



The Scramble for Africa

The Europeans called Africa the 'Dark Continent' because it was unknown to them



"The horror! The horror!" *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad

European explorers and missionaries began mapping the interior of Africa in the nineteenth-century. Adventurers like Henry Stanley revealed that Africa was full of raw materials that could be exploited to fuel the industrial revolution. They saw it as a new place to invest the money made in industry.

European powers were slow to realise the benefits of claiming land in Africa but when one or two started the rest did not want to miss out. In 1884–5 the Scramble for Africa was at full speed. Thirteen European countries and the United States met in Berlin to agree the rules of African colonisation. From 1884 to 1914 the continent was in conflict as these countries took territory and power from existing African states and peoples.

This map of Africa is from a 1917 atlas. It is colour coded to show what each European power owns. The key is in the bottom left-hand corner. The divisions were arbitrarily decided by the colonising countries. They were not based on existing tribal or geographical boundaries. Some of the new boundaries split tribes in half. Others made huge territories that were difficult to control. This led to conflicts in the twentieth century, when the colonised countries became independent. **Click on the map to see a larger version.**

The Europeans called Africa the 'Dark Continent' because it was unknown to them. This got mixed up with the more sinister idea of 'Darkest Africa' a place where the inhabitants were savage and brutal. Europeans, after the industrial revolution, considered industrial towns and technology to be signs of civilisation. African peoples did not have these, so they were branded uncivilised. These attitudes allowed European colonists to ignore the established African tribes and kingdoms with their rich histories and cultures.

By 1914, the only independent African states were Liberia and Ethiopia.

The area of West Africa that is now called the Democratic Republic of Congo is a good example of what happened to many African countries during the **Scramble for Africa**.



Case study: The Democratic Republic of Congo

1. Before 1874

For centuries the Congo River basin was inhabited by tribes and kingdoms with individual cultures. Many of these peoples spoke Bantu languages. They did not have much contact with Europe, but in the 1400s and 1500s one of the kingdoms had contact with **Portuguese explorers**.

Click on the image below to see a 1944 map of the tribes of the Democratic Republic of Congo. This map comes from a Geographical Handbook on *The Belgian Congo* printed for the Naval Intelligence Division during the Second World War. It shows how tribal divisions survived the colonial period.



2. King Leopold's Playground

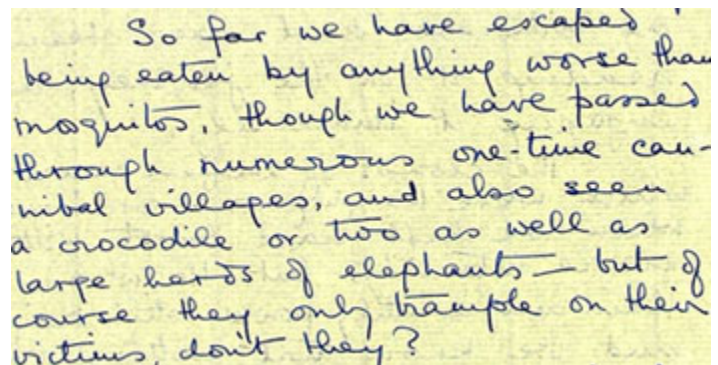
In the nineteenth century **Henry Stanley** explored the Congo river. He returned from his travels with tales of the rich resources available in the Congo. The British Government ignored them but King Leopold II of Belgium sent Stanley to claim the land for him. Stanley set up what was known as the Congo Free State from 1885-1908.

King Leopold presented good motives for doing this: to help the people of the Congo region and do scientific research there. In fact King Leopold's administrators exploited the people and the environment for rubber and ivory. In 1902 Joseph Conrad wrote a story called the *Heart of Darkness* set in Leopold's Congo. It was the beginning of growing criticism of the African colonies.



3. The Belgian Congo

In 1908 King Leopold was forced to hand the country over to the Belgian state because his administrators had run it badly. It was renamed the Belgian Congo. Not much was done to solve the problems that King Leopold's administrators had created. Christian missionaries who set up schools were some of the only people who tried to aid the region.



This is an extract from a letter written in 1940. It is from a woman who was probably a missionary in the Congo region to a Fellow of St John's College who was involved in organising missions to the Congo. She has been travelling in Africa. How does she view the African people?

4. Independence?

In 1959 the Belgian Congo was made independent and renamed the Democratic Republic of Congo. People were starting to acknowledge the human cost of colonialism, but did not know how to put the problems right. Tim Butcher's 2007 book about his journey in **Henry Stanley's**



footsteps, *Blood River*, shows that the Democratic Republic of Congo is still a troubled country.

Marlow, the main character in *Heart of Darkness* travels up the Congo river by steamboat to meet a colonial administrator. He is disgusted by the greed and brutality of the ivory traders in Africa. The picture above is a steamboat from **Henry Stanley**'s journey up the Congo river to find a real colonial administrator twenty years earlier. **Click on the picture to see more.**

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