

# [History essays - scramble for africa](https://assignbuster.com/history-essays-scramble-for-africa/)

## Can the'scramble for Africa' be understood as a single process?

Nowadays the 'Scramblefor Africa' may be remembered as a brief period, from around 1880 to 1900, ofultra-colonialism on the part of several European nations, in particularGermany, France and Britain but also Belgium, Portugal and Italy, in which thecontinent of Africa and the ten thousand or so polities it contained werepartitioned between them (Brooke-Smith 1987, 1). It is also often cited as thecause of many of Africa's problems today (eg Harrison 1993, 45) and thusFerguson (2003, 222) has suggested that 'Scramble of Africa' might be a moreapposite term.

Although 'scramble' wasearly adopted as a description of what was happening, for example Keltie usesit in The Partition of Africa published in 1893 (eg 189, 444), as Betts(1966, vii) suggests it tends to promote a certain interpretation of events, emphasising both their haste and interconnectedness. However, as Koponen(1993, 117) observes, while much may be known about the events of the'scramble', there remains no consensus on what forces drove it or its nature asa historical process. Was it a 'big bang' planned by the European powers atthe Berlin Conference in 1884/85, an intensification or existing activity, aseries of unplanned actions dictated by emergencies or a combination of these(Betts 1966, vii; Koponen 1993, 117)? This brief essay will attempt to discusswhether the 'scramble' can be understood as a single process with reference tothe origins of the 'scramble' and the motivations that involved those that tookpart in it, whether strategic, economic or otherwise.

Historians and scholarshave identified and explained the scramble and its causes and significance inmany different ways and there are differences in perspective and in conclusionsdrawn. One example of this diversity would be the variety in causes of thescramble that have been suggested. For Robinson and Gallagher (1966, 38), whose account has been widely influential (Betts 1966, x; Cain 1980, 50; Illife1995, 303), the British occupation of Egypt in 1882 began the scramble andfuelled it whereas for Keltie (1893, 161-2, 446) Bismarck and German colonialambition in 1884 were the cause while Stengers (1966, 42) sees French actionsin 1882/3 as the origin of the true initiatives of the scramble. Thedifficulty in identifying a beginning to the scramble, and indeed an end, illustrates a methodological problem in comprehending historical processes. Since a historical process is made up of interconnected events, the search fora beginning or cause may be to some degree irrelevant, in the sense that priorand contemporary actions always have effects and thus meaningful beginnings maynot always be found. As Brooke-Smith (1987, 1) reminds us, the term 'scramble'is a metaphor applied to a period and was applied, as we have seen, bycontemporary observers. In such a way, it is possible to understand thescramble as a single process, an intensification of relationships betweenEurope and Africa, whatever the myriad individual distinctions in motivation ofall involved. Indeed, conclusions are a matter of perspective and simplisticapproaches must be eschewed (Brooke-Smith 1987, 1).

It has been argued thatthe scramble is best seen as a single process stemming from a particularaction, as Robinson and Gallagher and others have done (Chamberlain 1974, 44). Egypt had been part of the Ottoman empire since 1517 but had come under theinfluence of France through the campaigns of Napoleon in 1798-99 and the Frenchremained the dominant European power. It had then become important to Britainin the 1840s as a route to India. The British opposed the building of the SuezCanal for strategic reasons, which was thus completed with French capital andexpertise. Financial crisis and political instability followed its completionin 1869 and, following a period of Anglo-French dual financial control, at therequest of the Khedive, after 1875, precipitated direct British intervention inand occupation of Egypt in August 1882. The particular fact that the Britishremained in occupation, thus ending dual control with France, has beensuggested as the trigger for the chain reaction resulting in the partition ofother parts of Africa by France in order to put pressure on London (Robinsonand Gallagher 1966, 32; Chamberlain 1974, 44). The British were, according toRobinson and Gallagher, primarily interested in securing their strategicadvantage with reference to India and the east through Egypt and the Cape. Inthis explanation, events in Africa caused intervention by Europeans, which inturn produces conflict between Europeans but played out in Africa.

On the other hand, it ispossible to suggest that the scramble was not one process and that to see it assuch hides much of importance. It is quite possible, for example, to suggestthat the scramble may have begun earlier with the personal ambitions of LeopoldII of Belgium in the Congo, who, in Brussels in1876, held a conference todiscuss the exploration, civilisation and commercial opening of Africa attendedby (non-governmental) representatives from many European nations (Keltie 1893, 117, 119, 130). Keltie (1893, 117-118) himself states that while this meetingmay have sown the seeds of partition, it was unlikely that Leopold had definiteor precise plans as to the outcomes of any intervention, and this should beborne in mind of all parties when considering the scramble. The increasedEuropean interest in Africa in the 1870s also to some degree stems from theincreased explorations by Europeans in the African interior, famouslyLivingstone and Stanley, the latter of whom later acted as agent for Leopold inthe Congo (McEvedy 1980, 102-110). These were themselves made possible by thediscovery or realisation in the 1840s and 50s that quinine could ward offmalaria, and technological advances that allowed a more active Europeanpresence in Africa, which had previously not been possible.

