**A Long Walk to Freedom: A Story of Tragedy and Triumph in Africa**

Noah Grady

Senior Division

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From the era of imperialism to modern day Africa, perhaps no other continent has experienced a longer walk to freedom, through triumph and tragedy.[[1]](#footnote-1) The story of Africa is richly unique and diverse, but nonetheless intrinsically linked with the yoke of colonial rule. Imperialism in Africa took many different forms regionally, but it almost always resulted in the socioeconomic and political exploitation of indigenous peoples.[[2]](#footnote-2) Colonization systematically suppressed and forcefully changed large parts of African culture, religion, and way of life – shaping the colonized into the image of the colonizer. The injustice of colonialism, however, has not completely dictated the destiny of Africa, as self–determination was ultimately achieved. Throughout the last century, the native voice of Africa continued to emerge and be heard, while the failings of colonialism began to be rectified. Although Africa was adversely impacted by the tragedies of the Slave Trade and colonization, there is nonetheless a momentous triumph in the ultimate independence and self-determination of the African continent.

The story of colonial exploitation began in the 15th century, when the Portuguese and subsequently other colonial powers, reached Africa.[[3]](#footnote-3) This contact with Europeans resulted in the pre-colonial African slave trade. Enslavement of indigenous peoples, primarily in West Africa, began in 1503. A system to send slaves directly to the Americas was implemented as early as 1518.[[4]](#footnote-4) Also, a significant portion of slaves were sold on the East Coast of Africa to Arab nations, contributing to a substantial loss of population. It is estimated over 11 million slaves were taken in the Transatlantic slave trade, and approximately 9.4 million to 14 million were taken in the Arab slave trade. The kidnapping of nearly 25 million people undoubtedly contributed to underdevelopment in Africa. Based on estimates, the population of Africa either stagnated or declined from the 16th to 20th centuries.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Africa’s slave trade had significant pre-colonial implications, which can be examined even today. The systematic removal of peoples almost certainly had a degrading structural effect on African society in general, and in individual regions. There is a considerable negative correlation between the quantity of slaves taken from an African nation, and its success in economic development. However, this relationship is not necessarily causal, and could be due to the plausibility that underdeveloped nations engaged in the slave trade out of a need for wealth.[[6]](#footnote-6) One underlying effect of Africa’s slave trade was the ethnic and cultural fragmentation of regions within Africa. This resulted from the manner in which slaves were taken, which was most commonly through villages or competing ethnic groups raiding one another. Coalitions between African villages were weakened and insecurity further segmented regions, preventing the development of broader ethnic identities.[[7]](#footnote-7) Similarly, the slave trade induced destabilization of political systems through the corruption of legal structures and the dissolvement of preexisting governments. Unstable bands of slave traders controlled by rulers or warlords replaced regional governments but were often unable to form into cohesive states. Furthermore, the slave trade caused the degradation of legal systems because communities began to use judicial penalties to enslave their own. Instead of the punishments of beating, exile or fines, the penalties for law breaking almost always became enslavement.[[8]](#footnote-8) The “fever” of the European slave trade infected Africa, and regional groups began selling their own to the European slave traders. One example of this was in Benin, in which powerful kings captured and sold slaves to Portuguese, British and French merchants.[[9]](#footnote-9) The corruption of legal systems and the fragmentation of regional governments certainly divided Africa regionally and contributed to the destabilization of centralized governments and the preponderance of economic underdevelopment. This period lasted for over 300 years, from the beginning of the 16th century to the onset of the colonial period in the late 19th century.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The late 19th century is often referred to by historians as “The Scramble for Africa” and largely involved the British, French, Germans and Belgians.[[11]](#footnote-11) In the late 19th century, these regimes systemically expanded their colonial territory at a staggering rate – in the year 1879, 90% of the African continent was ruled by Africans, however, by 1900 that figure declined to only a negligible fraction.[[12]](#footnote-12) This expansive colonial period was sanctioned by the Berlin Conference of 1884, which included 13 European nations and the United States as an observer. The conference created a resolution to try and establish a sense of order within the Scramble for Africa. The resolution was called the General Act, and it contained six distinct declarations (articles) relating to the partition and colonization of the African continent.[[13]](#footnote-13) The six declarations addressed these topics: free trade, slave trade, the neutrality of the Conventional Basin of the Congo, the navigation of the Congo, the navigation of the Niger River, and the ground rules for further occupation of coastal Africa.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Despite the official significance of the Berlin Conference, it is important to understand that its role in African colonization is heavily contended within the historical community.[[15]](#footnote-15) Some historians claim that the conference established a flimsy frame of international law and was therefore insignificant to the colonial time period. One of these historians was Sybil Crowe, who in 1944, argued the legal framework of the General Act was without content. Crowe explained that the Act destabilized the colonial situation, and only encouraged highly monopolistic systems of trade while paving the way for the atrocities committed in the Congo.[[16]](#footnote-16) Certain historians such as John Westlake and Tony Anghie, however, contradict this interpretation. They contend that the Conference and Act was significant in its content, as it was a milestone in internationally normalizing the subjugation of Africa.[[17]](#footnote-17) Although interpretation of the conference varies greatly, it undoubtedly marked the beginning of the effective partition of Africa which consist of more than 50 independent countries today. The country borders were created based on colonial interests, and without a single African present – leaving many historians to assert that African country boundaries were and are fundamentally artificial.[[18]](#footnote-18)

