# End of Old Regimes

By Trevor Getz

What's almost as complex and significant as colonization? Decolonization, that's what. After the devastation of the Second World War, people in the colonies began asking things like, "So, you're in charge of me... why?"

What Was 'Decolonization'?

We already know that something big happened between about 1948 and the 1980s—the big empires of the world were pretty much taken apart. If you look at these two maps, the story comes through loud and clear:
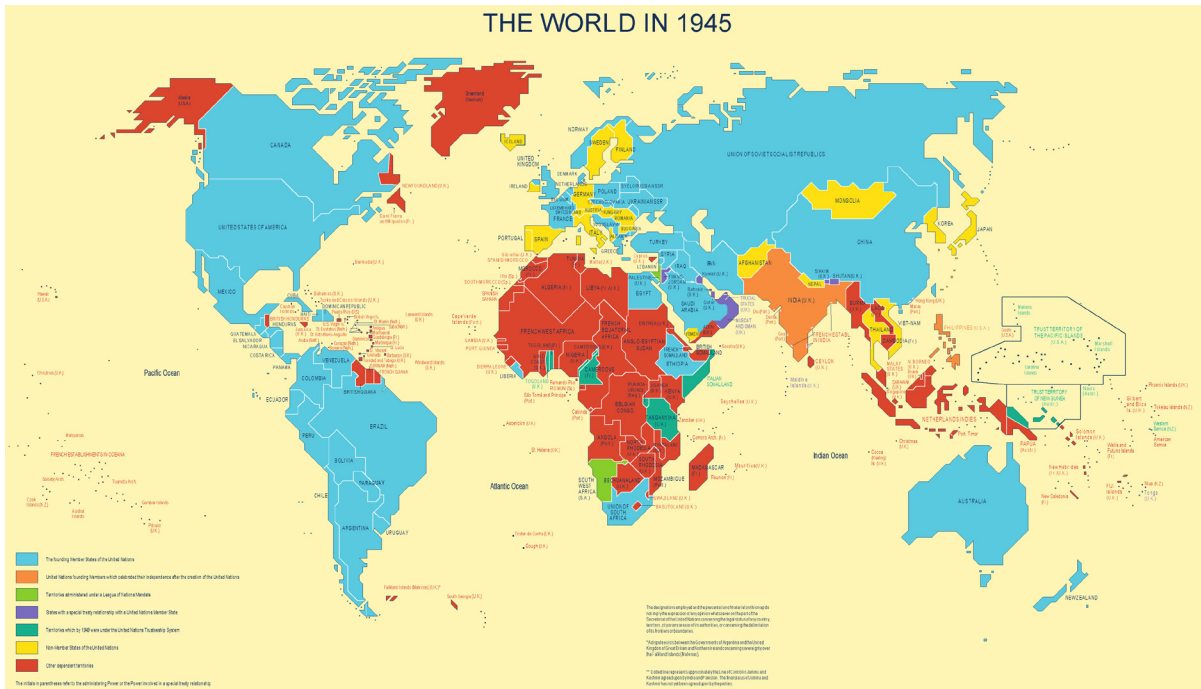
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Maps from the United Nations.

These maps only show the formal colonies of empires in colors other than blue. In 1945 they are all over the place, covering much of the landmass and population of the world. In the contemporary map, all that is left are some islands in the Caribbean, Pacific, and Atlantic and a few tiny bits of land, much of it only very sparsely inhabited. What happened? Where did all the colonies go? They are now sovereign, self-ruling countries.

Historians often call the historical event by which colonies gained their independence *decolonization*. But decolonization also refers to a more complex idea—that of removing all of the legacies of colonialism. So, we refer to the political transformation shown in these maps more specifically as "the end of empires". This article asks the question: why did empires collapse so thoroughly in the period after the Second World War? We'll explore three sets of theories—two having to do with global changes and one emphasizing local events within the colonies.

The impact of the Second World War

One of the global theories about why decolonization happened when it happened links to the Second World War. In a few cases, the events of the war directly led to decolonization. In Asia, the Japanese tried hard to stir up sentiment against their European enemies. In some cases, Japanese invasions of European colonies helped launch anti-colonial movements against European empires in Asia.

A Japanese leaflet urging Indian subjects of the British Empire to rise up against Britain during the Second World War. Public domain.

The massive destruction and disruption caused by this global conflict weakened the ability of the big empires to hold on to their territories. After the war, some imperial powers were defeated permanently, like—Italy and Japan. Others suffered temporary defeat, like France, the Netherlands and Belgium, which meant they could not adequately govern their colonies for a while. The war also drained manpower from even the giant British empire. The war broke down the economic system of empires and made people in the colonies even more resistant to foreign rule.

