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Africa in World History

From Prehistory to the Present

Second Edition

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Europe's Industrial Transformation and Africa

The *Nemesis* is a perfect example of the forces at work in this shift in the global balance of power. She was 184 feet long and 29 feet wide, with a draft (the depth of water needed to float a boat) of only 5 feet. Her hull was not vee-shaped, like that of a sailing ship, but flat with a retractable keel. This was possible because her main source of power was a pair of 60-horsepower steam engines and because her hull was made of iron. The iron hull made possible the hull's radical shape and also allowed the ship to be divided into multiple watertight compartments. As a result, water entering because of damage to the hull—always a concern in the shallows of rivers—was confined to only a few of the compartments. *Nemesis* was bristling with guns, but most of her armament would have been familiar to any naval officer a hundred years earlier. What was radical was her iron hull and her steam engines. And these were both the result of the industrial revolution.

The precise causes of the industrial revolution and the ticklish question of why it first emerged in northwestern Europe are outside the scope of this book. What is important from the African perspective is that it happened first in Europe and not elsewhere. From the last decades of the eighteenth century well into the twentieth century, European industry made quantum leaps, not just in how much it could produce, but also in the sophistication of the products it produced. First water and then steam power were harnessed to permit fewer people to do more work. Producers (i.e., the people who owned the factories) took more and more control over how their workers worked and lived. Engineers and scientists, many of whom increasingly worked for industry, developed ever more efficient means of production and ever more clever things to produce. Steamers like the *Nemesis* were made of industrially produced iron, were fitted with steam engines that had been painstakingly refined and miniaturized until they would fit in a boat, and were produced in shipyards that used the latest in production techniques.

Other tools and weapons that would contribute to this sweeping change in the global balance of power came out of the burgeoning factories of Europe. Firearms that were not only more lethal, but also cheaper than their precursors had been, were issued to soldiers on their way to wars of colonial conquest in Africa. Those same soldiers, and later on administrators and settlers, were able to survive unfamiliar—to them—tropical diseases because they were medicated with drugs produced by industry. In short, the industrial revolution opened the door to a new phase in Africa's relationship with Europe.

The steamers that were to follow in the *Nemesis*' wake would eventually open to Europeans the vast river and lake systems of the African interior. The Niger, the Congo, the Zambezi, and the equatorial parts of the Nile had mostly been closed to Europeans. The complex deltas and rapids that characterized the lower reaches of the rivers were major obstacles in the age of sail. But the flat-bottomed iron, and later steel- and aluminum-hulled, steamer made these waterways into highways.

First they opened the way to exploration. In 1832, Macgregor Laird led an expedition to the Niger River. The expedition managed to ascend the Niger past its confluence with the Benue. This feat opened up the possibility—later exploited by

the Lairds—that a commercial steam service might be opened on the Niger and that European merchants might be able to trade directly with the interior and bypass the African merchants who then dominated trade on the Niger.

Other explorers also exploited the possibilities of the river steamer. David Livingstone, a prominent opponent of the slave trade and one of the first Europeans to travel into Central Africa from the East Coast, used a steamer to ascend the Zambezi in 1858. He later had a steamer carried in pieces to Lake Nyassa. As shipwrights learned to build steel hulls in sections, explorers frequently used steamers they could take apart, have carried around an obstacle, and then reassemble. Henry Morton Stanley (1877) and Savorgnan de Brazza (1880) both did this on the Congo. Once around the rapids and falls that make the first 200 miles of the Congo impassable, Stanley and Brazza were able to steam deep into the interior on hundreds of miles of easily navigable river. Where explorers showed that steamers could go, commercial steam traffic was never too far behind. But commercial exploitation of Africa's rivers by Europeans, usually accompanied by or followed shortly by a colonial seizure of the same rivers, would require a few new developments.

