Triggers and early moves: the partition to 1889

WHO OR WHAT STARTED THE SCRAMBLE?

Virtually all the ‘triggers’ that have been advanced as the starting point for the scramble deal with either West Africa, or Egypt or the Congo. It is generally agreed that the scramble for Africa started some time between 1879 and 1882. Diplomatic historians have isolated a number of different triggers, and there has been much debate and disagreement about which trigger set off the scramble. It is a debate that many African historians avoid as being of little importance. They say that what is important is that around 1880 European powers began to establish formal colonies in areas where they had hitherto had informal spheres of influence. Curtin et al. write as follows: ‘One can argue over which was first or most important, but in fact a number of triggers were pulled nearly simultaneously in different parts of the continent. If one or another of these had never existed, the others would have done the job.’¹ This is probably true, but the actual sequence of the scramble has much to do with what European powers obtained which colonies, and is thus an important determinant of the final shape of colonial Africa. Without some knowledge of the European diplomacy behind the scramble, the actual pattern of colonial Africa is unintelligible. Even the shape of
postcolonial Africa requires an understanding of the type of colonial states from which it emerged.

**Jauréguiberry and Freycinet: the French ‘trigger’**

**Senegal**

Senegal was the base for French colonial expansion in Africa. By 1880 St Louis, the capital, was a town of over 16,000 people, many of whom had come strongly under the influence of French culture; other important establishments were Gorée and Dakar. Although there are a number of explanations for the starting point of the scramble, the decision in 1879 by the French to build a railway line from Dakar to link Senegal with the upper Niger valley, and so monopolise the trans-Saharan trade as well as that of the savanna regions of West Africa, is widely regarded as the beginning of the formal partition of Africa.

By 1880 Louis-Alexandre Brière de l’Isle, who had been governor since 1876, had consolidated and extended French control and was preparing the way for an advance to the upper Niger. He was fortunate in that there was now an influential group of men in high positions in government circles who believed that French prestige could be regained by expanding in Africa. The two most important men in this respect were Charles de Freycinet, a great railway enthusiast, who was Minister of Public Works until December 1879 when he became prime minister, and Admiral Jean Jauréguiberry, a former governor of Senegal, who was head of the Ministry of Marine and Colonies from February 1879.

‘Freycinet and Jauréguiberry, not the geographical societies or the explorers,’ write Newbury and Kanya-Forstner, ‘were the true architects of the new African policy. The two men were intimate friends and close political allies. They shared a common belief in the Sudan’s economic potential and a common determination to exploit it for their nation’s benefit. They were convinced that the race for Africa had begun, and that the state, with all the resources at its command, had to make the running.’ It was only in 1895 that Britain came to the same conclusion when Joseph Chamberlain determined to make the state the instrument of expansion.

**Freycinet and Jauréguiberry**

Freycinet thought more in terms of opening up an informal commercial empire, but Jauréguiberry regarded the railway not primarily as a means of opening up fresh areas to French trade, but as a way of extending French political influence; he wanted to create a political empire and to do this he would use military force. Newbury and Kanya-Forstner believe that ‘ultimately, the motives for French expansion are to be found within the policy-making framework itself, within the “official mind” of French imperialism. What transformed French policy after 1879 was a change in official thinking on the vital questions of cost and military effort. Freycinet and Jauréguiberry were the ones who broke with the tradition of limited government intervention in African affairs. Alarmed by the imagined threat of foreign competition, they made the state the principal agent of African expansion. Convinced of Africa’s legendary wealth, they invested public funds in its future profitability. Discarding the old notion of informal empire, they made political control the basis for economic development, and
they set out to win their empire by military means. This last was the crucial decision.' These two authors write that 'the beginnings of British imperialism in West Africa may have been a consequence of the partition; the beginnings of French imperialism were its cause'.

In 1880 Jaureguiberry created a special military command in Senegal, giving this post to Gustav Borgnis-Desbordes, a ruthless military man with a burning desire to extend the French empire. Desbordes spearheaded a French drive towards the upper Niger. Railway enthusiasts spoke dreamily of a railway line that would cross the Sahara, and of one that would connect St Louis with the Niger and so enable French traders to draw a large part of the trade of the Niger basin to St Louis. The expansionists used this enthusiasm to obtain money from parliament. It was clear that there could be no railway line until the area between the Senegal and Niger rivers was firmly under French control. The money obtained for a railway survey was thus used to recruit a military force in Africa and to pay for the construction of forts along the line of conquest. Although little progress was made on the line, progress towards the upper Niger was significant. Although Freydnet and Jaureguiberry fell from power in September 1880, Desbordes paid scant attention to orders to undertake no military expeditions apart from such punitive measures as were necessary to secure existing French stations. He was the government’s main source of information on what was happening in the interior and it was not difficult to portray a further advance as a defensive measure to retain existing interests.

In January 1882 Freycinet was back in power, and Jaureguiberry returned to the Ministry of Marine in February. These two men wanted to stretch the French reach to the upper Niger, which they could do from Senegal without infringing on the British dominance on the Niger coast. So the movement here was not an open anti-British move, which in 1879 would not have been welcomed at the Quai d'Orsay. Jaureguiberry authorised the occupation of Bamako on the upper Niger and this was accomplished in February 1883. Although no money was available for a further advance at this stage, and Jaureguiberry resigned in 1883 so that his active support was no longer there, Bamako was well placed for future attacks on the Tukolor empire of Ahmadu, on Samory’s empire south and east of Bamako, and on the new religious empire being carved out between the Senegal and Gambia rivers by Mahmadu Lamine. The expansionists had plans to conquer all of these states, and had already done much to undermine Ahmadu on their way to the Niger, but for the moment they remained at peace, until resources could be spared for a major onslaught on these empires.

Like many other French naval officers, Jaureguiberry was combative towards England. In April 1883 he established a formal French protectorate at Porto Novo, an area west of Lagos in which there was much competition. France had originally established a presence there in 1863 but this had been allowed to lapse. He had plans too for the extension of this protectorate further westwards, and for the Niger delta, the Benue River and in Cameroon. Since early 1881 the Quai had become increasingly combative towards Britain and they stood solidly behind him. The protectorate over Porto Novo was particularly significant because this lay between the Gold Coast and Lagos, and
The French challenge to Britain in Madagascar may be seen as part of the new French initiative that was started in 1879–1880. Since the 1860s the French had allowed the British a fairly free hand in increasing their influence over the Merina dynasty, although the French sugar planters on Réunion wanted the French government to become more involved because they saw that Madagascar had potential as a food and labour source. But in July 1881, when Britain encouraged the Merina to extend and consolidate their rule, Paris saw this as an attempt to oust the French from Madagascar. In January 1882 the French decided to act positively on the island and the aggressive Auguste Baudais was appointed to the island. He engineered a quarrel with the Merina and broke off relations with them. A Merina delegation to Paris met with no success with a French government that had decided to take control of the island. They found no support in London either. In February 1883 French naval action against Madagascar was begun, and in December 1885 the Merina accepted a French protectorate.

So, in terms of the theory that makes France the initiator of the era of formal empire, it would seem that French action from 1879 onwards started the scramble for Africa. In these early French initiatives one may also include the French occupation of Tunisia in 1881, which is not normally considered part of the scramble for Africa, as French action was encouraged by Britain and German, so there was no competition, except, of course, from Italy, who had coveted it.

The Egyptian ‘trigger’

Not all historians agree that it was France that started the partition. They argue that French expansion in the Senegal region was going on very much despite official French government policy, and that by 1882 there had been no official French decision to undertake a programme of formal control. What did change the French attitude was the British occupation of Egypt in 1882. Robinson and Gallagher in *Africa and the Victorians*, published in 1961, cited the British occupation of Egypt in 1882 as the start of the scramble for Africa. Over the years this theory has been hotly debated, and although there is by no means agreement on the issue, the balance of informed opinion is that while the occupation may explain British participation in the scramble, it cannot be used as an explanation for the entire scramble. On the other hand, there is little doubt that it did heighten international tensions and rivalry.

Basically the argument in favour of Egypt stems from the nature of the British occupation of that country in 1882. In chapter 5 we left Egypt in the hands of Urabi Pasha. Britain and France planned joint action to remove Urabi and put the Anglo-French puppet Tewfik back on the throne and thereby secure Europe’s financial investments in the country. At the time there were Muslim revolts in Algeria and Tunisia, both under French control, and the French prime minister, Gambetta, saw a link between this and Urabi’s revolt, believing that it was all part of a Pan-Islamic conspiracy. The British would have preferred the Ottoman sultan, as the nominal suzerain of Egypt, to take
direct control. France was against this as it believed this would be a bad precedent and might have repercussions on its position in Algeria and Tunisia. So the two powers planned a joint naval demonstration which it was hoped would give courage to the khedive’s supporters and daunt those of Urabi. But at the last moment, there was a domestic political crisis in France, and France withdrew from the planned attack. The British, having bombarded Alexandria on 11 July 1882, now found themselves committed to further action. Instead of bringing the Egyptian rebels to heel, the bombardment served rather to fan the flames of anti-European feeling in the country, and a British force under Sir Garnet Wolsely was sent to restore order. Urabi’s army was overwhelmed at the battle of Tel-el-Kebir and Britain became the sole occupier of Egypt.

