

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 190

“1919 – Africa II”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The peoples of the world left behind by the decomposition of Russia, Austria, and Turkey are mostly untrained politically...they are mostly destitute and will require much nursing toward economic and political independence. If there is going to be a scramble among the victors for this loot, the future of Europe must indeed be despaired of. The application of the spoils system at this most solemn juncture...would indeed be incorrigible madness on the part of rulers, and enough to drive the torn and broken peoples of the world to that despair of the state which is the motive power behind Russian Bolshevism.

Jan Smuts, *Plan for the League of Nations*.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 190. 1919 - Africa, part two.

This is the fifteenth episode on our 1919 World Tour, and the second and final episode on Africa. We're taking in all of Sub-Saharan Africa in these episodes, and last time we looked at the first centuries of European-African relations. By the early twentieth century, we can see a rising pan-African consciousness.

By 1914, European-style civilization was well-established in many places on the African continent, generally the places where the most Europeans were living. But their presence had also led to the emergence of a native African middle class of people who worked for or with the Europeans. These new middle-class Africans could as often be seen playing football or chess or attending public events as could their European counterparts. They even danced—waltzes from Europe please, not native African dances—even as Europeans of this time were learning to dance to ragtime and jazz, the latest music from America, although its genealogy can be traced back to you-know-where, yes, Africa. One again, the irony fairy is hard at work.

This first generation of Africans raised and educated under European rule came of age expecting to cash in on the promises made to them by their rulers: to wit, that once they became properly educated and civilized, they would be granted greater control over their own lives, their own communities, and the nations they were part of. They would enjoy more of the benefits of modern trade and prosperity.

Then came the Great War. During the war, Africa was both a theatre of battle and a source of crucial manpower in a conflict where numbers were everything. Millions of Africans fought in the war. The French used soldiers from Algeria and from West Africa on the Western Front, at Gallipoli, and in the Near East. The British and Germans used African soldiers exclusively in Africa. The Germans had no other option here, as they had no way to bring African soldiers to Europe or send Europeans to defend the African colonies. The British found African soldiers to be the best African fighters, under conditions where neither European nor Indian soldiers managed very well, and not even white South Africans. Millions more Africans were hired or conscripted to serve as porters to supply the soldiers, again raising the question of how forcing Africans leave their homes and travel long distances so they can be put to work carrying heavy loads for the benefit of European masters is any more enlightened than the slave trade that Europeans claim they now disdain.

Much of this is already familiar to our regular listeners, but here's a moment from the Great War period I haven't gotten around to talking about yet. It concerns Ethiopia and the successor to its Emperor Menelik II. We last met Menelik all the way back in episode 23, when he led Ethiopia to victory during the 1896 war with Italy, making Ethiopia the first African nation in modern times to win a war against a European nation.

On a side note here, and for the sake of podcast consistency, I want to interject that English speakers of the early twentieth century usually called Ethiopia "Abyssinia," just as they usually called Iran "Persia" and Thailand "Siam." As is the case with those other two countries, the more modern name, Ethiopia, is closer to what the inhabitants themselves call their country, so I'm going to use it here in the podcast, even though at this historical moment it's a bit of an anachronism.

Anyway, Menelik and his army defeated the Italians and preserved Ethiopian independence. He also introduced a number of domestic reforms that modernized the country and won international recognition for Ethiopia as a sovereign state. By 1914, Ethiopia was the only independent African state, apart from Liberia, which was really more of an American protectorate.

Menelik was a successful and respected ruler, but in October 1909, at the age of 65 and 30 years into his reign, the Emperor suffered a massive stroke, which incapacitated him for the remaining years of his life. He passed away in December 1913. A regency council governed Ethiopia during the period of the Emperor's incapacity, but his death left the country with a succession problem. You see, although Menelik had been married three times, he'd had no children by any

of his wives. He did father a number of illegitimate children by several other women, and he legitimized three of them, two daughters and a son. The son, alas, died in his teens. The older daughter, Shoaregga, had two sons. The elder, Seged, was sickly and was also a dwarf. Menelik felt these conditions made him ineligible for the throne and so he designated the younger son, Iyasu as his heir. Iyasu is the Ethiopian form of "Joshua."

