

# The Berlin Conference

*By Trevor Getz*

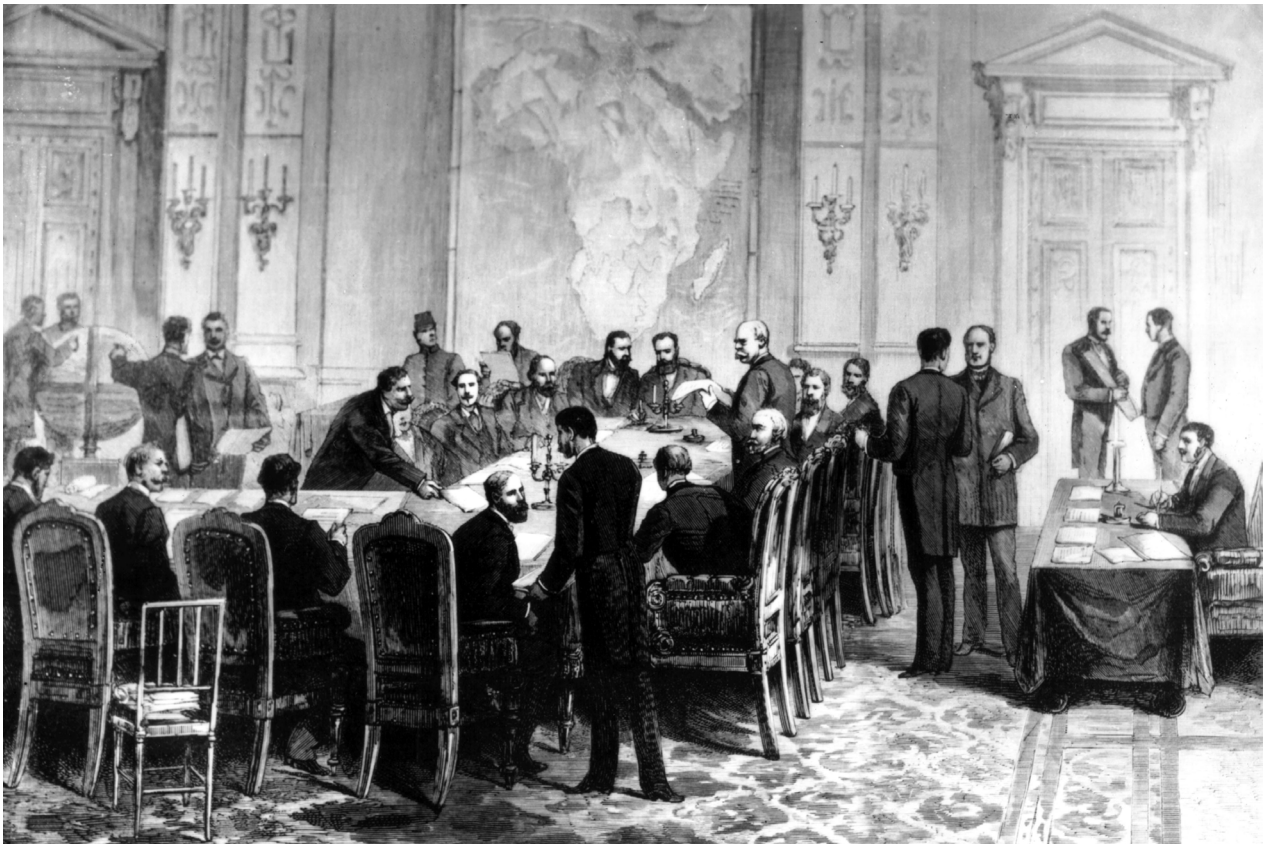
The Berlin Conference gathered a group of Europeans to plot ways to divide up Africa between them. It may not have been the “start” of colonialism, but it accelerated the process.

## 1150L



## A picture worth 1000 words

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. Look below at the image of the Berlin conference of 1884– 1885. It was a conference about Africa, but happening in a room in Berlin, Germany. There were zero Africans, and only two of the attendees had ever stepped foot on that continent. The conference included a bunch of European men representing 12 countries in Europe, plus an American representative and one from the Ottoman Empire. The room was dominated by a gigantic map of Africa. The men at the conference had taken it upon themselves to divide up Africa between their respective countries.



