

The Scramble for Africa

But other factors played an important role in the process. The political impetus derived from the impact of inter-European power struggles and competition for preeminence. Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, Italy, Portugal, and Spain were competing for power within European power politics. One way to demonstrate national preeminence 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 interplay of these economic, political, and social factors and forces that led to the scramble for Africa and the frenzied 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.