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Railways and Rubber: Colonial Infrastructure and the Making of Modern Central Africa

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Introduction

This book argues that infrastructure is never merely a set of pipes, rails, or wires. In Central Africa from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, railways, river ports, depots, and plantations became the scaffolding of a colonial economy centered on resource extraction, especially rubber. These projects reordered landscapes, labor, and law; they carved corridors through forests, reoriented towns toward distant metropoles, and knit peoples into new markets whose logics were defined elsewhere. The costs of this transformation—paid in coerced labor, dispossession, and ecological disruption—are inseparable from the profits it generated.

Railways were the most visible emblem of colonial ambition, but they were also regimes of work and systems of knowledge. Surveyors and engineers mapped mountains and swamps; administrators imposed taxes payable in labor or cash; recruiters moved bodies to construction camps and plantations; doctors and missionaries tried to stabilize a workforce amid disease, malnutrition, and high mortality. Along the tracks, new settlements emerged—railtowns where time was marked by whistles and schedules, and where commodity prices determined the rhythms of life. These corridors connected river steamers to ocean ports, translating local ecologies into global supply chains.

Rubber plantations—variously private, concessionary, and state-managed—functioned as infrastructure in their own right. Nurseries, roads, tramways, and tapping regimes were technologies that disciplined both trees and people. The violence of early “red rubber” extraction and the later institutionalization of plantation labor reveal shifting forms of coercion, from overt force to contractual compulsion, fines, and pass systems. Yet Africans were never only subjects of rule: they resisted, negotiated, and innovated—striking, fleeing, sabotaging, and repurposing colonial tools for their own ends. Women’s work in gardens, markets, and households underwrote men’s wage labor and sustained communities through scarcity.

Environmental change was not a side effect but a central outcome of these projects. Forest composition altered under pressure from tapping, clearing, and fire. Wildlife patterns shifted with the advance of lines and logging. Rivers were dredged, banks fortified, and wetlands drained to serve locomotives and barges. This book treats these landscapes as engineered ecologies, showing how infrastructures redistributed water, soils, pathogens, and plants. In doing so, it brings environmental history into direct conversation with economic history and the study of labor systems.

Methodologically, the chapters combine maps and archival case studies to reconstruct how decisions made in colonial offices traveled onto the ground—and how the ground

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talked back. Cartographic evidence allows us to trace the evolving geometry of lines, depots, and plantation blocks, while records from companies, public works departments, missions, and African petitioners reveal the social worlds that infrastructures created. Oral histories and court cases illuminate the everyday expertise of porters, carpenters, tappers, and technicians whose knowledge kept the system running.

The narrative is both chronological and thematic. Early chapters examine the scramble for territory, the granting of concessions, and the experimental years of construction and plantation science. Middle chapters analyze labor recruitment, health regimes, and the politics of time and movement across the network. Later chapters follow the shocks of world wars and the Great Depression, the rise of late-colonial developmentalism, and the entanglement of railways and plantations with anticolonial politics. The conclusion turns to the afterlives of these infrastructures, asking how nationalization, maintenance crises, and contemporary logistics corridors reproduce or challenge colonial patterns.

The legacies of this history are everywhere in the present. Development plans still follow the grooves of colonial tracks; commodity frontiers reappear where lines and ports already exist; conservation initiatives grapple with landscapes shaped by extraction; and memories of forced labor and displacement haunt communities along rail and river. By situating today’s debates over corridors, special economic zones, and sustainable supply chains within a longer history, the book provides a foundation for thinking more critically about what it means to build—and for whom.

Ultimately, Railways and Rubber invites readers to see infrastructures as social contracts written into earth and timber, steel and sap. They connect, but they also confine; they promise prosperity, but they distribute costs and benefits unevenly. Understanding how colonial projects in Central Africa made the modern requires following the tracks and tapping paths that bound people, places, and markets together—and attending to the voices and ecologies that strained against those bonds.

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CHAPTER ONE: Cartographies of Conquest: Mapping Central Africa

Before the railways could snake through the dense forests and across vast plains of Central Africa, the continent first had to be imagined, measured, and inscribed onto European maps. This wasn't a neutral academic exercise; it was an act of profound political and economic consequence, laying the groundwork for the colonial scramble and the subsequent imposition of infrastructure. European cartographers, explorers, and even missionaries, often unwittingly, became agents of empire, translating diverse landscapes and societies into grids and contours that served metropolitan ambitions. Their maps were not merely reflections of reality but powerful tools that shaped perceptions, justified territorial claims, and ultimately directed the flow of capital and labor into the heart of Africa.

The late 19th century witnessed an intensified European obsession with mapping the "dark continent." Earlier centuries had seen coastal charts and speculative interior outlines, often populated with mythical creatures and vast blank spaces. But as industrialization in Europe gained pace, the demand for raw materials—and new markets—grew exponentially. Central Africa, with its rumored mineral wealth and agricultural potential, became a focal point of this imperial gaze. The blank spaces on the map, once symbols of the unknown, now represented unclaimed resources and opportunities for expansion. Filling in these blanks became a competitive endeavor, driven by a mix of scientific curiosity, national pride, and naked economic self-interest.

Explorers like Henry Morton Stanley, with his dramatic expeditions across the Congo basin, were pivotal in this cartographic revolution. His accounts, often sensationalized and widely published, captivated European audiences and fueled the imperial imagination. Stanley's journeys, while celebrated as feats of endurance and discovery, were also meticulously documented surveys, recording river courses, elevation changes, and the locations of various communities. These observations were invaluable to cartographers back in Europe, allowing them to refine their maps with unprecedented detail. His explorations, for example, definitively traced the course of the Congo River, transforming a vague, speculative line on a map into a navigable artery, at least in theory, for future exploitation.