When Menelik died in 1913, this grandson, Prince Iyasu, was 18 years old. So, succession problem solved, right? Hold on for a second. Government ministers and the nobility had their doubts about Prince Iyasu. He assumed much of the authority of an Emperor, but in the end he never will be given a formal coronation. There was resistance to his rule from the very beginning. He was reported to be moody and cruel to his ministers and advisors. He was also sexually promiscuous and showed little sense of the responsibilities that came with being Emperor.

More worrisome still was his father, a military commander named Ras Mikael. Ras is a title. Mikael had been close to Menelik, hence the late Emperor marrying off his daughter to him, but Mikael had been born Muhammad Ali and raised a Muslim. He had converted to Christianity and adopted the name Mikael for political reasons, but it was widely suspected that father and son both were closet Muslims. The thought of Ethiopia, the only independent indigenous African state, complete with its own indigenous state church, ruled over by a Muslim Emperor was unacceptable to many. On the other hand, the prince's father was still an important and powerful military commander, so resistance risked civil war.

And so an uneasy compromise prevailed for two and a half years, with Iyasu effectively but not officially Emperor of Ethiopia. The Great War began just months into Prince Iyasu's reign, and now the Ethiopian ruler's possible secret Muslim sympathies became a concern not only within Ethiopia but among the Allies. As you know, the Ottoman Sultan declared a jihad against the Allies, although nothing much came of it, but it had the Allies worried. They had seen some Muslim resistance in North Africa against British and Italian rule, and Turkish and German representatives were in Addis Ababa, attempting to persuade Iyasu to enter the war on the Central Powers side. The British and Italians both feared that Ethiopian entry into the war could open new fronts that would threaten their colonial holdings in East Africa. Ethiopia had to be kept neutral at all costs.

The British engineered a propaganda campaign against Iyasu in Ethiopia that included doctored photographs purporting to show the young prince engaged in sex with a number of different women. They didn't have Photoshop back then, but they managed. These pictures were calculated to offend both conservative Christians and devout Muslims, and the British and Italians went on to engineer a coup among the nobility that overthrew Iyasu in September 1916. The Archbishop excommunicated the would-be Emperor and he was placed under a comfortable house arrest. Menelik's other daughter, Zewditu, was made Empress, making her Ethiopia's first empress regnant, unless you want to count the Queen of Sheba, although her son, Ras Tafari, was

named regent and her successor, making him effectively co-Emperor. And if that name, Ras Tafari, rings a bell, yes, that's a thing. After the Empress died in 1930, Ras Tafari would succeed his mother as Emperor himself, taking the throne name Haile Selassie.

Anyway, in colonial Africa, as we've discussed, European officials and settlers on both sides hoped that when war broke out in Europe, Africa might somehow remain at peace. Many Europeans living in Africa felt they had more in common with fellow Europeans than with the indigenous Africans, and worried that if you taught Africans how to use rifles and shoot Europeans, that could lead to, well, the Africans remembering those skills even after the war was over.

Well, the war did come to Africa and some Africans were indeed taught how to be soldiers, fulfilling the colonialists' worst nightmares. When Europe called, Africans had answered not only with their soldiering, but with their labor and with increased taxes, just like Europeans. If Africans shared equally in the burdens of war, should they not also share equally in the blessings of peace? An editorial in the *Gold Coast Leader* in May 1918 made this point, looking ahead to the peace talks. "Never before in modern history has the black man a better opportunity for his uplift than in the present war...we shall not be left out of the reckoning at the last day." Even worse, from the colonialist point of view, once Mr. Lloyd George and Mr. Wilson got to talking about "self-determination," some Africans began to ask whether that concept also applied to them.

