Forgotten Histories: The Impact of World War One on African territories

Political maps of Africa

Background Information

European explorers and missionaries began mapping the interior of Africa in the nineteenth-century. Explorers such as David Livingstone and Henry Stanley revealed that Africa was full of raw materials that could be exploited to fuel the industrial revolution. They saw it as a new place to invest the money made in industry. There are many reasons why European countries wanted to expand their empire in the ‘scramble for Africa’ during the nineteenth century. These include economic and strategic reasons as well as military innovations such as the bullet cartridge.

The start of the 1880s saw a rapid increase in European nations claiming territory in Africa, culminating in the Berlin Conference in 1884-5 which saw the continent of Africa being divided into colonies under European rule. These boundaries were not based on existing tribal or geographical boundaries which led to many conflicts in the twentieth century, when many of these countries became independent. At the time of the conference, 80% of Africa remained under traditional and local control, at the end of the conference thirteen European countries and the USA had divided the continent into fifty colonies. France, Germany, Great Britain, and Portugal were the major players in the conference, controlling most of colonial Africa at the time.

By 1914, the only independent African states were Liberia and Abyssinia (Ethiopia). The political map showing international boundaries in 1914 (map A) below is colour coded to show the territories each European nation controlled:

- German South West Africa, Cameroon, German East Africa, and Togo
- British territories of Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, Egypt, Uganda, British East Africa, British Somaliland, Northern and Southern Rhodesia, Nyasaland, South Africa, Basutoland, Bechuanaland, Swaziland, Nigeria, the Gold Coast, Sierra Leone and Zanzibar
- French control of much of western Africa, French Equatorial Africa and Madagascar
- Belgium control of the Congo
- Portuguese rule of eastern Africa and Angola on the west
- Italian control of Libya, Italian Somaliland and Eritrea
- Spain with the smallest territory, Equatorial Guinea and Rio de Oro

The First World War gave rise to a crucial change in the relationship between Europe and Africa. Over two million people in Africa made huge sacrifices for the European Allies. 100,000 men died in East Africa and 65,000 men from French North Africa and French West Africa lost their lives. Despite many Africans fighting in the war, in the peace settlements after the war, European powers divided up Germany’s African colonies without consulting anyone in Africa, and without any attention being paid to the geographical spread of
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different ethnic groups.

In 1920, after the First World War, the territories that had been under German control were divided between Britain and France. German South West Africa became under British rule and was administered by the Union of South Africa. Togoland was divided between French Togoland and British Togoland as League of Nations mandates. Cameroon was divided between British Cameroon and French Cameroon. German East Africa became Tanganyika under British administration with the northwest regions of Ruanda and Urundi given to Belgium as League of Nations mandates.

These mandates were an authorisation given by the League of Nations to a member nation to govern a former German colony. Following the defeat of Germany in World War One, African territories were not seen as ‘ready’ to govern themselves so were divided among the Allied powers. The political map showing international boundaries in 1920 (map C) shows most of these changes, except for the division of Togoland.

Discussion questions

1. What does a political map show? What is not shown on these maps?
2. Using the key (B), identify which territories belonged to the European nations? Which country had control over most territories and what were the reasons for this?
3. Why do you think railways were included on the maps?
4. How did control over the African territories change after the First World War (maps C and D)?
5. Why do you think it was so important for Europeans to ‘map’ Africa?
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A. Political map showing international boundaries 1914
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B: Political map showing international boundaries 1914: detail of key
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C. Political map showing international boundaries 1920

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D. Political map showing international boundaries 1920

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