**Africa Imperialism and Colonialism  
*How European partitioning across Africa contributed to conflict, civil war, and artificial political boundaries.***

Europe first became interested in Africa while they were engaged in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. This trade lasted from the 1500s until the middle 1800s. The major European countries had ended the slave trade by the early 1800s. The United States followed in 1808, though ownership of slaves already in the US was allowed. Still, the trade in human beings continued as long as countries had a demand for their labor.

Even though the slave trade ended, interest in the wealth of the African continent did not. Europeans stayed close to the coast during the years of the slave trade, though the Dutch and later the British controlled arts of Southern Africa. Competition for power drove Europeans to move into the African continent in the 1800s looking for colonies and raw materials. Belgians took control of the Congo. Britain, France, and Germany fought over control of Sudan and Egypt. The Zulu nation fought the British in South Africa. The Fulani resisted French control in what is now Nigeria; the Ashanti struggled to hold on to what would become Ghana. Because of superior technology and more advanced weapons, the Europeans usually came out as the winners.

**IMPERIALSM**

Europeans in the nineteenth century saw colonies as a measure of national power and a key part of the system known as **Imperialism**. A strong country was supposed to have colonies to provide raw materials and markets to increase its wealth and importance in the world. Some countries, like Britain, wanted to control areas of Africa to protect the transportation routes to British Empire territories in India and Asia. Egypt was on the Suez Canal. Cape Colony overlooked the southern tip of Africa, protecting the sea route around the continent. Other parts of Africa were rich in natural resources. Gold, platinum, and diamonds were discovered in South Africa. Iron ore, coal, and eventually the element uranium were found in other areas. The Congo produced rubber, a key part of industrial production in Europe. Another key factor was the work of Christian missionaries. They saw European colonization of Africa as a way to bring Christianity to a “heathen” land. Their work gave the colonizers another excuse to do whatever they wanted to do in Africa.

Some European powers allowed large companies to come into the areas of Africa they controlled, organizing the African population in whatever ways would guarantee the most efficient work force. Others set up colonial governments. They forced the African population into going along with colonial demands for work and using natural resources. African colonies were divided into administrative districts and put under the power of European officials. These administrators were expected to keep the peace, get the work done, and help “civilize” the African people. Nearly all Europeans working in Africa felt the local people were backwards and in need of Europe’s civilizing influence. Most knew nothing of the great cultures that were a part of Africa’s past.

**LIFE AS PART OF A COLONY**

Some European powers like the British used **indirect rule.** They appointed local chiefs to be their enforcers, to collect taxes, run the businesses the British wanted, and put down any trouble that began to emerge. Africans were lured into jobs with promises of wealth, power, and influence. The French took a more direct approach, encouraging Africans to become French citizens, a policy of **assimilation**. The French forced those they had conquered to give up their own customs and adopt French ways. Many people in African colonies controlled by France began speaking French and several applied for and were granted French citizenship.

**AFTER WORLD WAR II**

Though they worked to keep order in their African colonies, few European powers did not do much to improve the lives of the Africans themselves, unless doing so would increase profits. This neglect remained largely the rule until after World War II. By the 1950s however, change was in the air. Many Africans were openly opposed to continued European control of their countries. They realized that colonialism was not equality for all. The European powers had more rights and more comfortable lives than their African subjects. They were taking advantage of African land and labor, and they saw the African people as second-class citizens. World Wars I and II had opened Africa to the rest of the world. They had fought on the side of the Europeans, and they now began to demand freedom for themselves.

Slowly the European powers began to liberate their African colonies. By 1960, there were 27 independent African countries. By 1975, over 47 were independent. Even so, independence came at a high cost. When European countries established their African colonies, they paid little attention to the traditional loyalties and kinship groups of the people they were ruling. Boundaries between colonies were decided according to colonial practice rather than what made sense in terms of the different groups who lived in the areas being divided. These new boundaries often followed old colonial boundaries, with little concern for the ethnic and religious groups that lived there.