The Colonization of Africa

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Between the 1870s and 1900, Africa faced European imperialist aggression, diplomatic pressures, military invasions, and eventual conquest and colonization. At the same time, African societies put up various forms of resistance against the attempt to colonize their countries and impose foreign domination. By the early twentieth century, however, much of Africa, except Ethiopia and Liberia, had been colonized by European powers.

The European imperialist push into Africa was motivated by three main factors, economic, political, and social. It developed in the nineteenth century following the collapse of the profitability of the slave trade, its abolition and suppression, as well as the expansion of the European capitalist Industrial Revolution. The imperatives of capitalist industrialization—including the demand for assured sources of raw materials, the search for guaranteed markets and profitable investment outlets—spurred the European scramble and the partition and eventual conquest of Africa. Thus the primary motivation for European intrusion was economic.

**The Scramble for Africa**

But other factors played an important role in the process. Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, Italy, Portugal, and Spain were competing for power within European power politics. One way to demonstrate national power was through the acquisition of territories around the world, including Africa. The social factor was the third major element. As a result of industrialization, major social problems grew in Europe: unemployment, poverty, homelessness, social displacement from rural areas, and so on. These social problems developed partly because not all people could be absorbed by the new capitalist industries. One way to resolve this problem was to acquire colonies and export this "surplus population." This led to the establishment of settler-colonies in Algeria, Tunisia, South Africa, Namibia, Angola, Mozambique, and central African areas like Zimbabwe and Zambia. Eventually the overriding economic factors led to the colonization of other parts of Africa.

Thus it was the combination of these economic, political, and social factors and forces that led to the “Scramble for Africa” and the attempts by European commercial, military, and political agents to declare and establish a stake in different parts of the continent through inter-imperialist commercial competition, the declaration of exclusive claims to particular territories for trade, the imposition of tariffs against other European traders, and claims to exclusive control of waterways and commercial routes in different parts of Africa.

This scramble was so intense that there were fears that it could lead to inter-imperialist conflicts and even wars. To prevent this, the German chancellor Otto von Bismarck convened a diplomatic summit of European powers in the late nineteenth century. This was the famous Berlin West African conference (more generally known as the Berlin Conference), held from November 1884 to February 1885. The conference produced a treaty known as the Berlin Act, with provisions to guide the conduct of the European inter-imperialist competition in Africa. Some of its major articles were as follows:

1. The Principle of Notification (Notifying) other powers of a territorial annexation
2. The Principle of Effective Occupation to validate the annexations
3. Freedom of Trade in the Congo Basin
4. Freedom of Navigation on the Niger and Congo Rivers
5. Freedom of Trade to all nations
6. Suppression of the Slave Trade by land and sea

This treaty, drawn up without African participation, provided the basis for the subsequent partition, invasion, and colonization of Africa by various European powers.

**A Period of Change**

It is quite clear that most African societies fought fiercely and bravely to retain control over their countries and societies against European imperialist designs and military invasions. But the African societies eventually lost out. This was partly for political and technological reasons. The nineteenth century was a period of profound and even revolutionary changes in the political geography of Africa, characterized by the demise of old African kingdoms and empires and their reconfiguration into different political entities. Some of the old societies were reconstructed and new African societies were founded on different ideological and social premises. Consequently, African societies were in a state of flux, and many were organizationally weak and politically unstable. They were therefore unable to put up effective resistance against the European invaders.

The technological factor was expressed in the radical disparity between the technologies of warfare deployed by the contending European and African forces. African forces in general fought with bows, arrows, spears, swords, old rifles, and cavalries; the European forces, beneficiaries of the technical fruits of the Industrial Revolution, fought with more deadly firearms, machines guns, new rifles, and artillery guns. Thus in direct encounters European forces often won the day. But as the length of some resistance struggles amply demonstrates, Africans put up the best resistance with the resources they had.

By 1900 much of Africa had been colonized by seven European powers—Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, and Italy. After the conquest of African decentralized and centralized states, the European powers set about establishing colonial state systems. The colonial state was the machinery of administrative domination established to facilitate effective control and exploitation of the colonized societies.