Algerian and Egyptian delegations actually came to Paris, but they were not permitted to take part in the peace talks. Also in Paris were delegates to the Second Pan-African Congress, which met in February 1919, in parallel with the Paris Peace Conference. The Congress was organized by friend of the podcast W.E.B. Du Bois, the African-American writer and civil rights activist. There was already the Pan-African Association, meant to unite the efforts of indigenous Africans with the African diaspora, especially in the US and the West Indies, to pursue equal rights for all persons of African ancestry.

Over fifty delegates attended the Congress, representing 15 nations. The largest contingent came from the US. Few actual Africans attended, because their colonial governments blocked them by refusing them passports. Still, the Congress did useful work. It called on the Allies to take joint control of the former German colonies in Africa, rather than parceling them out among the victors, and to grant Africans the greatest possible degree of home rule. At the Peace Conference, they listened politely, but no more. Still, the Congress was a step forward in the process of developing that African consciousness I've been talking about.

[music: "Digya"]

It's time now to turn to the question the Pan-African Congress raised, the disposition of Germany's colonies in Africa, along with Germany's other colonial territories, and those of the Ottoman Empire. For the British and the French and the Japanese, there was a simple answer to

all of this. The formerly German colonies were spoils of war, to be divided among the victors. The Allies had already worked out who was getting what. In the Pacific, Japan would get all German possessions north of the equator, while territories south of the equator would go into the British Empire. In Africa, the French get Togoland and Cameroun, while the British get East Africa and South West Africa. In the Near East, well, the British and French had already worked all that out under the Sykes-Picot Agreement.

But then along came Woodrow Wilson, with his discomfiting and unwelcome argument that in the new post-war twentieth century world, civilized nations did not and should not divvy up territories forcibly taken from a defeated adversary like so many bank robbers in their hideout dividing the loot after pulling off the Big Job. Wilson had long insisted that America hadn't entered the war in order to enlarge other nations' colonial empires. He had a different plan.

Europeans had always claimed that colonialism was in the best interests of the peoples being ruled, and that those peoples lacked the means to govern themselves and participate as modern nations in the world order. So it was an act of charity, of altruism, for the advanced nations of the Earth to step in and take charge of their affairs for them. Some Europeans even believed this. In 1919, there was a consensus among the Allies that Germany had failed in its colonial administrations. German colonies had not been governed for the benefit of the indigenous peoples, but for the benefit of German settlers and the German nation. The Germans had often been ruthless and bloody in their treatment of the native Africans. There was truth in this, though similar accusations could just as easily be made against the Allies.

Woodrow Wilson wanted to make the former colonies into mandates, which were essentially trusts. For those of you who are not lawyers, here's a quick lesson in the law. If a person owns property, whatever property you might conceive, we generally understand that to mean two things: the owner has the power to control the property and the right to enjoy the benefits that ownership provides. A trust is a legal arrangement that severs those two aspects of ownership. One party, the trustee, controls the property, while another party, the beneficiary, enjoys the benefits. This is typically done in circumstances when the beneficiaries are unable to control the property themselves. Children, for example, or incapacitated persons.

Wilson wanted to apply this concept to the German colonies. Those lands belonged to the peoples who lived on them. If those peoples were not able to govern their own lands and someone else needed to step in and do it for them, then that other nation would be granted a mandate, a form of trusteeship, under which it would be granted the power to govern, with the understanding that it would be doing so for the benefit of the people governed, and it would be accountable to the League of Nations to insure that the mandatory power was not abusing that trust.

This concept takes the informal claims of colonialism and makes them official. The mandatory powers, which is what they were called, would have to report regularly to the League of Nations

on their efforts to develop these lands for the benefit of their peoples. And, significantly, the mandatory powers would not be permitted to draft soldiers from their mandates or to construct military bases there.

That was the vision, but Wilson was frustratingly vague on the details. Would these mandates be temporary or permanent? It depends. Would European territories also become mandates? Some of the new nations born in the aftermath of the war, like Finland and Poland, appeared politically and economically capable of governing themselves and participating in the international community from the word go. Other nations, like the new South Slav state in the Balkans, might possibly benefit from a short-term mandate, say five or ten or twenty-five years, until they got their houses in order and their nationhood became secure. What about the African territories? There were many in 1919 who persisted in believing that Africans would never be able to govern themselves. Mandates in Africa might have to be perpetual.

