

**IMPERIAL GERMANY  
(1871-1918): PEACEFUL  
IMPERIALISM:  
BISMARCK AND THE  
BERLIN CONFERENCE  
OF 1884**



# IMPERIAL GERMANY (1871-1918): PEACEFUL IMPERIALISM: BISMARCK AND THE BERLIN CONFERENCE OF 1884

## Description

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain Otto von Bismarck's reasons for calling the Berlin Conference of 1884, what provisions the European nations were able to agree upon at the conference, and how the "Scramble for Africa" both temporarily saved Europe and also eventually hurt Africa.

## Subjects

European History, World History, Economics

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- Bismarck Memorial, Berlin
- Bismarck statues around Germany

## Essential Questions

- Who was Otto von Bismarck?
- What were the major provisions of Bismarck's foreign policy in terms of the acquisition of colonies?
- Why did Bismarck call for the Berlin Conference of 1884?
- What decisions were made at the Berlin Conference of 1884? How did those decisions keep Europe out of war for another 30 years?
- How are the current African nations still living with the legacy of the Berlin Conference of 1884?

## Academic Summary

GENERAL ACT OF THE CONFERENCE AT BERLIN OF THE PLENIPOTENTIARIES OF GREAT BRITAIN, AUSTRIA-HUNGARY, BELGIUM, DENMARK, FRANCE, GERMANY, ITALY, THE NETHERLANDS, PORTUGAL, RUSSIA, SPAIN, SWEDEN AND NORWAY, TURKEY AND THE UNITED STATES RESPECTING: (1) FREEDOM OF TRADE IN THE BASIN OF THE CONGO; (2) THE SLAVE TRADE; (3) NEUTRALITY OF THE TERRITORIES IN THE BASIN OF THE CONGO; (4) NAVIGATION OF THE CONGO; (5) NAVIGATION OF THE NIGER; AND (6) RULES FOR FUTURE OCCUPATION ON THE COAST OF THE AFRICAN CONTINENT ...

... WISHING, in a spirit of good and mutual accord, to regulate the conditions most favorable to the development of trade and civilization in certain regions of Africa, and to assure to all nations the advantages of free navigation on the two chief rivers of Africa flowing into the Atlantic Ocean;

BEING DESIROUS, on the other hand, to obviate the misunderstanding and disputes which might in future arise from new acts of occupation (prises de possession) on the coast of Africa; and concerned, at the same time, as to the means of furthering the moral and material well-being of the native populations

...

### Article 34

Any Power which henceforth takes possession of a tract of land on the coasts of the African continent outside of its present possessions, or which, being hitherto without such possessions, shall acquire them, as well as the Power which assumes a Protectorate there, shall accompany the respective act with a notification thereof, addressed to the other Signatory Powers of the present Act, in order to enable them, if need be, to make good any claims of their own.

### Article 35

The Signatory Powers of the present Act recognize the obligation to insure the establishment of authority in the regions occupied by them on the coasts of the African continent sufficient to protect existing rights, and, as the case may be, freedom of trade and of transit under the conditions agreed upon.

*General Act of the Berlin Conference on West Africa, 26 Feb 1885*

In 1871, after over one thousand years of political bickering and jostling, the Germanic states finally unified behind one flag. Led by the will of Prussia's "Iron Chancellor", Otto Von Bismarck, the German Reich accomplished in a less than a decade what had taken the rest of the major European powers hundreds of years: world notice. It was the fastest rise of a true world power in modern history. Bismarck today is probably best known around the world for the system of alliances he forged over the years trying desperately to isolate France after the Franco-Prussian War and thus giving Germany the security of not having to face a two-front war (a strategy that would eventually backfire after Bismarck's dismissal in 1890 and the subsequent alliance between France and Russia in 1894). The Chancellor is also known for his domestic policies, particularly in expanding medical insurance and developing an old-age pension for the

working proletariat of Germany, both very radical decisions in the late 19th century. Others know Bismarck for his “Blood and Iron” style of governing. Some opinions on Bismarck are based on subsequent events that happened long after Bismarck was gone (two world wars), while others are grounded in Bismarck’s own words and political style. What is sometimes forgotten, however, was that Bismarck also opened the door for European Imperialism and the “Scramble for Africa” in the decades before the Great War.

By the early 1880s, European nations were eyeing Africa, not for its people (slaves) as in centuries past, but rather for its natural resources, many of which were critical to the industrial revolution. Promises and dreams of rubber, oil, coal and other resources drove late 19th century European explorers and politicians wild with visions of untold wealth. If they could bring civilization, Christianity and cleanliness to the “dark” continent, so much the better, as then average citizens and voters would approve and pay for such measures.

