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# The Scramble for Africa

By Mike Kubic  
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*Mike Kubic is a former correspondent of Newsweek magazine. Here he writes about African imperialism, or the act of creating an empire composed of foreign territories and colonies. As you read, identify the causes and effects of African imperialism during the 19th and 20th centuries.*

[1] In the 19th century, Western Europe made enormous contributions to the quality of our lives. It gave us, for example, the rich canvas of Alexandre Dumas' and Victor Hugo's novels; the graceful architecture of the Paris Opera and the Houses of the British Parliament; the enchantment of Claude Monet's paintings and of Ludwig van Beethoven's music – all immortal achievements that have been as important for our enjoyment and culture as was the era's Industrial Revolution for our economic well-being and progress.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, that's not all that Britain, France, Germany and other Europeans accomplished during the 1800s. They also pounced like vultures on a long-ignored continent, and collectively wrote one of the darkest chapters on man's inhumanity toward man.

Their violent assault is known as "The Scramble for Africa" and, most unusually, historians agree that its primary author was one King Leopold II of Belgium.<sup>2</sup>



*"The Rhodes Colossus Striding from Cape Town to Cairo" by Edward Linley Sambourne is in the public domain.*

Although the ruler of a small nation, King Leopold had deep pockets and an obsessive desire to own an empire. For years, he tried to buy large tracts of land in Latin America and Asia, without success. But in 1876 he read in the *London Times* that a British explorer had crossed the uncharted interior of Africa and found it "a magnificent and healthy country of unspeakable richness... [a land where] gold, copper, iron, and silver...are abundant."

1. Alexandre Dumas was a French writer known for *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo* while Victor Hugo was another French writer known for *Les Misérables* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*; Eduard Monet was a master of French impressionist painting; and Ludwig van Beethoven was an Austrian composer and pianist from Vienna. The Industrial Revolution was a period of rapid advancement in manufacturing and technology.

2. King Leopold II was the second king of Belgium and ruled from 1865 to 1909.

- [5] Losing no time, the same year Leopold invited an odd group of 37 explorers, politicians, photographers, geographers, philanthropists, missionaries and businessmen from Britain, France, Germany, Austria-Hungary, Italy and Russia to Brussel's Royal Palace for a three-day conference. He proposed to the gathering to conduct "a crusade<sup>3</sup> worthy of this age of progress," namely, "[t]o open to civilization the only part of our globe which it has not yet penetrated, [and] to pierce the darkness in which entire populations are enveloped."<sup>4</sup>

Lavishly dined and wined, his guests readily voted to create an "International African Association" with Leopold as its president. A shrewd<sup>5</sup> operator, he used the title to get a go-ahead of European (and the U.S.) governments to acquire 900,000 square miles of central African territory, an area 75 times bigger than his own country. He named it the "Free State of Congo," and proclaimed himself its "King Sovereign."<sup>6</sup>

The Belgian monarch loftily<sup>7</sup> dedicated his African realm to "relief, science and ... pacification<sup>8</sup> ... as a means of abolishing slavery [and] establishing harmony among the [native] chiefs" Specifically, Leopold promised to build across Africa a string of settlements "to promote ... that natural ascendancy that emanates<sup>9</sup> from the superiority of civilized man ... [by] diffusing<sup>10</sup> the light of civilization among the natives."

It was a royal scam.

In his voluminous<sup>11</sup> book *Africa, A Biography of the Continent*, British historian John Reader described the astonishing land grab as "a strictly personal" business venture. "Leopold's personal fortune financed the state," he wrote. "Leopold determined the nature of its administration, and Leopold was the principal<sup>12</sup> recipient of such profits as accrued<sup>13</sup> from the undertaking."

- [10] It was also the beginning of a frantic race by other European potentates<sup>14</sup> to get in on the bonanza by ripping off pieces of Africa. Joseph Conrad, in his classical novel *Heart of Darkness*, called it "the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience."