Jan Smuts made the case for mandates in his memorandum on the proposed League of Nations. I read an extract from it at the top of the episode. The concept was debated at the peace conference. Cynics wondered if it wasn't just an exercise in cloaking old-fashioned 19th-century imperialism in the latest twentieth century fashions. Idealists hoped it marked the beginning of a new era in international relations.

David Lloyd George, who probably leaned more to the cynical side, felt he had more important battles to fight and was willing to let Wilson have his way on mandates. Georges Clemenceau, on the other hand, hated the idea and fought it furiously. His top priority at the peace conference was always protecting France against the possibility of another attack from Germany, and since Germany was always going to be bigger and have a larger economy, it therefore followed that France needed its overseas colonies to redress this economic and demographic imbalance. African soldiers had helped rescue France during the late war; someday they might be needed again. The purpose of the League was to maintain the peace, not meddle in colonial affairs. Lloyd George proposed some compromise language, clarifying that what the League would prohibit was raising colonial armies to attack neighboring colonies—exactly what the Germans had been doing in Africa. Raising colonial forces to defend those colonies or the mother country, on the other hand, would be permitted.

And although Lloyd George preferred to keep his powder dry and stay out of the mandate debates, the same wasn't true of the British Empire's newly assertive dominions. Three of them in particular: South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand, each of which coveted nearby German territories. South Africa wanted German South West Africa, which the South Africans had captured on their own, episode 103. This was a significant claim. In terms of land area, South West Africa is larger than Britain or France. In the South Africans' minds, they had captured the territory, they understood the native Africans better than any League of Nations ever could, and geographically it seemed logical for them simply to annex the territory and make it the Union of South Africa's fifth province.

New Zealand wanted German Samoa, and the Australian prime minister, Billy Hughes, wanted those German Pacific territories south of the equator, the ones that hadn't already been promised to Japan. Principally, he wanted German New Guinea and the Bismarck Islands. Like the South Africans, Hughes believed that Australia had already won them by right of conquest and was not prepared to surrender them to anyone or anything. He argued they were essential to the defense of Australia. Woodrow Wilson asked Hughes whether Australia was prepared to stand against the whole world on this matter. Hughes replied, "That's about the size of it."

Colonel House and Canadian Prime Minister Robert Borden worked to smooth out these disputes, along with Jan Smuts and Lord Cecil. The latter two came up with a formula for how League of Nations mandates were to work. They set out three classes of mandate. Class A were territories that could be regarded as provisional nations, subject to the advice and assistance of the mandatory powers. The Ottoman territories of Palestine, Syria, and Mesopotamia fell into this category. France would take charge of Syria, while Britain would advise Palestine and Mesopotamia.

Class B territories were the former German colonies of Africa, except for South West Africa. These territories would be administered by the mandatory power, subject to few restrictions. Freedom of conscience and freedom of religion were to be respected, and the mandatory power could not construct military bases in the mandate. Togoland and Cameroun were mostly given to France, with some portions reserved for the British. German Ruanda and Urundi would be given to Belgium, and the former German East Africa, now Tanganyika, would go to Britain, apart from a small triangle of land that was turned over to Portugal.

The remaining German colonial holdings were Class C, described as "best administered under the laws of the Mandatory as integral portions of its territory." Under this category, Japan, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand all got the territories they coveted, under terms that were perhaps not quite annexation, but something pretty close, although the mandatory powers were still not permitted to construct military bases in these territories. The island of Nauru, home to valuable phosphate deposits, would be jointly administered by Australia, New Zealand, and the UK. Billy Hughes described the difference between a Class C mandate and annexation as like the difference between a 999-year lease and outright ownership.