The newly created German Empire was hardly in the position to join the race for colonies in the 1870s, but nonetheless found itself in the middle of the scramble. As the most industrialized nation on the continent, Bismarck’s Germany had more members of the urban proletariat than any nation in Europe. Marxist and Socialist advocates were calling on the working class across the Reich to rise up and to take control of their own destinies. Bismarck and Kaiser William I had forged this new empire through Realpolitik and war, not through any up-swelling grassroots effort coming from the German people. Creating Germany was easy ... governing the new Reich was proving more difficult. Bismarck turned to a type of “paternalistic” socialism as a way to control the proletariat, while at the same time he tried to foster German nationalism through the acquisition of colonies designed, it was said, as a way to spread German civilization to the poor uneducated and desperate people around the globe.

Bismarck quickly saw another huge advantage in colonization. As part of the peace treaty that ended the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, France had to surrender two of its eastern territories to Germany. Alsace and Lorraine became the focal point in the French idea of revenge, a notion taught to French school children. According to that philosophy, Germany had stolen France’s heart (Joan of Arc had been the “Maid of Lorraine”) and that another war between the Germans and the French was inevitable. Bismarck theorized that if he could divert French attention off the continent, so much the better. In 1884 he invited most of the European nations to his residence in Berlin (along with the United States) for a conference to hammer out on paper their issues with Africa before they settled them with weapons. Nations from across the continent sent representatives to Berlin. The conference took almost a year, issuing its report in Nov 1885. In the end, the Scramble for Africa worked, at least for Bismarck. Peace held in Europe for 30 additional years, until 1914, but Bismarck’s plan also allowed European nations to acquire resources and people in the colonies that would ultimately extend the time needed to exhaust the killing fields of France. Unintentionally, the Berlin Conference of 1884 also left a legacy that Africa nations have to deal with into the 21st century. Modern African boundaries, often cutting across linguistic and tribal lines, were drawn by the Europeans in Berlin, and these boundaries have sometimes led to civil wars and genocide since independence.

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain Otto von Bismarck's reasons for calling the Berlin Conference of 1884, what provisions the European nations were able to agree upon at the conference, and how the "Scramble for Africa" both temporarily saved Europe and also eventually hurt Africa.

## Objectives

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how and why European nations looked to Africa for colonization in the decades leading up to the Great War.
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain the reasons Otto von Bismarck called for the Berlin Conference of 1884.
3. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain the provisions of the Berlin Act of 1885 in terms of how it set up the division of the African continent.
4. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how the Berlin Conference of 1884 ultimately helped European nations but hurt the African people and why this legacy continues to plague Africa into the 21st century.

## Procedure

### I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: What was the purpose of having colonies? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

### II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture – Brief overview of Imperialism and the Scramble for Africa. (20 min)
- Video – Scramble for Africa (10 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the primary sources and articles on the Scramble for Africa and the Berlin Conference of 1884-85, taking notes as appropriate. (15 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles for homework the night before class to prepare for class discussion.
- Group Activity – Discussion: Why did Otto von Bismarck call European delegates to the Berlin Conference of 1884? What provisions were the European nations able to agree upon at the conference? How did the "Scramble for Africa" both temporarily save Europe and also eventually hurt Africa? (15 min)

### III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail Otto von Bismarck's reasons for calling the Berlin Conference of 1884, what provisions the European nations were able to agree upon at the conference, and how the "scramble for Africa" both temporarily saved Europe and also eventually hurt Africa.

## **Extension**

### **On tour: Ethnological Museum in Berlin**

While on tour, students with free time in Berlin can visit the Ethnological Museum. Like many colonial/imperial museums across the continent, the Ethnological Museum in Berlin is the subject of controversy, since most of its artifacts were collected from around the globe during Germany's imperialistic period. Students can see for themselves such collections as African pottery, sculptures and even huts that were brought to Berlin before 1914. Perhaps a discussion as to whom the artifacts really belong to might be appropriate. The museum also has a section dedicated to scholarly pursuits.

