

# The Causes and Effects of the Berlin Conference 1884-85

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## Abstract

When I picked my essay topic, I was convinced that it would be a fairly easy thing to write as I firmly believed that the Berlin Conference was the event in which Africa was partitioned. Thus, I set out to start writing my essay with the research question: What were the causes and effects of the Berlin Conference 1884-85? As I started my research however, I was astonished to find how utterly wrong my assumptions had been. The effects of the conference seemed so small that I had serious doubts of whether the topic was even possible to write about. The partition did in fact not take place at all in Berlin's formal negotiations due to a prohibition to speak of territorial matters. The Conference's true importance for the Scramble for Africa is this: the Conference, caused by increasing commercial interests in Africa and the territorial disputes that followed, did not instigate the partition of the continent. Instead, it accelerated a process already in motion through formalizing the colonization process. Particularly the Congo was affected, as it changed ownership twice due to the Conference. The Conference was also important for commerce and the abolishment of slave trade in Africa. I have been investigating the causes, course and effects of the Berlin Conference. The main source of information has been secondary sources found at my local university library. The most significant books for my investigation have been *The Berlin West African Conference: 1884-1885* by S.E. Crowe, *The Scramble for Africa 1876-1912* by Thomas Pakenham and *Bismarck, Europe, and Africa: The Berlin Africa Conference 1884-1885 and the Onset of Partition*, edited by Stig Förster, Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Ronald Edward Robinson. Some sources have been translated from Swedish. In these cases, the original text is found as a footnote.

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## Introduction

Until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, only a very small part of the African continent was under European rule.<sup>1</sup> But during merely two decades, the great states of Europe divided Africa between themselves and asserted their authority through bloody military conquests. The only few areas left untouched were the ones that did not carry any political value.<sup>2</sup> Historically, the Berlin Conference in 1884-85 has been commonly regarded as the one event where the leaders of Europe partitioned Africa by drawing straight lines with a ruler. However, this claim can be dismissed as a pure myth. Otto von Bismarck, the chairman of the conference, explicitly stated that no territorial matters would be dealt with as he opened proceedings. Nevertheless, the conference was significant for both Europe and Africa, but in other ways than what is commonly believed. This essay will examine the relative importance the Berlin Conference had upon the so-called Scramble for Africa by firstly analyzing the events that led to the conference and the conference itself, before investigating its consequences.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, European states such as Germany, Portugal, France and Britain had developed considerable commercial interests in Africa, and they did also wield much informal influence. Cases of formal annexations were highly unusual as there was little need for them: the same amount of power could be derived without the costs and risks of unforeseen events that armed conflicts would bring about. However, this was soon about to change.<sup>3</sup>

## Reasons for Conference

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<sup>1</sup> Oliver, Roland, and John Donnelly, Fage. *Afrikas Historia*. Trans. Hans Dahlberg. Stockholm: Aldus/Bonnier, 1970. 168. Print. "År 1879 var, trots att de västeuropeiska nationernas makt oavbrutet ökat i förhållande till resten av världen, endast en liten del av den afrikanska kontinenten under europeiskt välde."

<sup>2</sup> Ibid 169. "Två årtionden senare, i början på nittonhundratalet, gjorde europeiska regeringar anspråk på överhögheten över samtliga utom sex av de ungefär fyrtio politiska enheter, i vilka de då hade delat upp kontinenten - och av dessa sex undantag var fyra mer av teknisk än av reell politisk art"

<sup>3</sup> Uzoigwe, G.N. "European Partition and Conquest of Africa: An Overview." *General History of Africa VII: Africa Under Colonial Domination 1880-1935*. Ed. Adu. A, Boahen. Paris: UNESCO, 1990.14 Print.

The Berlin Conference was caused by three major issues: General commercial interests, the North African situation and the conflict concerning the Congo.