In the colonial era the largest and most influential landowners were Britian, France, Germany and King Leopold’s Belgian regime. As a rule, most countries did not significantly expand their land holdings until the end of the 19th century following the Berlin Conference.[[19]](#footnote-19) For example, Britain annexed several large land areas in various parts of the continent.[[20]](#footnote-20) France also claimed a significant amount of land area primarily in West Africa.[[21]](#footnote-21) Germany also joined the scramble, annexing several areas.[[22]](#footnote-22) Additionally, King Leopold’s Belgium, ruled the Congo Free State, a land area approximately 75 times larger than Belgium itself.[[23]](#footnote-23) These combined territories, along with smaller land areas owned by other various other nations comprised almost all of the African land mass.

Perhaps the most effective way to understand how colonialism affected Africa is to examine the socioeconomic impact. Prior to the Scramble for Africa, African nations were advancing in almost every measure of economic prosperity, particularly in trade.[[24]](#footnote-24) During the era of colonialism, however, these countries began to suffer, as the goal of colonization was almost always to exploit the human and economic resources of the colonized.[[25]](#footnote-25) Capitalism under the colonial system did not allow for the accumulation of wealth within the colonized territory, as everything was exported to the colonizer.[[26]](#footnote-26) One of the most frequent techniques colonizers used to gain wealth was through subjugating farmers and the implementing cash crop industries. This exploited the common African farmer, often impoverishing them and causing their quality of life to decline. Additionally, the constant forced rotation of cash crops on African lands often drained the soil of nutrients and rendered many regions inept and infertile.[[27]](#footnote-27) Analyzation of the political and socioeconomic exploitation of Africa has led many historians to believe that Africa would be undoubtedly more developed had it always been free.[[28]](#footnote-28) Many historians argue that absent colonialism, African living standards could have gradually improved over the last century.[[29]](#footnote-29) For instance, on the eve of independence in 1960, the average life expectancy in the Congo was 47 years of age, by 2015 that figure increased to 59 years of age.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Beyond the socioeconomic starvation of African society were the atrocities committed during the colonial era, which are extremely well documented within the Congo Free State, a microcosm of the colonialism in Africa. The book *King Leopold’s Ghost*, by Adam Hochschild, recounts terror in the Congo. It details the exploration of the infamous Henry Morton Stanley, the political rise of King Leopold, the rubber terror, and the brutality used against the natives. The book also includes dreadful native accounts of the barbarism committed against them by their white colonizers.

As you see, my right hand is cut off… When I was very small, the soldiers came to make war in my village because of the rubber… As I was fleeing, a bullet grazed my neck and gave me the wound whose scars you can still see. I fell and pretended to be dead. A soldier used a knife to cut off my right hand and took it away. I saw that he was carrying other cut-off hands…. The same day, my father and mother were killed, and I know they had their hands cut off.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Adam Hochschild additionally reaffirms the horrors of colonialism by alluding to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899).[[32]](#footnote-32) Although Conrad’s work is literary and not historical, it still holds significant weight in its exposure of the atrocities of the Congo. As Adam Hochschild writes, *Heart of Darkness* had extensive accuracy in depicting the horrors of colonialism.[[33]](#footnote-33)

The tragedy of colonization found its end with the dawn of the era of African Independence, which had its roots in the Second World War (WWII).[[34]](#footnote-34) WWII had an ideological impact on Africa; participation in the war exposed Africans to new ideas about self-determination and African rule. After having fought in a war that was not their own, Africans began to want a stake in the world which they had been exposed to.[[35]](#footnote-35) This fueled the emergence of the African Independence era, and was only bolstered as the grip of European nations began to loosen after the war. The reigns of colonialism loosened because global power and hegemony shifted away from Western Europe to the United States and the USSR. Although they were distinctly imperialistic in their own ways, both the U.S. and the USSR supported the growth of nationalism in Africa.[[36]](#footnote-36) WWII turned the centuries old global structure of power on its head and caused a rapid change toward African independence. The war not only did this, but also taught Africans that there was a whole world of possibilities that had been denied to them under colonialism.

Despite the appalling indignities which have plagued Africa, there is an ever-illuminating future in store for Africa. Africa, although damaged by the legacy of exploitation, is now in the hands of its own people. The people and nations of Africa, for the first time, are exercising their inherent right to self-determination and self-autonomy. The hopeful optimism of the independence movement was encapsulated by Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah in his 1957 “Ghana is Free Forever” speech. He exclaimed, “… From now on – today – we must change our attitudes, our minds, we must realise [sic] that from now on, we are no more a colonial, but a free and independent people.”[[37]](#footnote-37) Similarly, in regard to African independence, Nelson Mandela profoundly stated, “The sun shall never set on so glorious a human achievement.”[[38]](#footnote-38) In the long walk to freedom, prosperity and societal progress is always difficult for an exploited and wronged people to overcome, and nowhere will it be harder than in Africa.

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