

# Europe and Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

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### INTRODUCTION

In the late 19th century, between roughly 1875 and 1900, a handful of European nations conquered most of Africa. Since this came after more than three centuries of relatively cooperative trading activity between Europeans and Africans, it represents a significant departure in world history. This "Age of Imperialism" also had long-range consequences including the spread of European languages around the globe, the creation of borders that sparked many subsequent conflicts, and the construction of institutions that made globalization possible. As a consequence, this course begins with an examination of European and African societies in the 19th century in order to determine why Europeans chose to invade Africa in the late 19th century.

### EUROPEAN SELF-IMAGE

By the mid-19th century, Europe had undergone major changes that affected their beliefs about themselves. In his book *A Generation of Materialism, 1871-1900* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941), Carlton J. H. Hayes listed the following major developments in Europe:

- the French Revolution introduced the idea of the nation-state as an organizing concept for politics, and the Napoleonic Wars showed the strength of the nation-state
- the rise of Liberalism supported a belief in progress and change
- the Industrial Revolution changed how people worked and acquired goods, the number of goods in circulation, and economic relationship between industrialized and non-industrialized regions of the world
- art and religion adapted to the new emphasis on materialism
- new techniques for communication and organization gave rise to the concept of "the masses" as a political and economic force

Carrington went on to say that these changes led to the "resurgence of economic nationalism and national imperialism." They initiated a period of intense national competition that culminated in two world wars in the 20th century. That competition, coming at the end of the 19th century, provided a direct challenge to the balance-of-power system created in 1815 to keep the peace in Europe after the Napoleonic Wars.

Confident in the superiority of their culture and institutions, Europeans looked for the same in the rest of the world, and related to other societies as if they existed on a continuum from "primitive" to "developed." In assigning these positions,

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Europeans looked especially at the level of material culture and the size of political institutions. By these criteria, northern Europeans occupied the top end of the continuum while southern Europeans, Arabs, Chinese, Native Americans and other groups occupied lower positions. Black non-Muslim Africans were near the bottom, just ahead of Australian aborigines.

## EUROPEAN BELIEFS ABOUT AFRICA

Three centuries of the slave trade had taught Europeans that Africans were inferior, and that helped to justify imperialism in the minds of many Europeans. Even slave abolitionists contributed to this by arguing that Africans had to be "protected" from slavers; i.e. they couldn't take care of themselves. The limited information brought back to Europe by explorers like Mungo Park and Henry Morton Stanley made Africans appear warlike and/or childlike, and they wrote books and gave lectures that popularized the notion of Africa as "the dark continent." For example, this relatively favorable quotation from a first-time visitor to Africa illustrates the prevailing beliefs among Europeans:

*"As we steamed into the estuary of Sierra Leone on November 18th [1889], we found Africa exactly as books of travel had led us to anticipate-- a land of excessive heat, lofty palm-trees, gigantic baobabs, and naked savages. At five o'clock we dropped anchor at Free Town, called, on account of its deadly fevers, the 'white man's grave.' Immediately, our vessel was surrounded by boats filled with men and women, shouting, jabbering, laughing, quarrelling, and even fighting. ... Without exception it was the most confusedly excited and noisy lot of humanity I have ever seen."*

Source: William Harvey Brown, On the South African Frontier: The Adventures and Observations of an American in Mashonaland and Matabeleland (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1970; London: Sampson Low, Marstan & Co., 1899), 3.

Victorian philosophers even had an explanation for African backwardness. According to late 19th century science, human development took place in three stages: savagery, marked by hunting and gathering; barbarism accompanied by the beginning of settled agriculture; and civilization, which required the development of commerce. European scientists believed that Africa were stuck in the stage of barbarism because they lived in a place with such good soil and climate that it provided "tropical abundance." The ease of life in Africa made Africans fat and lazy. For proof, Europeans relied on data about the work habits of African-American slaves (who had their own reasons for working "slow"), and ignored how seasons determined the rhythm of work for African farmers.

## AFRICAN REALITY

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Naturally, Africans had a somewhat different understanding of their culture and institutions in the 19th century. While it is impossible to generalize about the entire continent in a few sentences, it is accurate to say that the continent that produced the first humans, and which developed universities as early as the 11th century, was in a state of turmoil by the 19th century. Much of the cause can be traced to the resumption of regular contacts with Europeans beginning in the 15th century and the impact of European expansion on the Muslim world. Among the consequences were...

- the development of the overseas slave trade which created African states whose power was based on guns
- the end of the overseas slave trade in the early 19th century, undermining those states -- mostly along the coast -- which had grown strongest due to the slave trade
- Muslim reform movements that developed in response to the adoption of some aspects of European modernization by the Ottoman Empire, the center of the Muslim political world
- the expansion of the trade in slaves and ivory along the East African coast following efforts to end the slave trade in West Africa
- the proliferation of guns obtained from European and (to a lesser extent) Muslim sources

European military officers often had a more realistic view of Africa, at least after serving for a few years. As the French learned in West Africa, the coastal states in Senegal were small and relatively weak, but beyond the town of Médine in the Upper Senegal River Valley, two large interior states were still healthy enough to block French efforts for roughly forty years. The leaders of one of them, Samory Touré, created an empire by employing smiths to manufacture guns, using Islam as a unifying ideology and making an alliance with "the business community" of long distance traders.

## **TECHNOLOGY AND IMPERIALISM**

In the late 19th century, the technological gap between Europeans and Africans, already present since the 16th century, began to widen at a faster pace. The first successful use of gunpowder was by Ottoman forces at Constantinople in 1453, and its use spread to Europe more so than to Africa. Europeans adapted the technology until firearms were small enough to mount in ships or be carried by foot soldiers. They also improved the speed and economy of firearms production, making them more plentiful.

In the 19th century, European society was also more highly militarized as a result of its recent experience during the Napoleonic and Crimean Wars. The

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Napoleonic Wars lasted nearly a quarter century, involved all parts of Europe as well as parts of Africa and the Americas, and popularized Egyptian culture, especially in France. The Crimean War, which was fought in the Black Sea from 1853 to 1856, provided a generation of officers who craved military action and a testing ground for technologies that proved their worth in colonizing Africa.

Other technological changes affected the timing and process of imperialism. The British learned in 1857 how railroads and the telegraph could enable a relatively small number of British personnel to survive a rebellion in India. Advances in medical science, particularly in the field of tropical disease, made it safer for Europeans to go to Africa, and consequently easier (and cheaper) for the government, churches, military and commercial firms to recruit European staff people. Advances in firearms, particularly developments with the repeating rifle, machine gun and lightweight artillery, enabled smaller military units to defeat larger numbers of opponents, further reducing the cost of conquest. Improved steam engines gave steamships larger capacities by requiring less space for fuel, while railroads extended the reach of European commerce beyond the coasts.