IMPERIALISM IN AFRICA

The Search for Natural Resources

During the 19th century, the Industrial Revolution was powered by machines and factories that created goods. The construction of these machines and factories resulted in a need for large amounts of natural resources. However, many European countries did not have the natural resources needed, so they looked to other countries. The continent of Africa had vast quantities of natural resources—such as gold, silver, diamonds, coal, palm oil, and rubber—and European leaders knew they would profit greatly from these resources.

In 1884, several European countries including Great Britain, France, Belgium, and Germany met at the Berlin Conference to divide up the continent of Africa for themselves. Representatives from the United States also attended the conference, though they did not claim any African territory for themselves. No one from Africa was in attendance. When one country takes control of another country to profit economically or politically, it is known as **imperialism**.

Control and "Civilization"

By the early 1900s, almost the entire continent of Africa had been split into **colonies** that were controlled by European countries. In these countries' quest to obtain more natural resources and riches, the colonial borders they established disregarded the existing boundaries of ethnic groups, often putting groups of native people together who did not traditionally get along.

Economic growth was not the only reason for imperialism. European countries also wanted to control distant lands because this enabled them to increase their political power and influence over the rest of the world, thus building an **empire**. (This is where the term *imperialism* comes from.) European leaders thought the people in Africa were "uncivilized" and felt that creating colonies would not only increase their countries' power but also "civilize" native Africans.

Colonial Policies and Legacy

Through forced labor and slavery, European colonial leaders made African people work against their will to extract natural resources. These resources from Africa were then shipped back to Europe. Additionally, an African colony was not permitted to conduct trade with any country besides the one that controlled it. For example, modern-day Nigeria was controlled by Great Britain until 1960. While under British control, Nigeria could not trade with anyone besides Great Britain. In this way, European powers made Africans economically dependent on them.

While European countries varied in how they ruled their colonies, African people were exploited and treated as inferior in every colony. France's colonial leaders encouraged Africans to assimilate and become like the French in every way possible, yet Africans in French colonies were not given the same rights or opportunities as French citizens. In Belgium's African

colonies, most notably the Congo, rulers forced the native people to harvest rubber from trees and murdered an estimated 10 million Africans, one of the largest genocides in recent history.

Meanwhile, Great Britain generally allowed the people in its colonies to keep their traditional ways of life and leadership roles, but they still had to follow orders from the British government despite not being considered citizens. The British also taxed the native people and brought the money back to Great Britain, which hurt the colonies' economic development.

Beginning with Ghana in the late 1950s, African countries gradually gained independence from the European countries that had colonized them. By that time, however, Europeans' imperialist ventures had already taken much from native Africans: natural resources and the economic wealth that came with them, traditional ways of living and cultural practices, and in some cases their very lives. Even today, the consequences of imperialism throughout the African continent can be seen through lingering issues of scarcity, inequity, and conflict in many countries.

Sources

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