Perhaps most importantly, many, many people from the colonies fought in the war as soldiers, sailors, and airmen, while others supported the war effort as laborers and merchant mariners. Some fought because they believed that the Axis powers were dangerous, but most fought because they were promised something in return. Promises like more political rights after the war, pensions, housing allowances, and other financial goods were dangled as prizes. In many cases, the empires never planned to actually give them what they were promised, but these veterans ended the war expecting to get repaid. So they decided the prize they would take—in spite of it not being offered—was independence.

Global transformation

Veterans returning to the colonies with new leadership skills and anti-colonial feelings was one important outcome of Second World War that contributed to decolonization. The Cold War was another. Both the United States and the Soviet Union were generally happy to see an end to European overseas empires. The Soviet Union saw anti-colonial movements as one way to attack their ideological enemies in the West. The United States hoped that colonies would become independent states open to American companies. In this context, anti-colonial leaders used both the Soviet Union and the United States to achieve independence. In particular, many actively sought to study in Warsaw Pact[1] countries and other communist states like Cuba and China, where they were taught Marxist anti-colonialism. Others studied in the United States, where they read the Enlightenment thinkers on freedom and were taught free-market economics.

These anti-colonial leaders also learned to influence public opinion in Europe against European empires. Like our world today, this was an era of rapidly changing technology. Radio and then television brought world events to the public as never before. Some anti-colonial leaders used the new media to take their case for independence directly to the public in Britain, France, and beyond!

The newly created United Nations served as an even more powerful forum for anti-colonial leaders to spread messages and coordinate internationally. Early, powerful supporters of decolonization included China (especially after communist forces came to power), India, Egypt, and Ghana. These states, which had essentially won their own struggles for self-rule, provided concrete support for others in the United Nations.
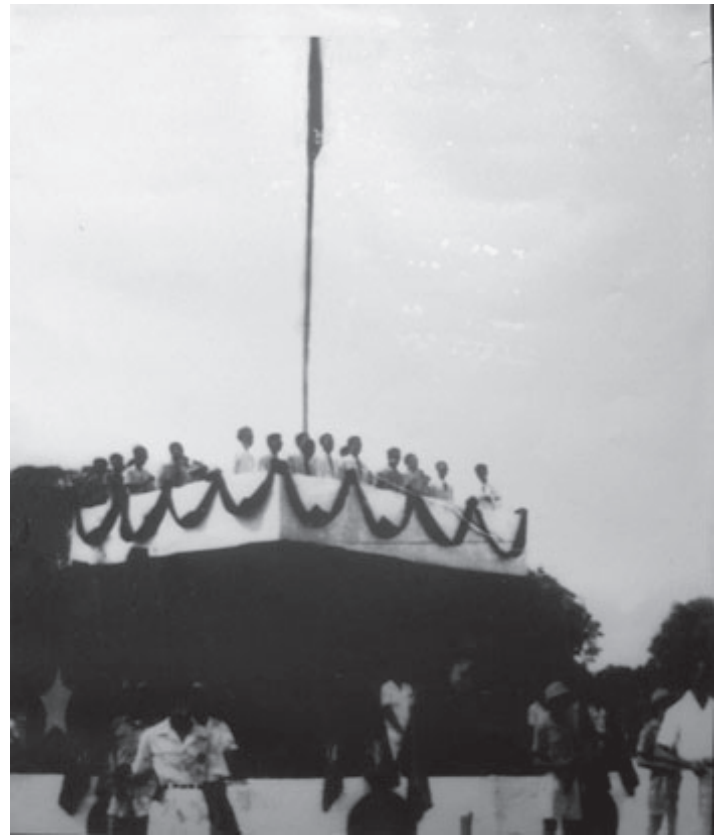
Ho Chi Minh declares independence for Vietnam, 1945. The declaration of independence was inspired by U.S. and French documents, and was meant partly to speak to the public in these countries. It did not succeed in swaying public opinion in the US and France, but it was an example of anti-colonial leaders' attempts to speak to the public in powerful countries. By BnBPhm, CC BY-SA 3.0.

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1 The Warsaw Pact was a treaty that lasted from 1955 to 1991. It formed an alliance of several eastern European countries with communist governments. This was in response NATO (North American Treaty Organization, signed in 1949) which was an alliance of non-communist nations.

