Why did Decolonization Happen?

It is indisputable that there was a change between 1945 and 1975. In 1945, formal colonies covered much of the world's surface. By 1975, almost none of those formal colonies existed anymore, and in their place were more than eighty independent states.

How did this change happen? Historians, political scientists, sociologists, and other scholars have been debating this question for decades – they even argued about it while it was still going on. There is probably no single answer. But it is useful to discuss some of the theories, so that you can look at the evidence and reach usable conclusions yourself.

We can break down this debate along several lines. One way of looking at decolonization is to focus on a range of explanations that are divided the way we typically divide up causation: that decolonization was a result of economic factors, political transformation, or cultural change.

Another way of debating the causes of decolonization is to try to understand causation along two related axes. First, whether decolonization was primarily a result of structural change, or the result of agency of people. Structural change means transformations in the actual context of the era that had made colonialism possible and sustained it. When these contextual factors changed, colonialism became unsustainable. Agency means that decolonization was largely a result of the actions and activities of people who wanted to end colonialism. In this case, it was the actions and efforts of active anti-colonial resistance. A similar way of looking at this question is at what scale decolonization should be studied. Was it largely a result of changes at a global scale, or should we look for answers within each colony? Did the world change and make colonies impossible? Or did those in the colonies themselves resist and break away from imperial rule?

WHY DID DECOLONIZATION HAPPEN?

THE SECOND WORLD WAR

THE COLD WAR

CONTRADICTIONS WITHIN COLONIALISM

EUROPEAN PUBLIC OPINION

EUROPEAN ECONOMIES

THE UNITED NATIONS

THE DEMONSTRATION EFFECT

NATIONALISM

CONCLUSION

Below, we will look at a series of explanations that have been presented for decolonization in the mid-20th century. You can then use these as a guide for reading the primary sources provided for you, as you look for evidence for the causes of decolonization.

The Second World War

Many historians suggest that the Second World War was a watershed moment that created the context for decolonization as a historical event. This argument seems convincing because political decolonization wasn't very common before World War II, and it happened rapidly almost everywhere after the end of that conflict.

The Second World War clearly had a significant impact on the ability of imperial powers to rule their colonies for a variety of reasons:

1) The war drained the empires of the so-called 'thin white line' of European administrators living in the colonies who generally administered 'indirect rule'. Their numbers were dramatically reduced during the war years in order to maintain the war effort.

2) In some ways, World War II also broke the hierarchy of white rule. For pragmatic reasons, Britain and France in particular sent colonial soldiers of color to fight other white people both in Europe and in the colonies. In the 1930s at least, this had been largely inconceivable.

Key Terms:

Decolonization

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Anti-Colonialism

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World War II

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The Cold War

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United Nations

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Demonstration Effect

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Nationalism

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Pan Africanism and Pan Islam

Senegalese Tirailleurs serve alongside white French Soldiers during World War II, c 1940

3) The war also broke the myth of the 'civilizing mission' in many ways. In particular, during the war the colonizers frequently promised rewards such as localized self-rule or benefits to colonial subjects who fought for them, and none of these were ultimately delivered.

4) The war also drained European states of resources and left their economies and infrastructure in ruins. When war ended and reconstruction began, colonies were far down on the priority list!

5) Finally, the war broke the imperial economic system – the exploitation of workers in the colonies increased in this period, but the finished products that should have been shipped to the colonies dried up. This had two results: it caused great deprivation and suffering in some colonies, but it also inspired colonial subjects to starti up cottage industries to create for themselves goods that they hadn't produced for many decades.

Soldiers of the King's African Rifles in Burma. Some colonial soldiers served in a dozen countries during the war, while colonies themselves were treated as economic assets.

Extent of Japanese imperial expansion from 1870 through World War II

Another way in which the Second World War arguably contributed to decolonization was by immediately fracturing formal imperial formal rule in some regions – either temporarily or, in a few cases permanently.

Japan's conquest of British, French, Dutch, and American colonies in Southeast Asia and the Philippines during the war not only proved that 'white superiority' was a myth, it literally broke many of the prior institutions of colonial rule – even if Japan itself was an imperial power. When Italy was defeated at the end of the war, it lost control over its colonies in North and East Africa, colonies that would henceforth become independent states, even as their neighbors remained under British or French rule. While France ended up on the winning side of World War II, it was temporarily defeated in 1940, economically devastated, and unable to reassert control in the eastern Mediterranean, in particular in Syria.