In terms of the scenario put forward by historians for many years, the reasons why Europe took action against Urabi were that he was threatening to repudiate the national debt, and that the revolution which he headed was responsible for the country sliding into chaos, which endangered the Suez Canal as well as the foreign investments. Historians have also insisted that it was France rather than Britain that had been in the forefront of steps to interfere in Egyptian affairs. They have also put forward the view that Britain in 1882 was a most reluctant occupier of Egypt.

These assumptions have not gone unchallenged and from time to time historians have expressed reservations about one or other of the above conclusions. Hopkins, in a 1986 reassessment of the 1882 occupation of Egypt, has given us reason to question some of the above premises. In the first place, he says, the military protests from February 1879 were not aimed at establishing a new revolutionary government. ‘Even when Urabi emerged as the leading figure in Egyptian politics in February 1882, his actions were consistent with his pronouncements that he was loyal to the khedive and to the sultan, and that he intended neither to eliminate European influences or to renege on the interest payments due on Egypt’s debts. Furthermore, “law and order” were maintained until June, when rioting occurred in Alexandria.’ Even these disturbances, which contemporaries portrayed as being horrific and which served as a justification for European intervention, ‘were less serious than has long been supposed’, says Hopkins, ‘and they were probably spontaneous. If there was premeditation, the prime suspect has to be Tewfiq, Britain’s pliable puppet, who had an interest in discrediting Urabi in order to bolster his own position. Urabi himself heard of the disturbances late in the day, and moved quickly to quell them.’ In other words, Egypt was not ‘sliding into anarchy’.

Hopkins goes further and says that the perception that chaos reigned was not simply the result of a misreading of the situation by Europe – it was an impression that was being deliberately created. Hopkins explains it thus: ‘This happened because the Europeans faced a dilemma which in the end could be resolved only by intervention. They wanted a government which was both stable and co-operative. A stable government was one with a solid domestic power-base; but the stronger its local support the greater its ability to resist or qualify external demands. The more pliable the regime, the weaker its domestic power-base; the government would obey orders but could not implement them without arousing opposition. Hence a paradox emerged: strong governments
were reported for non-compliance, which was equated with the erosion of orderly rule; pliable governments were given warm approval but ultimately could not sustain the stability they were said to represent.  

Ufabi a threat to Europe

What specifically alarmed European government agents and business interests in September 1881 was that a new and stable government had emerged in Egypt and had a reform program that included a reduction in the number of highly paid European officials and the curbing of the operations of certain categories of foreigners. Since disorder was defined as allowing Egyptians a greater say in running their own country, it was not surprising that scare stories multiplied in number and intensity. It was not anarchy that drew the Europeans into Egypt, but the European presence which made the formula for maintaining stability increasingly complex and represented opposition as anarchy.

Suez Canal as rationale for invasion

Where the canal is concerned it does not appear that many British officials in high places thought that the events in Egypt in 1882 were endangering its security. Until the 1890s the Admiralty based its strategy on the Cape route. Even the shippers, who preferred the canal, did not appear to regard it as being under threat. It was only in July 1882, with disturbances in Egypt, that the security of the canal became an issue. 'Evidence from different sources,' Hopkins writes, 'points clearly to the conclusion that the Canal was promoted late in the day to justify a forward policy. It was a device to provide a rationale for action by suggesting that free trade and international communications were in peril. In this way the invasion of Egypt could be presented favourably in Britain and made palatable to Cobdenite Liberals and to Gladstone in particular ... Cause and effect need to be reversed: it was the bombardment of Alexandria which created a threat to the Canal, not a threat to the Canal which made bombardment necessary.'

On the question of France dragging Britain into Egypt, Hopkins also believes that this is not true, that French action in Tunisia in May 1881 resulted in a far heavier involvement here than had initially been anticipated, so that the French government approached the issue of intervention in Egypt very cautiously. Although France may have been more assertive early on in the crisis, it certainly was not so at the end.

The issue of French pressure

'British economic interests as reason for invasion

'British economic interests' Hopkins believes, 'is the one which Africa and the Victorians is most concerned to deny, namely that Britain was largely responsible for her own actions and that these were much more combative and calculated than Robinson and Gallagher's reading of the evidence indicates.' He concludes that British intervention came 'from the conscious and sustained defence of Britain's expanding economic interests in Egypt'. These interests had expanded rapidly, and there were close ties between financial interests in the City and politicians in Whitehall, ties which were often rooted in friendships and marriage. Of course, this pressure to safeguard British economic interests was not the only one with which politicians had to deal, but statesmen knew the importance of expanding the British role in the international economy; they appreciated the significance of overseas trade in the balance of payments. 'It remained only to make the occupation palatable to parliament and the public,' Hopkins writes. 'This was achieved by emphasizing the national interest rather
than by referring to specific business and financial concerns, and by stressing the spurious danger to the Canal and to the freedom of the seas, the duty of defending British lives and property, and the need to uphold Christianity in the face of militant Islam.\textsuperscript{11}

Although Britain became the effective ruler of Egypt, the khedive remained at the head of affairs, albeit as a figurehead. Egypt remained a possession of the Ottoman empire under British protection. The main reason for this was that the British did not intend taking permanent control of Egypt; they believed that their stay would be temporary. As soon as law and order was restored they would withdraw. The last thing that Gladstone wanted to do was to add a colony to the British empire. But in the end Britain did not withdraw, although between 1882 and 1922 it made 66 official declarations of its intent to do so.

According to Robinson and Gallagher, the British occupation of Egypt in 1882 was the start of the scramble for Africa, because France, annoyed at being ousted from Egypt, now embarked on an aggressive expansion policy in West Africa and so unleashed a train of events that led to the parceling out of Africa among the European powers.

In order to place this in perspective we must focus on Leopold and Stanley and also on the activities of Savorgnan de Brazza. In 1876 Leopold was taking steps that would eventually result in him obtaining the Congo as a personal fief. Some historians have credited him with thinking in terms of a colony in the Congo even at this early stage. It seems more likely that, although he might have had some vague political plans, what he really wanted was to organise the commercial exploitation of the region. Stanley had demonstrated that above the cataracts there was a vast stretch of navigable water from Stanley Pool (Malebo Pool). The British, who were doing very well with their coastal trade between Cameroon and the Congo mouth, did not feel the need to go into the interior, but Leopold saw the commercial possibilities, and in 1879 Stanley went back as Leopold’s agent to explore the trading possibilities and set up bases. He opened up communications from Stanley Falls (Kisangani) to Stanley Pool, and between 1879 and 1884 he made treaties with some 400 chiefs in which the sovereignty of the International African Association was recognised.

At this stage Brazza enters the scene. Despite having been born in Rome in 1852, Brazza was an ardent French nationalist and believed very much in France’s civilising mission. Between 1875 and 1878 he discovered a route from the coast along the Ogowe River to Stanley Pool which was much simpler and easier than the one pioneered by Stanley. Back in Europe in 1878 Brazza heard that Stanley was about to return to Africa, this time in the employ of King Leopold. Brazza decided to return to Africa and, although he succeeded in obtaining a small grant from the French government, his return was undertaken in the name of the French branch of the International African Association. So there was no deliberate French plan to expand here, and nothing might have come of his journeys had it not been for Leopold’s activity in the Congo.
The journeys of Livingstone, Stanley and Brazza
In 1880 Brazza went overland from Gabon and towards the end of the year he concluded a treaty with Makoko of the Teke on the northern banks of Stanley Pool, in which the chief ceded his territory to France. The treaty was signed where Brazzaville was later established; it was well inland and it was separated from existing French interests in Gabon. He returned to France in 1882. When Leopold heard of this treaty he took immediate steps to acquire sovereignty over the Congo basin. It is because Brazza's treaty spurred Leopold to take decisive action to obtain control of the area to the south of the Congo River that certain historians have regarded the Teke-Brazza treaty as the starting point of the scramble, the 'trigger' that began it all.

But Brazza had not gone to Africa as the agent of the French government, and the government at first wanted nothing to do with the treaty. Brazza's reception in official circles was decidedly lukewarm. Jauréguiberry regarded the treaty as a completely unauthorised piece of diplomacy by a man who was an agent of the International African Association, which was closely linked to Leopold. He was against submitting the treaty to parliament for ratification. Jauréguiberry had his own strategy for furthering the French empire in Africa and this did not include taking sovereignty over the northern banks of the Congo River. Jauréguiberry disapproved of Brazza's activities, because they were distractions from his own priority areas. Leopold, who had set his sights on the whole of the Congo basin, approached prominent people to use their influence to see that the treaty was not ratified. The Teke lands were just above the Congo rapids, at the end of the navigable part of the river. Leopold was afraid that French control here might isolate his stations in the interior from the coast.