Quinine and Colonialism

When Macgregor Laird returned in triumph from his 1832 ascent of the Niger, that triumph was tainted by the appalling loss of life among his fellow expeditionaries. Of the 48 Europeans who set out in 1832, only 9 returned. Most of those 39 deaths were caused by disease. The West African disease environment was discussed in Chapter 8, but a few points are worthy of reiteration. Two diseases, malaria and yellow fever—both endemic in West Africa—were most likely responsible for the deaths on Laird's expedition. A mosquito-borne virus causes yellow fever; a mosquito-borne protozoan causes malaria. For most Africans yellow fever is a childhood disease that passes unnoticed and confers lifetime immunity. For Europeans, who arrived without prior exposure to the disease, it was much more severe and often fatal. Conversely, malaria is if anything harder on children than it is on adults, and one never gains immunity to the disease. However, if one survives multiple attacks as a child, the severity of the attacks one suffers as an adult are reduced and less likely to be fatal. Again, for Europeans arriving as adults with no prior experience of the strains of malaria present in tropical Africa, malaria was often fatal.

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, Europeans in Africa had no option but to live, or more often die, with these conditions. West Africa was known as the "white man's grave." In the years between 1695 and 1722, of every ten European employees sent to West Africa by the Royal Africa Company, "six died in the first year, two died in the second through seventh years, and only one lived to be discharged in Britain." With odds like these, most European merchants were more than happy to let African merchants dominate trade between the interior and the coast. They brought their ships to trade ports, bought their goods, and cleared out as fast as they could. So even though Laird had shown that steamers could operate on the Niger, no one was enthusiastic about the prospect of risking the disease costs of following through on his discovery.

A drug that could be used to treat malaria—cinchona bark—had been available in Europe since the seventeenth century. However, it was often in short supply. In the early part of the nineteenth century, chemists isolated **quinine**, the active ingredient in cinchona bark. In 1847 a breakthrough came as an English physician published an article indicating that quinine could be used prophylactically (taken to prevent rather than to cure) against malaria. By the 1850s and 1860s, the great age of European exploration in Africa, quinine was an essential part of any traveler's equipment. Quinine, which was soon being produced on a lavish scale, reduced but did not eliminate the disease costs for Europeans trying to trade with, travel in, or conquer Africa. There remained one innovation that would fully tip the scales in favor of European conquerors—the repeating rifle.

Weapons and Colonialism

In his book, *How I Found Livingstone* (1872), Henry Morton Stanley included a section of advice for “the young traveler.” He recommends a good tent and a few other creature comforts, and then moves on to the important things—guns. After a few suggestions about hunting weapons he comments that

for a fighting weapon, I maintain that the best yet invented is the American Winchester repeating rifle, or the “sixteen shooter” as it is called, supplied with the London Eley's ammunition. If I suggest as a fighting weapon the American Winchester, I do not mean that the traveller need take it for the purpose of offence, but as the best means of efficient defense.

Offense, of course, was precisely how Stanley and others employed their repeating rifles. And it was rifles like these that let relatively small groups of Europeans first venture into the interior and then claim it as their own.

When the nineteenth century began, European armies enjoyed only very limited technological advantages over their African counterparts. Indeed, parts of the African continent were awash in guns. In West Africa, where European-made firearms were frequently exchanged for slaves and gold, guns were part of the fabric of life. By the middle of the eighteenth century most West African states had acquired large stocks of guns and had changed their military tactics to accommodate the new weapons. By way of example, in 1742 a Dutch observer reported that in the kingdom of Asante there was a 5,000-man unit of musketeers. A few years earlier a single ship delivered a cargo to the Gold Coast that included 55,135 pounds of gunpowder and 2,243 muskets. In 1829, the British sold 52,540 guns and almost 2 million pounds of gunpowder in West Africa. West African states clearly had a taste for guns, and the various European nations were willing to satisfy it. By at least the end of the nineteenth century, African blacksmiths were learning to repair and sometimes even build their own firearms. There is also evidence that some states were making their own gunpowder, but by then it was too late.