## Web Links

### Lesson Plan Websites

- [africanhistory.about.com/od/eracolonialism/l/bl-BerlinAct1885.htm](http://africanhistory.about.com/od/eracolonialism/l/bl-BerlinAct1885.htm)  
General Act of the Berlin Conference on West Africa, 26 February 1885 (primary source)
- [www.martinfrost.ws/htmlfiles/april2007/africa\\_scramble.html](http://www.martinfrost.ws/htmlfiles/april2007/africa_scramble.html)  
Scramble for Africa (website) – great website with dozens of links to primary and secondary sources on the Scramble for Africa
- [wysinger.homestead.com/berlinconference.html](http://wysinger.homestead.com/berlinconference.html)  
Scramble for Africa: Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 to Divide Africa (website)
- [www.regentsprep.org/Regents/global/themes/imperialism/africa.cfm](http://www.regentsprep.org/Regents/global/themes/imperialism/africa.cfm)  
Scramble for Africa (website) – outstanding site from the NY Regents Exam Prep Center in Oswego, NY. Highly recommended for teachers and students.
- [sunburst.usd.edu/~clehmann/HWB/1999/1999f/imperialism%20in%20africa.htm](http://sunburst.usd.edu/~clehmann/HWB/1999/1999f/imperialism%20in%20africa.htm)  
Scramble for Africa (website)
- [kasieconomics.com/2013/03/30/scramble-for-africa-berlin-conference-of-1884-1885-to-divide-africa/](http://kasieconomics.com/2013/03/30/scramble-for-africa-berlin-conference-of-1884-1885-to-divide-africa/)  
Scramble for Africa: Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 to Divide Africa (website)
- [www.historyhome.co.uk/europe/bismarck.htm](http://www.historyhome.co.uk/europe/bismarck.htm)  
Bismarck's Foreign Policy, 1871-1890 (website) – from historyhome (UK) website by Marjorie Bloy
- [teacherweb.ftl.pinecrest.edu/snyderd/mwh/projects/mun-bc/index.htm](http://teacherweb.ftl.pinecrest.edu/snyderd/mwh/projects/mun-bc/index.htm)  
Berlin Conference: Creating a Better Africa (website) – class project from Daniel Snyder, AP Human Geography teacher at Pine Crest Prep School (FL). Great project for all classes studying the Berlin conference or the Scramble for Africa.
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video) – great 2 minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA – highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.pptpalooza.net/PPTs/GlobalStudies/EuropeanColonialisminAfrica.ppt](http://www.pptpalooza.net/PPTs/GlobalStudies/EuropeanColonialisminAfrica.ppt)  
European Colonization of Africa (PowerPoint) – from Susan Pojer, AP history teacher at Horace Greeley High School in Chappaqua, NY.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=OJe1W\\_HIWmA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OJe1W_HIWmA)  
European Imperialism in Africa (video) – from Discovery Education
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=FTjBNppdk-M](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FTjBNppdk-M)  
Berlin 1885: The Division of Africa (video) – 3-minute video that provides a good overview of the Berlin Conference
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-YuLzzHQIq](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-YuLzzHQIq)  
The Scramble for Africa – Professor Richard J Evans (video). Lecture by Richard Evans, Regius Professor of Modern History at Gresham College (UK). This 58-minute college lecture may be too long for most academic classes, but is a valuable resource for both students and teachers studying the “Scramble for Africa”.

## **Background Information**

- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Otto\\_von\\_Bismarck](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Otto_von_Bismarck)  
Otto von Bismarck – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin\\_Conference](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Conference)  
Berlin Conference – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scramble\\_for\\_Africa](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scramble_for_Africa)  
Scramble for Africa – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imperialism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imperialism)  
Imperialism – Wikipedia article
- [passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/germany/country\\_profile](https://passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/germany/country_profile)  
On the Road: Germany (country profile) – from Passports Educational Travel

## **Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans**

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/germany/german-unification-under-bismarck](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/german-unification-under-bismarck)  
German Unification in 1871
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/germany/bismarck-berlin-conference-1884](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/bismarck-berlin-conference-1884)  
Imperial Germany (1871-1918) – Otto von Bismarck: Berlin Conference of 1884
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/germany/bismarck-paternalistic-state-socialism](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/bismarck-paternalistic-state-socialism)  
Imperial Germany (1871-1918) – Otto von Bismarck: Paternalistic State Socialism
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/germany/bismarck-triple-alliance](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/bismarck-triple-alliance)  
Imperial Germany (1871-1918) – Otto von Bismarck: Triple Alliance
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/british-colonization-white-mans-burden](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/british-colonization-white-mans-burden)  
British Imperialism – Rudyard Kipling: The White Man's Burden

## **Key Terms**

- Berlin Conference of 1884
- Colonies
- Imperialism
- Otto von Bismarck
- Scramble for Africa



