

# The Electronic Passport to Colonial Africa

## Prince Henry the Navigator

Prince Henry the Navigator seldom left Portugal, but he helped make it possible for the first Europeans to explore Africa. In Henry's time, the ocean was very dangerous and Africa was a mysterious place that seemed to contain endless miles of sand. Today we know this sand as the Sahara



Desert. Although it isn't endless, the Sahara is the largest desert in the world. On the other side of the Sahara were many great cultures that were isolated from the rest of the world.

Henry wanted to find a water route to India. The passage to India over land was long, slow, and dangerous. A ship could carry more goods to and from India than the largest caravans, but Europeans could only guess that sailors could circumnavigate, or go around, Africa.

Prince Henry helped unlock the secrets of Africa. Henry set up a school for sailors to learn the secrets of the ocean. He paid for many sailing expeditions out of the Portuguese treasury. Henry also employed cartographers who created the most sophisticated maps of their time. The maps made it possible for sailors to learn from previous expeditions.

Henry was a visionary. A visionary is someone who can imagine something that hasn't yet happened. Henry owned a globe when many people believed the world was flat. He knew that Africa was more than endless land, and that if his sailors could circumnavigate the continent; he would find a water route to India.

When Henry died in 1460, his sailors had only reached as far as the Canary Islands in West Africa. Twenty-eight years later,

Bartholomeu Dias proved that Africa could be circumnavigated when he reached the southern tip of the continent. This is now known as the "Cape of Good Hope." In 1499, Vasco da Gama was the first sailor to travel from Portugal to India. Just a few years earlier, Queen Isabella of Spain hired a sailor from Genoa to reach India by sailing west. It wasn't until years later that anyone understood that the "Indians" he encountered weren't from India after all.

## Maafa

Maafa is a Kiswahili term for "disaster" or "terrible occurrence." It is used to describe more than five hundred years of exploitation of Africa through slavery, colonialism, and imperialism. A colony is a settlement in one land supported by another land, and imperialism is the practice of building empires to support trade.

The barbarous "triangle trade" began shortly after Europeans began exploring the west coast of Africa. Ships leaving Europe first stopped in Africa where they traded weapons, ammunition, metal, liquor, and cloth for captives taken in wars or raids. The ships then traveled to America, where slaves were exchanged for sugar, rum, salt, and other island products. The ships completed the triangle loaded with products popular with the European people, and were ready to begin their journey again.

The Europeans explored the interior of Africa to expand trade. By the 1880s a "scramble for Africa" occurred. Five European powers--Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, and Italy colonized almost the entire continent by 1900. They exploited the great mineral wealth of Africa and sought to expand their borders by moving into the continent.

The colonial rulers were often cruel and had little regard



for the Africans. King Leopold II of Belgium obtained personal title to the Congo in central Africa. He forced the native people to work under cruel conditions in his rubber plants. Every village was required to donate four people a year to work for Leopold. Villagers who failed to complete their duties were flogged; others had their hands or their heads cut off. When the Belgian government learned what was happening, they took Leopold's grotesque colony from him and made reforms. France attempted to annex Algeria in the 1830s, but made little effort to understand the Muslim Berbers who lived there. The Algerians resisted, often violently. The French finally withdrew from the colony in 1962 after the Algerians voted 6,000,000 to 16,000 to ask the French to leave.

## The Missionaries

Africa has more than 250 million Christians, making Christianity the second most prevalent faith on the continent. Africans learned of the faith through devout Christians who traveled to Africa on a mission to teach their religion. The missionaries did more than share their faith; they also taught the African people modern science and medicine.

David Livingstone was the most famous African missionary. Livingstone first planned to become a medical missionary in China, but the Opium Wars made China a bad place for a westerner with good intentions. Livingstone turned instead to Africa and, after a four-month journey, landed in Cape Town, in modern South Africa, in 1841.

Livingstone treated the Africans with respect. He learned their languages and customs and explored a great portion of the continent. Livingstone believed the best way to share his faith with the Africans was to teach them about the outside world. Livingstone supported his missionary work by writing books about his travels.