It is significant that the guns were made in Europe and that many of them were made specifically for export to Africa. There are two reasons for this. The first was to cater to the particular tastes and preferences of African buyers. In certain

regions and times, for instance, longer barrels were preferred over shorter ones; at other times and in other places the opposite was true. But the other reason was that the guns sold into the African trade were often of inferior quality. In Asante gun barrels were often wrapped with cord to prevent them from bursting. At times the preferred varieties of gunpowder were relatively weak—they were less likely to damage inferior but precious guns. So the guns West Africans had were generally inferior to those used by European armies. However, they were not that different. Like the muskets that virtually all European armies used in the early nineteenth century, the guns West Africans had were smooth-bored muzzle loaders that were inaccurate and slow to load.

If European armies had a significant advantage, it was in their bureaucratic structures and the discipline inculcated in soldiers by drill. But those counted for little when soldiers were dropping dead left and right from disease or when European troops encountered African armies with their own tradition of drill. As a result, where European garrisons were present in Africa at the turn of the nineteenth century, they were usually confined to a few coastal enclaves that a few sick soldiers defended with courage born of desperation.

By the mid-nineteenth century, a host of innovations in the design of guns dramatically changed the fortunes of European military ventures in Africa. The flintlock musket was smooth bored, which meant that the ball it fired more or less skittered off in the direction of the last bounce it made on its way up the barrel. Such weapons had a useful range of about 75 yards and to be effective had to be used by well-drilled infantry that fired them in mass volleys. Europeans had no monopoly on drill, and several African states trained their soldiers to fire their muskets in organized volleys. Rifles are much more accurate because grooves carved into the barrel spin the bullet. Rifles had been known since the sixteenth century, but their use was largely confined to sport because forcing a bullet down a rifled barrel required the use of greased patches and much effort. Their accuracy did not offset their slow rate of fire, and most military officers avoided them like the plague. Myths about American frontiersmen using their hunting rifles and guile to defeat British redcoats, whose muskets forced them to stand in the open to deliver mass volleys, are just that—myths.

The first major innovation of the nineteenth century was the percussion cap. This was a brass cap that fit over a nipple on the breech of the gun, and when struck by the gun's hammer, it detonated the charge in the barrel. It took less time to use percussion caps than it did to use the flint-and-steel ignitions of flintlocks, they worked better in the rain, and by igniting the charge over a shorter period of time they drove the ball harder and faster. Next came bullets that when exposed to the force of the exploding charge expanded to fit the rifled barrel. Such a bullet could slip down a rifled barrel as easily as a musket ball went down the barrel of a smooth-bored musket. So rifles that used these bullets could fire at the same rate as a musket, but were far more accurate. The next step was to produce rifles that loaded from the breech rather than the muzzle. Breechloaders could be loaded more quickly than muzzle loaders. They used brass cartridges that held the bullet, the powder, and the primer (the aforementioned percussion cap inserted into the base of the brass cartridge) in a convenient watertight container, so ammunition for

these weapons could be transported through almost any amount of wetness and still function. A breechloader can also be reloaded without standing up, something virtually impossible with a muzzle loader. A soldier equipped with such a rifle could lie on the ground and fire his weapon at a distant enemy without exposing himself to return fire and without pausing more than a second or two to reload. Soldiers who at the beginning of the century had to fire massed volleys at ranges that were at times closer than 50 yards could now spread themselves out, fire aimed shots at individuals, and do so while lying on the ground. Furthermore, they could shoot much faster. Even the best-trained infantry could get off only three rounds a minute with a musket. Almost anyone could fire a shot every five to ten seconds with a breechloader. In short, the military potential of a single soldier had increased markedly, especially if his opponent was not equipped with similar weapons.

