

Scramble for Africa

Find out about Europe's rapid colonisation of Africa from the 1880s

Slow to colonise

Africa was the last populated continent to be colonised by Europeans. Native peoples had been supplanted by Europeans in the Americas and in Asia from the early sixteenth century, but in Africa, Europeans had limited themselves to a few trading forts. The reasons for this are varied. Parts of Africa were well populated and simply too difficult to overcome. Other parts were already under the influence of the powerful Ottoman Empire, which was more than capable of resisting European encroachment.

A major factor in West Africa was the disease environment: whereas in the Americas, Europeans found a native population with no resistance to Old World diseases such as influenza and smallpox, the situation in Africa was the reverse. Europeans had no resistance to tropical diseases such as malaria or yellow fever, and the region quickly became known as 'The White Man's Graveyard'.

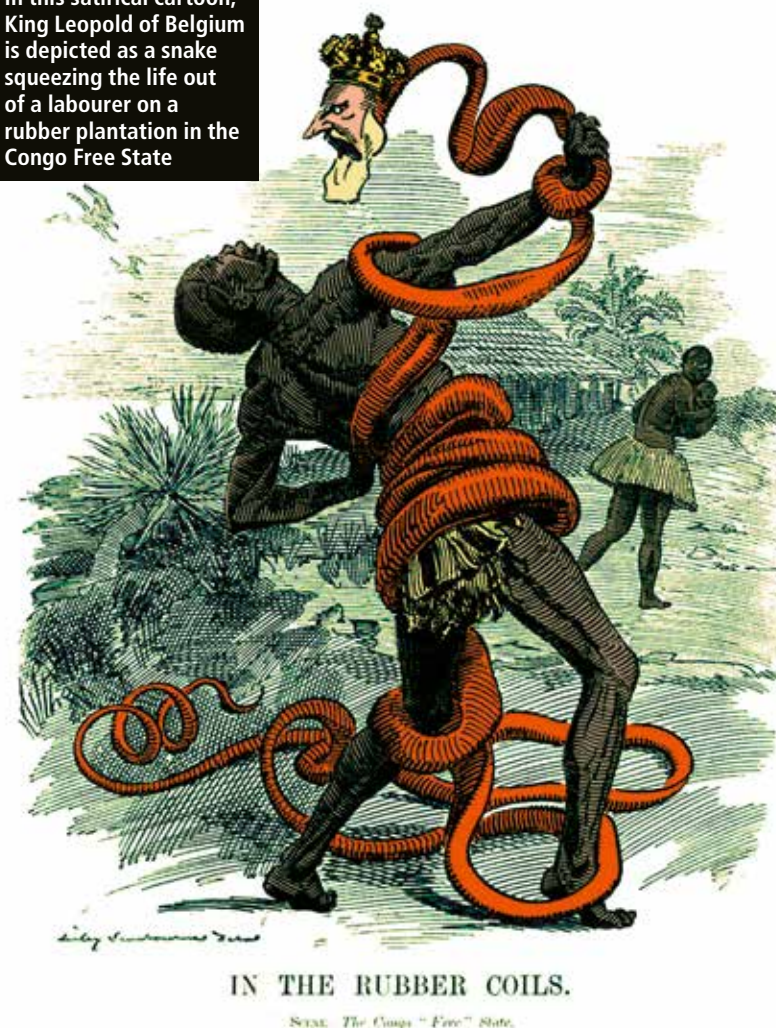
Rapid control

As late as 1880, European control of Africa was minimal, and most of the African interior remained unexplored by Europeans. By 1914, nearly the entire continent was under European control, with the French dominating the northwest, the British the south and northeast, and Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Belgium carving up the rest. There were several explanations for this 'scramble for Africa.' By far the most relevant was the idea in European capitals that, in order to be a 'Great Power', you needed an empire.

Britain was the dominant world power in the nineteenth century, with the largest empire (encompassing Canada, Australia and India) and the largest navy, which controlled much of world trade. France had lost most of its empire in the eighteenth century and was keen to recover its imperial status. The unification of Italy in 1866 and Germany in 1870 created two new nations with imperial ambitions.

A secondary, but nonetheless vital, factor was the gradual improvement of medical knowledge about tropical diseases, which led to the emergence of quinine as a treatment for malaria. Europeans were increasingly able to survive in African conditions.

In this satirical cartoon, King Leopold of Belgium is depicted as a snake squeezing the life out of a labourer on a rubber plantation in the Congo Free State



Asserting control

In the early 1880s, European nations began to feel the need to act before their imperial rivals did and so started to assert control over much larger swathes of African territory. France occupied Tunisia in 1881, and in the following year, wary of losing control over the Suez Canal, the British asserted control in Egypt. In 1884, Germany formalised its control over parts of west, southwest and southeast Africa.

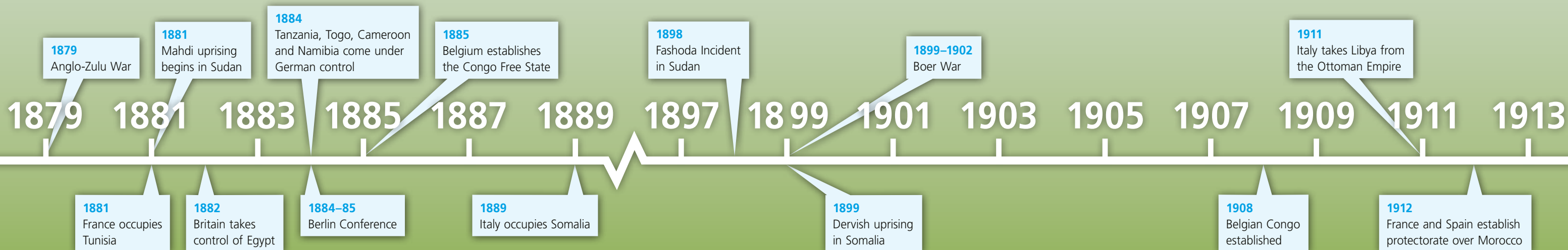
Aware that there was a substantial risk of conflict between European powers, a conference was organised in Berlin from November 1884 to February 1885. The conference agreed certain 'spheres of influence' for each nation, and that each European power would keep its rivals informed of new colonial ventures. With the broad agreement of the other powers, each European nation began to consolidate its African territories in earnest. Needless to say, the views of native inhabitants were ignored, due to a general belief that Europeans were bringing 'civilisation' to 'savage' regions.

All colonial regimes exploited Africa for its natural resources. One of the most repressive was the Congo Free State established by Belgium, where brutal forced labour on rubber plantations took a terrible toll on the population. Local uprisings against European encroachment, such as the Zulu Wars in South Africa, the Mahdi uprising in Sudan and the Dervish resistance in Somalia were eventually overwhelmed by European military technology. In South Africa, resistance by Dutch settlers to British encroachment was eventually eliminated by the Boer Wars.

Tense standoffs

Despite the agreement forged in Berlin, Europeans still came close to conflict in Africa. In 1898, a French force attempting to link French West Africa with the Red Sea encountered a British force trying to establish a 'Cape to Cairo' link at Fashoda in Sudan. After a tense standoff the French withdrew, seeing a longer-term strategic benefit to keeping Britain as an ally – a decision that would result in the Entente Cordiale in 1904. In Morocco, Germany tested French control in 1905 and again in 1911, and when the First World War broke out, Britain and France moved quickly – and largely successfully – against German colonies.

Peace in 1918 reaffirmed European control over Africa. The slow process of decolonisation would not commence until after the Second World War and was only completed in 1990 with the independence of Namibia.



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