*The Berlin Conference, November 1884 to February 1885, Germany. © Getty Images*

## Leopold's big swindle

The immediate reason for the Berlin Conference was the jealousy of the king of a small country called Belgium. The king was jealous of his cousin, Queen Victoria of Great Britain. King Leopold II of Belgium considered himself to be an important man, but in the 1870s, the only territory Leopold ruled was Belgium. Queen Victoria was not only Queen of Great Britain but also Empress of India and had a whole empire.

Leopold set out to get himself an empire, swindling his fellow Europeans and a lot of Africans. Leopold pretended to be a great humanitarian and abolitionist. He claimed a huge territory in Central Africa, and called it the "Congo Free State," declaring that he would allow free trade and eliminate slavery there. Instead, he set about building a state that would work the local population mercilessly for his own profit.

Although Leopold deceived most Europeans for a while, his fellow rulers caught on to his trick. The French immediately sent out expeditions to claim the territory to the north and the British convinced Portugal to expand their claims to the territory to the south in order to block Leopold.



Map of the “Belgian Congo,” which began as the “Congo Free State,” King Leopold II’s personal territory.  
Note Portuguese Angola to the south and French Equatorial Africa to the north. © Getty Images.

The race for control in the Congo region was just one of many that were happening in the 1880s as Europeans turned their attention to violently conquering African societies. Soon they were fighting with each other. The German Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, believed that this threatened his plans for Europe, so he invited European leaders to come to Berlin in 1884 to work out a policy for their expansion on the African continent.

## The Conference

The Berlin Conference took about three and a half months, from November 15, 1884, to February 26, 1885. It resulted in an act that did three things. The first thing it did was recognize the territory that King Leopold claimed as his private property. The second thing it did was recognize some existing territorial claims in different parts of Africa.

The third, and most important, result of the conference was to set up a way for Europeans to claim and annex territory in Africa. European countries would send out explorers. These explorers would sign treaties with local leaders who would accept the “protection” of the European state. Then, the explorers would head home to Europe, where they would submit the treaty to their governments. Finally, the government of each European country would negotiate with the other European states to have them recognize that this “protection” really meant that they now owned that territory.

This was all a gigantic scam. For starters, those treaties were often meaningless. They were usually printed in English or French, and often the local leaders didn't know what they said. Sometimes, the explorers would get just about anyone to sign the treaty, including leaders who didn't really have the power or authority to sign them. The whole process was based on a racist idea—that all of this land was “unclaimed,” and that local societies could not simply rule themselves.

## Menelik in the middle

One African leader who figured this out early was Menelik II, the future Emperor of Ethiopia. In 1884, Menelik was not yet emperor but was an important leader of this state. He knew about the conference, although neither he nor any other African leader had been invited.

Menelik decided to write a letter to the European states at the conference. He asked them to take Ethiopia seriously as a military and political power. He wrote, “I have no intention at all of being an indifferent spectator, if the distant Powers hold onto the idea of dividing up Africa... Since the All-Powerful has protected Ethiopia up until now, I am hopeful that he will keep and enlarge it also in the future, and I do not think for a moment that He [God] will divide Ethiopia among the other Powers.”<sup>1</sup>

Some historians have argued that Menelik was in an interesting position. On the one hand, Ethiopia was a powerful state that was looking to build an empire of its own in the surrounding territory. On the other hand, they knew that Europeans were dividing up the continent and they feared being divided themselves. The Ethiopians could clearly see that Italy, Britain, and France all wanted to reach the nearby headwaters of the Nile River and to claim that territory. Yet Ethiopian leaders dreamed of claiming that territory for themselves.

In the end, Menelik's letter was largely ignored. Although Ethiopia escaped “protection,” the Europeans went about chopping up the rest of the continent among themselves.