David Livingstone

Livingstone was a very religious man who was appalled by the way the Dutch and Portuguese colonists treated the African people. His writings told the world about the slave trade, which Livingstone called "the open sore of Africa." When he died in 1873, most of his body was returned to England, but Livingstone's many friends buried his heart in Africa.

## Liberia

Liberia is a West African nation originally founded by freed slaves from the American South between 1820 and 1865. President James Monroe's administration furnished the funds for the freedmen and is honored by Liberia's capital city: Monrovia. Liberia is unique among African nations in that a colonial government has never controlled it.

The former slaves subjugated the indigenous Mande, Kwa, and Mel people in the same manner that white colonists later did. A ruling class of "Americo-Liberians" dominated the government, despite comprising less than three percent of the population. The last Americo-Liberian leader, William R. Tolbert, was the grandson of freed South American slaves. He was believed to have stolen about \$200 million dollars from the Liberian treasury.

Tolbert was killed in a 1980 coup led by Samuel K. Doe, who opposed the privilege of the Americo-Liberians. Doe brutally ruled Liberia for ten years until being killed by rebel forces. A civil war is a war within a nation, as opposed to a war with other nations. Liberia's civil war lasted from 1989 to 1997, when military strongman Charles Taylor sealed his control over the nation. Civil strife has destroyed much of Liberia's economy and caused business people to leave the nation. Liberia's recent history is a sad chapter for a nation whose founding was steeped in freedom.



Samuel K. Doe

## The End of African Colonialism

Colonialism ended surprisingly quickly and quietly in most of Africa after World War II. The British granted Gold Coast independence in 1957. The indigenous government of the former colony reached into Africa's glorious past to rename itself Ghana. These factors contributed to the end of colonialism in Africa:

- Mohandas Gandhi's successful campaign to end British colonial rule in India inspired many African leaders.
- The United States and the Soviet Union became military "superpower" nations after the war. Both sides sought to influence Africa by encouraging nationalist movements.
- The colonial governments educated an elite class of Africans in western universities. The educated Africans saw how the colonial rulers exploited their nations.
- Much of Europe's economy was destroyed in the Second World War, and the European governments could not afford to send armies to Africa to suppress nationalist movements.

## The Boers

In 1652, a group of people from the Netherlands settled in South Africa. The Netherlands are also known as Holland, and the people who live there are "Dutch." These settlers came to be known as Boers because Boer is the Dutch word for farmer.

The Boers thought that their new home was empty, but it was a homeland for nomadic Bantu people. Nomads travel from place to place in search of food. They need a large area to dwell in because they do not cultivate crops. The Bantus attempted to fight for their land, but their spears were no match for the Europeans' guns. The Boers enslaved many of the Bantus and forced them to work on the colonists' farms.

Great Britain assumed control of South Africa in 1795, after the Napoleonic Wars in Europe. The Dutch settlers were



**Rioting during the Apartheid era in South Africa**

unhappy with British rule and became even angrier when the British outlawed slavery in 1835. The British government paid owners for their slaves, but the Boers complained the payments were too small. The British outlawed slavery twenty-three years before the United States. Gold and diamonds were discovered in South Africa in 1867, causing a large number of people from Great Britain to move to the colony. Tensions between the parties led to the "Boer Wars" from 1899 to 1902, where the British soundly defeated the Boers.



**An anti-apartheid rally in South Africa**

## Apartheid

The British granted South Africa independence in 1910, but gave power only to white people. In 1948, the National Party gained office in an election where only white people were allowed to vote. The party began a policy of racial segregation known as apartheid, which means "apartness."

The Population Registration Act classified the people as Bantu (black Africans), coloured (people of mixed race), white (the descendants of the Boers and the British), and Asian (Indian and Pakistani immigrants).

The Group Areas Act established separate sections for each race. Members of other races were forbidden to live, work, or own land in areas belonging to other races.