Beyond the celebrity explorers, a vast network of lesser-known figures contributed to the cartographic project. Missionaries, often among the first Europeans to penetrate remote regions, kept detailed journals and produced sketches of their surroundings. While their primary mission was spiritual, their observations on local geography, populations, and resources were eagerly consumed by colonial administrators and

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commercial enterprises. Traders, too, venturing deep into the interior for ivory, rubber, and other commodities, gathered intelligence about trade routes, river depths, and potential sites for trading posts. This disparate information, filtered through European lenses, slowly coalesced into more comprehensive and seemingly authoritative maps.

The very act of naming places on these maps was an exercise in colonial power. Indigenous names were often ignored, mispronounced, or replaced with European alternatives, erasing centuries of local history and knowledge. Rivers became "Stanley Falls," mountains were christened after European monarchs, and entire regions were re-labeled to reflect the claims of various European powers. This cartographic renaming wasn't simply a matter of convenience; it was a symbolic appropriation, a declaration of ownership that preceded and often justified physical occupation. The map, in this sense, became a performative document, asserting a new reality onto the landscape.

The Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 formalized this cartographic partitioning of Africa. European powers, gathered around tables in Berlin, carved up the continent with little regard for existing African political structures or ethnic boundaries. The lines drawn on these conference maps, often arbitrary and geometric, became the future borders of colonial territories. These lines, sometimes following rivers or mountain ranges, but often simply straight lines across vast, unknown expanses, were a testament to the abstract nature of this colonial project. The "paper partition," as it was sometimes called, created a geopolitical framework that would profoundly shape Central Africa for decades, if not centuries, to come.

These early maps, while increasingly detailed, were far from perfect. They often contained significant inaccuracies, reflecting the challenges of surveying vast, unfamiliar terrains with limited technology. Yet, their imperfections did not diminish their utility to colonial planners. Indeed, the very presence of detailed, if sometimes erroneous, maps imbued colonial claims with a sense of scientific authority and inevitability. They provided a visual framework for imagining grand schemes of resource extraction and infrastructure development, even if the practicalities of implementation were still largely unknown. The lines on the map became blueprints for future railways, plantations, and administrative centers.

The production of these maps also involved a significant, though often unacknowledged, element of African knowledge. Local guides, porters, and interpreters possessed invaluable understanding of the terrain, water sources, and local communities. Their expertise was crucial for the success of European expeditions, yet their contributions were rarely credited on the final maps. Instead, their knowledge was often extracted, standardized, and then re-presented as European "discovery." This appropriation of indigenous geographical knowledge was another subtle but significant aspect of the cartographic conquest, demonstrating how colonial power operated not just through force, but also through the assimilation and

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reinterpretation of local expertise.

As colonial rule solidified, the demand for even more precise maps intensified. These were no longer just maps for exploration and territorial claims; they were maps for administration, resource assessment, and, crucially, for engineering. Railway engineers, for example, required highly detailed topographical maps to plan routes, identify suitable bridge locations, and calculate gradients. Geologists used maps to pinpoint potential mineral deposits. Agricultural experts consulted maps to identify fertile lands suitable for plantations. The blank spaces of earlier maps were steadily filled in, replaced by increasingly granular data that served the specific needs of colonial economic development.

The mapping process itself became an infrastructure of empire. Survey teams, equipped with the latest instruments—theodolites, chronometers, and magnetic compasses—fanned out across the continent, meticulously recording every detail. This was often dangerous work, carried out in challenging environments, and it required not just technical skill but also a willingness to confront disease, hostile encounters, and formidable natural obstacles. The data they collected was then sent back to colonial offices in Europe, where skilled cartographers painstakingly translated raw field notes into polished, standardized maps. These maps, often beautifully rendered and printed, became powerful symbols of European control and progress.

These maps were not static documents; they were continually updated and revised as new information became available. Railway construction, in particular, generated a constant stream of new cartographic data. As lines were laid, bridges built, and tunnels dug, the landscape itself was being re-mapped and re-imagined. The railway lines, once speculative lines on a map, became tangible realities, carving new features onto the land and, in turn, demanding even more detailed mapping to serve their operational needs. The very act of building infrastructure refined and expanded the cartographic understanding of Central Africa.

The legacy of these colonial maps is profound and enduring. They continue to influence contemporary understandings of Central African geography, even as their inherent biases and historical context are increasingly recognized. The borders drawn in Berlin, initially lines on a map, became the foundations of modern nation-states, shaping their political economies and often contributing to ongoing conflicts. The resource maps, identifying areas rich in minerals or fertile land, continue to guide investment and development decisions, perpetuating patterns of extraction established during the colonial era. Even the placenames, imposed during the era of conquest, often persist, serving as silent reminders of a past dominated by European power.

In essence, the maps of Central Africa crafted during the late 19th and early 20th centuries were more than just geographical representations. They were ideological

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constructs, instruments of power that facilitated the transformation of a diverse continent into a colonial economic zone. They were the conceptual infrastructure upon which the physical infrastructure of railways and rubber plantations would be built. Understanding the story of colonial infrastructure in Central Africa, therefore, must begin with an appreciation of these cartographies of conquest—the lines drawn on paper that reshaped an entire continent. The act of mapping was the first, crucial step in making Central Africa legible and exploitable to the European imperial imagination.

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