European armies began to adopt breechloaders in the 1840s. They were not in widespread use until the late 1860s, by which time the French and British had fully converted to breechloaders. African military forces, which had acquired and used muskets—especially the famed “Dane guns” manufactured specifically for the African trade—suddenly found themselves outgunned. Europeans carefully restricted the supply of the new weapons. The Brussels Convention of 1890 forbade Europeans to sell modern firearms in Africa. Some African leaders did manage to purchase a few modern weapons, but these (with a few notable exceptions) were too little and came too late. Unlike muskets, which could be furnished with locally produced ammunition and repaired—occasionally even built—by local craftsmen, repeating rifles required imported ammunition, and once broken they could not be repaired, much less manufactured, locally. The balance of power was now firmly in the hands of Europeans. They could now send soldiers, missionaries, and merchants to tropical Africa without the devastating losses to disease they once suffered. They could now ply the inland waterways of the continent wrapped in the steel cocoons of their steamboats. A few Europeans or Africans equipped and trained in the use of European weapons could now defeat numerically superior African forces. Conquest could now be conducted on the cheap.

This is not to say that Africans did not fight back. They did and did so valiantly. But the cards were stacked against them. When African states directly resisted European encroachments, the costs were high. The most appalling example of this was the Battle of Omdurman (1898). At Omdurman, a small but well-armed Anglo-Egyptian army confronted a Sudanese army of 40,000. The Sudanese launched wave after wave of cavalry and infantry into a storm of machine-gun, rifle, and artillery fire. When it was all over, 40 members of the Anglo-Egyptian army were dead, and 11,000 Sudanese had perished. Courage was no match for modern weapons.

African societies that were less politically “developed,” which is to say societies that lacked the structures of a large-scale state, ironically often provided a more effective resistance to European invasions. Stateless societies such as the Tiv and Igbo in Nigeria were more difficult to conquer than larger entities such as the Sokoto Caliphate in Nigeria or the Mahdist State in Sudan. Because colonial invaders had to deal with each village separately, it took far more time and effort to “pacify” these politically fragmented peoples. Smaller societies also sometimes



The Battle of Omdurman in 1898 as depicted in a British magazine. Note the inability of the Mahdist troops to approach the British lines. Modern weapons made this one of the most lopsided battles in history.

mounted fierce military resistance. Modern-day Tanzania had no large-scale states in the nineteenth century except for the Arab state of Zanzibar. When the Germans began their conquest, the Zanzibari-controlled areas of the coast were taken relatively easily. There was resistance, but it came mostly from private citizens who organized resistance when the state could not or would not. Away from the coast, some Tanzanian societies chose to accommodate the Germans; others fought them ferociously. The Hehe fought for most of a decade against the Germans, only succumbing after the death of their leader Mkwawa in 1898. But succumb they did. Military resistance was futile when the odds were so uneven.

The Great Transformation

Fifty years before Mkwawa's death, Europeans were a minor military and political force on most of the continent. Outside the few coastal enclaves and the temperate parts of southern Africa, Europeans were noticed, when they were noticed at all, as an economic force. Between 1850 and 1900 what had been a stable balance of power between Europe and the rest of the world was upset. Gunboats appeared on Chinese canals. India came under the direct control of the British government. The French and the Dutch conquered Southeast Asia. In the American West, this same period saw the final demise of independent Indian nations. And Africa, which had previously been less affected than any of these other places by Europeans, suddenly came to be carved up by Britain, France, Germany, and Belgium.

We would be wrong, then, to assume that Europe has dominated Africa for a long time. In fact, direct European political domination of the African continent lasted about a human lifetime. Europeans did not conquer Africa because of any inherent superiority they enjoyed. Rather, they did so because for a time they were the only ones who had access to the tools and weapons created by industry. Once their monopoly on industrial weapons was broken, colonialism was abandoned. And it was not just Africans who fell behind technologically and so suffered the humiliations of conquest. A Vietnamese official, who took his own life in 1862 rather than submit to the French, wrote that

The French have huge battleships, full of soldiers and armed with powerful cannons. Nobody can resist them. . . . And I said to myself: It would be as senseless for you to assail your enemy as for a fawn to attack the tiger. You would only draw suffering upon the people whom Heaven has entrusted to your care. I therefore wrote to all civilian and military officials to lay down their arms.

