

Heart of Darkness context: Imperialism and Colonialism

God has not been preparing the English speaking and Teutonic peoples for a thousand years for nothing but vain and idle self-contemplation and self-admiration. No! He has made us adept in government that we may administer government among savage and servile peoples.

Albert Beveridge (1903)

Dividing a Continent: The Berlin Conference (1884-1885)

The Berlin Conference was Africa's undoing in more ways than one. The colonial powers superimposed their domains on the African continent. By the time independence returned to Africa in the 1950's, the realm had acquired a legacy of political fragmentation that could neither be eliminated nor made to operate satisfactorily.

In 1884 at the request of Portugal, German chancellor Otto von Bismark called together the major western powers of the world to negotiate questions and end confusion over the control of Africa. Bismark appreciated the opportunity to expand Germany's sphere of influence over Africa and planned to force Germany's rivals to struggle with one another for territory.

At the time of the conference, 80% of Africa remained under native African control. What ultimately resulted was a hodgepodge of geometric boundaries that divided Africa into fifty irregular colonies. This new map of the continent was superimposed over the one thousand indigenous cultures and regions of Africa. The new countries lacked rhyme or reason and divided coherent groups of people and merged together disparate groups who really did not get along. Fourteen countries were represented by a plethora of ambassadors when the conference opened in Berlin on November 15, 1884. Of these fourteen nations, France, Germany, Great Britain, and Portugal were the major players in the conference, controlling most of colonial Africa at the time.

The initial task of the conference was to agree that the Congo River and Niger River mouths and basins would be considered neutral and open to trade. Despite its neutrality, part of the Congo Basin became a personal kingdom for Belgium's King Leopold II and under his rule, over half of the region's population died.

At the time of the conference, only the coastal areas of Africa were colonized by the European powers. At the Berlin Conference the European colonial powers scrambled to gain control over the interior of the continent. The conference lasted until February 26, 1885--a three month period where colonial powers haggled over geometric boundaries in the interior of the continent, disregarding the cultural and linguistic boundaries already established by the indigenous African population.

Following the conference, the give and take continued. By 1914, the conference participants had fully divided Africa among themselves into fifty countries. Major colonial holdings included:

- Great Britain desired a Cape-to-Cairo collection of colonies and almost succeeded with their control of Egypt, Sudan (Anglo-Egyptian Sudan), Uganda, Kenya (British East Africa), South Africa, and Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Botswana (Rhodesia). The British also controlled Nigeria and Ghana (Gold Coast).
- France took much of western Africa, from Mauritania to Chad (French West Africa) and Gabon and part of the Congo (French Equatorial Africa).
- **Belgium and King Leopold II (personally) controlled the Belgian Congo.**
- Portugal took Mozambique in the east and Angola in the west.
- Italy's holdings were Somalia (Italian Somaliland) and a portion of Ethiopia.
- Germany took Namibia (German Southwest Africa) and Tanzania (German East Africa).
- Spain claimed the smallest territory - Equatorial Guinea (Rio Muni).

Blackburn, Winston. *Imperialists Divide Africa*. Social Studies Department. Natick High School. <http://www.natick.k12.ma.us/~winston_blackburn/>

Social Darwinism is a belief, popular in the late Victorian era in England, America, and elsewhere, which states that the strongest or fittest should survive and flourish in society, while the weak and unfit should be allowed to die. The theory was chiefly expounded by Herbert Spencer, whose ethical philosophies always held an elitist view and received a boost from the application of Darwinian ideas such as adaptation and natural selection.

Herbert Spencer, the father of Social Darwinism as an ethical theory, was thinking in terms of elitist, "might makes right" sorts of views long before Darwin published his theory. However, Spencer quickly adapted Darwinian ideas to his own ethical theories. The concept of adaptation allowed him to claim that the rich and powerful were better adapted to the social and economic climate of the time, and the concept of natural selection allowed him to argue that it was natural, normal, and proper for the strong to thrive at the expense of the weak. After all, he claimed, that is exactly what goes on in nature every day.

However, Spencer did not just present his theories as placing humans on a parallel with nature. Not only was survival of the fittest natural, but it was also morally correct. Indeed, some extreme Social Darwinists argued that it was morally incorrect to assist those weaker than oneself, since that would be promoting the survival and possible reproduction of someone who was fundamentally unfit.

Social Darwinism was used to justify numerous exploits which we classify as of dubious moral value today. Colonialism was seen as natural and inevitable, and given justification through Social Darwinian ethics - people saw natives as being weaker and more unfit to survive, and therefore felt justified in seizing land and resources. Social Darwinism applied to military action as well; the argument went that the strongest military would win, and would therefore be the most fit. Casualties on the losing side, of course, were written off as the natural result of their unfit status. Finally, it gave the ethical nod to brutal colonial governments who used oppressive tactics against their subjects.

Replicators: Evolutionary Powerhouses. ThinkQuest. <<http://library.thinkquest.org/C004367/home.shtml>>