Srebrnik, Henry. “Berlin Conference (1884-1885).” *The* *Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism*. London: Taylor and Francis 2016. Ed: Stephen Ross.

The Berlin West Africa Conference of 1884-1885, as it was called, ushered in what became known as the ‘New Imperialism’. While the first waves of European expansion had focused on the Americas and Asia, the third one concentrated on Africa, largely ignored since the conclusion of the Atlantic slave trade at the beginning of the 19th century. Its imperialist effects served as a prelude to the colonial partitioning of Africa.

In 1884, only the coastal areas of Africa were colonized by European powers. With the exception of trading posts along the coasts, the continent was essentially ignored. This changed as a result of one man’s ambitions and greed.

In 1876 King Leopold II (1835-1909) of Belgium had hired Henry Morton Stanley (1841-1904) to explore and colonize the Congo River basin of equatorial Africa. His claims to the Congo, which emerged out of the scientific and philanthropic activities of the Association internationale du Congo (AIC), would lead to a ‘scramble for Africa’ amongst France, Germany, Great Britain and Portugal, among those represented at the Conference.

French intelligence had discovered Leopold’s plans, and France was quickly engaging in its own colonial exploration. French naval officer Pierre de Brazza (182-1905) was dispatched to central Africa, traveled into the western Congo basin, and raised the French flag over the newly founded Brazzaville in 1881, in what is currently the Republic of the Congo.

Portugal, which had a long-established colonial empire in the area in what is now Angola, also claimed much of the region. In order to forestall further French efforts in the Congo basin, an Anglo-Portuguese Treaty of 26 February 1884 recognised Portuguese rights along the Angolan coastline.

Chancellor Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898) of Germany took advantage of the resultant French anger by persuading the government of French Prime Minister Jules Ferry (1832-1893) to join him in sponsoring a major gathering to create an orderly division of European spheres of influence in Africa. King Leopold would now be able to convince them that common trade in Africa was in the best interests of all.

Although Portugal’s ambitions, too, had precipitated the call for an international forum on Africa, now Portugal would go too far. The Portuguese government presented a project, known as the ‘Pink Map’, in which its colonies of Angola, on the Atlantic, and Mozambique, along the Indian Ocean in east Africa, would be united across a belt of southern Africa by the occupation of the intervening territory. Portuguese control of this area -- lands that later became Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Malawi – would have prevented Britain from governing contiguous territory in eastern Africa between the Sudan and South Africa. Britain determined to forestall this and would.

The overt purpose of the Conference, attended by France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Great Britain, Portugal, Spain, the United States, Austria-Hungary, Russia, Italy, Denmark, Sweden and Norway (at the time one country), and Ottoman Turkey, was to ‘manage’ the ongoing process of colonisation in Africa so as to avoid the outbreak of armed conflict between rival colonial powers.

The Conference coincided with Germany’s sudden emergence as an imperial power after its unification in 1871. Although Bismarck felt that imperialism would do Germany no good, and wanted no part of it, he was overridden by public opinion.

The Conference ushered in a period of heightened colonial activity by European powers, while simultaneously eliminating most existing forms of African autonomy and self-governance.

Once convened, it ran over a period of three months between 15 November 1884 and 26 February 1885. The outcome was the adoption of a General Act signed and ratified by all participants, with the exception of the United States, in order to secure ‘the development of trade and civilization in certain regions in Africa’ while mitigating ‘the misunderstanding and disputes which might in future arise from new acts of occupation on the coast of Africa’ and ‘furthering the moral and material well-being of the native populations’.

The General Act, published on 26 February 1885, contained four ‘Declarations’ and two ‘Acts of Navigation’ (relating to the Congo and Niger rivers respectively), arranged in seven chapters and 38 separate articles. Among other things, it, set out the conditions under which territory might be acquired on the coast of Africa; it internationalised the two rivers; it orchestrated a new campaign to abolish the overland trade in slaves; and it declared as ‘neutral’ a vast swathe of central Africa delimited as the ‘conventional basin of the Congo’. Article 17 of the General Act provided for the establishment of an International Commission charged with execution of the provisions of the Act of Navigation for the Congo (which, in fact, was never established), and in Article 30 Britain was held responsible for applying the principles of freedom of navigation on the Niger so far as its waters ‘may be under her sovereignty or protection’.