## General commercial interests

The Berlin Conference was largely brought about because of commercial interests. By 1850, consumer demand in Europe grew for products obtained in Africa, particularly palm oil. Previously, traders seldom left the coast and displayed little interest in possible inland developments. But as a consequence of the growing demand, big commercial houses developed and explorers increased their activities inland.<sup>4</sup> As a result of the increasing competition, it became more common for states to put up tariffs against each other's trade. In 1877, the Cobden Treaties that prohibited preferential tariffs in a nation's territory, signed by both France and Britain, were not renewed. In the following year, France imposed tariffs in all of their territories. Their economy soon showed signs of improvement and this was believed to be because of the new tariffs. Therefore, the French decided to introduce new regulations in their colonies, by closing rivers to British merchant ships and imposing further discriminatory tariffs. As soon as France acquired a new colony, similar tariffs were introduced.<sup>5</sup> This sped up the race to conquer new territories as the state who assumed control also could acquire a commercial monopoly. This race for colonies often led to conflicts. In order to minimize the conflict in future annexations, the Berlin Conference was called in 1885.

## North Africa

For the major part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, formal military interventions in Africa were restricted to North Africa. In 1830, the French invaded Algeria. Tunisia, in its turn, became a French protectorate in 1881. But Egypt became the most significant Northern African region. In 1879, Egypt had reached national bankruptcy. France and Britain cooperated in administering Egypt's budget and thus assumed dual control. In 1881, Egypt's army revolted against the foreign rule. France and Britain were to crush the rebellion together, but France had to withdraw its forces due to a domestic crisis. Therefore, Britain fought the rebels themselves. They were victorious and took unilateral control over Egypt, infuriating both France and Germany. France decided to strive for more formal colonies in particularly West

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<sup>4</sup> Crowe, S. E. *The Berlin West African Conference: 1884-1885*. London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1942. 12-13. Print.

<sup>5</sup> Nzemeke, A.D. "Free Trade and Territorial Partition". *Bismarck, Europe, and Africa: The Berlin Africa Conference 1884-1885 and the Onset of Partition*. Ed Förster, Stig, Mommsen, Wolfgang J, Robinson, Ronald Edward. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988. 64. Print.

Africa as a result of Britain's occupation. This increased the race for formal colonies, which made the Berlin Conference necessary.<sup>6</sup>

## Congo

A major clash of interests concerned the area by the Congo River. Arguably, no European statesman triggered the Scramble for Africa to the same degree as King Leopold II, King of the Belgians. Already during the 1850's and 60's did Leopold investigate the possibility of an empire outside of Europe. His focus was turned to Africa, and in 1876 he created the African International Association whose task was to explore and thereby lay claims to territories by the Congo river.<sup>7</sup> Leopold's way of laying claim to an area as huge as the Congo in front of way more powerful states (of which some, like Portugal and France, had political interests in the Congo area) was seen as a provocation to the other states, many of whom became determined not to remain as passive in the future.

Portugal was the oldest established power by the mouth of the Congo river, but she had very vague claims to any authority there. Furthermore, Portugal's primary income from the region came from slave trading, which was universally condemned.<sup>8</sup> Britain and France exercised strong pressure on Portugal to prevent her from seizing territory. Therefore, the Congo became a no-mans-land of sorts, as no European power came to have ownership over them. But new commercial desires for products such as palm oil, rubber and ivory led to the increased interest for the Congo region. On February 26<sup>th</sup> 1884, the Anglo-Portuguese Treaty was signed. This treaty recognized some Portuguese territorial claims by the Congo River. In return, the Portuguese would exert only a small tariff on British imported goods.<sup>9</sup> However, the treaty was never ratified, due to the strong international opposition it met.<sup>10</sup> In order to work out the situation of the opposing claims to the territories around the Congo, Portugal suggested an international conference. Bismarck enhanced the idea, and so the seed for what would become the Berlin Conference was planted.