Leading the pack was France, which began making territorial deals with African chiefs as soon as Leopold made his claim to the Congo and rapidly occupied vast portions of west Africa. Another major participant in what came to be called "The New Imperialism" was Prussia's "Iron Chancellor" Otto von Bismarck.<sup>15</sup> Refusing to be left out of the suddenly widely coveted<sup>16</sup> continent, in 1883 he called an international conference to carve out Africa and enable Germany to colonize the areas of Namibia, Togoland, the Cameroons, and Tanganyika.<sup>17</sup>

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3. **Crusade (noun):** a holy military expedition taken on behalf of a religious cause
  4. **Envelope (verb):** to wrap around
  5. **Shrewd (adjective):** having or showing sharp or clever powers of judgement
  6. **Sovereign (noun):** an undisputed ruler
  7. **Loftily (adjective):** majestic or noble in character
  8. **Pacification (noun):** the act of calming the anger of someone or something else
  9. **Emanate (verb):** to send (something) out
  10. **Diffuse (verb):** to spread in all directions
  11. **Voluminous (adjective):** of great size, quantity, or volume
  12. **Principal (adjective):** first in rank or importance
  13. **Accrue (verb):** to collect
  14. **Potentate (noun):** a powerful ruler
  15. Prussia was a historic European state central to the foundation of Germany and Otto van Bismarck (1815-1898) was a Prussian statesman who unified the separate German states, excluding Austria, into a German empire with the help of Prussian leadership.

Great Britain, though a little late off the mark, colonized so eagerly that by 1914 it dominated the African continent from Egypt to South Africa and ruled over 30 percent of its population. When the scramble ended, Europe's formal holdings included the entire African continent except for Ethiopia and Liberia, and the Old World powers controlled one-fifth of the land area of the globe.

## The End of the “New Imperialism”

For a time, the African colonies produced almost as much wealth as was promised by the early explorers. One of the great beneficiaries of the scramble was its founder, King Leopold, who had the great luck of acquiring the Congo just as a widespread use of bicycles and the invention of automobiles created a mushrooming demand for rubber.

At Leopold's initiative, a British firm built a 155 mile-long narrow gauge railway from the coast into the continent's interior. It enabled the “Free State” to triple its exports of kauchuk rubber,<sup>18</sup> and the profits paid for Leopold's lavish plan to beautify Brussels with grand buildings.

- [15] African diamonds, precious metals, copper, cotton, palm oil, tin and other products were also in high demand in the increasingly prosperous, turn-of-the century Europe. Political tensions among European nations stimulated competition for African ports and naval bases, and the opening of African markets for Europe's manufactured goods added still more incentives for colonizing the continent.

But as the Europeans discovered, their new possessions were not necessarily cheap. During its first decade — before the rubber boom — the Free State of Congo produced just enough revenue to cover one-tenth of Leopold's expenditures in 1887-1888. On top of the dicey economics, African chiefs in time shook off their squabbles and inertia<sup>19</sup> and singly or jointly began to fight back.

Their bows-and-arrows-armed guerrillas<sup>20</sup> almost invariably lost to the modern armies of the colonizers, but keeping those troops in Africa was expensive and not always worth the cost. For example, in the famous battle of Adwa in 1896, 100,000 Ethiopian troops decisively defeated an Italian army and preserved their country's independence for 40 years. The German punitive<sup>21</sup> eviction of the Herero and Nama people<sup>22</sup> from their lands required 15,000 soldiers, cost almost \$2.6 billion in 2016 dollars, and took a year to execute.

But biggest by far was the price the colonialists eventually paid for the unspeakable savagery of their rule. Leopold's Belgian and native enforcers, for example, flogged,<sup>23</sup> imprisoned, starved, or massacred entire villages that failed to meet production quotas. The abuse, mutilations, and other atrocities<sup>24</sup> reduced the number of the Congolese from an estimated 20 million in 1876 to 8.5 million in 1911.

