Imperialism in Africa:
The Hidden Role it Played in the Development of WWI

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As made evident in the *Black Man's Burden,* Africans fell victim to "the material gods of the white man" embodied as "imperialism" at the turn of the 20th century.[1] Reduced to a mere geometrical shape, European countries carved and divided Africa among themselves with no regard for its inhabitants. Not a single African was present when the future of their respective homelands was decided. Africa, an innocent pawn in Europe's game for power and territory, possessed scarce means to resist the inevitable subjugation and devastation that ensued following the permanent arrival of the white man. The European powers sought control beyond their own borders to make their individual reputations, strength, and influence known worldwide. Inherently, competitiveness accompanied this imperialistic attitude. As select dominating powers arose, the strong desire to ascend as the superior power emerged. In short, the tensions engendered by the competition for prestige and international influence reflected in the colonization of Africa only functioned to exacerbate the already strained relationships of the European colonial powers. Thus, the tensions between the major European powers, fostered primarily on African soil and fueled by Germany, served as a critical factor that contributed to the outbreak of the First World War.

The various meetings of the Berlin Conference systematically established the foundation required for a world war. Motivated by fear, Otto von Bismarck, chancellor of Germany, requested the gathering of all those interested in acquiring African territory in 1884.[2] Twelve European countries, the United States, and Turkey signed treaties with one another to organize and secure colonial boundaries.[3] By hosting the assembly, Germany attempted to interrupt the expansion of the British and French empires while simultaneously affirming its share of the supposedly available African territory. Although the conference may have seemingly prevented further conflict regarding the Scramble for Africa, it in fact only provided a starting line for the development of the First World War. In accordance with this sentiment, author G. N. Uzoigwe affirms*,* "After 1880 the nibbling dramatically changed to aggressive grabbing and swallowing of Africa's belongings."[4] Following this shift in demeanor recognized by Uzoigwe, the division of Africa into equal counterparts for all imperialistic players involved proved no longer feasible. The colonial powers with the most strength and manpower able to combat African resistance and

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[1] Edward Morel, *The Black Man's Burden* (1903), *Internet Modern History Sourcebook*, http://www1.udel.edu/History-old/figal/Hist104/assets/pdf/readings/12blackmanburden.pdf (accessed March 9th, 2022).

[2] G. N. Uzoigwe, "Reflections on the Berlin West Africa Conference, 1884-1885," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, vol. 12, no. 3 (Dec. 1984): 9–22 at 11.

[3] Robert W. Harms, *Africa in Global History: With Sources* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2018), 386.

[4] Uzoigwe, "Reflections on the Berlin West Africa Conference, 1884-1885," 11.

manage the newly conquered land annexed the largest regions. Captain Frederick Lugard, a soldier and an avid believer in Africa's potential, asserted in 1893 that the British empire must "go forward" to compete with its "commercial rivals" and "share in the partition of the world."[5] To advance in societal rank, European nations, like Britain, turned to Africa. Thus, Africa represented a method to prove one's vigor and potency to the surrounding world.

To conceal the selfish motivation to amass control and dominance, the European powers involved in the exploitation of Africa justified their actions by adopting the ideals of Social Darwinism. As explicitly outlined in 1884 by Jules Ferry, prime minister of France and avid supporter of the natural selection viewpoint, claimed, "the higher races have a right over the lower races…because they have a duty."[6] In this perspective, the white race stood as the dominant species who inherently gained the right and privilege to govern the black race. Consequently, colonial Europeans exhibited a false attitude of heroism. To convince the general population that the African continent needed rescuing, colonialists reinforced a prejudiced perspective of Africans. Africans were viewed as barbarous, uncivilized individuals who required the help of the Europeans to implement positive social, cultural, and religious reconstruction. English poet Rudyard Kipling, who consistently represented the British Empire in a positive light, clearly emulates these beliefs in his poem *The White Man's Burden*, in which he states "[referring to the Africans] your new-caught, sullen peoples, half-devil and half-child…shall weigh your gods and you."[7] Kipling wrote this piece in hopes of glorifying the colonization of Africa, specifically by promoting the actions of the Europeans as comparable to those of gods. This poem illustrates the basic concepts of Social Darwinism and inherently instilled an initiative to dictate disadvantaged and vulnerable populations within European nations. Therefore, Kipling's *The White Man's Burden* inadvertently enticed other countries to join the contest for worldwide status and prominence in Africa.

Comparing the role of the European powers to a "God-like" figure, J. Kameron Carter states the imperial man "carries out a 'soteriological' or 'missionizing' project of salvation – the civilizing mission of the West – aimed at ruling the world."[8] Many promoted this expansion by calling for the social evolution of Africa, when the ulterior motive was truly rooted in the drive for extending authority and control. In 1914, German writer and soldier Friedrich von Bernhardi illustrated the goals of the imperial man when he professed, "if we wish to secure Germanism that prestige to which it is entitled…we must gain a firm footing upon this earth, and we must create

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[5] Capt. F. D. Lugard, *The Rise of Our East African Empire* (1893), *Internet Modern History Sourcebook,* https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1893lugard.asp (accessed March 30th, 2022).