Pass Laws required non-whites to carry a "pass" to prove they had permission to travel in white areas.

The Bantu Homelands Citizenship Act created several small "nations" within South Africa for black South Africans. All black South Africans, regardless of where they lived, were made citizens of the homelands and thus were excluded from participating in the governing of South Africa.

Other South African laws forbade most social contacts between races, authorized segregated public

facilities, established separate school systems with lower standards for non-whites, and restricted each race to certain jobs.

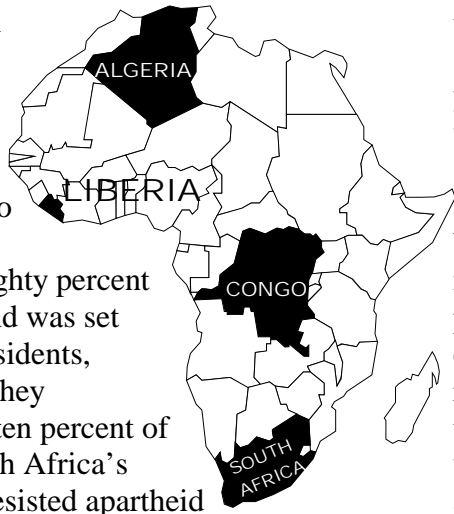
More than eighty percent of South Africa's land was set aside for its white residents, despite the fact that they comprised less than ten percent of the population. South Africa's black majority had resisted apartheid for many years. They began rioting in 1976, when the South African government tried to force black children in the Soweto township to learn Afrikaans, one of the languages of the white minority. The rioting continued for the next fourteen years until the apartheid laws were repealed.

The world community made South Africa a pariah because of its racial policies. The nation was forced to leave the Commonwealth, an alliance of former British colonies, in 1961. In 1985, both the United Kingdom and the United States imposed restrictions on trade.

White South African yielded to world pressure and domestic violence in 1990 by repealing most of the apartheid laws. Three years later, a new constitution gave people of all races the right to vote, and the following year South Africans elected a black man, Nelson Mandela, as president.

## Nelson Mandela

Nelson Mandela led the African National Congress, a black liberation group that opposed South Africa's white minority government and apartheid. Mandela was initially opposed to violence, but after a massacre of unarmed black South Africans in 1962, he began advocating acts of sabotage against



the government.

In 1962, Mandela began a twenty-seven year stay in prison. Most of his confinement was spent during hard labor at the notorious Robben Island maximum-security prison.

During his imprisonment, Mandela became a symbol of the anti-apartheid movement among South Africa's black population and among the international community that opposed apartheid. Mandela rejected several government offers to allow him to leave prison on the condition that he renounce violence. Mandela was released from prison and instantly became an international celebrity.

Mandela shared the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993 with F.W. deKlerk, South Africa's last white president. Their combined efforts ended apartheid and brought about a peaceful transition to nonracial democracy in South Africa.

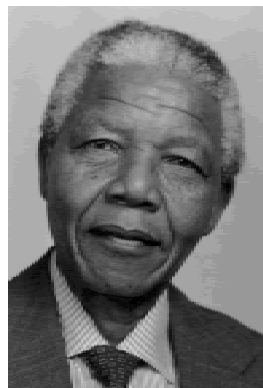
Three years after his release, South Africans of all races were allowed to vote for the first time in a national election. They selected Mandela as their president, giving him 62% of the vote. The same person who was once was a symbol of black resistance in South Africa later eventually because the nation's first black president.

Mandela's government was praised for its treatment of South Africa's white minorities. One white South African told our class in 1996 that "[Mandela] has treated us better than we treated him." In the interviews I conducted over the Internet in the late 1990s, no South African of any race had kind words for apartheid.

Mandela's government had its critics.

Crime increased during his term, but the violent war between the races ended. Every South African I spoke with said life is better today than it was before Mandela took power.

Mandela married for the third time on his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1998. A year later he retired from the presidency. The 400-year-old prison on Robben Island is now a museum.



**Nelson Mandela**