But Brazza had invested too much in the project to give up so easily, and he made a direct appeal to the French public, writing in the press of the wonderful economic potential of the region, suggesting that it would be disgraceful and damaging to national prestige to give up something that had been won for France in a race against Stanley. Public opinion, usually notoriously apathetic towards Africa, was stirred by the appeal to national prestige, and many voices were raised in favour of the ratification of the treaty. Public pressure on the French government mounted, and on 30 November 1882 the treaty was ratified, thus laying the foundations for the French Congo (Congo-Brazzaville). It was ratified because it cost little politically against the lightweight Association of Leopold's, and it gave a safe and popular success after the depressing events in Cairo.

Many historians have focused attention on the Brazza treaty as the start of the partitioning of Africa. Robinson and Gallagher, who maintain that it was the British occupation of Egypt in 1882 that set off the scramble, cite the Brazza treaty in support of their view. They attach much significance to the fact that the treaty was ratified only a few months after the British occupation of Egypt, and suggest that this was an aggressive reaction by France to being ousted from Egypt by Britain. Although France could have joined Britain in the occupation of Egypt, it was annoyed by the unilateral British action and the failure of the British to withdraw immediately. The British occupation of Egypt did not really harm the French position in the balance of power stakes in the Mediterranean.
What France was so upset about was being pushed out of an area where it had been dominant. So here we have prestige very much to the fore.

Robinson and Gallagher believe that in ratifying the treaty France was signalling a new policy in West Africa, in which it would no longer be so sensitive about treading on British toes in this part of the world, a change from the informal understanding they had had not to interfere in one another’s spheres of influence. Those who hold this view say that prior to 1882 British and French traders operated quite happily without the intervention of their governments. The French sphere of influence was Senegal and the western Sudan, while the British were predominant in the region of the lower Niger. Before 1882 France gave no support or encouragement to French traders in their attempts to establish themselves in the British trading sphere. But after 1882 this changed. The ratification of the Brazza treaty, so it is said, marked this altered situation. It spurred Leopold to take steps to assume formal control over the southern banks of the Congo River, thus forcing Britain and France into further action to formalise control over their informal spheres.

But the weight of opinion is that it was not the occupation of Egypt that resulted in the Makoko treaty being ratified. Hopkins denies that the French were initially annoyed at the British occupation of Egypt. In 1882 they congratulated the British on their action ‘because it appeared to safeguard rather than imperil French business and personnel’. France was at the time heavily engaged in Tunisia, Algeria and Indochina, and Hopkins says that it was only in 1885 that they could give Egypt their full attention. Sanderson agrees that French anger did not date from 1882. He maintains that, for close on two years after the British occupation of Egypt in September 1882, the French continued to believe that Britain would restore joint financial control in Egypt and so they did not obstruct Britain in Egypt; in fact they cooperated with it. So France did not act in anger over Egypt in 1882. He agrees with those who see French action as beginning some 18 months before the Egyptian crisis of 1882, especially in West Africa and Madagascar. Bitterness about Egypt came to the fore only with the collapse of Anglo-French negotiations on Egyptian finance in the middle of 1884. French moves before that were not prompted by a desire to get back at Britain over Egypt. He does not believe that the Egyptian crisis affected the partition of West Africa until at least 1894. The most rapid French advance in West Africa occurred between 1879 and 1883 when there was no serious rift with Britain. When the issue began to arouse great bitterness in 1884–1885, there was a pause in the advance, and when the advance continued in 1889–1890 its focus was the establishment of a large empire around Lake Chad, and this objective distracted the French from the Nile valley until 1894.

But even divorced from the Egyptian issue, there are those who still maintain that the Brazza treaty was the ‘trigger’ for the scramble. Jean Stengers thus argues that the Brazza treaty would have been ratified even if there had been no crisis in Egypt. He does admit, however, that the hurt of the Egyptian issue may well have made the French public more receptive to any scheme that seemed likely to compensate them for the loss of Egypt.
The Egyptian explanation has come under attack from many quarters. 'It will not do,' writes Paul Kennedy, 'to make the Egyptian crisis the sole or even the chief cause of the European “scramble for Africa”. The reasons for that phenomenon had long been developing, and lay in the altering relationships (especially the economic and power relationships) between Europe and the tropical world.' Kennedy argues that by the time Britain occupied Egypt in 1882, the British were expanding in South Africa, the French along the Senegal and in Tunisia, Leopold was already eyeing the Congo – in short, that the scramble had started and was gaining momentum. Kennedy does agree that Egypt was important in the further course of the partitioning. 'What the British entry into Egypt and failure to withdraw from there did do, however, was to open up a new zone of rivalry and to make impossible any earlier hopes of an agreed Anglo-French supervision of the colonial scramble.'

Newbury and Kanya-Forstner also take issue with the Egyptocentric thesis, although agreeing that the Egyptian crisis might have led the French to adopt more openly anti-British policies and that Brazza’s campaign to whip up public feeling may have been the more successful because of it. They agree with Stengers that it was France who set off the scramble for Africa, but as we have seen, they maintain that the vital decision to expand had been taken as far back as 1879–1880, long before the Egyptian crisis or the Brazza treaty. This theory enjoys widespread support. They say that despite Jauréguiberry’s initial unenthusiastic attitude towards the treaty, ‘Parliament ratified the De Brazza treaty because it gave France another route into the vast and wealthy lands of the West African interior’. In other words, they see it as of a piece with the new policy indicated in 1879–1880 by Jauréguiberry and Freycinet – the ratification of the Brazza treaty was merely a continuation of that policy, it was not the beginning of a new policy.

The 1883 initiatives on the lower Niger and Benue were likewise a continuation of that policy. The British were dominant in the Niger River delta and by 1871 there were between 20 and 30 British firms trading in this area from hulks moored on the river. In 1879 George Goldie succeeded in putting an end to disruptive competition among British firms trading in the region and formed the United African Company. But there were still French firms along the river; in September 1882 the agent-general of the Compagnie française de l’Afrique équatoriale, Mattei, signed a commercial treaty with a chief on the Benue River.

The British were too strongly entrenched to the west of the Niger to be challenged with much success, but Jauréguiberry felt that there was a good chance of France being able to secure a foothold on the east banks of the river and on the Benue. In January 1883 Jauréguiberry called on the French parliament to ratify the commercial treaty, and he issued instructions for the commander of the South Atlantic Naval Division to make treaties with chiefs in the delta. Late in 1883 Mattei was sent to the Niger and Benue to sign treaties, and French gunboats cruised around the Bight of Benin.

This sudden initiative was part of Jauréguiberry’s designs for the creation of a huge French West African empire. The treaties with the delta chiefs were not aimed at simply giving France a commercial foothold, but were intended to provide an outlet to the sea in this area. It was a step in the fulfilment of Jauréguiberry’s plan for opening up the
road for France to Lake Chad, Adamwa and Borno. Of course, say Newbury and Kanya-Forstner, he did not expect that the African empire would be created in a few short years – it was a long-term goal, but it was part of the same initiative that saw him appoint Desbordes to push French expansion in the western and central Sudan; he hoped to be able to advance into the interior from the lower Niger and Benue and eventually link up with the drive from Senegal. Jaureguierry was not able to follow up on these initiatives. When he made them he knew that he was about to resign from the French cabinet. He thus had to move quickly, and his instructions to the commander of the South Atlantic Naval Division were signed two days after his resignation from the cabinet.18

When he heard that French warships were in the vicinity of the delta and that the French were making treaties, Percy Anderson of the Foreign Office wrote as follows in June 1883: ‘British trade will have no chance of existence except at the mercy of French officials.’ To avoid this a British protectorate would have to be established at the mouth of the Niger. ‘Protectorates are unwelcome burdens,’ Anderson wrote, ‘but in this case it is ... a question between British protectorates, which would be unwelcome, and French protectorates, which would be fatal.’19 Anderson saw the choice that was being forced on Britain a good deal sooner than most British policy-makers. Nothing came of this French policy, the French did not succeed in establishing a presence on the eastern delta or the Benue. However, the French activity, and the proclamation in 1883 of a French protectorate over Porto Novo, resulted in British consul Hewett in November 1883 being given instructions to make treaties with the coastal states and establish protectorates. This resulted in the proclamation of the Oil Rivers Protectorate. Anglo-French fear and suspicion played a major role here. It was fear of British action on the coast opposite Lagos that made France proclaim a protectorate over Porto Novo, but that protectorate in turn made the British fear that France was about to take aggressive expansionist steps in West Africa. Britain had no intention of establishing an empire. As John Flint has written: ‘The motives behind British policy in the 1880s were pragmatic and practical. There was during that period no question in the minds of the British politicians of building anything, least of all an empire in Nigeria. The motives of British actions were entirely defensive, designed simply to retain existing areas of British commercial predominance. The acquisition of British political control over the Nigerian coast and the banks of the Niger in 1884–5 took place in a spirit of anti-imperialism and financial parsimony; and control was thus essentially minimal. The British meant only to prevent France from obtaining control of the British palm-oil trade on the Niger and its delta.’20 Once the British government had proclaimed the Oil Rivers Protectorate it did virtually nothing for a number of years to transform this ‘paper’ protectorate into something more meaningful.