[6] Jules Ferry, *Jules Ferry (1832-1893): On French Colonial Expansion* (1884), *Internet Modern History Sourcebook,* https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1884ferry.asp (accessed March 31st, 2022).

[7] Rudyard Kipling, *The White Man's Burden* (1899), *Internet Ancient History Sourcebook*, https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/Kipling.asp (accessed March 9th, 2022).

[8] J. Kameron Carter, "An Unlikely Convergence: W. E. B. Du Bois, Karl Barth, and the Problem of the Imperial God-Man," *The New Centennial Review*, vol. 11, no. 3 (Winter 2011): 167–224 at 172.

bases for the promotion of German civilization."[9] European nations recognized the significance the procurement of colonies played in the expansion of their own unique ideas and characteristics. The country that attained the most land also gained the most people to incorporate within their empire. To accomplish this, the manner of imperialism shifted during the late 19th century. Infiltration of the interior African land defined this era, commonly referred to as "new imperialism." Beforehand, Europeans only established trading ports along the African coast. Africans thus gravely mistook the fruition of events that accompanied the establishment of permanent settler colonies. The supposed devotion to aiding the Africans dissipated fully upon the Europeans' arrival. In an effort to convey the African perspective, Morel wrote a detailed and explicit poem in response to *The White Man's Burden,* in which he explains that by "hewing out for himself a fixed abode in Africa, the white man had massacred the African in heaps" and that their presence "wrecks his [the African's] polity, uproots him from the land, invades his family life, destroys his natural pursuits and occupations, claims his whole time, enslaves him in his own home."[10] With no interest in a symbiotic relationship, the Europeans only used and manipulated the African population for their own gain.

Kaiser Wilhelm II, the final German emperor, claimed Germany's future lay "upon the water" in his speech to the North German Regatta Association in 1901.[11] Eager for power and prominence, he desired "to see to it that this place in the sun [African territory] shall remain an undisputed possession."[12] Most leaders of European empires during that time also demonstrated the aggressive and possessive mindset regarding Africa practiced by Kaiser Wilhelm II. The inclination to compete dominated all proceeding decisions and actions. This tunnel vision resulted in the viewpoint that the penetration of Africa served only as an opportunity to build a renowned reputation known worldwide. However, by exploiting African labor and materials, European powers fueled their own economies and military efforts in their respective countries. Richard Hamilton and Holger Herwig in their book *The Origins of World War I,* discuss the foundation necessary for a world war and claim that "world wars…require extensive economic, technological, and political development."[13] Thus, without the exploitation of the African peoples and the fruits their land offered, the scene for a world war would not have been set in place.

By occupying Africa, the development of full-fledged empires capable of extending across the world to engage in war emerged. Among these empires, relationships and rivalries developed. For example, in 1906, the First Moroccan Crisis revealed the potential formation of alliances. The situation arose when Germany grew offended by France's dismissal of their influence. France

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[9] Friedrich von Bernhardi, *Britain as Germany's Vassal,* ed. and trans. J. Ellis Barker (London: W. Dawson, 1914), 80.

[10] Edward Morel, *The Black Man's Burden.*

[11] Kaiser Wilhelm II, *Speech to the North German Regatta Association* (1901), *Internet Ancient History Sourcebook*, https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1901kaiser.asp (accessed February 2nd, 2022).

[12] Kaiser Wilhelm II, *Speech to the North German Regatta Association*.

[13] Richard F. Hamilton and Holger H. Herwig, eds., *The Origins of World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 5.

signed agreements with Italy, Spain, and England between 1900 and 1904 to increase French control in northwest Africa, specifically Morocco, but neglected to sign any agreements with Germany. France acted under the assumption Germany possessed an insignificant interest in Morocco. Extremely dissatisfied, Germany summoned a conference in Algeciras, Spain with all the European countries who possessed African colonies in hopes they would oppose French control in Morocco. Germany, however, was sorely mistaken. Austria-Hungary expressed the only support for Germany at the gathering. According to Gregory Miller, who highlighted the importance of prestige and dependability in his book *The Shadow of the Past: Reputation and Military Alliances before the First World War,* "most observers perceived this to be a German defeat."[14] The First Moroccan Crisis provided a foresight of the formation of the opposing sides of World War One, specifically the cordial association between France and Britain and between Austria-Hungary and Germany. Both relationships persisted into the war.