Most important, however, was the fact that each time a colony became independent, other colonies saw proof that it could be done. This demonstration effect was particularly powerful if it was your neighbor who had just won freedom. For example, Ghana's successful achievement of independence in 1957 catalyzed decolonization within three years for almost all of West Africa. But distant populations also gained inspiration. The greatest example of this was the 1954 battle of Dien Bien Phu, a VietMinh[2] victory over French forces in rural, mountainous northern Vietnam. Anti-colonial leaders in other French colonies were inspired by this battle. In fact, the leaders of the independence movement in French Algeria quickly asked to meet with the Vietnamese General who had won at Dien Bien Phu.

Nationalism

Despite all of these global trends, we can argue that colonies only became independent by their own efforts. The fact is, in order to overthrow colonialism, the people of a colony had to unite around their cause. But in most of these areas, both before and during colonization, people had not necessarily ever had a common goal, so creating unity was not in their toolbox. Then, in the post-war era, that tool presented itself in the form of nationalism.

Nationalism was the main instrument of those who sought to gain sovereignty and independence for their nations. It's hardly surprising, since nationalism is rooted in people's desire for a homeland. But we've seen how it can also be twisted into an excuse for one group of people declaring the right to govern or oppress others. With decolonization, however, nationalism was about self-rule, meaning the oppressors had to go. The leadership of the new nationalist political parties that emerged in the colonies in this period were often veterans (remember those soldiers in colonies who fought for the empires that controlled them?). And there were others who were dissatisfied with colonial rule and stepped up to lead. But all of these leaders had to win the support of the people and unite those who had been divided by colonialism. For that reason, the period from the 1940s through the 1960s was very much a story of nationalist leaders trying to convince the people of the colony to unite, work together, and overthrow colonial rule for good. Once they did that, they were usually successful!

Ahmed Sékou Touré, leader of the independence movement in Guinea, West Africa. He created a political party that managed to unify much of the population of Guinea, despite it having many ethnic groups and different religions. This nationalist movement was successful in ending French rule in Guinea in 1958. From the Dutch National Archives, The Hague, Fotocollectie, CC BY-SA 3.0.

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2 The VietMinh were members of a nationalist movement to end Vietnam's colonial relationship with France and install a communist, independent government.

So those are the local factors and nationalist movements, and earlier we looked at global trends. How, then, did each of these elements interact to bring about decolonization all around the world during this period?

The answer can be found in specific case studies and examples around the world. But it seems that the global transformations created an environment that strengthened nationalists. They could network with each other through the United Nations, or be inspired by successful movements elsewhere. They could take advantage of the Cold War to gain allies, whether in the Soviet or U.S. sphere. They could use new technologies to organize themselves and to shift public opinion in the empire. And, of course, they could make use of angry, empowered veterans, returning from the war, who had not been given what they were promised.

Of course, that wasn't the end of the story. Asking nicely for independence doesn't go very far—these groups had to fight for it, and usually the empires didn't want to let go. Sometimes that fight took the form of protest marches and boycotts. Sometimes, it took the form of guerilla warfare and violence. And even once they were technically independent, sometimes colonialism continued informally, as we will see. Nevertheless, in many regions after the Second World War empires were disintegrating like wet paper bags, and independent colonies began spilling out of them all over the changing world.

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Trevor Getz is Professor of African History at San Francisco State University. He has written eleven books on African and world history, including *Abina and the Important Men*. He is also the author of *A Primer for Teaching African History*, which explores questions about how we should teach the history of Africa in high school and university classes.

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Maps from the United Nations. https://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/map/profile/world00.pdf

A Japanese leaflet urging Indian subjects of the British Empire to rise up against Britain during the Second World War. Public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Japanese_propaganda_leaflet_India.jpg

Ho Chi Minh declares independence for Vietnam, 1945. The declaration of independence was inspired by U.S. and French documents, and was meant partly to speak to the public in these countries. It did not succeed in swaying public opinion in the US and France, but it was an example of anti-colonial leaders' attempts to speak to the public in powerful countries. By BnBPhm, CC BY-SA 3.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ho_Chi_Minh_reading_the_Declaration_of_Independence_in_Ba_Dinh_Square.jpeg

Ahmed Sékou Touré, leader of the independence movement in Guinea, West Africa. He created a political party that managed to unify much of the population of Guinea, despite it having many ethnic groups and different religions. This nationalist movement was successful in ending French rule in Guinea in 1958. From the Dutch National Archives, The Hague, Fotocollectie, CC BY-SA 3.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ahmed_Sékou_Touré_1962.jpg