Besides the strategicmotivations of the British and the individual motivation of Leopold, some haveargued that the French used colonialism as a vent for their frustration atdefeat in Europe, making Tunisia a protectorate in 1881 as well as advancing inSenegal and Gabon (McEvedy 1980, 110). Even so, in Senegal and western Africagenerally, Person (1985, 255-256) has pointed out that colonial boundaries wereonly completed in about 1900 and could not have been foreseen by those involvedand that there had generally been a lack of design in how the area was drawn into the world market. Lack of unity of purpose on the part of the Europeannations in the scramble for Africa has been emphasised by Lonsdale (1985, 680)who has commented that 'alien rule seemed to impose on Africa a crushinguniformity of ruler's intentions.' Certainly it is questionable that thescramble was caused and driven by the British being in Egypt since the Frenchand others were already active in other parts of Africa and German colonialpolicy is not accounted for and it fails to explain British actions in westernAfrica and the long interest in Sierra Leone, which seem to have been economicand commercial and partially resulting from defending the interests of Britishtraders and Africans against other European interests (Brooke-Smith 1987, 25). The economic motivations for the scramble may best be applied to local areasrather than Africa as a whole since as Iliffe observes 'Africa was not centralto European economies'. Nonetheless, private money making initiatives, such asby Rhodes, became extremely important politically.

It has now become commonto see in the scramble at least two phases, the first in which Africa wasdivided on paper in Europe and the second phase in which interventionsincreasingly took place - partition then conquest (Lonsdale 1985, 680-681; Oliver and Fage 1975, 192-193). These continued after 1900. British conquestsafter 1895 may have been rationalisations of earlier actions (Cain 1980, 50)with the conquest of northern Nigeria in 1901-1903 and Sudan/Uganda in 1909(McEvedy, 1980, 116). In south west Africa, the Germans almost wiped out theHerero and Nama between 1904-1907 in response to local conditions while theOvambo were only brought into the colonial sphere in 1915 (Marks 1985, 464-465). The Italians invaded coastal Libya in 1911-1912 but did not fullyoccupy the interior until 1928 while Morocco remained contentious betweenFrance and Spain until its division by treaty in 1912 (McEvedy 1980, 116-118). In 1898 British and French forces came the closest to coming to blows oversouthern Sudan at Fashoda, although conflict was avoided and the two nationsmoved towards eventual entente (Brooke-Smith 1987, 87-99). This would suggestthat both local issues of control and issues of prestige in Europe were playedout in Africa.

In conclusion, it is largely a question of perspective as to whether the scramble for Africacan be understood as a single process. Certainly from the 1870s there was anincreasing European interest in Africa, but this was due in part to practicalreasons of its accessibility, quinine and technological progress, and thelongstanding relations between Europe and Africa. There were a variety ofmotivations for the scramble, personal in the case of Leopold, perhaps areaction to internal pressures on the part of Bismarck, who also seems to haveviewed Africa as an extension of the European political arena. For the Britishtoo, there were strategic concerns as well as the need to be seen to defendcommercial interests and later to compete with the other powers. On theground, the processes that began during and even before the classic scrambleperiod caused a variety of actions, reactions and decisions based on localrequirements and the requirements of higher policy. From a Europeanperspective at least, the scramble may be understood as a single process, aperiod different and distinct from those before and after for the intensity ofconcern with and activity in Africa, although it was a process in which manyparties played a variety of roles, dependent on a variety of specificindividual, local and international motivations, such as traditional interest, strategic interest, economic interest and prestige, at particular times, sometimes made explicit, for example in the Berlin Conference; while at thesame time being part of a longer process of interrelations between Europeansand Africans, Europeans and Europeans and individuals and individuals. Alienrule should not impose unity of purpose and action on this period, even thoughit may to some extent be usefully seen through the singular metaphor of'scramble'. This is especially the case since such a mindset was evidentlypresent at the time which itself would have, to some degree, influencedactions. Keltie was right to place the scramble in the context of historicalintervention in Africa and neatly stated: 'what seems an unaccountably suddenevent or catastrophe is simply the natural and inevitable result of forces thathave been accumulating and growing in intensity over a long period of time'(Keltie 1893, 162). Presumably he would have seen the events of the earlytwentieth century as part of the same process.

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