The Berlin Conference, 1884-85

AiCE Africanism & Pan-African Studies — Fourteen nations, zero Africans

The Context: European Rivalry in Africa

By the early 1880s, the European powers were rushing to claim African territory with increasing speed and with increasing risk of conflict with each other. Britain, France, Portugal, Belgium, Germany, Italy, and Spain were all extending their reach into the interior of the continent, and their expanding claims were beginning to collide. The Congo River basin in particular — a vast, resource-rich territory in Central Africa — had become a flashpoint, with King Leopold II of Belgium, acting in a private capacity rather than as the representative of the Belgian state, making aggressive territorial claims through his International Association of the Congo.

The German Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, called a conference of the European powers in Berlin in November 1884 to manage these competing claims and establish rules for the partition of Africa that would prevent European war. Germany, a late entrant to the colonial race, wanted international recognition of its African claims. The conference he called would determine the fate of an entire continent.

The Conference: Fourteen Nations, Zero Africans

The Berlin Conference on West Africa opened on 15 November 1884 and concluded on 26 February 1885. Fourteen nations attended: Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden-Norway, the Ottoman Empire, and the United States. Not a single African nation, leader, or representative was present. Not a single African voice was heard. The fate of approximately 200 million people was decided by men who had largely never set foot on the continent they were carving up.

The delegates were diplomats, not geographers or Africa experts — most had only the haziest idea of what actually existed in the territories they were discussing. The maps they used were riddled with errors, blanks, and speculation. When delegates argued about the course of a river or the location of a mountain range, they were often arguing

about features they had never seen and whose existence they could only guess at from the accounts of European explorers.

The Berlin Conference: Key Facts
Dates: 15 November 1884 to 26 February 1885.
Location: Bismarck's official residence, Berlin, Germany.
Nations attending: 14 European powers plus the United States — zero African nations.
Hosted by: German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck.
Immediate trigger: competing European claims over the Congo River basin.
Key outcome: the General Act of Berlin — the legal framework for the partition of Africa.
Key principle established: 'effective occupation' — a power must physically occupy territory to claim it.
Consequence: within 30 years, 90% of Africa was under European colonial control.

What Was Decided: The General Act of Berlin

The Berlin Conference produced the General Act of Berlin — a document of fourteen articles that established the legal framework for the partition of Africa. First, the principle of free trade in the Congo River basin and the Niger River basin was established, meaning that no European power could establish exclusive commercial monopolies in these regions — primarily a concession to Britain, which had strong commercial interests in West Africa.

Second — and most consequentially — the principle of 'effective occupation' was established. This meant that a European power could only claim sovereignty over African territory if it could demonstrate 'effective occupation' — meaning it had to actually establish an administrative presence, sign treaties with local authorities, and physically control the territory. In practice, this triggered a frantic and violent rush by all the European powers to physically occupy as much African territory as possible before rivals could do so — a process of extraordinary violence examined in the next lesson.

Third, the conference recognised King Leopold II of Belgium's claim to the Congo Free State — approximately 2.3 million square kilometres of Central Africa — as his personal private property. This recognition of a single individual's claim to an area 76 times the size of Belgium, in a territory whose tens of millions of inhabitants were not consulted, was among the most morally obscene acts of the Berlin Conference. Its consequences were a holocaust.

> *"At the Berlin Conference, Africa was treated not as a continent of human beings with histories, cultures, and political rights, but as an empty space — a wilderness to be mapped, claimed, and exploited. The men in that Berlin ballroom committed an act that generations of Africans are still living with."*
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> **— Adesina Olagunju, Founder, AiCE**

The Straight Lines: How the Borders Were Drawn

Perhaps the most visible and most enduring legacy of the Berlin Conference is the map of Africa that it produced — a map of straight lines, geometric borders, and artificial boundaries that sliced through the territories of ethnic groups, kingdoms, and communities with total indifference to African political and social realities. Approximately forty percent of Africa's colonial borders were straight lines — lines of latitude and longitude drawn by cartographers in European capitals with a ruler and a pen.

What the Border Did	Contemporary Impact
Divided the Somali people among British Somaliland, Italian Somalia, French Djibouti, Ethiopian Ogaden, and Kenya	The Somali desire for unification drove conflict in the Horn of Africa throughout the 20th century and into the 21st.
Forced Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo peoples into a single British colony (Nigeria)	Ethnic tensions, never resolved, drove the Biafra War (1967-70) and continue to shape Nigerian politics today.
Divided the Ewe people between British Gold Coast (Ghana) and German/French Togoland (Togo)	The Ewe have campaigned for reunification since independence; the border remains a source of tension.

What the Border Did	Contemporary Impact
Used the Congo River as the border between French Congo and Belgian Congo	Kinshasa and Brazzaville — two national capitals — face each other across the river, a reminder of the artificial division.
Divided the Yoruba between British Nigeria and French Dahomey (Benin)	Cultural and family ties across the Nigeria-Benin border persist; the border itself is largely a colonial fiction.

Key Takeaways

The Berlin Conference of 1884-85 formalised the rules for a continent's partition without a single African present to object. Its 'effective occupation' principle triggered the violent rush to physically conquer Africa's interior, and its recognition of Leopold II's private claim to the Congo set the stage for one of history's great atrocities. The straight-line borders it produced — dividing peoples and forcing rivals together — remain the national borders of African states today, and remain a source of conflict. The next lesson turns from the diplomacy of partition to its actual, physical imposition: conquest.