

# Berlin Conference 140 Years Later

Colonial legacy of division and exploitation continues into the 21st century

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*From November 15, 1884, until February 26, 1885, the Berlin West Africa Conference was held in Germany where numerous European states convened to carve up the continent based upon their own economic interests.*

Commonly known as the Berlin Conference, the gathering marked the consolidation of European imperialist rule on the African continent which lasted formally for more than a century.

One artistic expression which emanated from the gathering was a portrayal of **King Leopold II** carving up a giant cake which represented the African continent. Africa had already garnered enormous wealth for several European and North American states through the Atlantic Slave Trade and the establishment of colonies in Western Hemisphere.

Portugal was one of the earliest colonizers and enslavers in Africa and maintained a presence from the 15th through the 20th centuries. Spain and Portugal, the pioneers of European slave and colonial structures, were later overshadowed by the Dutch, British, French and the United States.

The abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade and eventually involuntary servitude in the Western feudal and burgeoning capitalist states did not usher in a renewed and more inclusive form of bourgeois democracy. Colonialism was a logical outcome of the slave system. As industrial production provided an enhanced rational methodology for the exploitation of labor, the colonial system with its reliance on land seizures, population displacement, forced taxation, cash crop production and mining reaped far greater profits for the ruling class.

African enslavement was resisted internally from its early phase between the 15th and 18th centuries until its eventual demise in the 19th century. The successful slave rebellion which transformed into a revolutionary movement in Haiti between 1791-1804 signaled the rise of widespread resistance to human bondage. In the U.S. notable rebellions such as on the Louisiana German Coast of 1811; Denmark Vessey in Charleston, South Carolina during 1822; Nat Turner and his comrades in South Hampton County, Virginia in 1831; John Brown at Harper's Ferry in Virginia in 1859; and the 200,000 Africans who joined the Union army in the Civil War were motivated by the desire to eliminate their enslavement.

Interestingly enough it would be the territories initially colonized by Spain and Portugal which would be the last countries to abolish slavery in the late 1880s in Cuba and Brazil. However, despite the legal abolition of involuntary servitude, colonialism, racism and economic exploitation would continue.



## Codifying Colonial Exploitation

The Berlin Conference was designed to utilize the knowledge acquired by the European explorers who traveled throughout areas of the African continent to assess their capacity for the domination of land and labor along with the extraction of its riches. Henry Morton Stanley, who was born in Wales and later immigrated to the U.S. where he served in both the Confederate and Union armies during the Civil War, was recruited by King Leopold II to map out areas of Central Africa for the exploitation of the land and its people.

These imperialist designs on Central Africa by the Belgian monarchy conflicted with that of France which had deployed its own explorer, Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza, who proceeded to challenge Leopold II for his claim to the area. The connection between the exploration and mapping of Central and other regions of Africa, and the pursuit of profits was made clear in Leopold II's instructions to Stanley [when he said](#):

“It is not about Belgian colonies. It is about establishing a new state that is as large as possible and about its governance. It should be clear that in this project there can be no question of granting the Negroes the slightest form of political power. That would be ridiculous. The whites, who lead the posts, have all the power.”

Consequently, the purpose of the Berlin Conference was to resolve these differences so that the total colonization of Africa could move forward rapidly. The entire process of colonization was an extremely violent affair.

Between 1876 and 1908 in Congo, estimates are that 8-10 million Africans died due to the horrendous treatment from the Belgian ruling class. During this initial period the territory was run exclusively by the monarchy. After 1908 the Congo came under Belgian colonial rule where it remained until 1960.

One source said of the 1884-85 Berlin meeting [that](#):

“The conference, proposed by Portugal in pursuance of its special claim to control of the Congo estuary, was necessitated by the jealousy and suspicion with which the great European powers viewed one another's attempts at colonial expansion in Africa. The general act of the Conference of Berlin declared the Congo River basin to be neutral (a fact that in no way deterred the Allies from extending the war into that area in World War I); guaranteed freedom for trade and shipping for all states in the basin; forbade slave trading; and rejected Portugal's claims to the Congo River estuary—thereby making possible the founding of the independent Congo Free State, to which Great Britain, France, and Germany had already agreed in principle.”

Nonetheless, this conference was not able to prevent violent disputes over the future of Africa and the world. The European imperialists in Congo and many other regions of Africa utilized repressive measures which were reminiscent of the period of enslavement where forced labor, coercion, detentions, exile, beatings and killings were routine.

During the first decade of the 20th century, the German colonialists carried out genocidal onslaughts in South-West Africa (now Namibia) during 1904-1907 when 60-80 percent of the African population was wiped out. During the same time period in Tanganyika (now Tanzania) in East Africa, the German conquerors killed thousands of people between 1905-1907. These acts of genocide by Germany were in response to resistance wars launched by the Africans in Namibia and Tanzania when they rose up against the national oppression and economic exploitation inflicted by imperialism.



Tanzania Maji Maji Rebellion 1905-1907

World War I (1914-1918) and World War II (1939-1945) grew out of contradictions within the imperialist system. After 1945, the U.S. emerged as the undisputed dominant political and economic power in the capitalist world. The only real challenges to imperialism emerged from the socialist camp and the national liberation movements.

## Legacy of the Berlin Conference

Colonialism remains in its various forms throughout the world. France has been exposed for its ongoing colonial project when recent rebellions have erupted in New Caledonia and Martinique.

On the African continent, France relinquished most of its classical colonies and has exerted its influence through neocolonial structures which involve disadvantageous economic arrangements and the presence of military forces which guard the interests of Paris. In the early 1960s, the French government conducted nuclear weapons testing in the Sahara irrespective of the protests from the Ghana government under **President Kwame Nkrumah**.

In recent years, the Sahel region of West Africa has been a flashpoint for anti-imperialist movements which have rejected French, U.S. and NATO military involvement. In Niger, where some of the largest deposits of uranium in the world exist, the long-term contract between the Committee to Safeguard the Homeland (CNSP) government for uranium extraction has been cancelled by the new administration.

Reuters in a December 4 report [pointed out](#):

“French nuclear firm Orano says the military authorities in Niger have taken control of its uranium mining operations in the West African country. After seizing power in a coup in July last year, Niger’s military rulers said they would revamp rules regulating the mining of raw materials by foreign companies. In June, they withdrew Orano’s permit to exploit one of the world’s largest uranium deposits. Orano then suspended production.

This marks another escalation in the unravelling relationship between France and Niger, following the expulsion of French troops from its former colony.”

These political shifts in the Alliance of Sahal States (AES) portend much for the future of imperialism in Africa and other geopolitical regions. African states were founding members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) which recently condemned the Israeli airstrikes on the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The African Union (AU) 55 member-states are participants in the Group of 77 Plus China which represents approximately 80 percent of the world’s population. The Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa Plus (BRICS) countries are seriously discussing de-dollarization and the building of a New Development Bank (NDB). With the statements made by the incoming U.S. administration of former President Donald Trump threatening large-scale tariffs not only against the leading trading partners of Washington which are Mexico and Canada, such measures are being weaponized as well against the BRICS countries seeking to break free from the dollar.

These conflicting interests will intensify aggravating tensions over the direction of the world economic system. These divergent objectives will foster broader alliances among the peoples of the Global South and their counterparts among the working class and nationally oppressed within the imperialist states.

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