Enter the Germans

Hewett was successful in concluding the treaties in the Niger delta which laid the foundation for the proclamation of the Oil Rivers Protectorate in 1885, but elsewhere he was not so fortunate. This was because Germany now entered the picture. Up to about
1880 British naval preponderance did not destabilise the political situation on the coasts because it was not necessary for it to annex territory or interfere actively. But this stability was ruined when France challenged the British in West Africa and Madagascar. As late as the mid-1870s, apart from Britain and France, the only other coastal powers were Egypt, Zanzibar and Portugal. Egypt and Zanzibar were both British client-states, and Portugal was almost one. British attempts to confine the area of ‘competitive instability’ by making protectorates on the coast between the Gold Coast and Cameroon were ruined by Bismarck. The German factor has also been mooted as a trigger of the scramble for Africa. Oliver and Atmore argue that France and Britain had no need to convert their informal spheres of influence into formal empire, that the two governments did not allow conflicts between traders to become ‘causes’. According to them it was the sudden appearance on the scene of Leopold and Bismarck, neither of whom had hitherto shown any interest in Africa, that changed the situation. The way that they burst into the African arena, and the suddenness of their specific claims made within such a short time, threw France and Britain into a state of confusion, and forced them to follow suit and take steps to formalise control.

There can be little doubt that Germany’s colonial activity in 1883–1885 and the Berlin Conference, at which Leopold’s claim to the Congo was recognised, were major events in the partition of the continent. Above all, they made clear to Britain that informal control was no longer a sufficient safeguard of existing interests. Until Bismarck took an interest in obtaining colonies in Africa, Britain and France had the field virtually to themselves. Portugal also had interests, but was not considered a threat. So Germany’s sudden interest did indeed alter the cosy situation, for Britain in particular. What is unique about Germany’s entry into the colonial field is that, unlike Britain and France, it did not have a strong colonial tradition in Africa. Unlike the other two, it had no colonies in Africa. The German Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, had appeared supremely indifferent to colonies. Then suddenly, between mid-1883 and early 1885 Germany carved out four widely separated areas in Africa, establishing formal colonies in Kamerun (Cameroon), Togo, South West Africa (Namibia) and German East Africa (later Tanganyika and still later Tanzania).

Historians differ as to the reasons for this volte face, but they mostly agree that Bismarck was not thinking primarily of the value of colonies in Africa, but that he had his eye on diplomatic gains in Europe. In other words, ‘Bismarck’s map of Africa lay in Europe’. As such Bismarck’s plans form part of European rather than African history. But a few aspects of particular relevance to Africa need to be highlighted. One of the more inventive theories, part of which is still given some credence by historians, is that of A. J. P. Taylor who put forward the view that Bismarck entered the colonial field to win the friendship of France. Wanting to distract French attention from the loss of Alsace-Lorraine to Germany, he encouraged France to channel its energies into expanding in West Africa. At the same time he wanted to drive a wedge between France and Britain; he thus decided to enter Africa and to take colonies where British interests rather than French ones would be threatened. It has been suggested that Bismarck secretly hoped that Britain would make some objections to German colonial claims, as this would
enable Germany to portray Britain as a disruptive force, opposing Germany's legitimate ambitions in the same way as Britain had thwarted France. Whether or not there is any truth in this theory, certainly three of the four colonies taken by Germany affected British interests more than they did French ambitions. In connection with this theory, Bismarck knew that whatever objections the British might make, they would not be serious ones. The reason for this was that after France stopped cooperating with Britain on the caisse de la dette publique, Britain needed German support on this body in her bid to reform the Egyptian economy.\(^{24}\)

Taylor's explanation has been challenged by many historians. Thus H. A. Turner pours cold water on the notion that Bismarck could possibly have believed that success in the relatively unimportant African sphere could ever be regarded by the French as adequate compensation for the vital loss of Alsace-Lorraine.\(^{25}\) It has also been said that Bismarck wanted to teach Britain a lesson, and show it that German support in Africa had to be paid for with closer cooperation in Europe.

Historians have recently devoted more attention to internal pressures on Bismarck as a factor in his decision to make Germany a colonial power. Like Britain and France, Germany also had its economic pressure groups. Others have argued in favour of domestic political gains Bismarck hoped to gain by espousing an expansionist programme that would be popular with the Conservative Party and also the Bremen and Hamburg merchants, and which at the same time might impress the Catholic Centre Party. The Hanse towns were putting pressure on Bismarck to look after German commercial interests in Africa. By the middle of 1884, with Britain alienated from France because of Egypt, Bismarck could get his colonies at bargain basement prices, although he remained sceptical of their value.

With the idea of colonies steadily gaining ground in Germany as a whole, an outward colonial policy might be worth some support in the 1884 Reichstag autumn elections. It seems likely too that Bismarck had the tariff policy he had embarked upon in 1879 at the back of his mind. He believed that an era of protectionism lay ahead on all sides, and he was afraid that unless Germany had colonies of its own it would be unable to make reciprocity agreements with other powers for the free entry of German goods into the colonies. Bismarck never became a fiery imperialist and he did not think that the colonies would ever amount to much. Besides which, they could cause problems. The colonies would come under the sovereignty of the Reich so that there would have to be an annual financial budget, which would give the Reichstag an extra opportunity of interfering in his handling of political matters. But with increasing European interest in Africa he could not afford to stand aside. If he was wrong about colonies and they proved to be the tropical treasure houses that many people believed they would become, history would be harsh in its judgement of the chancellor who had failed to secure part of this great bounty for Germany. And Bismarck was very concerned about the judgement of history. In many ways German participation in the partitioning of Africa was the outside manifestation of a new and confident united country, a self-assured Germany assuming its rightful place in the affairs of nations. Besides this, it did not seem as if the colonies would cost the treasury very much, as the German companies
The break with France over Egypt in 1884 (for the first two years after 1882 there was no break as France expected that Britain would again give it a share in what was happening in Egypt) gave Bismarck the opportunity to act in Africa and help himself. Taylor saw this as purely a move to pick a quarrel with Britain and as evidence that Bismarck wanted to move closer to France, but it has never been very clear why Bismarck preferred friendship with France rather than see the country more isolated after the rift with Britain. This has been a weak point in Taylor’s thesis. It now seems that by 1884 Bismarck had decided that Germany needed colonies and spheres of interest, and that he had to have a Franco-German alignment against British preponderance in order to do so.26

It has been argued that Bismarck may even have found other ways of protecting German commercial interests, but what drove him finally to colonies was the British attitude between January and June 1884 over South West Africa. Bismarck’s motives in expansion were complex, but prestige played a vital role here. He called Britain’s attempt to impose a ‘Monroe Doctrine for Africa’ and exclude Germany from areas that Britain herself did not possess or even claim, as ‘an affront to our national self-esteem’.27

German missionaries had been active in the region for many years and there was also a substantial German trading interest at Angra Pequena. Because of renewed Herero-Nama warfare, in February 1883 the German ambassador inquired whether Britain would afford protection to the Bremen merchant Lüderitz at Angra Pequena (renamed Lüderitz Bay in 1921). When no clear answer to the request was forthcoming, in September 1883 Britain was asked whether she claimed sovereignty at Angra Pequena. Under pressure from the Cape, on 21 November Bismarck was informed that the establishment of a foreign power in South West Africa ‘would infringe legitimate rights’ (that is, British rights). On 31 December Bismarck asked for particulars of British rights. He was not going to be put off by the claim to paramountcy. The British government was in no hurry to reply and entered into talks with the Cape government regarding the territory. They were still talking on 24 April 1884 when Bismarck informed the German consul at Cape Town that Angra Pequena was under German protection, basing the claim on treaties that had been concluded in May and August 1883. Taken by surprise, Lord Derby stated that while the British did not claim Angra Pequena, ‘we had claimed a sort of general right to exclude foreign powers from that coast’.28

It was at this point that ‘the German factor’ became a major consideration in Africa. Bismarck had seized the initiative, much to the discomfiture of the British. Some British politicians were slow in realising that the era of informal rule was quickly drawing to an end, but in November 1883 the cabinet authorised Consul Hewett to establish protectorates in West Africa. The money was slow in coming from the Treasury so Hewett left only in May 1884 on his treaty-making mission. As we have seen, Hewett was not too late in the Niger delta, where cut-throat British competition backed up by gunboats against Africans who were inclined to trade with the French had demoralised
French companies. But he was too late elsewhere. Britain was not bent on empire building and wanted to extend British protection eastwards from the Gold Coast to the Togo coast to stop smuggling around the edges of the Gold Coast. The Germans had well-established mission and trading interests here, and so did the British. Bismarck sent Gustav Nachtigal, better known as a traveller in the Sudan and the Sahara, with orders to extend German protection to areas where his fellow countrymen were operating. Between 4 and 6 July 1884 he signed treaties which brought the area under German protection, thus snatching it away from Britain.

The British had a very strong presence on the coast of the modern Republic of Cameroon. The Baptist Missionary Society had been there since the 1840s, and the British consul of the Bights of Benin and Biafra visited the area periodically in his gunboat, so that in the 1870s the region clearly came within Britain’s informal sphere of influence. Although the Germans were also represented here, their interest was a fairly recent one, dating from the opening in 1868 of a trading station on the estuary at Douala by the Hamburg firm of Woermann. Once again Hewett was too late; when he arrived in Douala on 20 July 1884 it was to discover that Nachtigal, who had hastened there from Togo, had raised the German flag in Cameroon five days earlier. Hewett was to go down in British colonial history as ‘too-late-Hewett’.