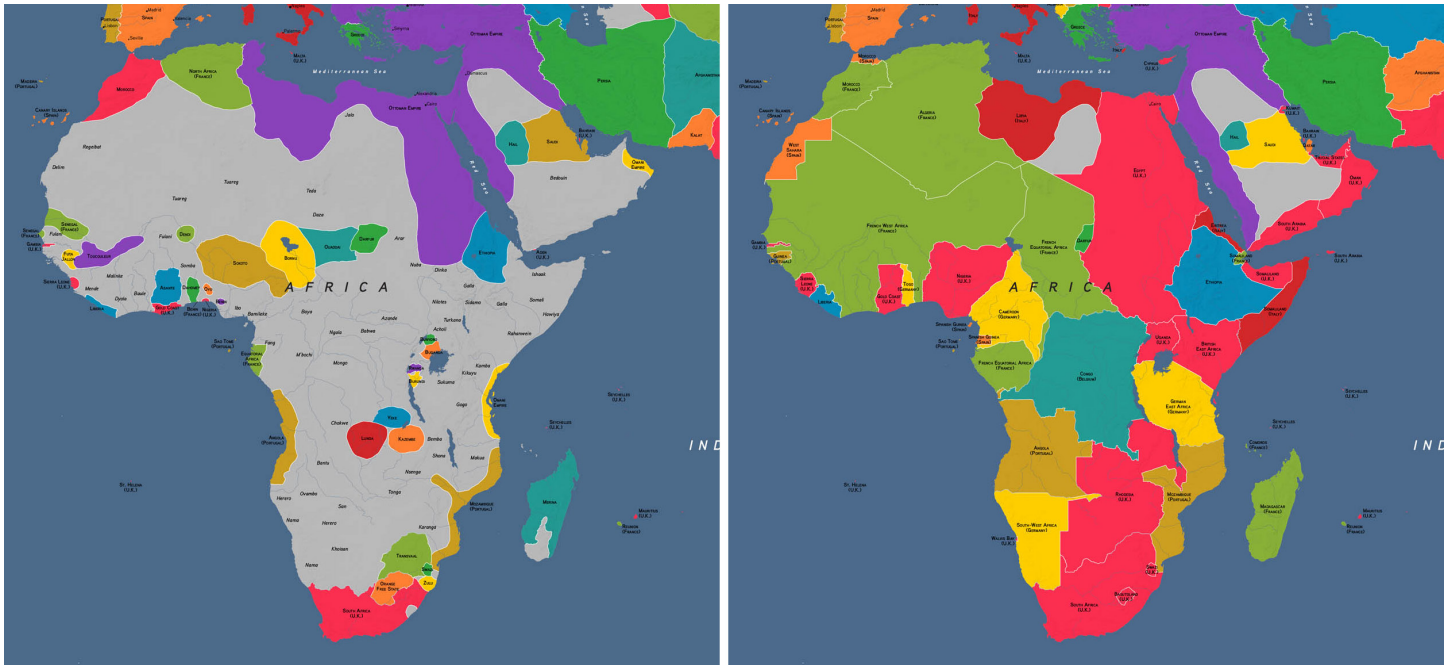


Menelik II, Emperor of Ethiopia. Photo from *L'illustrazione Italiana*, XXXVI, no. 7, February 14, 1909. © Getty Images.

<sup>1</sup> Op. cit. A. Adu Boahen, *African Perspectives on Colonialism*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 1989, 25.

## Continuity and change

How important was the Berlin Conference? To what degree did it lead to change, including the colonization of Africa? Historians and legal scholars who study these questions don't all agree on the answers. Look at the two maps below and you can see different ways to answer the questions.



*Africa, 1871 (prior to the conference) and 1914 (post conference). Note that in the 1871 map, European nations controlled just a few regions along the coast, but by 1914, European nations controlled all of Africa except Liberia and Ethiopia. © OER Project.*

The map on the left shows that many regions of Africa had already been claimed by Europeans by 1880, four years before the conference. In North Africa, France had conquered Algeria. Italy was already partially controlling Libya and Britain had a great deal of power over Egypt. In the West, there are small colonies like French Senegal and British Gold Coast and Sierra Leone. In southern Africa, there are Portuguese territories of Angola and Mozambique. Even further south is the Cape Colony, ruled by Britain. On the one hand, lots of colonization was already happening prior to the Berlin Conference.