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<sup>6</sup> Oliver 172 *"Den stadigvarande brittiska ockupationen av Egypten retade fransmännen och uppmuntrade de matt utveckla sitt formella imperium I Västafrika. Detta passade Tyskland och gav det också möjligheter att öva påtryckning på britten utan att öppet stödja Frankrike"*

<sup>7</sup> This association should not be confused with the International Association of the Congo, as that was a body which evolved from the former one.

<sup>8</sup> Crowe 11

<sup>9</sup> Ibid 16

<sup>10</sup> Ibid 23

## The Berlin Conference

The Berlin Conference was held in Berlin, between November 15<sup>th</sup> 1884 and February 26<sup>th</sup> 1885. The participants were Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, The Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden-Norway<sup>11</sup>, Turkey and the USA.<sup>12</sup>

In the beginning of the conference Bismarck declared the three main aims of the gathering: free trade for the Congo, free navigation on the Niger, and an agreement on how to handle future annexations of territory. But his most significant statement was that there was to be no discussion about sovereignty during the conference.<sup>13</sup> This was mainly France's idea, as she felt more at ease negotiating with indigenous leaders rather than having her European rivals interfering. Another reason was her already existent formal colonies in North Africa that she did not want to lose.

The Berlin Conference ended with the signing of the Berlin Act, a document of 38 articles.<sup>14</sup> With regards to the announced aims, all of them were fulfilled to some extent. Also, other important decisions were taken. This essay will firstly examine all decisions touching commercial interests, before moving on to an analysis of decisions about the Congo, annexation rules, and other agreements.

### Decisions about Commerce

One of Bismarck's aims was to come to an agreement about freedom of navigation on the Niger. There was indeed an article promising that ships of all signatory powers would be allowed navigation without having to pay any tariffs or taxes, with the exception for compensatory ones for harbor and lighthouse dues. However, the Commission that would see to the law being respected had little authority and little money which rendered the article very inefficient.<sup>15</sup> For example, the Commission was not allowed to assess dues where other powers exercised any authority on the river. In effect, this made the Commission a weak organization.

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<sup>11</sup> Sweden and Norway were in a union at the time, called Sweden-Norway

<sup>12</sup> It is noteworthy that there were no African delegates attending whatsoever. Moreover, the International Association of the Congo deserves special mention. Seeing as it was not a state, it had no official spokespersons present. However, it had informal connections by members in the Belgian as well as American delegations, and its will was certainly recognized in the conference. (Crowe 95)

<sup>13</sup> Pakenham, Thomas. *The Scramble for Africa 1876-1912*. London: George Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1991. 241. Print.

<sup>14</sup> Jones, Jim. "General Act of the 1885 Conference of Berlin." *General Act of the 1885 Conference of Berlin*. Westchester University, n.d. Web. 14 Nov. 2012. <<http://courses.wcupa.edu/jones/his312/misc/berlin.htm>>.

<sup>15</sup> Crowe 134

Another aim for Bismarck was to ensure free trade for the Congo. The conference did not only pass an article guaranteeing free trade for the Congo – the free trade clause was extended to what was called “*The Conventional Basin of the Congo*”, an area clearly bigger than what was first stipulated.<sup>16</sup> Britain and Germany were strongly in support of an extensive free trade clause, whereas France was opposing it since they would have to remove their successful tariffs in some territories. It is noteworthy that Bismarck thought that a strong International Association of the Congo was crucial to enforce the article. The International Association was an organization headed by King Leopold who had wielded considerable influence in the Congo. This certainly affected the countries who later on declared the Association a sovereign state.<sup>17</sup>