If Bismarck did indeed hope that Britain would offer some opposition to his colonial ventures, he would have been disappointed. Local British officials in West Africa were upset at the way that Togo and Cameroon, where there were well-established British interests, were snatched away before their eyes, but the British government did not regard Bismarck’s building of a colonial empire as a threat. Despite the German tariffs of 1879, Germany was regarded by Britain as a free trading nation; it did not pose a strategic threat as it had no fleet to rival that of Britain. Besides, Britain was very dependent upon German support in order to enable it to reform Egyptian finances. So Britain would not antagonise Bismarck. Bismarck’s interest took London by surprise. They had not realised he was planning to establish German colonies and they had some reservations about what they regarded were the underhand methods of Bismarck, pretending disinterest and making enquiries about British intentions while he was all the time preparing the way for the assumption of German authority.

It was the Cape government rather than the British government that objected to the establishment of German control. Although the British were not opposed to the German presence as such, it did complicate British policy in southern Africa. In 1883 it seemed likely that the activities of freebooters from the Transvaal (South African Republic) would result in the borders of the state being extended westwards. The fear that this stretch of land through Tswana territory, between the Transvaal to the east and the Kalahari desert to the west, would become part of the South African Republic, was a cause of deep concern to the Cape, as this was its only means of access to the interior.
Bismarck's anger at British attempts to exercise a sort of informal paramountcy was by no means confined to the establishment of colonies, and he entered the diplomatic arena to further embarrass Britain and promote his own aims. Britain was challenged at the Congo mouth where it had a considerable trade. The British did not appear to have any objection to the ratification of the Brazza–Teke treaty, but then in December 1882 Lord Granville at the Foreign Office told Lisbon that Britain would recognise its 'historic claims' at the Congo mouth. For some 40 years Britain had consistently rejected Portugal's claims to sovereignty over the Congo mouth. But now there were widespread fears that France would gain control of the mouth of the river and cut British traders off from the Congo. Britain began to look at Portuguese control of the mouth in a new light. Virtually anyone was preferable to having the French there. Although Britain had well-established interests on the coast between Cameroon and the Congo, it was reluctant to step in itself and assume responsibilities. Britain thus supported Portugal, signing the Anglo-Portuguese treaty on 26 February 1884, recognising Portugal's claims to the Congo mouth and its hinterland. Instead of taking responsibility itself, Britain promoted Portugal, thus falling 'back on a variant of their technique of informal empire. Others could administer on paper, while they enjoyed the trade. But the treaty soon ran into major opposition. The French, of course, opposed it. In Britain itself there was much opposition to the ratification of the treaty by the British parliament from British businessmen and church groups. The businessmen were afraid that French or Portuguese control of the mouth of the Congo would result in the exclusion of British trade. The campaign in Britain against the treaty received a moral basis when the Anti-Slavery Society focused on Portugal's poor record in combating the slave trade. At the same time Protestant missionaries were afraid that if Portugal controlled the area, Protestant missions would be excluded. It was this combination of internal and external pressure that defeated the proposed Anglo-Portuguese treaty.

Leopold obtained French support for his plans for international recognition of his claim to the Congo by promising France that if he had to step down from the Congo (and few people really believed that he would be able to hold on to it) he would give France the first option on it. But this was not the only reason for French opposition to the Anglo-Portuguese treaty. They saw the treaty as an attempt by Britain to secure control over the Congo River. Ever suspicious of British moves, ever ready to put the most sinister construction possible on British actions, the French saw the treaty as a deep plot. As they read the situation, Britain had obstructed France in Egypt and secured control of the Nile; at the same time it was making treaties with chiefs in the Niger delta and thus preparing the way for British control of the Niger River. Now it was clear that it wanted the Congo as well.
Franco-German alignment

Bismarck was so angry at Britain's behaviour over South West Africa that he refused to recognise the Anglo-Portuguese treaty in any form. He determined to destroy the informal system of empire as espoused by Britain with its pretensions to apply a sort of Monroe Doctrine. In August 1884, after the final Anglo-French break on the question of Egyptian finance, Jules Ferry began to respond positively to Bismarck's proposal for an alignment against Britain on African issues. Bismarck and France joined together to oppose the Anglo-Portuguese treaty. This was not a real entente or a permanent alliance that had any significant relevance to Europe, but it served Bismarck's purpose of destroying British pretensions, and at the same time of driving a wedge between Britain and France. This alignment collapsed soon after Ferry's fall from grace in March 1885, and in the later 1880s there was a marked improvement in German relations with Britain. But in this critical period between August 1884 and March 1885, the entire course of the partition of Africa was transformed.

France accepted Bismarck's suggestion that all the Congo questions, including the British treaty with the Portuguese, be put to a conference. With French backing, Bismarck called for an international conference in Berlin to discuss the situation in Africa. Britain thus lost the initiative in the Congo question to Bismarck. Britain was unhappy at this Franco-German rapprochement, which came at a bad time for it, just when the Egyptian issue had strained relations with France and it needed Germany's support in Egypt. French colonial expansion and Germany's sudden appearance on the scene seemed to challenge British supremacy everywhere and to complicate Britain's wider diplomacy immeasurably. It was Germany's support for Leopold's claims that enabled the Belgian king's dreams to come true.

THE BERLIN CONFERENCE

The representatives of 14 nations were present at Berlin when Bismarck made the opening speech on 15 November 1884. They were Germany, France, Britain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, the United States, Austria-Hungary, Russia, Italy, Denmark, Sweden and Norway. The General Act of the Conference was signed on 26 February 1885. It contained 38 clauses and covered a number of important issues. The Berlin Conference (known also as the Berlin West Africa Conference or the Congo Conference) was not one of the world's major conferences, but it was the first international conference to deal exclusively with Africa and was a reflection of the continent's growing importance.

The significance of the Berlin Conference in the history of the partitioning of Africa has been the subject of great controversy. There is no agreement on the implications of what was discussed and decided at Berlin. Contrary to widespread belief, the conference did not partition Africa. Questions in connection with territorial matters were specifically omitted from the agenda. Nor did it create the Congo Free State. By the time the conference opened Leopold had obtained French, German and American recognition of the association and of the existence of the Congo Free State as an independent polity. All that the conference did was to give international recognition to Leopold's International African Association, in whose name the Congo Free State would be established.
The British were not too happy to accept this. Certainly no British officials and very few British businessmen believed that Leopold would be the disinterested trustee who would see that free trade in the Congo basin would be guaranteed, nor did they believe in the humanitarian principles of the International African Association. But with the collapse of the Anglo-Portuguese treaty, it was a case either of supporting Leopold’s claims or of sitting back and watching French influence there grow. Although Bismarck wanted to destroy British informal influence at the Congo mouth, he did not want to do so at the expense of having French protectionism in the Congo basin. To Bismarck, to give the Congo to Leopold was a good solution to the Anglo-French Congo dispute; Leopold was certainly making all the right sort of noises about allowing free trade. Bismarck put pressure on the British to acquiesce, threatening that otherwise he would oppose the British claim to monopolise the commerce of the lower Niger.30

And such a threat struck at the heart of British interests. Although British business interests and officials were concerned with securing continued free access to the Congo, they were even more anxious to ensure that British control of the lower Niger was not weakened. The British believed that at Berlin the French had two aims: to seal off the upper Congo by means of tariff walls, and to establish some sort of international control on the lower Niger that would interfere with Britain’s predominant trading position on the river. The British position was that international control on the Congo should be established to allow free trade to flourish, but not on the Niger. The Britons argued that the Congo and the Niger were two completely different propositions. Britain had opened up the Niger, it gave free access to all comers, and the best guarantee of that continued free access and free trade for merchants of all nations was for the area to remain in British hands.

French hopes for the internationalisation of the Niger received a setback two weeks before the opening of the conference when Goldie reported that he had bought out the two French trading houses that had been in competition with his company. This news, together with Hewett’s treaties with chiefs on the delta and lower Niger, rendered the British position very strong. To make doubly sure that French attempts to weaken this did not succeed, Britain needed Bismarck’s support on the diplomatic front. And in order to obtain this, the British representatives at Berlin gave their support to Leopold.

Once the conference got under way it soon became apparent that the Franco-German rapprochement was weakening and that the French were wary of giving too much support to German plans lest this provoke a reaction at home and a possible accusation that France was following pro-German policies. They had worked together to ensure that the Anglo-Portuguese treaty was thwarted, but on the question of the Niger France did not obtain the hoped-for support from Germany for the internationalisation of the river. Bismarck increasingly realised that German interests on the free trade question coincided with British rather than with French policies.

