*Industrialization stirred ambitions in many European nations. Many nations looked to Africa as a source of raw materials to fuel their industrial production and as new markets for their industrial products. As a result, colonial powers seized vast areas of Africa during the 19th and early 20th centuries. This seizure of a country or territory by a stronger country is called imperialism. As occurred throughout most of Africa, stronger countries dominated the political, economic, and social life of the weaker countries.*

**Africa Before European Domination**

In the mid-1800s, on the eve of the European domination of Africa, African peoples were divided into hundreds of ethnic and linguistic groups. Most continued to follow traditional beliefs, while others converted to Islam or Christianity. These groups spoke more than 1,000 different languages. Politically, they ranged from large empires that united many ethnic groups to small independent villages.

Although Europeans had established contacts with sub-Saharan Africans as early as the 1450s, powerful African armies were able to keep the Europeans out of most of Africa for 400 years. In fact, as late as 1880, Europeans controlled only 10 percent of the continent’s land, mainly on the coast. European travel into the interior on a large-scale basis was virtually impossible. Europeans could not navigate African rivers, which had many rapids, cataracts, and changing flows. The introduction of steam-powered riverboats in the early 1800s allowed Europeans to conduct major expeditions into the interior of Africa. Disease also discouraged European exploration.

Those Europeans who did penetrate the interior of Africa were explorers, missionaries, or humanitarians who opposed the European and American slave trade. Europeans and Americans learned about Africa through travel books and newspapers. These publications competed for readers by hiring reporters to search the globe for stories of adventure, mystery, or excitement.

**The Congo Sparks Interest**

In the late 1860s, David Livingstone, a missionary from Scotland, traveled with a group of Africans deep into central Africa to promote Christianity. When several years passed with no word from him or his party, many people feared he was dead. An American newspaper hired reporter Henry Stanley to find Livingstone. In 1871, he found Dr. Livingstone on the shores of Lake Tanganyika. Stanley’s famous greeting - “Dr. Livingstone, I presume?” - made headlines around the world.

Stanley then set out to explore Africa and trace the course of the Congo River, sparking the interest of King Leopold II of Belgium, who commissioned Stanley to sign treaties with local Congo River chiefs. Between 1879 and 1882 that gave King Leopold control of these lands, claiming that his primary motive in establishing the colony was to abolish the slave trade and promote Christianity. Instead, his companies brutally exploited Africans by forcing them to collect sap from rubber plants and at least 10 million Congolese died due to the abuses inflicted during his rule. As a result of his cruelty, humanitarians around the world demanded changes. In 1908, the Belgian government took control of the colony away from Leopold. The Belgian Congo, as the colony later became known, was 80 times larger than Belgium.

**Forces Driving Imperialism**

The Industrial Revolution provided European countries with a reason to add lands to their control. As European nations industrialized, they searched for new markets and raw materials to improve their economies. The race for colonies also grew out of a strong sense of nationalism. Europeans viewed an empire as a measure of national greatness. As the competition for colonies intensified, each country was determined to plant its flag on as much of the world as possible.

When European countries began colonizing, many believed that Africans would soon be buying European goods in great quantities. They were wrong; few Africans bought European goods. However, European businesses still needed raw materials from Africa. The major source of great wealth in Africa proved to be the continent’s rich mineral resources. The Belgian Congo contained untold wealth in copper and tin. Even these riches seemed small compared with the gold and diamonds in South Africa. Businesses eventually developed cash-crop plantations to grow peanuts, palm oil, cocoa, and rubber. These products displaced the food crops grown by farmers to feed their families.

Many Europeans had the racist belief that they were superior to other peoples. Social Darwinism, a social theory of the time, took Charles Darwin’s ideas about evolution and natural selection and applied them to human society. They believed that those who were fittest for survival enjoyed wealth and success and should be considered superior to others. Non­Europeans who had not made the scientific and technological progress that Europeans had were considered to be on a lower scale of cultural and physical development. Europeans believed that they had both the right and the responsibility to bring the results of their progress to other countries. Cecil Rhodes, a successful businessman and a major supporter of British expansion, clearly stated this position:

*I contend that we [Britons] are the first race in the world, and the more of the world we inhabit, the better it is for the human race. . . . It is our duty to seize every opportunity of acquiring more territory and we should keep this one idea steadily before our eyes that more territory simply means more of the Anglo-Saxon race, more of the best, the most human, most honourable race the world possesses. ~Cecil Rhodes,* Confession of Faith*, 1877*

The push for expansion also came from missionaries who worked to convert the peoples of Asia, Africa, and the Pacific Islands to Christianity. Many missionaries believed that European rule was the best way to end evil practices such as the slave trade and to “civilize,” - or “Westernize” - the people.

Several factors contributed to the Europeans’ conquest of Africa. One overwhelming advantage was the Europeans’ technological superiority. The Maxim gun, invented in 1884, was the world’s first automatic machine gun. European countries quickly acquired the Maxim, while the resisting Africans were forced to rely on outdated weapons.