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16. **Covet** (*verb*): to desire
  17. The German protectorate of Togoland consisted of modern-day Togo and parts of Ghana. The British took the Tanganyika Territory and the Cameroons from the Germans using a League of Nations mandate in 1922; Tanganyika became an independent republic in 1961 and joined the Republic of Zanzibar in 1964 to become the modern-day country of Tanzania, while the Cameroons today make up parts of Nigeria and Cameroon.
  18. Kauchuk rubber is a brand of rubber that comes from natural sources, the rubber tree, which can be found in central Africa.
  19. **Inertia** (*noun*): state of rest or being still
  20. **Guerrilla** (*noun*): a member of a usually small group of soldiers who do not belong to a regular army and who fight in a war as an independent unit
  21. **Punitive** (*adjective*): inflicting, involving, or aiming at punishment
  22. The Herero and the Nama are two ethnic groups found in South Africa, Botswana, and Namibia. The Germans exterminated both in a system of genocide during the Herero Wars from 1904-1907.

The cruelty of the German rule was reflected in a proclamation of the colony's commander (he signed his name as "the Great General of the Mighty Kaiser, von Trotha") that the 24,000 native Herero "will have to leave the country... Otherwise I shall force them to do so by means of guns. Within the German [colony] boundaries, every Herero, whether armed or unarmed, with or without cattle, will be shot. I shall not accept any more women and children."

- [20] The order was later withdrawn on orders from Berlin, but eight out of ten Herero were killed before they reached their new destination and von Trotha was awarded the Order of Merit<sup>25</sup> for his devotion to the Fatherland.

Stories of these and other abominations<sup>26</sup> were gradually appearing in European newspapers and providing ammunition for human rights and religious groups that were agitating<sup>27</sup> against the African colonization. Leopold and his peers kept denying the atrocities, but what "punctured their lies," according to Reader's book, was "George Eastman's invention of the Kodak roll-film camera." According to Reader:

"Determined reformers took their cameras to the Congo and returned with photographs that were truly worth more than a thousand words. One horrifying picture shows an [African] man ... looking sorrowfully at the small hand and foot ... of his five year-old daughter [who] had been killed, dismembered, cooked and eaten by armed sentries."

In November, 1908, Leopold yielded to the widespread public condemnation<sup>28</sup> of his reign in Africa and turned over his territory to the Belgian government, which annexed<sup>29</sup> it and stopped its horrors. It was the start of the crumbling of "The New Imperialism," a process that was greatly accelerated by U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. His insistence on including the freedom for colonies in the 1941 Atlantic Charter, a document describing the Allied aims in World War II,<sup>30</sup> helped persuade Britain, France and other countries to give up their holdings in Africa.

By 1961, almost all of the major European colonies in Africa achieved their independence, and since the 1970s, the continent has been self-ruled.

## The American "Republic of Liberia"

- [25] The story of the "Scramble for Africa" would be incomplete without a footnote about the Republic of Liberia, the United States' sole African colony.

The Virginia-size country was carved out on the east coast of Africa already in 1820 – almost six decades before Leopold's "Free State of Congo" – and it was vastly different from its European counterparts.

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23. **Flog (verb):** to beat harshly
  24. **Atrocity (noun):** a horrifying or wicked act
  25. The Order of Merit is an honorific decoration bestowed by states, governments, or royal families in recognition of civil or military merits, or actions worthy of high recognition.
  26. **Abomination (noun):** a person or thing that is disgusting
  27. **Agitate (verb):** to disturb
  28. **Condemnation (noun):** strong disapproval
  29. **Annex (verb):** to join or add by conquest or occupation
  30. The Allies in World War II included the U.S., France, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union in the fight against Germany, Italy, and Japan. The Allies won.

Although supported by President Abraham Lincoln, Secretary of State Henry Clay, and President James Monroe,<sup>31</sup> Liberia was not a creature of the state, as were most African colonies. It was founded and paid for by private individuals, including both wealthy slave owners and Quakers, who were deeply opposed to slavery.

The purpose of their American Colonization Society<sup>32</sup> was not to exploit Africa's resources, but to find a new home for freed Africans in America who were regarded as potential leaders of slave revolts and a threat to the slave culture in the South.

The American blacks who had volunteered for the resettlement never suffered the fate of other colonized Africans by becoming subjects of foreign overlords. The Liberians chose their own constitution based on that of the U.S., and in 1948 elected their first president.

- [30] Also unlike former European colonies, Liberia – the first African colony to become independent – has friendly relations with its mother country and supports the U.S. in the United Nations and other international organizations.