The principle of free trade was recognised at Berlin, thus securing a victory for the British position. But in practice the free trade provisions of the Berlin Act meant little. No machinery was set up to see that they were enforced, and monopolies and concessions became the order of the day. The principle of free trade was falling into disfavour.
in Europe generally and in the 1890s tariff barriers and customs dues became more common. Free navigation on the Congo and Niger also meant little. Although a supervisory commission was planned, it never came into being and control remained in the hands of those who controlled the territories through which the rivers ran — Leopold and Britain. In the case of Britain, the Niger was given over to Goldie’s Royal Niger Company, which ruthlessly cut out rivals, whether British or foreign. W. K. Louis writes: ‘In retrospect the work of the Conference appears hollow in view of the commercial monopolies established despite the Berlin Act. But at the time the accomplishments of the Conference appeared substantial, especially in British eyes because of the reverses suffered by France.’

At Berlin the ‘right’ of European powers to take over Africa was not questioned — Europeans were very sure of their own values and of the bounty they were passing on to the peoples of Africa by bringing them within the orbit of ‘European civilisation’. Usually a few treaties signed by African leaders, who allegedly ceded their rights, were sufficient to keep rival powers at bay, but whether this was enough was no longer certain. At Berlin rules were laid down for the international recognition of new claims. In future ‘effective occupation’ was the only test of valid title. But we should not make too much of what ‘effective occupation’ implied. Nobody was appointed to examine claims to see if the occupation was indeed ‘effective’. This was the era of the ‘paper partition’ of Africa. Many of the areas now claimed by virtue of treaties and a ‘European presence’ were not brought under the effective control of their European masters until many years had passed. Most of the railways were built only after the establishment of an administration. In practice ‘effective occupation’ meant that a European power would have to demonstrate that it had visible interests in the area, that its traders were active, and that it had appointed consuls. It meant no more than this. The construction of a primitive fort and the garrison of a few African levies under the command of a European sergeant were proof of effective occupation.

The real significance of ‘effective occupation’ was that by laying down procedures to be followed in acquiring new formal colonies or protectorates, the Berlin Conference put an end to the idea of informal empire. It was the death knell of paramountcy and informal empire. The ‘effective occupation’ clause was a deliberate tactic by Bismarck to destroy the informal spheres of influence that had been such a cornerstone of British policy. Of course, even before the conference, Britain had been made all too aware that its informal spheres of influence were no longer an adequate safeguard of its interests. The French threat to Britain’s Congo trade, and French initiatives on the lower Niger and in Madagascar, were all pointers in this direction. But it was the German formal annexations in West Africa that had destroyed Britain’s informal West African empire.

But worse was yet to come. British policy in East Africa had been based upon the informal influence it exercised over the sultan. Britain would have liked the sultan himself to strengthen his authority on the mainland, to make his authority effective in the interior, but it had no intention of extending formal rule to the region. But now its entire policy was thrown into disarray. While the conference was sitting German agents were busy carving out a German colonial empire in East Africa. A group of Germans
under the leadership of Carl Peters, who a few months earlier had been one of the founders of the German Colonization Society, came back from an expedition to the East African interior armed with a number of treaties they had concluded with chiefs. Although Peters did not have any official backing, these treaties fitted in well with Bismarck's plans. Within a few days of the breaking up of the conference, Bismarck proclaimed a German protectorate in East Africa. The German Colonization Society was authorised to take over the administration of the new protectorate. In this way Bismarck not only perpetuated the existing area of instability in West Africa, but extended it to East Africa.

The area claimed by the Germans took in much of what today is east central Tanzania, which until then had come within the sultan of Zanzibar's sphere of influence, although not his actual control. The sultan's coastal domains were not included in the German protectorate, and through their informal control of the sultan, had the British wanted to, they could have strangled German East Africa by preventing its access to the sea. But the British had no intention of doing this. They needed Bismarck's support in Egypt. In 1885 the region was not considered to be of great strategic value. There were also far more serious crises that demanded attention in 1885, such as the situation in the Sudan and a confrontation with Russia in Afghanistan. Although there were some objections to the almost clandestine way in which Bismarck went about his colonial empire-building, the British government in 1884–1885 had no serious objections to the appearance of the Germans in Africa. The Anglo-German agreement of 1886 restricted the sultan's mainland possessions to a 16-km-wide coastal strip.

The Berlin Conference was more symbolic than real. Many years ago historians referred to the conference in terms such as a 'tardy starting gun' for the scramble, but it was nothing of the sort. The French advance up the Senegal in 1879 had started the penetration of the interior with a view to taking it over, and the basis for Anglo-French rivalry had already been provided by the French occupation of Tunis, the British occupation of Egypt and the ratification of the Brazza treaty. The Germans had formal bases in South West Africa, Togo and Kamerun, and were establishing themselves in East Africa. Berlin gave international recognition only to Leopold's Congo. It was also said that the 'nibbling process' of the period 1881–1884 became a 'gobbling process' after Berlin as the powers scrambled to parcel out Africa among themselves.

But not all researchers said that. To some the conference seemed to do more to slow down imperialism than to speed it up, by attempting to impose free trade zones in the Niger and Congo basins, and by setting out rules for claims. As early as 1942 Miss S. E. Crowe wrote that the representatives at Berlin 'were not talking about partitioning Africa but rather of ensuring the continuation of the traditional free-trading system on its coasts and its great rivers ... The General Act may be seen as much as an attempt to apply the brakes to the partition as to accelerate it. Diplomats whose custom was to regard Black Africa solely from the point of view of coastal commerce did not become excited about the interior of the “mysterious continent”. They were able to hope that ... they were delaying the moment when governments would be obliged to meet the heavy expenses of occupying new territories.' More recent researchers have con-
firmed the views she arrived at in 1942. Professor J. D. Hargreaves has argued that, far from being a starting gun, Berlin represented an attempt to apply the brakes. Palm oil prices in West Africa had been low for a long time, and trade with Africa did not seem to have any particularly exciting prospects. The trading situation in East Africa was even more unpromising. European governments were reluctant to extend their authority to new areas, although traders might be drawn more into the interior in an attempt to find other sources of supply or to cut out middlemen. As Hargreaves sees it, the expansionist offensive of 1884–1885 lost momentum, and there was a pause in the partitioning of Africa.

The Berlin Conference ended a stage in the partitioning of Africa. It has been said that it ended the ‘paper partition’ of Africa, but one can argue that the paper partition carried on up to the series of European conventions and agreements over Africa between 1889 and 1891. Even after that, for a number of years treaties continued to be used to keep out rivals. By the time of the Berlin Conference almost the entire coast was in European hands. Another stage was about to begin. Virtually all the areas annexed from 1882 had hinterlands which, if one went deep enough inland, clashed with one another. Once competition for the interior had been joined, and ‘effective occupation’ applied to the interior as well as to the coast, the scramble attained its own unstoppable momentum, and there could be no halting until the whole continent had been carved up into colonies and spheres.

THE ‘LOADED PAUSE’ IN WEST AFRICA, 1885–1889

Compared with the years immediately preceding the Berlin Conference, and the years from 1889 onwards, in the period 1885–1889 there was a lull in the scramble for West Africa. Hargreaves calls this a ‘loaded pause’, a gathering of strength for the next round of the scramble, a time for preparation. According to this view, at Berlin the governments had made an attempt at stopping the uncontrolled grabbing of territory and at continuing with the free trade system on the coast and rivers, because the only alternative to this was the heavy expense of formal control, which they wanted to avoid.35 The disgrace and fall of Jules Ferry in March 1885 saw the expansionist lobby lose a powerful ally; at the same time the French humiliation at Lang-Son in Indochina seemed to many people to be a timely warning about the dangers of colonial adventures. Those Frenchmen who maintained that operations in far distant places wasted French power, which should be conserved for defence of France’s vital interests in Europe, gained the upper hand over those who believed that expansion in Africa and the East could do wonders for France’s prestige in the world. Many Frenchmen were troubled by the enormous military and financial expense that accompanied empire-building. French business interests were still not enthusiastic supporters of expansion – military officers on the spot wanted to bring African societies under French control, but many traders were opposed to the military campaigns as these tended to disrupt the trading relations they had built up.
This was very much a period in which the men on the spot took the lead. Only when they could persuade the government at home that the British were about to pre-empt them did the French government bestir itself and give permission for some limited action. By early 1883 the French were at Bamako on the upper Niger, but their control of the region and further penetration were threatened by Samory and the Tukolor empire. A third obstacle and the most immediate threat to French hegemony in Senegambia was Mahmadu Lamine, whose expeditions harassed the French lines of communication, frequently cutting telegraph lines.

Colonel J. S. Gallieni, who was appointed commander of the Niger–Senegal area in November 1886, shared the vision of his predecessors like Faidherbe, Brière and Desbordes. He was in no doubt that all the obstacles to a further French advance would have to be swept away. But in the absence of support from the government in France, Gallieni did not have the resources to act against all three of these polities. He therefore decided to tackle the most immediate threat – that from Mahmadu Lamine. Until such time as support from France was forthcoming for action against Samory and the Tukolor he would make peace treaties with them. Despite the writing on the wall at Berlin for the idea of informal empire, treaties remained a way of establishing a claim, which although it had no sanction of any law, might serve to keep other rivals out. If nothing else, the treaties would give an advantage at the bargaining table when it came to the delimitation of colonial claims. Gallieni hoped that his treaties with Samory and the Tukolor empire would serve the dual purpose of keeping them quiet while he attacked Mahmadu Lamine and would also act as a deterrent to the British. Gallieni was afraid that the British would establish an alliance with Samory, who was obtaining guns from them through Sierra Leone. Above all Gallieni wanted to prevent the British from establishing a presence on the upper Niger.