Yet these colonies were still quite small. Contrast this with the map of Africa in 1913, two decades after the conference. In this second map, all of Africa's nearly twelve million square miles is colonized by European states, except for Ethiopia and the tiny state of Liberia. Clearly this vast territory was acquired after the conference.

One thing is clear—the Berlin Conference established the legal claim by Europeans that all of Africa could be occupied by whomever could take it. It also established a process for Europeans to cooperate rather than fight with each other. This cooperation played a huge role in the division and conquest of Africa. It was a form of legal violence practiced upon the whole continent and all of its people. It is for this reason that we tend to see the Berlin Conference as a significant event in world history.

## Sources

Bragg, Melvyn. "The Berlin Conference." Produced by BBC4. *In Our Time*. October 31, 2013. Podcast, MP3 audio, 42:00.  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03ffkfd>.

Boahen, A. Adu. *African Perspectives on Colonialism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.

Mackenzie, John. *The Partition of Africa: And European Imperialism 1880–1900*. New York: Routledge, 1983.

## Trevor Getz

Trevor Getz is a professor of African and world history at San Francisco State University. He has been the author or editor of 11 books, including the award-winning graphic history *Abina and the Important Men*, and has coproduced several prize-winning documentaries. Trevor is also the author of *A Primer for Teaching African History*, which explores questions about how we should teach the history of Africa in high school and university classes.

## Image credits

**Cover image: Congress of Berlin**, 13 July 1878, after the painting by Anton von Werner. © Stefano Bianchetti/Corbis via Getty Images.

**The Berlin Conference**, November 1884 to February 1885, Germany. © Photo12/UIG/Getty Images.

**Map of the "Belgian Congo,"** which began as the "Congo Free State," King Leopold II's personal territory. Note Portuguese Angola to the south and French Equatorial Africa to the north. Illustration by J Lebegue, 1896. ©Buyenlarge/Getty Images.

**Menelik II, Emperor of Ethiopia.** Photo from L'illustrazione Italiana, XXXVI, no. 7, February 14, 1909. ©DEA/Biblioteca Ambrosiana/Getty Images.

**Africa, 1871** (prior to the conference) and 1914 (post conference). Note that in the 1871 map, European nations controlled just a few regions along the coast, but by 1914, European nations controlled all of Africa except Liberia and Ethiopia. © OER Project.



Articles leveled by Newsela have been adjusted along several dimensions of text complexity including sentence structure, vocabulary and organization. The number followed by L indicates the Lexile measure of the article. For more information on Lexile measures and how they correspond to grade levels: [www.lexile.com/educators/understanding-lexile-measures/](http://www.lexile.com/educators/understanding-lexile-measures/)

To learn more about Newsela, visit [www.newsela.com](http://www.newsela.com)



## The Lexile® Framework for Reading

The Lexile® Framework for Reading evaluates reading ability and text complexity on the same developmental scale. Unlike other measurement systems, the Lexile Framework determines reading ability based on actual assessments, rather than generalized age or grade levels. Recognized as the standard for matching readers with texts, tens of millions of students worldwide receive a Lexile measure that helps them find targeted readings from the more than 100 million articles, books and websites that have been measured. Lexile measures connect learners of all ages with resources at the right level of challenge and monitors their progress toward state and national proficiency standards. More information about the Lexile® Framework can be found at [www.Lexile.com](http://www.Lexile.com).



OER Project aims to empower teachers by offering free and fully supported history courses for middle- and high-school students. Your account is the key to accessing our standards-aligned courses that are designed with built-in supports like leveled readings, audio recordings of texts, video transcripts, and more. Offerings include a variety of materials, from full-year, standards-based courses to shorter course extensions, all of which build upon foundational historical thinking skills in preparation for AP, college, and beyond.

To learn more about The OER Project, visit [www.oerproject.com](http://www.oerproject.com)