European countries also had the means to control their empire. The invention of the steam engine allowed Europeans to easily travel on rivers to establish bases of control deep in the African continent. Railroads, cables, and steamships allowed close communications within a colony and between the colony and its controlling nation.

But Europeans were highly susceptible to malaria, a disease carried by the dense swarms of mosquitoes in Africa’s interior, a factor that kept them more confined to the coast. The perfection of the drug quinine in 1829 eventually protected Europeans from becoming infected with this disease.

Africans’ huge variety of languages and cultures and wars fought between ethnic groups over land, water, and trade rights prevented a unified stand. Europeans learned to play rival groups against each other.

**Berlin Conference Divides Africa**

The scramble for African territory had begun in earnest about 1880. At that time, the French began to expand from the West African coast toward western Sudan. The discoveries of diamonds in 1867 and gold in 1886 in South Africa increased European interest in colonizing the continent. No European power wanted to be left out of the race.

The competition for Africa was so fierce that European countries feared war among themselves. To prevent conflict, 14 European nations met at the Berlin Conference in 1884–85 to lay down rules for the division of Africa. They agreed that any European country could claim land in Africa by notifying other nations of its claims and showing it could control the area. The European nations divided the continent with little thought about how African ethnic or linguistic groups were distributed. No African ruler was invited to attend these meetings, yet the conference sealed Africa’s fate. By 1914, only Liberia and Ethiopia remained free from European control.

**Groups Clash over South Africa**

South Africa demonstrated the impact that Europeans had on African peoples. The history of South Africa is a history of Africans, Dutch, and British clashing over land and resources. Although the African lands seemed empty to the Europeans, various ethnic groups had competing claims over huge areas. The local control of these lands, especially in the east, had been in dispute for about 100 years.

**Boers and British Settle in the Cape**

The Dutch came to the Cape of Good Hope in 1652 to establish a way station for their ships sailing between the Dutch East Indies and the Netherlands and became the first Europeans to settle in South Africa. These “Boers” (Dutch for “farmers”) gradually took Africans’ land and established large farms. When the British took over the Cape Colony permanently in the early 1800s, they and the Boers clashed over British policy regarding land and slaves.

In the 1830s, to escape the British, several thousand Boers began to move north. This movement has become known as the Great Trek. The Boers soon found themselves fighting fiercely with Zulu and other African groups whose land they were taking.

**Zulus Fight the British**

Around 1816 Shaka, a Zulu chief, used highly disciplined warriors and good military organization to create a large centralized state. Shaka’s successors, however, were unable to keep the kingdom together against the superior arms of the British invaders. In 1879, after Zulu king Cetshwayo refused to dismiss his army and accept British rule, the British invaded the Zulu nation. Although the Zulus used spears and shields against British guns, they nearly defeated the great European army. In July 1879 however, the Zulus lost the Battle of Ulundi and their kingdom. The Zulu nation fell to British control in 1887.

**The Boer War**

Diamonds and gold were discovered in southern Africa in the 1860s and 1880s. Suddenly, adventurers from all parts of the world rushed in to make their fortunes. The Boers tried to keep these “outsiders” from gaining political rights. An attempt to start a rebellion against the Boers failed. The Boers blamed the British and, in 1899, took up arms against them.

In many ways, the Boer War was the first modern “total” war. The Boers launched commando raids and used guerrilla tactics against the British. The British countered by burning Boer farms and imprisoning women and children in disease-ridden concentration camps.

Some black South Africans fought in the war while others served as scouts, guards, drivers, and workers. Many black South Africans were captured by the British and placed in concentration camps, where over 14,000 died. Britain finally won the war and in 1910, the Boer republics were joined into the self-governing Union of South Africa, controlled by the British.

**A New Period of Imperialism**

The competition for Africa was so fierce that European countries feared war among themselves. To prevent conflict, 14 European nations met at the Berlin Conference in 1884-85 to lay down rules for the division of Africa. They agreed that any European country could claim land in Africa by notifying other nations of its claims and showing it could control the area. The European nations divided the continent with little thought about how African ethnic or linguistic groups were distributed. No African ruler was invited to attend these meetings, yet the conference sealed Africa’s fate. By 1914, only Liberia and Ethiopia remained free from European control.

The European imperialism of the 18th and 19th centuries demanded more influence over the economic, political, and social lives of the people. They were determined to shape the economies of the lands to benefit European economies. In many cases, they forced the people to adopt European customs.

**Forms of Control**

Over time, four forms of colonial control emerged:

A **colony** is a country or a territory governed internally by a foreign power; Somaliland in East Africa was a French colony.

A **protectorate** is a country or a territory with its own internal government but under the control of an outside power; Britain established a protectorate over the Niger River delta.

A **sphere of influence** is an area in which an outside power claims exclusive investment or trading privileges; Liberia was under the sphere of influence of the United States.

**Economic imperialism** is an independent but less-developed country controlled by private business interests rather than other governments; the Dole Fruit Company controlled pineapple trade in Hawaii.

In practice, gaining control of an area might involve the use of several of these forms.