Although Ahmadu guessed that the French had made peace with him only as a temporary measure and that their long-term aim was to destroy him, he cooperated with the French against Mahmadu Lamine because he needed to obtain arms through them to maintain order in his empire. Besides, Ahmadu was also keen to see Mahmadu Lamine defeated.

Samory’s empire was still expanding, but he was experiencing difficulties and unrest with the peoples he had recently conquered and so he increasingly favoured an alliance with France. In March 1887 Samory and the French signed a treaty in which Samory believed that the French and he had become allies, whereas the French believed that he had placed himself under their protection. This difference in interpretation was not important. The value of the treaty to the French was that its existence would act as a deterrent to any British expansion into Samory’s lands.

By the time Gallieni left Senegambia in 1888, despite the restraints that officialdom in France had put on military expansion, he had consolidated and even extended French control. The foundations for a further advance had been laid. Everything was in readiness for another major advance whenever the authorities in Paris decided to move ahead. The claim to many areas was, of course, still fragile. Title to Samory’s empire
rested on a treaty which the powerful and undefeated Samory himself did not believe made him a subject of the French.

If one looks at other areas of French interest in West Africa in the period 1885–1889, then the correctness of the description of a ‘loaded pause’ is confirmed. French explorers and agents travelling between the upper Niger and Volta rivers and from the Ivory Coast inland to the upper Niger signed treaties as they proceeded. They therefore linked these two areas in the minds of expansionists, and made the Ivory Coast more significant because of it. By the end of the 1880s French imperialists were already beginning to cast their eyes towards Lake Chad as the ultimate goal of French expansion. It was coming to be seen as the meeting point of French thrusts from Algeria, Senegal and the Congo. In Dahomey the French had Porto Novo and Cotonou, but there was no move forward here and the French government had no inclination to fight with the highly centralised and powerful state of Dahomey. So, here too there was no advance in the period 1885–1889.

Ferry’s fall disturbed Bismarck, who had worked well with the French premier; cracks in the Franco-German ‘alliance’ were evident at Berlin – these widened further after the conference. Bismarck was now keen to secure British cooperation in Europe and wanted to settle outstanding colonial differences with Salisbury. On the international scene, rapprochement between Russia and France and the threat of Russian conflict with Germany’s Habsburg allies meant that by 1888 Bismarck wanted British support. Besides, Bismarck was disappointed that the German companies he had hoped would relieve the German treasury of financial commitments in Africa had failed to do so. He was not keen to repeat the experiment. So here too in 1885 there was no enthusiasm for a further advance. For official German action the period was not a pause but a cessation, for after 1885 Germany did not resume its empire-building, although the borders of its existing colonies were considerably extended.

In 1885 the Irish issue dominated British politics and there was little time to devote to Africa. The return of Salisbury to the Foreign Office in 1885 did mark a shift in balance, however, and historians have seen 1885–1892 as a period in which, largely because of Salisbury’s guiding hand, Britain recovered the initiative it had lost to Bismarck in the years between 1883 and 1885. But this did not really apply to West Africa. For Britain in West Africa, Robinson and Gallagher went as far as describing the period from 1890 to 1895 as the ‘long standstill’. Salisbury regretted the disputes with France over African issues, as this unnecessarily complicated Britain’s foreign relations and made agreement over what he considered were more important issues so elusive.

But although the British government remained opposed to any decisive action, the increasingly insistent pleas by British merchants from the mid-1880s for the government to give them more assistance in their trading operations made officialdom aware that something more than informal control would have to be devised to safeguard British interests. Since the middle of the century the various small states along the banks of the Gambia River had been involved in wars that resulted from changes in the Gambian economy as it moved from a slave trade economy to one based on ground-
The British government warned the governor of Gambia not to become involved in these conflicts, and certainly not to do anything that would involve the British treasury in any expense. In 1886 British merchants in the Gambia were complaining that the government was not providing enough protection for traders in the interior, and although Britain did authorise some action to put an end to faction fighting, this was done more in response to a fear that the groundnut trade would be harmed and to French interference than it was to any desire to expand.

Sierra Leone merchants were demanding action to put an end to unrest beyond the colony's borders, as this was seriously disrupting trade. Beyond the borders of the Gold Coast Colony, the Asante, jealous of their trade with the far interior, were preventing British traders from penetrating beyond their territory to open up trade further inland. In the late 1880s the government was being pressed to bring the Asante under control and improve communications and transport facilities so that the interior could be opened up to trade. But they were not interested in doing so. One may contrast this attitude with that of the French who were expanding from Senegal into the western Sudan where, as early as the 1850s, Faidherbe had recognised the necessity for crushing the indigenous empires, and where French expansion was aimed not merely at defeating these empires but at adding them to the French possessions. The British, on the other hand, had defeated the Asante in 1874 and then withdrawn.

In February 1886 the whole of the coastline opposite Lagos was made part of the Lagos Protectorate, but beyond the coast fighting as a result of the collapse of the Oyo empire in Yorubaland was having an adverse effect on the Lagos trade. In its struggle against Ibadan, the Yoruba state of Ijebu blocked off trade between Lagos and Ibadan. There was a clamour from various quarters for British action in the interior. The desire of the traders for Ijebu to be brought to heel was supported by the Christian missionaries, many of them Sierra Leonians of Yoruba origin, on the grounds that Ijebu refused to admit Christian missionaries. The combined trader-missionary pressure for official action had not borne fruit by 1889, and when the British government did eventually move it was not because of these pressure groups but, as on the Oil Rivers, for fear of French action. The British were not so much interested in solving the problems of Yorubaland as in keeping the French out.

British merchants in Lagos and French merchants in Dahomey eyed each other very suspiciously, and when a French expedition in 1888 signed a treaty of trade and friendship with Abeokuta, an important commercial centre behind Lagos, it seemed as if the French were formally going to move into the Lagos hinterland. Being reluctant to take over the area itself, the British government sought and received assurances from the French that they had no political designs on the region. The British government, although relieved, felt that it would be prudent to allow the Lagos government to conclude treaties with chiefs in the interior. The British government did not specifically acknowledge these, but they were an insurance for the future, a bargaining counter if steps had to be taken because of the French threat. In this sense they were not unlike the French treaty with Samory. So although there was no advance here in the period 1885–1889 it was a ‘loaded pause’ as the way was prepared for an advance later.
These were all seeds that would bear fruit after 1889, but in the period immediately after the Berlin Conference the British government was unwilling to assume colonial responsibilities. The years before Berlin, and the conference itself, had made it abundantly clear that territories under its informal control could be snatched from under its very nose. Britain's policy of informal rule was in tatters, but it was not ready to replace it with formal rule. That would come later. Where some decisive action was necessary because of significant interests that required to be defended, as in the area of the lower Niger River, Britain allowed others to take responsibility for upholding British interests. On the coast the British had the Oil Rivers Protectorate, where virtually nothing had been done to make their rule effective. Higher up the river control was given to George Goldie, whose agents by 1886 had succeeded in obtaining 237 treaties with local rulers, ceding their territories to his company. On the basis of these the British government in 1886 granted a royal charter to Goldie, and his company now became known as the Royal Niger Company.

The company pursued commercial penetration ruthlessly, opening and closing markets at whim to reward those who gave it favourable trading terms and to punish those who did not. They made their own prices, their own monopolies, undercutting all other traders and making a mockery of the free trade agreement of the Berlin Conference. The company's constabulary did not carry out normal police duties, but was used to undertake expeditions to enforce the company's trading regulations. The company exploited but did little to develop the economy of its trading empire. The charter expressly forbade the setting up of any trade monopoly, but Goldie circumvented this by making use of the fact that the charter allowed him to impose customs and other dues to help cover the costs of government.

By the mid-1880s most of Africa had not been affected by the liquor trade, as Muslims did not drink spirits; apart from this, liquor was bulky and difficult to transport. But along the navigable rivers of West Africa and on the coast, cheap imported liquor was the staple of commerce. On the lower Niger liquor was the favoured trading item. If Goldie could stop the free transit of liquor he would be able to get around the Berlin Conference's aim of keeping the Niger open to the traders of all countries. The restriction of the liquor traffic would not harm British manufacturers as most of the liquor came from Germany, the United States and Holland. If the liquor trade was cut down, he reasoned, this could force African traders to accept more British manufactures in return for their palm products. Making use of the Berlin Act's provision for the charging of dues he charged high duties on liquor entering the Niger, defending these on humanitarian grounds as an act designed to protect the indigenous inhabitants from this evil. Since Goldie collected the customs, in effect he was paying the dues from his one pocket and putting it into the other.