### Decisions about the Congo

A major reason for why the Conference was held was to settle the Congo dispute. But as said, Bismarck had stated that no territorial matters would be addressed in the official meetings. Still, this did not stop the International Association, Portugal and France from gathering in unofficial meetings to clear up any controversy regarding the Congo. The clear winner of these negotiations was the International Association who was not only granted sovereignty from many different nations<sup>18</sup> but who also was awarded with about a million square miles in the Congo. At the very last meeting of the Berlin Conference, Bismarck announced the adhesion of the Association to the Berlin Act. By then, all signatory powers except for Turkey had formally recognized the Association’s sovereignty. This serves as the final transformation of the International Association of the Congo into a formal nation, since the Association in no other way would have been allowed to exercise the right of adhesion.<sup>19</sup> Subsequently, the Association would change name to the Congo Free State.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid 108.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid 143

<sup>18</sup> These treaties were not included in the actual Act as they were not a part of the conference in itself. However, they were attached to the Act.

<sup>19</sup> Crowe 150

<sup>20</sup> Pakenham 294

## Decisions about annexation rules

The third of Bismarck's aims was to come to an agreement upon how future annexations of African territory would occur. This agreement was materialized in the article of effective occupation. The article meant that the colonizers would have to actively govern their possessions to show that they could 'protect existing rights, and, as the case may be, freedom of trade and of transit under the conditions agreed upon'<sup>21</sup>. In practice, informal means of influence would not be enough and only a military intervention would suffice to prove a colonizer's control over the territory. However, several exceptions and limitations made the article lose most of its influence. The clause of effective occupation would only be applied to the *coasts* of Africa. Nearly all of Africa's coastal territory had already been colonized by the time of the conference, so the article would concern a very small part of the continent.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the article would only be relevant to future acquisitions and did not apply to the pre-existing colonial possessions. Additionally, the article distinguished between *annexations* and *protectorates*. This was crucial, as Britain's main method of colonizing was through protectorates.<sup>23</sup>

It was also agreed that treaties signed with African rulers should be considered as legitimate titles to sovereignty.<sup>24</sup> Prior to the Berlin Act, European powers had acquired spheres of influence in Africa in several ways – for example through settlement, exploration, establishment of commercial posts, missionary settlements and occupation of strategic areas, and by making treaties with the African rulers.

## Decisions about slave trade

Another significant article is the one addressing the prevention of slave trading. The conference did indeed discuss the possibility of completely doing away with the slave trade, but the only result was merely a moral declaration against the African slave trading and no special commitment to enforce any measures was made. However, the particular article proved important in the future.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Uzoigwe *European Partition and Conquest of Africa: An Overview*, 15

<sup>22</sup> See Appendix 1

<sup>23</sup> Pakenham 253

<sup>24</sup> Boahen, A. Adu. *African Perspectives on Colonialism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987. 33. Print.

<sup>25</sup> Grant, Kevin. *A Civilised Savagery: Britain and the New Slaverries in Africa, 1884-1926*. New York: Routledge, 2005. 28. Print.

## Effects of the Berlin Conference

When looking at the consequences of the Berlin conference, it is important to emphasize its limitations: seeing as it was explicitly stated that the conference would not concern itself with questions of territory or sovereignty, no land changed ownership legally through the Berlin Act. Thus, many of the theories stating that “the Berlin Act had the effect of partitioning Africa on paper”<sup>26</sup> can be dismissed as a pure myth. Similar things can be said about the notion of a so-called Hinterland – a theory suggesting that colonial powers possessing territories along the African coasts should have priority in the back country, and that this was constituted in the Berlin Act. Considering that the principle of effective occupation only concerned the coasts of Africa, that only future acquisitions would be affected, and the dismissal of all territorial matters at the Conference, also renders the Hinterland theory incorrect.<sup>27</sup>

As seen, the conference was as influential as some people may believe. However, its effects were not entirely unimportant. Three consequences will be particularly assessed:

- the effects of decisions about the Congo
- the effects of decisions about annexation rules
- the effects of decisions about slave trade

### The effects of decisions about the Congo

Six months after the Conference, King Leopold II unilaterally took the decision to disband the International Association, instead declaring his personal sovereignty over an area which he named *L'État Indépendant du Congo*, better known in English as the Congo Free State. He met no opposition from any of the powers who had signed the Berlin Act. They did not object to this shift, simply because they believed that the Congo Free State would offer the same guarantee for the enforcement of the articles in the Berlin Act that the Association had previously done.<sup>28</sup> This creation of an entirely new state can undoubtedly be attributed to the Berlin Conference.

