Decades after achieving independence, why are Africans seeking asylum Europe. The answer is that ‘What goes around comes around’ and it’s not only about recent neglect, but centuries of abuse.

Although both southern hemispheres were aggressed by northern powers, their stories could not be more different. Latin America’s Indian populations fell prey to sixteenth century European explorers with modern arms, their Spanish and Portuguese descendants successfully challenged by Liberation movements. Africa, however, is separated from Europe by the much smaller Mediterranean, and when its extraordinary mineral wealth was discovered, in the nineteenth century, it became the victim of a competitive assault by half a dozen European powers, aided, in the 20th century by American intervention.

Northern Africa was first colonized by Phoenicians, who founded Carthage over a thousand years before the Romans invaded Cleopatra’s Egypt. In the seventh century AD, following the death of the Prophet, Arabs created powerful Muslim dynasties along the Mediterranean coast, which in turn colonized large areas of the interior. Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco are known today by the collective noun ‘Maghreb’, while neighboring Libya was occupied by Italy during the first half of the twentieth century.

Libya’s two colonies, Tripolitania and Cyrenaica were unified in 1947, but are currently at war again, following the
2011 assassination by the West of its previous leader, Muammar Ghaddafi who revolutionized the country from 1969. Turkey, Russia and Germany are trying to mediate the conflict between the legal government and rebel forces in the East, while NATO, though claiming it needs a new job, is not interested in helping.

Meanwhile, the Sahel region of north central Africa is fighting widespread terrorism, motivating French President Emanuel Macron to hold a summit with the presidents of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. He set up a joint military command that is reminiscent of the US heading NATO and encouraged the region’s rulers to set up a cooperative agenda. (France has maintained a military force in Africa since colonial days, and ensures that the ‘African Franc’ remains steady.)

Africa was scarcely known to the outside world until Marco Polo brought back spices from the Orient that were tasty and also exhibited medicinal qualities, motivating Europeans to search for a way to get to them without traveling over dirt roads. Until then, their explorers had been content to sail along the Atlantic coast; but in 1499, the Portuguese Vasco da Gamma persevered all the way south to what became The Cape of Good Hope, connecting the Atlantic to the Indian ocean.

In the nineteenth century the Muslim North continued under French domination, while the southernmost areas were disputed between the British and Dutch, and Britain, France and the Kaiser’s Germany competed to exploit the vast central area, at first under the cloak of religion (turning ‘savages’ into good — and obedient — Christians), then under that of ‘development’, backing rival local leaders.

Even Portugal, today a relatively quiet country, and tiny Belgium with three competing languages, were major players in Africa from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. While mapping the continent’s waterways, their explorers stumbled upon huge gold and diamond mines, causing Belgian’s King Leopold to declare that he would get “a piece of the pie”. These events initiated centuries of European domination that lasted until the liberation movements of the twentieth century. Millions of black people would be slaughtered in the white man’s lust for riches, an example among many being the cutting off of hands for stealing rubber or elephant tusks. In the twentieth century, national leaders chosen by occupying powers failed to reverse the treatment of their people, giving rise to grassroots movements that not only shaped the destiny of the continent, but contributed powerfully to the rise of a major world movement. In 1955, leaders of newly independent African and Asian countries including Ghanian President Kwame Nkrumah, Egypt’s Nasser, India’s Nehru, Yugoslavia’s Tito, and Patrice Lumumba, the charismatic leader of the Congo, organized the Third World’s first major event, the Bandung Conference, in Indonesia. Three years later, Lumumba was instrumental in organizing the first Pan African Congress, laying the foundations for the African Union of fifty-four sovereign states that would be founded in 1999. In 1961, with the support of the Soviet Union, Lumumba was a key figure in moving from the Bandung Conference to the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) which declined to take sides in the Cold War. Having become a veritable Third World icon, he was assassinated by the West that same year.

Third world independence movements continued to grow throughout the sixties, and yet, as late as 1982, Africa was not really free. European and American colonizers had seized everything of value. As an example of the way in which they prolonged their power, Sese Seko Mobuto was chosen by the French company Bechtel’s so-called Friends of the Congo to lead the number one producer of cobalt, a key element in electronic devices. Today, the Democratic Republic of Congo owns over 50% of the world’s cobalt, over which local groups now fight.

However, the schools and hospitals that replaced traditional culture and modes of life with modern methods and laws were unable to meet the aspirations they created. Continent-wide corruption and poor governance have resulted in a deficit of infrastructure, poor resource usage, wars and unending conflicts, not to mention punitive World Bank and IMF policies that limit employment opportunities.

Like the global North, Africa woke up to find that modern economies do not create enough jobs to ensure the well-being of the larger populations that modernity brings forth. The total population of the continent doubled between 1800 and 1950, and almost tripled to 1.2 billion people from 477 million in 1980. The 12 million Africans born in 1955 could only expect to live to about 37, while the 42 million born this year can expect to reach 60. By 2050 the population will double again, to 2.4 million, as African women bear twice as many children as the world average. (Aside from unreliable supplies of contraceptives in many countries, uneducated girls and women are still subject to domineering paternalistic cultures and religious prohibitions.)

The question is whether as part of its own declaration of independence from Washington, Europe will transform its colonial attitude into one that encourages the new generation of Africans to take their destiny into their own hands.
instead of fleeing to Europe. The latest report from the Brookings Institute suggests that international business interests plan to maintain their hold:

“Collective action among African and global policymakers (sic) to improve the livelihoods of all under the blueprint of the Sustainable Development Goals and the African Union’s Agenda 2063 is representative of the shared energy and excitement around Africa’s potential. With business environments improving, regional integration centered around the African Continental Free Trade Agreement progressing, and the transformational technologies of Fourth Industrial Revolution spreading, never before has the region been better primed for trade, investment, and mutually beneficial partnerships.”

Indeed, African cities are still in the bottom half of the cost of living index list, the most expensive being Pretoria at no. 252.

Deena Stryker is a US-born international expert, author and journalist that lived in Eastern and Western Europe and has been writing about the big picture for 50 years. Over the years she penned a number of books, including Russia’s Americans. Her essays can also be found at Otherjones. Especially for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.