And finally, one more difference: King Leopold maintained in Germany a secret trust where he kept his personal profits from the Congo. When it was discovered after his death, it held 1.8 million British pounds – about \$58 million in today's U.S. dollars.

American taxpayers have supported Liberia at least since 1912. In 2015, the U.S. aid to the four million Liberians and their poor but democratic country was \$459 million.

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31. Ironically, Monroe authored the doctrine that proclaimed any attempt "to create new colonies...in the Americas as hostile acts toward the United States.

32. The American Colonization Society was founded in 1816 to assist free black Americans in returning to Africa.

## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Which TWO of the following statements best explain the central ideas of the text?
  - A. Europeans saw Africa as land full of abundant resources that were available for the taking.
  - B. King Leopold was a visionary leader that should be admired even though his tactics were not always well received by all.
  - C. The Europeans' only motivation for colonizing Africa was to "civilize" the natives by spreading the Christian faith.
  - D. While European colonization did irreparable harm to Africa, Africans looked to Liberia as a beacon of hope for their future freedom.
  - E. European countries went to brutal lengths to secure their wealth in Africa.
  - F. Greed lead European people to use great violence because there were no strict moral rules in place.
  
2. PART A: Which statement best describes King Leopold's ideas for the resources in the Congo?
  - A. He saw an opportunity for personal wealth that would be wasted on the native population.
  - B. He saw an opportunity to increase his country's territory so that his people had more land to cultivate and live on.
  - C. He saw an opportunity to be a trendsetter in African exploration and gain even more territory for Belgium.
  - D. He saw the superiority of the African continent and a chance for Belgium to dominate world trade.
  
3. PART B: Which TWO phrases from the text best support the answer to Part A?
  - A. "Although the ruler of a small nation, King Leopold had deep pockets and an obsessive desire to own an empire." (Paragraph 5)
  - B. "He proposed to the gathering to conduct "a crusade worthy of this age of progress," namely, "[t]o open to civilization the only part of our globe which it has not yet penetrated" (Paragraph 6)
  - C. "'Leopold determined the nature of its administration, and Leopold was the principal recipient of such profits as accrued from the undertaking.'" (Paragraph 9)
  - D. "Refusing to be left out of the suddenly widely coveted continent, in 1883 he called an international conference to carve out Africa" (Paragraph 11)
  - E. "At Leopold's initiative, a British firm built a 155 mile-long narrow gauge railway from the coast into the continent's interior." (Paragraph 14)
  - F. "the opening of African markets for Europe's manufactured goods added still more incentives for colonizing the continent." (Paragraph 15)
  
4. PART A: What is the meaning of the word "ascendency" as it is used in paragraph 7?
  - A. inferiority
  - B. dominance
  - C. cruelty
  - D. wisdom

5. PART B: Which phrase from paragraph 7 best supports the answer to Part A?
- A. “establishing harmony”
  - B. “that emanates”
  - C. “from the superiority of civilized man”
  - D. “[by] diffusing the light of civilization”
6. How do paragraphs 7-8 contribute to the overall structure of the article?
- A. They reveal the central goal of European colonies in Africa.
  - B. They describe the main difference between the colonizers and the colonized.
  - C. They establish the competitive nature of the Scramble for Africa.
  - D. They reveal that Belgium had false motivations for colonizing Africa.
7. What does the author’s point of view in the section “The American ‘Republic of Liberia’” indicate about his opinion of American colonialism in Africa?

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## Discussion Questions

**Directions:** *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. In the text, the author quotes King Leopold, who said that European countries should “open to civilization the only part of our globe which it has not yet penetrated, [and] to pierce the darkness in which entire populations are enveloped.” What did King Leopold most likely mean by the word “civilization”?
2. How does the Scramble for Africa compare to the European colonization of America?
3. In your opinion, is it fair for one country to come into another and take their resources in times of peace? What about in times of war? Why or why not?
4. Can you think of recent conflicts in Africa that you can trace back to the Scramble for Africa? How do you think these conflicts might have been avoided once African countries gained their independence?