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But, we should be cautious about overemphasizing the Second World War as the cause of decolonization. None of the victorious states gave up their colonies willingly at this stage. Indeed, in 1945 France, Britain, the Netherlands, and Belgium planned to intensify colonial activity in order to pay their way out of the war. Furthermore, while some states did gain independence shortly after the war, the major waves of decolonization wouldn't unfold for some years..

Soviet-era poster, "Russia and India – Brothers!", 1962

The Cold War

The two superpowers that emerged from the Second World War, the United States and the Soviet Union, were both at least partly anti-colonial (although it could be argued that each also had its own form of empire), and generally had little sympathy for the older imperial powers retaining political and economic control over their colonies. The Soviet Union supported anti-colonial movements as one way to attack their ideological enemies in the West – particularly France and Britain. Meanwhile, the United States hoped that colonies would become independent states open to American companies. In this context, the rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States, and their search for global allies and partners provided an opportunity for anti-colonial leaders themselves to use both superpowers to achieve independence.

In addition, many students from colonies went to study in Soviet-allied Warsaw Pact countries, Cuba, and China, where they were taught Marxist anti-colonialism. African and Asian students also traveled for study in Europe and the US like never before. There, they were exposed to Marxist ideas as well, but of course also to liberal anti-colonialism and the writings of Enlightenment-era philosophers on topics like freedom and political representation. In both cases, these students actively translated these writings into multiple languages for dissemination back in the colonies.

Perhaps most important, students from colonies all over the world who traveled for study during the Cold War also became connected to each other and came to see their anti-colonial struggles as part of a shared cause!

President of Ghana Kwame Nkrumah meets with US President John F. Kennedy, 1961

Political cartoon of England as an imperial octopus, reaching for regions and colonies overseas, 1888.

Contradictions within Colonialism

Both as a result of their studies, their connections to one another, and, of course, their own experiences, many anti-colonial activists identified contradictions within colonialism. Often, western colonizers expressed values of political equality, freedom of expression, economic liberalism, and respect for basic civic rights, even as they continued to maintain rule over colonies. When these principles did not reflect their experiences as colonial subjects, colonized people came to see the inherent contradictions in how so many Europeans and Americans treated them.

European Public Opinion

Exposing those contradictions to large populations proved a powerful tool to build opposition to colonialism. In many cases, these anti-colonial leaders even learned to use public opinion in Europe itself against empire. To do so, they took advantage of the new technologies of the postwar world. Using radio, which was popular in Europe from the 1920s on, and then television in the 1940s they brought information about the rest of the world to listeners and viewers in Europe. As a result, European populations were increasingly exposed to events in the colonies and the voices of the colonized.

Members of the Community of the Arch of Lanza del Vasto fast against the use of torture by French troops during the Algerian War of Independence, 1957.

European Economies

At the same time, Europeans also began to see their economic future as tied more to other places in Europe than to their empires. The formation of the European Economic Community with the Treaty of Rome in 1957 tied European economies increasingly to each other. As a result of this more intense integration of European economies, economic ties to colonies were becoming less important to Europeans than they had been before the war.

The United Nations General Assembly in New York, 1946 and the UN Emblem

The United Nations

Meanwhile, anti-colonial leaders found new forums to present and discuss their views in the new international political establishment that followed the war. Visible international politics, and in particular the United Nations, provided a site for anti-colonial states and movements to make their case known.

Early on, powerful supporters of decolonization included the governments of China (especially after Communist forces took over in 1949 after a civil war there), India, Egypt, and Ghana. These states, which had essentially won their own struggles for self-rule, provided concrete support and access to the United Nations for others.

They also helped to organize their own forums, including the Bandung Conference in Indonesia in 1955, and alliances and leagues of mutual support like the Non-Aligned Movement, an international organization of countries who did not want to align with the United States (and its NATO allies) or the Soviet Union and (its Warsaw Pact allies). By 1960, the large number of previous colonies represented in the UN managed to even get a formal statement in support of decolonization passed by the General Assembly.

Did you know?

The Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and People's (General Assembly Resolution 1514) unanimously affirmed the UN's support for the independence of colonies, and even characterized colonialism as a violation of human rights.

Read the Declaration here and explore their audiovisual archive!