In the final analysis, David Lloyd George proved to be right, in that the mandate concept was no serious problem for the imperial powers. They were required to submit annual reports to the League of Nations describing their efforts to develop the mandates, but these reports did not receive close scrutiny, and the mandatory powers went about governing the territories the way they saw fit.

While the Allies were working out their system of mandates, the Russian Communists were developing their own policy toward Africa, one that will prove to have a surprisingly large impact on the continent. This is because the Communists quickly adopted the view that Africans

were as much downtrodden workers, victims of rapacious capitalism, as were the workers of Europe. Communist doctrine held that the miners in Wales, the factory workers in Germany, and the dockworkers in the Congo were all equally victims of plutocratic oppression, and all had a shared destiny of socialist revolution. Only, Communist doctrine also held that the masses in Africa lacked the requisite class consciousness and were not yet ripe for revolution. So the African cause will get nothing but verbal support from the Communists, for now. Still, the Communists and their allies in the European socialist parties are the first Europeans making a forthright call for freedom and self-determination for Africans, a fact that the Africans will long remember.

The British MI-5 and the French security services also took note of Communist support for the African cause. Africans who embraced the Communist message were subject to scrutiny, and colonial officials customarily barred Africans from attending meetings of international organizations like the League Against Imperialism, which had been organized by Communist and socialist groups. Soon anytime Africans organized strikes or protested for greater self-rule, European police and intelligence agencies saw Communist conspiracies, whether there actually was one or not.

After the Paris Peace Conference finished its work, most of Africa would now be under French, British, or Belgian rule. Those three nations were among the most liberal in the world, and liberals could hope that now that the war had ended, the restoration of international trade and commerce would gradually draw Africans fully into the international community. Unfortunately for liberal hopes, for Africa, and for the world at large, the postwar economy is going to be sluggish. The world economy is not going to bounce back to its prewar prosperity and it won't work very well for Africans or for most of the world's peoples.

Africa in the 1920s and 1930s would endure many of the same economic shocks the rest of the world will encounter. Africans by and large did not suffer much from ups and downs in food prices, because Africans were still feeding themselves by traditional farming and were essentially self-sufficient in foodstuffs. But as elsewhere during this period, the old economic model, in which Africans export agricultural products and raw materials in exchange for manufactured goods broke down. Africa's principal exports were crops like palm oil, cocoa, and tobacco, and there was some mining, but the prices these commodities could fetch on the international market plummeted after the war. The rubber boom was long over. Ivory was still in demand, but elephants had been overhunted since the days of the Belle Époque. Now, colonial authorities had to begin limiting the number of tusks that could be taken. There was no prospect of ramping up ivory exports to make up for the losses in other markets.

These export losses led to declining wages for Africans working in export trade; many Africans found their pay cut in half. Colonial government tax revenues also plunged, and cash-poor Africans weren't much of a market for European manufacturers. When Africans did buy imported manufactured goods, they often chose goods from the United States, which was selling

better products at lower prices. Governments in Europe did their best to persuade, or compel, Africans to “buy Empire,” but there just wasn’t enough African money out there to buy everything Europe needed to sell.

This was just one aspect of a larger crisis in world trade. We’ll be talking a lot about world trade in future episodes, but I’m afraid we’ll have to stop there for today. Thank you for listening, and I’d also like to thank David for his donation, and thank you, Keith, for becoming a patron of the podcast. The generous support of David and Keith and people like them helps keep the podcast going.

Speaking of which, I got a very nice email from Liberated Syndication, our podcast hosting service, advising all of us podcasters that they expected to be able to keep their service up and running during the COVID-19 emergency. They also kindly expressed the hope that we would keep podcasting on a regular schedule, in the hope that consistent production of new episodes and our familiar voices would be reassuring during this anxious time. For myself, I intend to keep right on going. This podcast is a one-man operation, so it’s perfectly suited for social isolation. There’s no need for me to stop or cut back, and if keeping up the podcast does indeed comfort or reassure even a few of my listeners, that alone makes it worth doing.

