ibid.*, p. 19.

Cited in Godfrey N. Uzoigwe, “Reflections on the Berlin West Africa Conference, 1884-1885.” *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 12, no. 3 (1984), p. 17. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44715366>.

[1] Godfrey. N. Uzoigwe, “European partition and conquest of Africa: An Overview” in *General history of Africa, VII: Africa under colonial domination, 1880-1935* (1985), p.29. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000184296>

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[3] Godfrey N. Uzoigwe, *ibid.*, p. 19.

[4] Cited in Godfrey N. Uzoigwe, “Reflections on the Berlin West Africa Conference, 1884-1885.” *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 12, no. 3 (1984), p. 17. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44715366>.



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