The Demonstration Effect

Perhaps the most important factor on the global scale, however, was the fact that each colony that became independent proved to other colonies that it could be done. This 'demonstration effect' was particularly powerful to near neighboring colonies. For instance, within three years, Ghana's successful achievement of independence in 1957 catalyzed decolonization for almost all of West Africa.

But the demonstration effect was true even for distant populations. The greatest example of this is Dien Bien Phu, a battle in which anti-colonial Viet Minh forces defeated French colonial forces in rural, mountainous northern Vietnam in 1954. This stunning victory forced the French to pull out of Indochina entirely and sent shockwaves around the colonized world, inspiring anti-colonialist individuals and movements, especially in other French colonies.

THẮNG

CHIẾN DỊCH ĐIỆN BIÊN PHỦ VĨ ĐẠI ĐÃ TOÀN THẮNG!

Explore more..

The Viet Minh victory at Điện Biên Phủ in 1954 signaled the end of French Colonial rule in Indochina, and inspired resistance movements around the world.

- [Hear the stories of two veterans of the battle.](#)

Viet Minh troops wave the Vietnamese flag after victory, 1954

But, Nationalism...

However, despite all of these global trends, it is possible to argue that colonies only became independent by their own efforts. In other words, decolonization was a result of local trends and local agency as well as global trends and structural changes.

Street banner in Hanoi calling for independence, 1945

Procession in Bangalore by the Indian National Congress during the Quit India Movement for independence

"Local agency" in the face of colonialism was a story as old as the colony. Resistance to colonialism began with resistance to conquest and annexation, and continued throughout the colonial era in a variety of ways, whether in organized groups or, more often, individually. Often, this resistance is difficult to see in the historical record. It took the form of sabotage and fighting against colonial officials, perhaps, but more often misdirection of officials, falsifying records, or even just avoiding work or working slowly. This kind of resistance could have a potent impact, but it could not overthrow colonialism, which was specifically designed to divide and separate people so that they couldn't work together. In order to actually overthrow colonialism, the people of a colony had to unite. And in the post-war era, they found the tool to do so in the form of nationalism.

Anti-colonial nationalism was the flagship vehicle for decolonization. This was true despite the many alternatives such as pan- movements and international religious ties that spanned across colonies and ethnic divisions within colonies. Nationalism, of course demands that:

- A community of people see themselves as a single nation (and feel connected to one another on some basis),
- And, those people aspire that their nation be self-governing.

Ghana's 50th Independence Anniversary parade, 2007

Indian National Congress marches in New Delhi, 1937

Nationalism is also almost always the project of a cadre, a group of people who create the message of the nation and share that message with other people. In the case of colonialism, nationalist cadres often emerged from the people who served the colonial state through indirect rule. Remember that under indirect rule, colonialism only worked because it relied on a group of locals to serve as clerks, soldiers, and other government workers. These people, because they worked for or with the colonial state, also knew how it worked, and how to capture or overthrow it. They just had to convince the majority of the population that they shared a common fate as a nation.

But first anti-colonial leaders had to unite those who had been divided by colonialism. To do this, they could stress the shared oppression at the hands of the colonizers. But nationalism was most powerful when it could offer a positive vision for what the nation was, and not just a negative vision of what it was not. A memory, sometimes mythologized, of a common past offered one way to unite people. A shared language, belief system, or cultural tradition worked too. National identity could find expression in shared clothing or other symbols well. What was critical is that it felt authentic.

The 1940s and 1950s and 1960s were in many ways very much a story of anti-colonial nationalist leaders trying to convince the people of the colony that they should unite and work together to overthrow colonial rule because they shared a fate as a nation. Once they did that, they were usually successful!

Did you know:

1960 is sometimes referred to as the "Year of Africa." 17 countries gained their independence that year, and 31 more by the decade's end!

- Learn more about the international politics, culture, and connections that marked this transformative period.

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Of course, nationalism wasn't always successful in binding colonized people together. Sometimes, internal divisions divided populations. In colonial India, for instance, considerable tension arose between the Hindu majority and the Muslim minority. When the colony gained independence, Pakistan formed as a state specifically designed for Muslims, separate from the secular state of India. Racial divisions could also divide colonized and formally colonized people as well. Such was the case in Rwanda and Burundi, where people mostly understood the Hutu and Tutsis as coming from different races. As a result, the politics of decolonization there were deeply shaped by these divisions. Elsewhere, ethnic, and linguistic divisions – which often had been created or exacerbated by colonizers – also operated in tension with a sense of nation unity. In Kenya, ethnic loyalties among the Kikuyu, Kalenjin, Luo, and Kamba peoples, for instance, posed a challenge to building a shared national identity.

