The Scramble for Africa is the general label for the period of European colonialism in Africa in the late 19th century. In 1885, fourteen European powers got together in Berlin and literally took out a map and drew a bunch of lines and carved up the continent of Africa.It’s really important to clarify that this is not the starting point of European colonialism of Africa. It’s actually just a change in the way that the Europeans approached it.

Before the 1880s, partially due to their own technologies or philosophies, the Europeans were largely just around the fringe of the continent. For example, in West Africa, there’s the slave trade that had been going on for several hundred years. Different European countries had forts on the coastlines, but they didn’t really go into the continent itself. You have the Dutch, who set up the Cape Colony at the very southern point in 1652, but you don’t really see a large concentration of Europeans inland until the late 1800s. And there’s no discussion of who gets what until the 1880s.

The reason that the European powers met in 1885 was largely to avert war because they were afraid that they were heading for a major conflict in the struggling for position in colonies, and not just in Africa. There was a lot of vying for prestige among the European powers—this was largely a European problem that was played out on the continent of Africa.

Relations between **North Africa** and Europe were eras old. In fact, North Africa is frequently treated differently by academics and is not even considered part of the mainstream of “African Studies.”  The Mediterranean was able to be navigated much earlier than the rest of the African coastline largely because of the ocean currents and the types of ships that they had at that time.

Things changed in the late 19th century, largely because of technology. The Suez Canal opened in Egypt in 1869. The British facilitated that project because they wanted easier access to India much more efficiently and, as a result of wanting to make money off of it and not let it fall into the hands of rival powers, they actually took control of Egypt in 1882.

Italy colonized Libya late. There isn’t a whole lot in Libya as far as European perceptions of wealth—it’s largely desert, there’s nothing they can mine—they didn’t know about oil at the time—and you can’t really farm it for anything. It was one of the last countries to be colonized, at a time when Italy was scrambling to establish itself as one of the great European powers. Essentially, they were coming from the perspective that they had to have a colony in order to be considered great.

**West Africa** had a lot of contact with Europeans for centuries before the 1880s. Although the Europeans stayed largely on the coastlines, because of the slave trade the people fled to the interior thinking they were safe.

Two major technology changes allowed the Europeans to expand. One was the discovery of quinine. The region is tropical and malaria is common. Quinine, which is used to treat malaria, allowed Europeans to travel into the region without dying from the disease.

The second was the steamship. A lot of African rivers are not navigable by sail. With the arrival of the steamship, they were able to go up rivers they were never able to go up before. (This is where Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* comes from.)

Because of these two innovations, West Africa is made passable, and Europeans were able to go in much further. This was hugely disruptive to local economies.  Although the slave trade had largely ended by this point, the Europeans used the local population to work for them in extracting resources, work on plantations, etc. It was culturally disruptive as well.

This also allowed Europeans to penetrate further into**Central Africa**.  The Belgians were the primary colonizers in Central Africa, with the Congo being the largest colony in the region. The Belgian King Leopold saw this area—which is almost all rain forest—as his personal property. He is very well known for his stark brutality. There are lots of stories about his employees cutting off the arms of the native population. He was trying to extract as many resources as possible, and was not regarding the local population in any sort of humanitarian way. One of the major resources he took from the area was rubber. It had a huge environmental impact, but also economically and culturally disruptive.

**East Africa** was a bit of a latecomer to European colonialism. This is where you find the one area that managed to escape the scramble, and that was Ethiopia. During this period, Ethiopia had a very strong emperor, Menelik II, and their warfare tactics were superior to the Italians, who tried to colonize Ethiopia. They defeated the Italians pretty soundly, and the other European nations decided not to try to colonize the region as a result. Menelik was able to keep Ethiopia relatively independent until the world wars.

The other areas of East Africa fell under British or German control. In Kenya, about ten percent of the population is of British descent today. It was very much a settler colony, similar to South Africa, which is probably the best known example on the continent.

There’s a large European-descendant population in **Southern Africa**, with South Africa having the largest population, with smaller white populations in Zimbabwe and Zambia.

This is a result of British imperialism. The image of The Colossus of Rhodes epitomizes British designs on the continent, and it comes largely from Cecil Rhodes’s involvement in southern Africa. He acquired a lot of land personally in southern Africa (the colony of Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, was named for him), and had plans to build the Cape-to-Cairo railway and telegraph line. He personified British ambitions - to have a swath of Africa that ran the entire length of the continent - and that’s where these settler colonies come from.

In a settler colony, the colonizers invest in reproducing their own culture in those colonies. They build homes, they build farms, they build churches that are for their own use, they’re not missionary churches, and that’s an important difference between a settler colony and other types of colonies. Elsewhere, the Europeans would go in to convert or Europeanize the local population, but they’re mainly there to extract resources and goods. In the settler colonies, the Europeans’ goal was to live there—they want to make money, obviously—but this is their home now. It’s where their grandkids are going to grow up. This changes the dynamics and the politics involved.

This is why, in South Africa and throughout the region, there is a lot of racial tension between whites and blacks. This is also where the policy of apartheid came from, the policy of separation of the races that existed for half a century. South African whites consider themselves South African; they’re not European any more.

Why is this still important? Why are we still talking about colonialism even though it’s been over for half a century?You can still see the ramifications of colonialism, as well as the process of decolonization. Africa is very diverse, so you have to look at each country as its own separate case, but to generalize, the process of decolonization was very disruptive. Some of the independence movements were quite violent, and you have the fallout from that politically, culturally, economically, and socially.

Some of the European countries maintain ties, especially economic ties—we see this in French West Africa where they still control the economic processes in a lot of their former colonies. A normal person, for example, will find their employment opportunities limited if they don’t speak French or weren’t educated in the French system.  And this is a result of the rapid pace with which these countries were decolonized.

This plays out in racial attitudes as well. One of the starkest examples of this is the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. That genocide has direct links back to German colonialism. They divided the local ethnic group to control them. They took the wealthier people and called them one ethnic group, and used them to control the poorer population, which they called a second ethnic group. So they were actually taking social classes and making them ethnicities. They completely constructed a new definition of two different peoples who used to be one.

They pitted one against the other; they took the wealthy minority and put them in charge of the poor, gave them access to better education and opportunities, until after several generations they *felt* different from the majority.  And then the Germans just left, and you had the problem of reconciling these two ethnicities who now have a long history of unfairness and unequal access to resources and power, and it ended up turning into a genocide. It’s a relatively unique situation, but that sort of manipulation by the Europeans that took place during colonialism still has lingering effects now that they are gone.