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<sup>26</sup> Uzoigwe, G.N. “The Results of the Berlin West Africa Conference: An Assessment”. *Bismarck, Europe, and Africa: The Berlin Africa Conference 1884-1885 and the Onset of Partition*. Ed Förster, Stig, Mommsen, Wolfgang J, Robinson, Ronald Edward. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988. 543. Print.

<sup>27</sup> Wesseling, H.L. “The Berlin Conference and the Expansion of Europe: A Conclusion”. *Bismarck, Europe, and Africa: The Berlin Africa Conference 1884-1885 and the Onset of Partition*. Ed Förster, Stig, Mommsen, Wolfgang J, Robinson, Ronald Edward. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988. 532. Print.

<sup>28</sup> Grant 44

Another long-term effect of the Berlin Conference was the Belgian take-over of the Congo. As early as 1889, King Leopold had made a secret offer to the Belgian Prime Minister that he would cede the Congo to Belgium in the fullness of time, in exchange for an interest-free loan of 25 million francs. The offer was accepted in 1890, where it was decided that Belgium got the right to take over the rule of Congo ten years later.<sup>29</sup> The reason for this was that Leopold's financial situation was precarious. He had spent a substantial amount of his personal fortune on the development of the Congo Free State, an investment that did not pay off.<sup>30</sup> In 1901 however, the Belgians let the option to turn the Congo into a colony evaporate.<sup>31</sup> Instead, the Congo was annexed by Belgium, with Leopold's consent, in November 1908.<sup>32</sup> The reason for the annexation was the massive international criticism directed against King Leopold for the inhumane way of which the natives were treated. The criticism was frequently based upon the Congo Free State's violations of the Berlin Act, as will be examined shortly. The widespread belief was that Belgium would reform the Congo, should it get the power of it. That way, the Belgians were nearly forced to become a colonial power, despite the fact that they had always sought to avoid becoming one.<sup>33</sup>

## The effects of decisions about annexation rules

The article of effective occupation included in the Berlin Act spurred some military campaigns. Although much of the coastal lands were already claimed and therefore excluded from the effective occupation clause<sup>34</sup> (as only new acquisitions would be assessed), some military actions became necessary for the European countries to show their sufficient authority, deemed necessary by the Berlin Act in order for an acquisition to be approved by the other powers. An example of this can be seen in the British invasion of northern Nigeria in 1897.<sup>35</sup> Italy's failed invasion of Abyssinia (present-day Ethiopia) in 1896 was also a result of a campaign that, to a degree, was brought about due to the article of effective occupation.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the effective occupation clause agreed upon in Berlin had some significance, despite its limitations.

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<sup>29</sup> Pakenham 399

<sup>30</sup> At the time, the Congo Free State's whole income was less than that of a small European factory (*Pakenham* 397)

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid* 589

<sup>32</sup> Grant 76

<sup>33</sup> Pakenham 13

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid* 253

<sup>35</sup> Guéye, Mbaye. "African Initiatives and Resistance in West Africa, 1880-1914." *General History of Africa VII: Africa Under Colonial Domination 1880-1935*. Ed. Adu A. Boahen. Paris: UNESCO, 1990. 68. Print.

