

The Berlin Conference

Enquiry: Did tensions over Africa make a European war more likely?

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In the 18th century, Europeans were afraid to explore Africa because of the risk of tropical diseases and their fear of the unknown. It was sometimes referred to as the 'Dark Continent' because of its mystery – people feared the unknown terrain and encountering hostile **natives**. Before 1840 there were European trading posts along the coast, but Europeans had not ventured further inland. A number of inventions changed this, and by the 1870s there began to be more enthusiasm for exploring central Africa.

One of the first rulers to explore the non-coastal areas of Africa was King Leopold II of Belgium. Leopold had read reports of the **raw materials** that were available in the Congo and was determined to gain control of it as a way of making his country, Belgium, rich and powerful. He secretly hired an explorer to travel there and help establish Belgian control. His explorer (Henry Morton Stanley) travelled up and down the Congo river, making agreements with local chiefs along the river and gaining Belgian **territory**.



The French were exploring the Congo at the same time and had sent an explorer named Pierre de Brazza to try and spread French influence there. This was the beginnings of what was later to be called the 'Scramble for Africa,' where European powers raced to gain land and territory across the African continent. While the French and the Belgians were competing in the Congo, the other European powers began to worry.

The other European governments were also attempting to establish control in Africa in order to have access to trading routes. The Congo was home to a large river which could be very useful in trade across Africa – if the Belgians controlled it, this could cause problems for other European governments. It became clear that the European powers were at risk of going to war over Africa if they kept competing in the region. All of the European countries seemed to have become obsessed with gaining as much land as possible in order to prevent it being controlled by one of their rivals.



In order to try and deal with the problem, there was a **conference** held in Berlin in 1884. It was attended by representatives of thirteen European states. The representatives met in order to decide the future of Africa. None of the representatives who were invited were from an African country. The conference was chaired by Otto Von Bismarck, the Chancellor of Germany. The result of the conference was the **Treaty** of Berlin, completed in 1885. The Treaty was completed in order to prevent European countries from having armed conflict on the ground in Africa, which could have caused a war in Europe. The main articles of the treaty stated:

- There should be free passage to all ships on the Congo and Niger rivers (for trade);
- To take an African territory, a European nation had to inform other governments, and demonstrate that they had already 'effectively occupied' the territory they wanted;
- Slavery should be abolished across the continent.

It should be noted that although the Treaty of Berlin had a provision for ending slavery across the continent, that was not the reason that the European powers met. It was politically convenient for the European countries to use **humanitarian** concerns to justify their meeting. Their main priority was to regulate European colonisation and trade in Africa for personal benefit, not to protect the African population. In actual fact, forced labour and oppression was used throughout the colonies after 1885.



Although the Berlin Conference had been called in order to try and prevent the European powers from competing and ultimately going to war, tension remained afterwards. In many ways, the Berlin Conference actually sped up the race between the European nations to gain new land. Each country became determined to expand their empire and prevent their rivals from doing the same. For example, in 1884 Germany established a **protectorate** over South-West Africa. Britain responded immediately by **annexing** Bechuanaland in 1885, to try and block them off. There was also stiff competition between Britain and France. France controlled West Africa and wanted to expand to the East so that they had a trade route across the continent. The French wanted control of African ports on the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans. Britain had control of Egypt and parts of Southern Africa. The British hoped to create a direct railway route between their territories. This would mean that their trade routes would cross with the French! To make matters worse, Germany then claimed the territories of German East Africa in 1885 – interrupting both Britain and France’s plans. The conference may have stopped war in the short-term, but created **rivalries** that were to continue until 1914.



Glossary

Natives: People who originally inhabit a country.

Raw materials: Unprocessed materials used to make goods, for example cotton.

Territory: An area of land under control of a country.

Conference: A meeting.

Treaty: Agreement made between countries.

Humanitarian: Showing concern for human welfare.

Protectorate: A state that is controlled or protected by another.

Annexing: To add territory by taking control of nearby territory.

Rivalries: Competition for superiority.



Comprehension questions:

1. What was Africa known as in the 18th Century?
2. Why was European control of Africa limited by 1840?
3. Why did Leopold II send an explorer to the Congo?
4. Why was this a worry for other European nations?
5. What was called in order to try and solve this problem?
6. What was agreed in the Treaty of Berlin?

Challenge: In what ways did the Treaty of Berlin create tension between the European Powers?

Sentence starter: The Treaty of Berlin created tension between the European powers because...

An example of this was...



Extension Question

Did the Treaty of Berlin make a European war more or less likely?

Use the sentence starters and key words below to answer this question

Sentence starters:	Key words
<i>On the one hand, it could be argued...</i> <i>For example...</i> <i>This is important because...</i> <i>On the other hand, it could be argued...</i>	Rivalry Short-term Long-term Annexed Competition