The Royal Niger Company relieved the British government of having to assume authority itself. The company was expected to expand and secure the approaches to Hausaland, and to do so before the French could get there. But the Royal Niger Company was not so strong as it liked to claim. The political framework upon which Goldie's monopoly rested was fragile, as was the basis for the trading monopolies. On
the Benue its traders went as far as Adamwa, but local Africans did not allow them to build factories on the banks of the river, or even to disembark. There were numerous gaps in the treaty system along the rivers, where local rulers had not signed treaties. Even where there were treaties, Africans sometimes insisted that they had not sold their land to the company, but had placed themselves under the company's protection on the understanding that the company would protect them against their enemies. Hausa traders were not attracted by Manchester cloth traded by the company and rather took their trade north to Kano. The company did not have the strength to force its terms on reluctant emirs; the most it could do was to use its supremacy on the river to keep foreigners out. In this it was largely successful. But it did not have the resources for a political expansion programme.

Opposition to the company was not confined to the Africans. There was no clear dividing line between the Oil Rivers Protectorate and the company's sphere of influence, and by 1889 British trading interests from Glasgow, London and Bristol, who were operating in the protectorate, objected to the way in which Goldie was extending his operations to the delta. They were joined by powerful British shipping interests who feared that Goldie would start his own shipping line and so be able to dictate freight rates. Business groups in Lagos were also opposed to Goldie because he had tried to exclude them from the Niger. All of these interest groups would have liked the government to revoke Goldie's charter and itself take control of the area. But the government was unwilling to do so.

It is in French Africa that one sees this period as one in which the men on the spot used their initiative to pave the way for major advances later, when the government in France had come around to supporting expansion. But in this period, in the British sphere there were also men on the spot who were busy paving the way for the assumption of British control. This was particularly true in the Oil Rivers Protectorate, in which the British had done nothing to make their authority effective after they had proclaimed the protectorate in 1885. In this period both Hewett and Harry Johnston, as consuls, interfered more in the affairs of the African trading states in the delta. A few inventive Africans, such as Jaja of Opobo, tried to become independent of the European traders by trading directly with Europe, but the willingness of the British consuls to intervene on the side of British traders doomed their efforts. Africans were speedily losing the ability to make their own decisions. The case of Jaja and Bonny demonstrates the way Europeans became more involved in the affairs of the Niger delta. Bonny was the strongest and richest of the delta states in the middle of the nineteenth century, and its capital was on an island in the far eastern part of the delta. In the early 1850s the British consul had King William Pepple deposed in order to end the disruption to trading activities that had resulted from a power struggle in Bonny. In 1883 Consul Hewett was largely responsible for King William's successor, George Pepple, being deposed. He was restored to power in 1887, and a firm alliance was created between the British consulate and the modernising Christian elements in Bonny, who worked well with the Europeans.
In the meantime, Jaja had broken away from Bonny and founded the prosperous trading state of Opobo, which succeeded in capturing many of Bonny's markets. Jaja was a shrewd moderniser who welcomed schools but not missionaries, whom he feared would try to subvert the basis of the state. At first he had an agreement with a number of British firms who paid him dues and accepted the trading conditions he laid down. But with the fall in oil prices, in 1884 these firms came to an agreement among themselves about the price they would pay for oil. Jaja refused to accept the lower prices offered and attempted to establish direct links with the Glasgow firm of Miller Brothers. The British firms in the delta complained bitterly to Consul Hewett, saying that Jaja was obstructing trade. They asked for the consul's assistance to help them bypass Jaja so that they could trade directly with the interior.

The crisis came to a head when the 27-year-old Harry Johnston arrived in the Oil Rivers as vice-consul in January 1887. He was a dedicated and passionate imperialist who shared Cecil Rhodes's vision of a large part of the map of Africa being painted red. When a modernising group of Bonny complained that Jaja had taken most of their markets he decided to act. He tricked Jaja into going aboard HMS *Goshawk*, took him prisoner and sent him into exile. Johnston did this of his own accord; his action was not authorised by Whitehall. In fact, Salisbury was angry when he heard what Johnston had done. The British prime minister decided to uphold the action, however, as it would cause even more harm if he reversed Johnston's decision.

This was a clear example of the way in which the initiative had passed to the men on the spot. In 1886 Hewett also forced Nana of the Itsekiri to lift a ban on trade which the king had imposed as a protest against falling prices. Nana was largely beholden to Hewett for his position, as the consul had supported him when his claim to the title was challenged by a rival lineage. In this instance Nana had used Hewett's support to defeat his rivals, but in the long run it made him dependent upon consular favour. But in the late 1880s this sort of intervention was exceptional. As Hargreaves writes, 'the British still preferred to govern through the cooperation of the African élites, and Africans thus retained some freedom to decide how far collaboration seemed compatible with their own essential interests and values'.

The increasing Anglo-French rivalry in West Africa was reflected in the convention of 1889, which incorporated a number of boundary agreements. This was a limited gesture on the part of the British government and it was hoped that this would eliminate rivalry and so make any other action unnecessary. The convention defined the western border of the Gold Coast for about 30 km inland and at the same time fixed the boundary between Porto Novo and Lagos. Of course neither of these two arrangements would prevent one or other of the powers from penetrating behind the other's coastal spheres and blocking off the trade that went to the coast, but it was nevertheless a step towards resolving the Anglo-French rivalry. The basis for French claims to the Ivory Coast was also recognised.

Although nothing was done in 1889 to secure a greater share of the hinterlands of Sierra Leone and the Gambia for British traders, Hynes suggests that the reason was that 'it was in those particular areas of West Africa where commercial opinion in the metropolis...
supported the demands of the local African merchants for state intervention, the Gold Coast and Lagos, that the British government ultimately intervened. Conversely, it was largely the lack of support in business circles in the metropolis at the crucial moment of delimitation negotiations that permitted the government to ignore the clamour of British merchants in the Gambia and Sierra Leone for the preservation of their hinterlands in the late 1880s ... Until the 1890s there was no serious mercantile pressure for territorial expansion in the region of Sierra Leone. Unlike the situation in the Gold Coast and the region of Lagos, where powerful metropolitan commercial groups pressed for government intervention in the interior, there was no strong or sustained mercantile pressure to extend British influence inland in the region of the Gambia or Sierra Leone in the second half of the 1880s. There was of course pressure from British merchants in the colonies themselves, but without firm backing from metropolitan businessmen this was insufficient to move the government.³⁸

The French made much of their gains in the convention of 1889, believing that the British were threatening them on all sides. But in reality only Porto Novo had been in danger from the British, and by 1889 this part of the coast had lost much of its attraction for British expansionists as the German annexation of Togo in 1884 had finally ruined any chance that Britain may have had of obtaining a long uninterrupted stretch of coast from the Gold Coast to Lagos.

In another agreement with Britain in 1890 France obtained British recognition of France’s right to a foothold on the shores of Lake Chad. The area north of a line drawn from Say on the Niger to Barruwa on Lake Chad (virtually the modern northern border of Nigeria) was recognised as a French sphere of influence. The area to the south of this, including the caliphate of Sokoto, was theoretically in the hands of the Royal Niger Company. In return for a free hand in huge areas of the western and central Sudan and in Madagascar, France accepted the British protectorate over Zanzibar and Pemba.

Salisbury was not in the least concerned at the large areas that he had allowed France to have. In the House of Lords on 11 August 1890 he said: 'I will not dwell upon the respective advantages of places which are utterly unknown not only to your Lordships, but to the rest of the white human race ... Anyone who looks at the map and merely measures the degrees will perhaps be of opinion that France has laid claim to a very considerable stretch of country. But it is necessary to judge land not merely by its extent but also by its value. This land is what agriculturists would call “very light land”; that is to say, it is the desert of Sahara.'³⁹

By 1889 European formal control was in most places confined to coastal settlements. In the 1890s Europe began to take effective action in the interior and moved deep into the heart of Africa. Of course in the case of the French in Senegambia, they had been active in the interior for a number of years. But further progress here meant that France would have to confront the Tukolor and also Samory. To establish the French presence firmly in the heart of the interior it would have to destroy these empires. If the early and mid-1880s saw European formal control being established over large areas of the African coastline, particularly in West Africa, and the period from 1885 to 1889 saw a
lull in European activity in West Africa, the decade of the 1890s was characterised by the establishment of formal control over most of the African interior.

Notes

1 P. Curtin, S. Feierman, I. Thompson & J. Vansina, African history, p. 452.
3 Ibid., p. 275.
7 Ibid., p. 375.
8 Ibid., p. 376.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., p. 374.
14 Sanderson, ‘The European partition’, p. 112.
18 Ibid., p. 271.
19 Quoted by C. C. Eldridge, Victorian imperialism, p. 152.
21 Sanderson, ‘The European partition’, p. 117.
22 R. Oliver & A. Atmore, Africa since 1800, pp. 105–110.
23 Collins, Problems in the history of colonial Africa, p. 3.
26 Sanderson, 'The European partition', pp. 112–113.
27 Quoted by Sanderson, p. 109.
28 Quoted by Sanderson, p. 132.
29 Robinson & Gallagher, Africa and the Victorians, p. 171.
32 Sanderson, 'The European partition', p. 133.
35 Hargreaves, The loaded pause.
36 Robinson & Gallagher, Africa and the Victorians, p. 379.
37 Hargreaves, The loaded pause, p. 121.
39 Quoted by Robinson & Gallagher, Africa and the Victorians, p. 303.