<sup>36</sup> Uzoigwe, *European Partition and Conquest of Africa: An Overview*. 18

The partition of Africa by means of treaty became more frequent in the years following the Berlin Conference, because of its agreement to make treaties legitimate titles to sovereignty.<sup>37</sup> There were generally two kinds of treaties: those between Africans and Europeans, and bilateral treaties between European powers. Several purely political African-European treaties were signed. In these, African rulers either relinquished their sovereignty in exchange for protection or obliged themselves not to sign treaties with other European nations. Typical examples were those treaties signed between the Imperial British East Africa Company (IBEAC) and Kabaka Mwanga II of Buganda in December 1890 and March 1892. As for the bilateral European treaties, they mainly served as a way of defining and acknowledging each other's spheres of influence.<sup>38</sup> The implications of these treaties were that the Scramble for Africa became more orderly – there were fewer expeditions with a vaguely defined territorial goal and more structure in the acquisitions.

### The effects of decisions about slave trade

Both Bismarck and Leopold II used the vague article in the Berlin Act concerning slave trade for their own purposes. In 1888, the first uprising against German rule in Africa took place in Zanzibar. Bismarck got the German Reichstag to support the expedition sent there to suppress the rebels with two million marks, by passing it off as a way of blocking the Arab slave trade.<sup>39</sup> This made Bismarck notice that the best way to finance a colonial war is to call it a war against the slave trade. Leopold II went one step further. He agreed to host the Brussels Conference, the world's first anti-slave trade assembly, in 1889-90.<sup>40</sup> Here, he stated that he would throw all his energy to suppress the slave trade if the article from the Berlin Conference concerning free trade in the Congo would be revised, and the Congo Free State could take a 10 percent tax on all goods from abroad. The proposal was accepted and so the Congo Free State acquired a monopoly on all trade going through the Congo River.<sup>41</sup> That way, one article from the Berlin Act meant that one of the Conference's initial aims fell completely.

One of the major points of criticism against King Leopold's regime in the Congo was the way the Congo Free State blatantly defied articles in the Berlin Act, and especially the one concerning slave trade. As stated beforehand, the free trade that was established in the Congo region by the Conference was amended in 1890. This led to pressure from British merchants by the turn of the decade.<sup>42</sup> The merchants managed to get some missionaries to testify about the persisting occurrence of slavery in the Congo, leading to a debate in the

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<sup>37</sup> Boahen 33

<sup>38</sup> Uzoigwe, *European Partition and Conquest of Africa: An Overview*. 15

<sup>39</sup> Pakenham 349

<sup>40</sup> Ibid 397

<sup>41</sup> Ibid 398

<sup>42</sup> Grant 50

British parliament where a MP requested a British intervention in the Congo to stop the ongoing atrocities.<sup>43</sup> Even though the request was denied, several investigations of the actual situation in the Congo followed. They gave irrefutable proof of the Congo Free State's way of using forced labor, something humanitarians deemed to be a new form of slavery.<sup>44</sup> One American report stated that the Congo Free State had openly violated the Berlin Act by its human rights abuses, and based that as a justification for an American intervention. An American suggestion soon followed, in which Belgium should annex the Congo and that the government had to ensure the enforcement of the Berlin Act.<sup>45</sup> Thus, the Berlin Act served not only as a way of changing ownership of the territory around the Congo but also used as a legal document when Belgium acquired the area.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the Conference of Berlin deserves a more nuanced image than has previously been offered. To say that the Conference alone bears responsibility for the partition of Africa is simply erroneous. The Scramble for Africa was well under way at the time of the Conference and the Berlin Act did not concern itself with territorial matters whatsoever. In contrast, it is not perfectly true to state that the Berlin Conference was completely insignificant either. While the article of effective occupation was watered down severely, it still served as a reason for invasions along the coasts of Africa. Also, several treaties can be linked to the Conference's approval of treaties as legal bases for authority. But most important was the connection between the Berlin Conference and the Congo Free State. In a strange sense, the Berlin Conference both helped creating and abolishing the Congo Free State. Its creation was closely tied to the conference, which recognized the International Association of the Congo for the first time as a sovereign state. In contrast, the article in the Berlin Act concerning slave trade was a powerful tool for when Leopold's reign of terror should be done away with and Belgium's colonial empire was born. In short, it is clear that the Berlin Conference did not partition Africa. However, it did facilitate and accelerate the Scramble and helped change the legal ownership of the Congo, not once but twice.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid 51

