

1200 UNIT 8:

Cold War and Decolonization

1945 to 1990 CE

**Colby Burnett****Kim Lochner**

Unit 8 Overview

The Second World War ended more definitively than the First, and the new United Nations presented a hope for avoiding a Third. To some degree, it succeeded. But the two great victors of the war—the United States and the Soviet Union—circled and poked at each other for more than half a century. They did this partly by taking opposite sides in struggles for independence happening in Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and Latin America.



0:01

Kim Lochner and Colby Burnett in conversation on video chat.

Colby I need your help. I always have trouble explaining the Cold War and decolonization to my students. Can you pretend to be a student and tell me if this makes sense?

Sure thing Ms. Lochner.

The Cold War was... Bogus! Because it was neither cold nor a war.

And decolonization...

Sounds like a drastic medical procedure. Mic drop. Student Colby out.

Helpful as usual. Hi I'm Kim Lochner. And I'm a grown-up named Colby Burnett. We're introducing Unit 8: Cold War and Decolonization 1945 to 1990.

0:41

Black and white photographs show people in celebration over the ending of WWII

When the Second World War ended with an allied victory, the world paused to take a deep breath. Many people had supported the war believing it was a fight to protect important values like national and individual sovereignty. So, they hoped that this victory would create an opportunity to expand those rights across race, class, and gender lines in a peaceful, cooperative way.

Video footage of the United Nations shows a man signing a document

The victorious powers even created a new international forum to avoid future conflicts: the United Nations. The last peace treaty of the war was signed in Tokyo Bay, but almost immediately new challenges emerged. The first was a confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. These were the two countries made stronger rather than weaker by the war.

Animated map shows the locations of countries mentioned

Germany and Japan had been defeated, France and Britain were struggling from the devastation of the conflict, and China was divided between nationalists and communists. So, the United States and the Soviet Union emerged as the two new superpowers.

1:50

Contrasting photographs of industrial factories in US and the Soviet Union

But, they had vastly different interests and values. Most importantly the US was deeply supportive of a free market capitalist world economy while the Soviet Union in contrast was the world's largest centralized command economy. Viewed through the production and distribution frame, the Cold War was a confrontation between two different economic systems.

Images of cold war destruction

Additionally their governments distrusted each other. They were powerful states competing for influence around the world. The result was a long if often hidden conflict involving the two states and their allies, a conflict that came to be known as the Cold War. The Cold War simmered around the world from the end of World War II to the late 1980s.

2:35

Photographs of people living in previously-colonized countries.

Viewed through the communities frame we can reveal another reason for the global reach of the Cold War: decolonization. You see, the people of the colonies wondered why they too shouldn't benefit from the struggle for freedom and national sovereignty. Why shouldn't they have independent nation states? These feelings drove a flood of anti-colonial movements that brought down weakened European empires after the Second World War. From Africa to Indochina. From South Asia through the Pacific and into the Caribbean. Local communities found

that they could use the tools of nationalism to forge solidarity both domestically and with anti-colonial movements in other countries. Colonized peoples around the world created new political communities then won independence from their imperial rulers.

3:27

Photographs of US and Soviet leaders making connections with leaders of previously colonized countries.

Both the United States and the Soviet Union saw these movements as opportunities in their struggle against each other. They would support local leaders who sided with them and take down those that favored their enemies. The results were fast networks that tied leaders of independence movements and their opponents to one side of the Cold War or the other.

How should we study these two great global trends: the Cold War and decolonization? Usually they form separate chapters in a textbook, so why don't I take the Cold War, and Kim you can do decolonization.

Actually, in this unit we're going to study them as intertwined episodes in history. Are we allowed to do that? Sure, as long as we explain what we can learn when we study the Cold War and decolonization together. And we should ask, "Is our understanding of this period better when we study them together?"

4:25

We can find answers by looking at the data, in this case US and Soviet military spending. Yes, this spending is evidence of the Cold War confrontation, but it also relates to the decolonization struggle. That's because some of the money spent on US and Soviet militaries went to other countries in the form of military aid or expeditions either in favor of or against anti-colonial movements.