I do have two concerns, though. The first is that my local library has closed for the emergency, making it more difficult for me to do my research. Thanks to the internet and electronic books, I have other options, and in the short run, my research and my writing go on. If the emergency continues for a long time, this could become a problem eventually, but for now we can only wait and see.

The second concern is that I myself might become ill, which could interrupt the podcast if I get sick enough, and I am at a higher risk because of my age. For now, my family and I are fine and all I can do is plug along and hope for the best. We’re isolating ourselves from contact with other people to the greatest degree possible. I hope you’re all doing the same, for your own sake as well as for your family, your neighbors, and for strangers too, especially those who are particularly vulnerable. Remember, they’re counting on you to help protect them.

And I hope you’ll join me next week on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we turn our attention to the Near East. Now that we’ve covered mandates, we’ll look at the Arab territories of the Ottoman Empire, and how the Allies will employ the new system of mandates—as well as the old system of “to the victor go the spoils”—to determine the future of the Arab lands. This is going to take three episodes, because we have a lot of territory to cover. We’re going to go from Syria to Arabia to Palestine to Iraq, along with side trips as far off as Egypt and Afghanistan. The Near East, beginning next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Before I go, I should take note of the fact that Britain securing a mandate over the former German East Africa finally completed the dream of British imperialists

of the past two generations: a continuous chain of British-controlled territories all the way from The Mediterranean coast to the Cape of Good Hope.

What was the benefit? Apart from the swelling of patriotic pride one might feel when looking at a map of Africa and taking note of that pleasant meandering strip of pink winding its way down the eastern part of the continent from Egypt to South Africa, one might also envision projects to develop communication and transportation links spanning the world's second-largest continent, a British Trans-Siberian Railway, if you will.

The first person to propose a trans-African railway was the editor of *The Daily Telegraph*, in 1874. This was the same newspaper that was funding Henry Morton Stanley's search for the source of the Congo River. At that time, interior colonial borders had not been set, so it was still possible to hope that Britain would gain the territorial rights that would be prerequisite to such a project.

But the dream of a trans-African railroad is most closely associated with the name of Cecil Rhodes, the quintessential 19th-century British imperialist. It was Rhodes who coined the memorably alliterative nickname "Cape to Cairo Railway" to describe the project. Rhodes had gotten rich from his African mining interests, and he dreamed of even greater profits from mines established far deeper into the interior of the continent, mines that would be serviced by this railway and its branches.

Rhodes was able to arrange construction of a rail line from South Africa as far north as Lake Tanganyika. In the north, the British had built rail lines as far south as Khartoum, so all this was a good beginning. Rhodes explored the idea of a trans-African telegraph line as a first step to a rail line. A trans-African telegraph line might profitably compete with underwater cables for communication to and from South Africa. He got as far as approval from Kaiser Wilhelm for his telegraph line to cross German territory in East Africa, but he never raised the funds to build the telegraph line, let alone the rail line, because by the late 19th century, the conflicts with the Boers had tarnished his reputation.

But after the Great War, Tanganyika became British controlled, which sparked new interest in this all-but-forgotten dream. What's more, the airplane was by now becoming established as a practical mode of transportation. As early as 1919, British exploring parties were already scouting locations to build a string of airfields down the continent that would make possible air travel between Cairo and Cape Town. With the aircraft of the time, that would take about a week of flying seven to eight hours per day, with nightly layovers.

This "air line" might be limited in value, but it could serve as a precursor to a rail line. By 1920, existing rail lines already traversed about two-thirds of the distance, down the Nile Valley and north to Lake Tanganyika. Only the middle third remained to be built. But it never was. There were too many technical issues, a lack of funding in an era when the British government was heavily in debt from the war, and, it has to be said, a lack of interest. There just weren't that

many passengers ready to buy tickets for a Cairo to Cape railroad line, and the Suez Canal made it just as economical to ship cargo by sea. And as we will learn as we move forward, twentieth-century Britain will find it has far more pressing uses for its money.

[music: Closing Theme]

© 2020 by Mark Painter. All rights reserved.