Quoted from Anthony Reid, *Last Stand of Asian Autonomies* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997)

In less than a century the Vietnamese and their counterparts in Africa would take up their arms again. But in the first half of the twentieth century Europe held the upper hand.

The Limits of Resistance

The military imbalance between Africans and Europeans was not the only reason that Europeans were able to control most of the continent for the better part of a century. The other was that there was never a unified "African" response to colonialism. We would do well to remember that a broader notion of African identity did not emerge until the twentieth century. Thus, at the time that all these places were being colonized, it was up to particular states, societies, and individuals to determine their reactions to the European presence. In some cases this meant a vigorous military reaction. In others cases the European presence was seen as an opportunity. European merchants brought desirable goods, mission stations offered education and medical care, and the emerging colonial governments provided new employment opportunities. What might be a threat to a state could be an opportunity to an ambitious individual. There was no standard response to European interventions.

It is also worth noting the role of African troops in the process of colonial conquest. The Germans in East Africa relied heavily on locally recruited soldiers, as did the Belgians in the Congo, and the British and French in their colonies. While from the present perspective we might wonder how African soldiers felt about participating in the subjugation of their fellow Africans, we should remember that these soldiers did not think of themselves or their opponents as either African or fellows. We might just as well ask how French and German soldiers of the First World War felt about fighting their fellow Europeans. Clearly they had few qualms.

Although military conquest paved the way for the emergence of the colonial state, it was just the beginning of the process of colonization. For the colonial state to really assert control it had to establish itself politically and economically and this

process opened up a host of opportunities for colonized people to either cooperate with or resist the colonial state, or to do a bit of both. That aspect of the colonial project will be the subject of the next two chapters.

The Colonization of a Continent

In the second half of the nineteenth century, colonial conquest was cheaper and easier for Europeans than ever before (or since). But the process of colonization unfolded differently in different places. In some places, usually those in which European powers had long-standing economic interests, colonization evolved from existing economic interests, often in gradual and unplanned ways. In other instances, colonial conquest was the result of a few ambitious individuals deciding that a region of the continent was ripe for colonization and then setting out to acquire the territory with the expectation that commercial or strategic gain would follow. In Senegal and the Gold Coast, for example, French and British colonial conquest evolved from over a century of prior commercial activity. By contrast, in the Belgian Congo and German East Africa, the Belgians and Germans had few prior economic interests and set out on a conscious program of conquest and colonization. In Kenya and South Africa, colonization followed a different pattern, in part because of the presence of large numbers of European settlers. Of course, these few examples do not exhaust all the possibilities. Some colonies—Liberia and Sierra Leone—were created for and settled by former slaves from the Americas. And Ethiopia, a place that seems to consistently be the exception to every rule, avoided colonization except for a few years in the 1930s. Although the process of colonization was highly variable—both from the perspective of the people being colonized and from the perspective of the colonizer—we have chosen to look at a few case studies that will give you a good sense of the larger process.

The Expansion of the Gold Coast Colony

The coastal regions of Gold Coast (now the modern country of Ghana) had been deeply involved with Europeans for centuries before the area was colonized. The Portuguese had built the first European fortress south of the Sahara at El Mina. There they had bought gold and slaves. Later they were driven from El Mina by the Dutch, who were joined on the coast by the British and the Danes. The British built a trade fort at Cape Coast, and the Danes used the nearby Christianbourg Castle. By the early nineteenth century all three groups of Europeans were still present, but the power of the British was waxing steadily, while the Dutch and Danes found their power to be waning. Still, their presence is an important part of the story because it meant that African states could always seek another European trading nation if one tried to cut them out of the trade.

On the African side of this trade system were the Asante empire and a loose confederation of Fante states. The Asante, as discussed in Chapter 9, had carved out an empire in the eighteenth century from a collection of Akan-speaking states.