4:52

Chart shows a huge spike and then decline in military spending between 1940-1950 – then, a steady increase by the US and the Soviet Union.

This chart shows us how much money was spent on the military by several large countries across the 20th century. For example, we can see a big spike around the Second World War. After the war, as expected, spending goes down almost everywhere. But then it begins to rise again for two countries: the United States and the Soviet Union. The two records are somewhat different but generally they rise together. In looking at this spending we can identify how it corresponds with some Cold War and decolonization events. For example, in the US military budget there was a big increase in 1950 as the Korean War began. There was another increase in the mid-1960s as the Vietnam conflict ramped up. There was a third spike in the 1980s as confrontation spread in Central America and other regions. Each of these was an important Cold War conflict, but each was also about decolonization.

Photographs of Korea, Vietnam, and the Central American states

Whether in Korea which had been a Japanese colony, Vietnam which had been a French colony, or the Central American states which were a part of the informal empire of the United States. You might have also noticed that Russian military spending increased at a steady rate until the end of 1988. Then in 1989 it suddenly collapsed. What does this mean? What does it tell us about who won and who was defeated in the Cold War?

6:21

Map zooms in on Cuito Cuanavale

To find more evidence to help us study the Cold War and decolonization, we can zoom in for a closer look at specific historical events from this era. One of these is the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale. Cuito Cuanavale is a small, sleepy farming town in Southern Angola in Central Africa.

Photographs of Angolan soldiers

6:56

Photographs of members of Unita, as well as Angolan Soldiers, alongside Soviets

Cuban soldiers stand together; an Angolan soldier stands in front of several large missiles

7:43

Angola was a Portuguese colony until 1975 when anti-colonial movements successfully ended Portugal's overseas empire. A socialist party led the new government of Angola. This party aligned themselves with the Soviet Union who had helped fund the Angolan struggle against the Portuguese.

In reply, the United States and its allies, including the government of South Africa, supported an Angolan rebel group called Unita. Throughout the 1970s, the Angolan government was backed by Soviet advisers and volunteers from other communist countries such as Cuba. They battled Unita and its supporters, particularly South Africa. In late 1987 government forces finally closed in on the Unita stronghold of Southern Angola.

The South African military quickly sent aid to the Unita forces trapped there. In response to that move, Cuba sent tens of thousands of volunteers to aid Angolan government forces. As a result, the small town of Cuito Cuanavale turned into a massive battlefield.

Throughout February and March 1988, Cuban and Angolan forces battled the Unita rebels and troops from South Africa, eventually driving them off. Now, neither the United States nor the Soviet Union were directly involved. Instead, the conflict was fought through allies and local forces. But this was definitely a Cold War confrontation between the capitalist and communist world. And it was also the last battle for the decolonization of Angola.

The battle of Cuito Cuanavale is only one example of the way in which the Cold War and decolonization overlapped. In this unit you will encounter many. You will see how civil wars in China and Latin America combined Cold War face-offs with anti-colonial struggles. You will explore resistance to colonialism in Southeast Asia which found itself embroiled in the conflict between Marxism and capitalism. This in turn drew the United States into the war in Vietnam.

8:43

Montage shows photos of anti-Colonial protests and leaders, including Gandhi.

Kim and Colby in conversation over video chat.

You will see how anti-colonial leaders in India, Indonesia, Central America, and the Middle East navigated between the two superpowers in order to successfully achieve their own independence. Finally, you'll return to Southern Africa to see the end of apartheid. This struggle was the final political liberation in Africa, and also one of the last Cold War political settlements.

Ms. Lochner, Ms. Lochner!

We're not doing that anymore, Colby.

Way back in the 2010s there was this show where they battled all the time, and they were all like winter is coming and then there was some zombie ice dragon trying to kill Jon Snow. So that was totally a cold war right?

Uh exactly! Full marks. Class dismissed. (music playing)