<sup>44</sup> Ibid 55

<sup>45</sup> Pakenham 661

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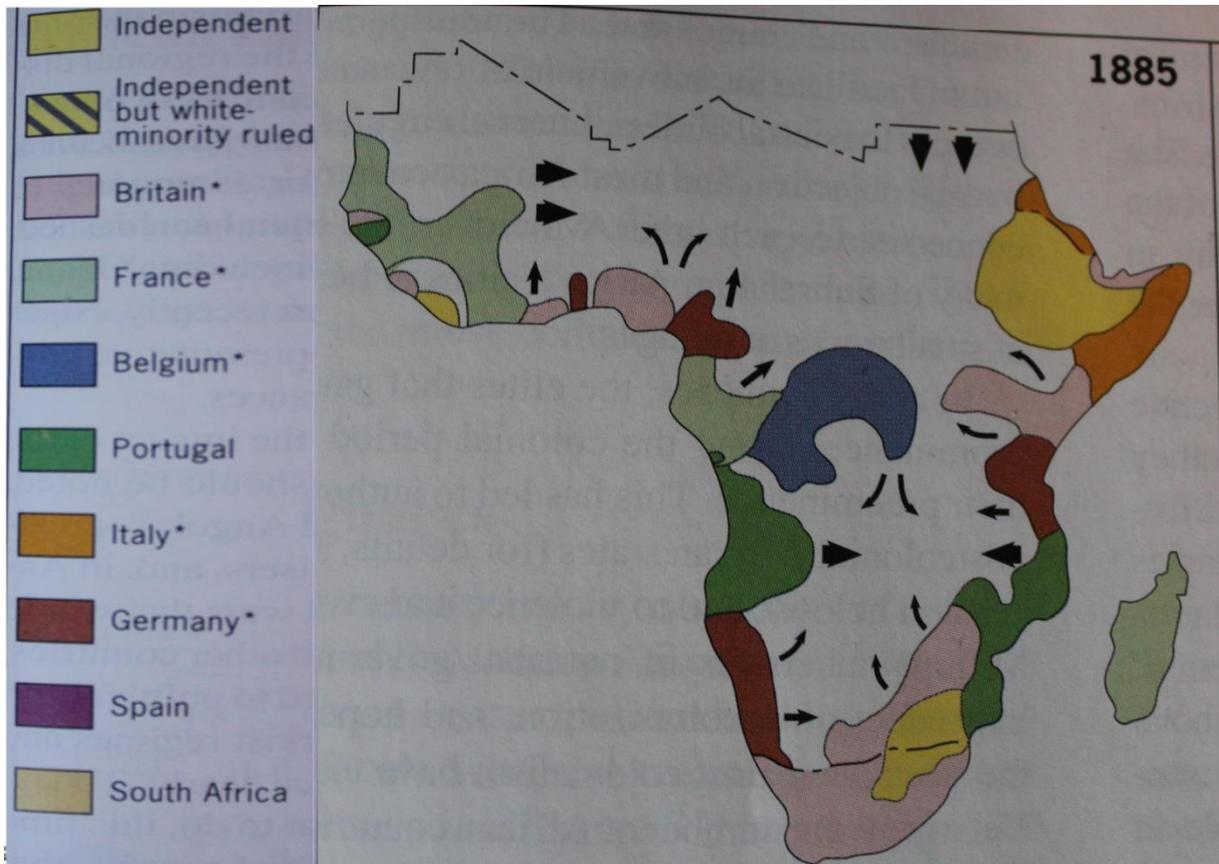
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## Appendix

### Appendix 1



Source: De, Blij Harm J., and Peter O. Muller. *Geography: Realms, Regions, and Concepts*. John Wiley & Sons. New York. 2002. 351. Print.