

Questioning Decolonization

Taking Down the Statues

In 2015, a group of students in South Africa began to protest against a statue. Specifically, students at the University of Cape Town began to call for the removal of a statue of Cecil Rhodes, once one of the richest people in the world and a proponent of British imperial rule over Africa. They thought his statue was an inappropriate centerpiece for a university that now served mainly African students, whom Rhodes would have seen as people suitable merely for labor to serve the British Empire.

Using the hashtag #RhodesMust Fall, this movement went after the obvious symbols of colonial rule. After the statue came down, however, the students didn't stop. They called for more racial equity in the hiring of their professors. They called for free education for people who were the children and grandchildren of victims of colonialism. They even challenged the disciplinary framework of the sciences, social sciences, and humanities as racist legacies of colonialism. They argued that although South Africa had achieved independence and even democratic rule decades before, it remained a deeply colonized society.

Were they right? Does colonialism still linger in South Africa? Does it linger in your community? After all, in recent years similar calls to remove statues of slave traders, slave owners, supporters of colonialism, and white supremacists have moved students to protest across the United States, in Britain, New Zealand, Belgium, India, France, the Caribbean – and maybe even in your hometown! Debates about such statues are deeply intertwined with the topic of decolonization.



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INTRODUCTION

ABOUT THE MODULE

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This module introduces you to decolonization as both a historical event having to do with political structures and a broader process encompassing economics, society, and culture.

As an event, decolonization describes the end of colonial rule around the world. One could argue that decolonization happens again and again in history as empires lose territory – whether the Romans in Britain in the 5th century, or the French in Algeria in the 1960s. But we generally use the term to describe the overthrow of European (and Japanese and US) formal rule in colonies around the world in the period 1945 - 1990 and the moment those colonies gained their political independence.

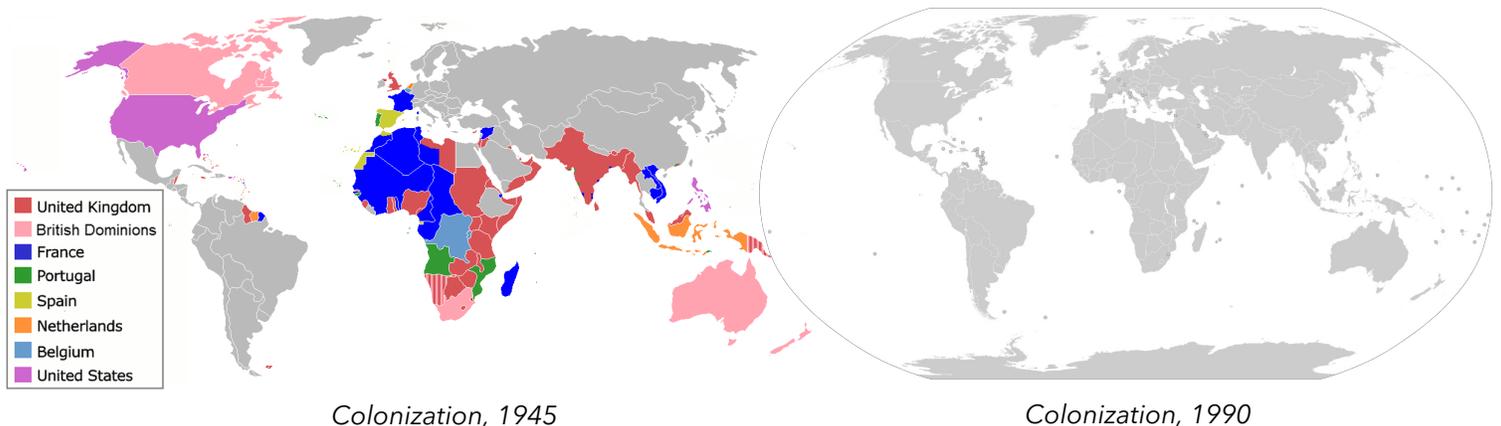
In addition to examining the events of decolonization, however, this unit will also aim to explore decolonization as a process, in which the elements of colonialism are brought to an end. This includes formal political rule, but also cultural, economic, and social elements that may take longer to transform. It also means consider the means by which people have opposed, reduced, or eliminated the institutions of colonialism.

Key Terms:

Decolonization

Colonialism

TWO MAPS MARKING A TRANSITION





About the Module

This module poses three questions. Two historical problems are specifically aimed at you, the student:

- Historical problem 1: How and why did widespread political decolonization occur between about 1945 - 1990?
- Historical problem 2: Did colonialism end, or does it still survive in the world today?

A third problem is more aimed at your instructor, but you should know about it:

- Pedagogical problem: How do students learn to make history usable for orienting themselves within the present?

Throughout this module, you will work with your instructor to examine the modern events and processes of decolonization and answer these questions.

Students protest South African Apartheid at Duke University, 1985

In the first lesson, we will aim to define exactly what colonialism is. Then using primary sources, we will try to understand why most of the world's colonies became independent in a relatively short time in the mid-20th century, and search for evidence for the causes of political decolonization. At the end of the module, we will use secondary sources to explore the question of what was really 'decolonized' in this period and whether further colonization needs to happen. Our final assignment for the module will also provide us with an opportunity to investigate whether colonialism remains potent today and what work remains to be done.

Removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes from the campus of the University of Cape Town, 9 April 2015



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