

## What Was the Driving Force Behind European Imperialism in Africa?

Between 1500 and 1800, European slavers and traders did not venture far from the African coast. The west coast of Africa from the Senegal River to Angola was known as “the white man’s grave.” Malaria was the biggest killer and crews often stayed on ship when trading their European pots and cloth and guns for West African slaves. During these 300 years, European presence in Africa was not about imperialism and seizing colonies; it was about buying slaves from local chiefs and then getting out of West African waters with your crew and slave cargo still alive.

In 1807, the British outlawed the trans-Atlantic slave trade and in 1833 slavery itself. At this point the only British colony in Africa was the Cape Colony in southern Africa. What now sharpened Europe’s interest in Africa was exploration. Scotsman Mungo Park gave his life in 1806 while investigating the Niger River region in west Africa. In 1840 David Livingston began more than thirty years in the interior of central Africa. Whereas maps of Africa drawn in 1800 had left great holes in the continent’s center, by 1850 some of the blanks were filling in. Still, as late as 1870 only 10% of Africa was under European control, and most of that was along the edges – French Algeria, British Sierra Leone, Portuguese Angola.

King Leopold of Belgium broke this pattern. In the early 1880s he acquired a private “country” of 900,000 square miles in central Africa. Leopold called his estate Congo Free State. Leopold’s Congo was 95 times the size of Belgium and his purpose was to make money by taking out ivory and rubber. Over the next twenty years Leopold’s managers proceeded to kill, through forced labor, horrible mistreatment, and the introduction of disease, as many as 10,000,000 people. It was not

a good beginning for European imperialism in Africa.

During the same years that Leopold was buying the Congo, other European leaders were becoming very aware of two things: First, Africa was filled with incredible natural resources; second, a scramble for these riches could lead to war among the European powers. Otto von Bismarck of Germany proposed that a conference be held in Berlin in 1884 and 1885 to divide up Africa in a reasonable and peaceful manner. The Africans, of course, would not be invited. At the

conference, the European nations (all except Switzerland attended) divided up the African continent by claim and by the rule of occupation. It was not enough, for example, for England to claim Nigeria. England also had to prove that it had treaty agreements, buildings, soldiers, and administrators on the ground to support their claim. At Berlin, the European nations also agreed to certain principles regarding colonization. These included free trade, the elimination of slavery, respect



for each other’s territorial claims, and improving the “moral and material well-being” of Africans. They did not, however, consider the land claims of Africans.

This short background brings us to the question asked by this Mini-Q. For more than three centuries Europeans had avoided the African interior. Now, powers like England, France, and Germany showed a fresh interest in getting and holding large pieces of the African continent. But why this new interest? More specifically, in the late 19th Century, *what was the driving force behind European imperialism in Africa?*

### Background Essay Questions

1. Between 1500 and 1800 what was a main reason Europeans did not enter the interior of Africa
2. What is the difference between ending the slave trade and ending slavery?
3. What is the connection between a man like Mungo Park and imperialism?
4. What percentage of Africa had been colonized by 1870?
5. What likely explains the poor standing of Leopold II among historians today?
6. When was the Berlin Conference and what did it do?
7. What place were Africans given at the conference table in Berlin?

#### Define the following terms:

- Malaria-
- Imperialism-
- Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade-
- Forced Labor-
- Rule of Occupation-
- Free Trade-

## Hook Exercise: Is Imperialism Ever Justified?

**Directions:** *Imperialism* is an action by a strong nation to take control of another country. For example, the United States was practicing imperialism when it took control of the Philippines in 1899. Throughout history, nations have turned to imperialism for a variety of reasons. Below are five different scenarios, each presenting a different reason for taking control of a country. Next to each scenario check whether imperialistic action is justified, sometimes justified, or never justified. In each case, provide your rationale, the reasons behind your thinking.



Scenario	Justified	Sometimes Justified	Never Justified	Rationale
1. National security: The colonized island country has deepwater ports for refueling the mother country's navy and merchant marine. It also has an airfield.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
2. National economy and energy independence: The colonized country has much needed oil reserves.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
3. Moral duty: The colonized country has a poor, uneducated population that needs roads, schools, and hospitals.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
4. Establishing religious freedom: The colonized country is ruled by a brutal theocracy. Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Jews are denied freedom of worship upon pain of death.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
5. Establishing political freedom: The colonized country is run by a tyrant who denies free elections and imprisons all critics.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	