Because Morocco's permanent future remained uncertain even after 1906, the Second Moroccan Crisis, also known as the Agadir Crisis, transpired in 1911. The tense strain between France and Germany resurfaced during this time. After a rebellion erupted in Morocco, France discharged troops to the Moroccan capital in fear of losing their advantageous authority in the region. In doing so, France dishonored the compromise reached in Algeciras with Germany. As a result, Germany took "direct action in Morocco and ordered the gunboat Panther to Agadir, the most southern port of Morocco."[15] With the presence of German naval forces in Morocco, tensions only grew. During the conflict, Great Britain made their loyalty to France undoubtedly known when Lloyd George announced his country would never surrender as "peace at that price would be a humiliation intolerable for a great country like ours to endure."[16] Germany, on the other hand, faced seclusion and abandonment yet again. Italy, using the momentum of the Agadir Crisis, invaded the Turkish territory of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica in North Africa.[17] In doing so, this exposed Turkey's weaknesses and created a rivalry between the two nations. According to Miller who recognized the role of social pressures, "public opinion in both states [France and Germany] viewed their government as giving up too much…this attitude, combined with the further tightening of Europe's alliances, helped push the great powers even closer to war."[18] Therefore, these crises forced the major European powers to defend their reputation by way of violence and military threats leading up to the First World War. Alliances formed just as quickly as they fleeted amidst these calamities. However, the events that occurred on African soil cemented the

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[14] Gregory D. Miller*, The Shadow of the Past: Reputation and Military Alliances before the First World War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 94-95.

[15] "German Gunboat Sent to Morocco," *The New York Times,* 2 July 1911.

[16] "Say Germany Went Too Far," *The New York Times,* 23 July 1911, 25.

[17] David G. Herrmann, "The Paralysis of Italian Strategy in the Italian-Turkish War, 1911-1912," *The English Historical Review* vol. 104, no. 411 (Apr. 1989): 332–56 at 332.

[18] Miller*, The Shadow of the Past,* 155-157.

framework necessary to form the Allies (France, Great Britain, Italy, Russia, and the United States) and the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Turkey).[19]

Interestingly, many deny or omit the role Africa played in the development of World War One. Many argue the rise of military technology, militarism, and militant nationalism fueled by the Second Industrial Revolution primarily caused the onset of the Great War. These opinions suggest the naval and arms race between Germany and Britain allowed a fervent rivalry to intensify between them that eventually recruited the involvement of other nations.[20] Political scientist Stephen Van Evera blames Germany's misconception, the belief that the nation who generated the initial attack during a physical encounter would invariably bear success, on the maturation of the worldwide conflict in 1914. He made this evident by stating, "the cult of the offensive was a mainspring driving many of the mechanisms which brought about the First World War."[21] However, to build the military's strength, African colonies supplied the European empires with the materials needed to construct military equipment. Africa provided cotton, rubber, copper, gold, cocoa, coffee, hides, and palm oil products to not only meet the growing needs of the military but also to maintain the functioning of the factories within Europe.[22] Without the role of African laborers, the economy of Europe would have been unable to sustain the investment in military expansion. By maintaining a robust military, leaders felt comfortable extending their territory. In other words, militarism encouraged the adoption of hyper-imperialistic ideals that led the Europeans to compete for African borders. Therefore, although militarism played a role in the years leading to World War One, it actually increased colonial power in Africa. Militarism alone proves insufficient and inadequate as the fundamental explanation for the unprecedented, worldwide outbreak of armed conflict in 1914. Militarism thus acted only as a domino in the imperialistic effect of the Great War.

Hence, the direct force initiating the fall of the dominos was the enlarging endeavor for territory, power, and supremacy, sparked by the Scramble for Africa, among the European nations preceding World War One. Consequently, the colonization of Africa indirectly caused strained relationships among the European countries involved. The need to protect existing land and widen colonial borders dominated all political policy during the early 20th century. Therefore, as explained by Bernhardi, the epitome of an imperialist, "when a nation sees its power jeopardized…and when the highest possessions of a nation can no longer be preserved by compromise, then war becomes a moral necessity."[23] Hence, African territory, which represented their influence and prominence among the world, required defense at all costs. To the Europeans,

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[19] Harms, *Africa in Global History*, 420.

[20] Dirk Bönker, *Militarism in a Global Age: Naval Ambitions in Germany and the United States Before World War I* (N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2012), 1.

[21] Stephen Van Evera, "The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War," *International Security* vol. 9, no. 1 (Summer 1984): 58–107 at 66.

[22] Harms, *Africa in Global History*, 412.

[23] Friedrich von Bernhardi/J. Ellis Barker, *Britain as Germany's Vassal,* 118.

there stood no other option than to engage in a physical confrontation with their challenger. European empires craved the entitlement of a "Great Power." Laying claim to the African continent served as one method of achieving this aspiration. However, the hostility among the major European powers that arose in Africa eventually played a grave role in the stimulation of the first colossal war that befell the world. As a result, long-term consequences and implications surfaced. It entrenched a violent precedent that led to post-war pessimism, the Second World War, and the Cold War. After 1914, warfare reached new dimensions and magnitudes. Even today, society continues to endure its effects. The inevitable development of another war involving the entirety of the world looms over humankind unceasingly.

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