

What Was the Driving Force Behind European Imperialism in Africa?

Before the 19th century, Europeans knew very little about the interior of Africa. Between 1500 and 1800, European presence in Africa was mostly about buying and selling slaves from local chiefs. Slave ships would arrive, trade their pots, cloth and guns for West African slaves, then set sail for the Americas. These ships anchored off the African coastline and their crews seldom left the ship because of the risk of catching **malaria** or other tropical diseases. Europeans were so vulnerable to these diseases that the west coast of Africa, from the Senegal River to Angola, became known as “the white man’s grave.”

In 1807, the British outlawed the **trans-Atlantic slave trade** and in 1833, slavery itself. With the end of slavery, European interests in the continent shifted to **imperialism** and seizing colonies. Serious exploration began. Scotsman Mungo Park gave his life in 1806 while investigating the Niger River region in West Africa. In 1840 David Livingstone 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. No Africans

were invited to attend. 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 coloni-

zation. 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?
8. Define the following terms:

malaria

trans-Atlantic slave trade

imperialism

forced labor

rule of occupation

free trade

Timeline

1806 – Mungo Park dies exploring the Niger River.

1807 – Britain abolishes the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

1830 – The French occupy Algeria.

1833 – Britain abolishes slavery.

1869 – The French complete building the Suez Canal in Egypt.

1872 – King Leopold II of Belgium begins to acquire land in the Congo River region.

1884 – The Berlin Conference begins to divide up Africa.

1914 – World War I begins in Europe.