In addition, regional and other affiliations, like Pan-African, Pan-Islam, Pan-Asian and Black Power movements could transcend, augment, or conflict with nationalisms. In some cases, these regional affiliations nations could operate in tension with one another. Such was the case with Pan-African and Pan-Islamic movements in Algeria, for instance. The former pushed toward alliances south of the Sahara Desert with fellow Africans, while the latter encourage Muslims to seek alliances with coreligionists in the Middle East and Asia.

But, by serving as a unifying force for colonial populations, nationalism generally provided the key tool that helped anti-colonial activists overthrow colonialism.

Conclusion

How did local factors and nationalist movements interact with global trends to bring about decolonization globally during this period? How did these factors lead to different experiences and outcomes in different regions? Take a look at the attached primary sources and you will find some answers to these questions. Or maybe do some research on a colony of your choice, and how it became independent. This kind of work will lead you to a deeper understanding not only of this process, but also how it made the modern world. When you're done, we can discuss your findings, and then talk about what decolonization *did not* change!

Patrice Lumumba, first Prime Minister of the
Democratic Republic of the Congo, 1960
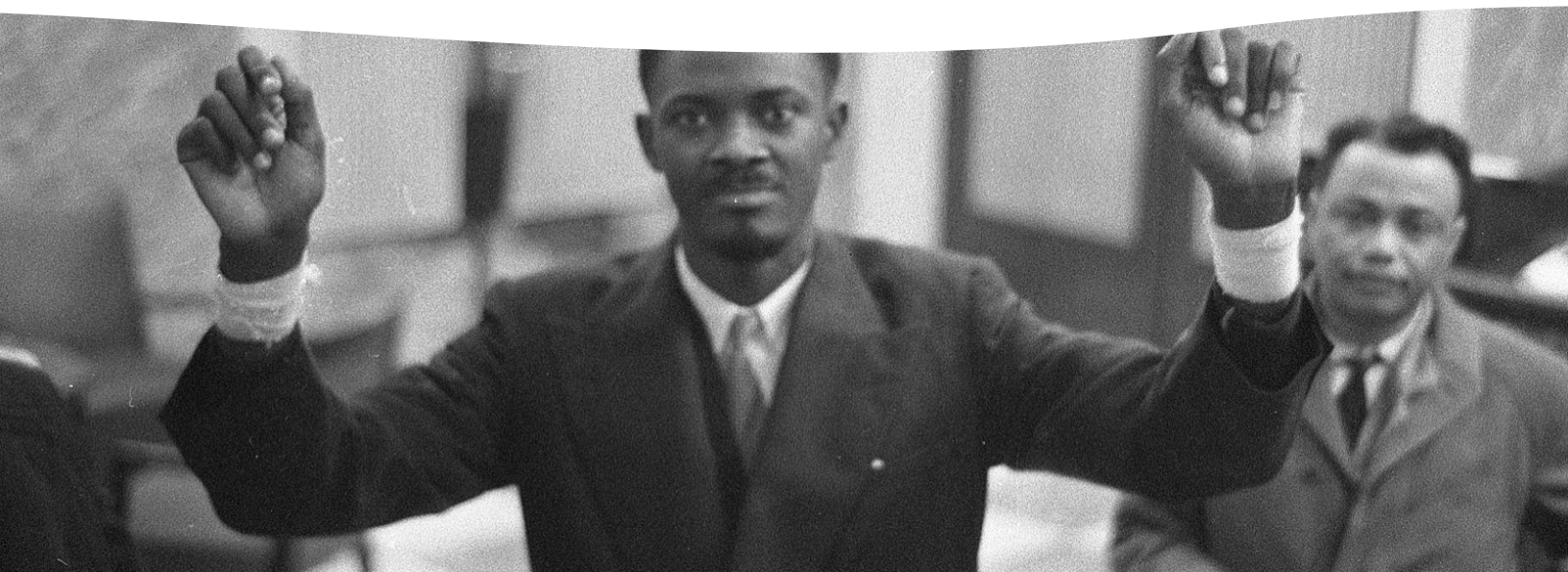
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