Its advocates claimed the Conference was all about philanthropy and the internationalisation of territory and free trade, but in fact it legitimized colonisation, exploitation and the subordination of the indigenous populations of the continent. Even if the partition of Africa was not the intent, the dynamics of commercial interest and the competition between colonial powers, once set in motion, made this inevitable. By the mid-19th century, Africa was considered ripe for exploration, trade, and settlement. European nations such as Great Britain, France, and Germany had begun looking to Africa for natural resources for their growing industrial sectors as well as a potential market for the goods these factories produced. In Britain, the ‘blessed trinity’ of commerce, civilization and Christianity was lauded as a way to identify international morality with commercial interests.

The Conference created a legal and political framework for the subsequent partition of Africa by turning it into a ‘terra nullius ’, meaning that European sovereignty could be established at will over territories not yet occupied. By silencing native resistance through the subordination of their claims to sovereignty, and providing an effective ideology of colonial rule, it helped formalise the international legal structure of imperialism. Neither the Berlin Conference itself nor the framework for future negotiations provided any say for the peoples of Africa over the partitioning of their homelands. It was a conference purporting to determine the future of Africa in which no Africans were involved.

The participants sought to regulate colonial competition by defining ‘effective occupation’ as the criterion for recognition of territorial claims – colonies were to be recognized only if actually possessed. The Germans, who were new to the continent of Africa, believed that as far as the extension of power in Africa was concerned, no colonial power should have any legal right to a territory, unless it exercised strong and effective political control. Since Germany was a late comer to the continent and was unlikely to gain many possessions, it had an interest in forcing other European powers to give up their own if they could not have a strong political presence.

Articles 34 and 35 therefore sought to ward off the possibility of open conflict between colonising powers by requiring mutual notification of the taking of new possessions and by insisting that occupation be effective rather than purely symbolic.

Though the centre of Africa was supposed to be internationalised, it eventually became Belgian, as the Conference decisions would lead to the recognition of King Leopold’s fledgling Congo Free State, with dire consequences for its population. Its precise borders came to be definitively defined through a series of later agreements.

It was not a colony as such, as there was no metropolitan power to which it was responsible; nor was it a state formed, like Liberia, as a consequence of settlement. It still retained the form of a private ‘philanthropic’ initiative advancing the common interests of the peoples of Africa and Europe.

Leopold had cultivated the notion that he wished to sponsor a self-westernising native confederation. The Free State would become a convenient device which would allow the European powers to preserve access to the area without undertaking financial or political obligations – Leopold would take care of those – while persuading themselves that they were advancing the well-being of Africans.

In effect, while the Congo basin became an entity that was treated as an independent state, in reality it became the personal property of Leopold, who instituted one of Africa’s most brutal and exploitative colonial regimes, marked by violence, slavery and mass murder, until public outcries forced the Belgian government to take it over in 1908. This was the arguably the worst result to come out of the Berlin Conference.

The Berlin Conference remapped Africa without considering cultural or linguistic borders, dividing the continent into some 50 different colonies. This new map of the continent was superimposed over the more than one thousand indigenous cultures and regions of Africa. By the start of the First World War, only Ethiopia and Liberia remained independent.

The new countries divided coherent groups of people and merged together disparate groups who really did not get along. When Africa regained its independence after the late 1950s, the legacy of political fragmentation that had resulted from carving up the continent could neither be eliminated nor made to operate satisfactorily. The African politico-geographical map, which makes little sense, is thus a permanent liability that resulted from the Berlin Conference.

The New Imperialism gave rise to new social views of colonialism, including the idea of ‘civilizing’ Africans, as described in Rudyard Kipling’s poem ‘The White Man's Burden’ (1899), while critiqued by others such as Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* (1899). European powers tried to associate colonial rule with the goals of justice and morality, resulting in the rule over tropical lands for a time gaining widespread acceptance.

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**Paratextual material**

Conrad, J. (1899) ‘Heart of Darkness’, *Blackwood’s Magazine* 165 (1000, 1001, 1002), 3 parts. (Available through *Conrad First: The Joseph Conrad Periodical Online* <<http://bit.ly/PinCMF>>, a project sponsored by the Department of English, Uppsala University. All scanned images accessed through *Conrad First* are in the Public Domain and be reproduced. For copyright information, see <http://www.conradfirst.net/conrad/copyright>.)

Kipling, R. (1899) ‘The White Man’s Burden’, *McClure's* *Magazine* 12 (4): [290-291]. (Available online via unz.org <http://bit.ly/RLNd06>. See <<http://bit.ly/tPfpcS>> and <<http://bit.ly/PUSlua>> for Licensing information.)