**Methods of Management**

European rulers also developed methods of day-to-day management of the colony. When colonies later gained independence, the type of government chosen in the new nation was greatly influenced by the management method used on them during their colonial period.

**Indirect Control**

Britain and other nations preferred indirect control. Indirect control relied on existing political rulers. In some areas, the British asked a local ruler to accept British authority to rule. These local officials handled much of the daily management of the colony. In addition, each colony had a legislative council that included colonial officials as well as local merchants and professionals nominated by the colonial governor.

The assumption was that the councils would train local leaders in the British method of government and that a time would come when the local population would govern itself. This had happened earlier in the British colonies of Australia and Canada.

**Direct Control**

The French and other European powers preferred more direct control of their colonies. Because they believed the Africans were unable to handle the complex business of running a country, the Europeans developed a policy called paternalism. Using that policy, Europeans governed people in a parental way by providing for their needs but not giving them rights. To accomplish this, the Europeans brought in their own bureaucrats and did not train local people in European methods of governing.

The French also supported a policy of assimilation. That policy was based on the idea that in time, the local populations would adopt French culture and become like the French. To aid in the transition, all local schools, courts, and businesses were patterned after French institutions. In practice, the French often abandoned the ideal of assimilation and settled for a policy of “association,” which was similar to indirect control. They recognized African institutions and culture but regarded them as inferior to French culture.

**African Resistance**

Africans across the continent resisted European attempts to colonize their lands, but the contest between African states and European powers was never equal because of the Europeans’ superior weaponry. Africans resisted the Europeans with whatever forces they could raise and often surprised the Europeans with their military ability. British journalist Edward Morel lived for a time in the Congo and made this observation about the Africans’ dilemma:

*Nor is violent physical opposition to abuse and injustice henceforth possible for the African in any part of Africa. His chances of effective resistance have been steadily dwindling with the increasing perfectibility in the killing power of modern armament. Thus the African is really helpless against the material gods of the white man, as embodied in the trinity of imperialism, capitalistic exploitation, and militarism.*

*~ Edward Morel,* The Black Man’s Burden *~*

Algeria’s almost 50-year resistance to French rule was one outstanding example of active resistance. The resistance movement led by Samori Touré in West Africa against the French is another example. After modernizing his army, Touré fought the French for 16 years.

Africans in German East Africa put their faith in a spiritual defense. African villagers resisted the Germans’ insistence that they plant cotton, a cash crop for export, rather than attend to their own food crops. In 1905, the belief that a magic water (maji-maji) sprinkled on their bodies would turn the Germans’ bullets into water sparked an uprising that became known as the Maji Maji rebellion. Over 20 different ethnic groups united to fight for their freedom, believing that their war had been ordained by God and that their ancestors would return to life and assist their struggle.

But when resistance fighters armed with spears and protected by the magic water attacked a German machine-gun post, they were mowed down by the thousands. Germans officially recorded 75,000 resisters dead but more than twice that number perished in the famine that followed. The Germans were shaken by the rebellion and its outcome and made some government reforms in an effort to make colonialism more acceptable to the Africans.

**Ethiopia: A Successful Resistance**

Ethiopia was the only African nation that successfully resisted the Europeans and its victory was due to one man - Menelik II. Menelik became emperor of Ethiopia in 1889 and successfully played Italy, France, and Britain off each other, building up a large arsenal of modern weapons purchased from France and Russia. Shortly after signing a treaty with Italy in 1889 he discovered differences between the wording of the treaty in the Ethiopian language and in Italian. Menelik believed he was giving up a tiny portion of Ethiopia. However, the Italians claimed all of Ethiopia as a protectorate. Meanwhile, Italian forces were advancing into northern Ethiopia. Menelik declared war. In 1896 Ethiopian forces successfully defeated the Italians and kept their nation independent. After the battle, Menelik continued to stockpile rifles and other modern weapons in case another foreign power challenged Ethiopia’s liberty.

**Negative Effects of Colonial Rule**

Colonial rule caused Africans to lose control of their land and their independence. Contempt for the traditional culture and admiration of European life undermined stable societies and caused identity problems for Africans. Many died of new diseases such as smallpox and in resisting the Europeans. Famines resulted from the change to cash crops in place of subsistence agriculture. They also suffered from a breakdown of their cultures as traditional authority figures were replaced. Homes and property were transferred with little regard to their importance to the people and men were forced to leave villages to find ways to support themselves and their families.

The most harmful political legacy from the colonial period was the division of the African continent. Long-term rival chiefdoms were sometimes united, while at other times, kinship groups were split between colonies. The artificial boundaries unnaturally combined or divided groups, creating problems that plagued African colonies during European occupation. These boundaries continue to create problems for the nations that evolved from the former colonies.

**Positive Effects**

On the positive side, colonialism reduced local warfare. Humanitarian efforts in some colonies improved sanitation and provided hospitals and schools. As a result, lifespans increased and literacy rates improved. Also positive was the economic expansion. African products came to be valued on the international market. To aid the economic growth, railroads, dams, and telephone and telegraph lines were built in African colonies. But for the most part, these benefited only European business interests, not Africans’ lives.