Unit 8 – Cold War and Decolonization

This Word document contains ALL of the readings from this unit. You are free to repurpose these materials as needed for your classroom. Please do remember to properly cite World History Project as the source. As always, only print what you need.

We have included a short description, author bio, and source list.

Unit 8 Introduction: Cold War & Decolonization, 1945-1990 2

The Spread of Communism 4

Devastation of Old Markets 8

The End of Old Regimes 11

The Cold War: An Overview 14

The Cold War Around the World 17

Chinese Communist Revolution 21

Apartheid 27

The Collapse of Communism 31

And Then Gandhi Came: Nationalism, Revolution, and Sovereignty 34

The Middle East and the End of Empire 38

Civil Rights and Global Liberation 41

When viewing this document in Microsoft Word format, you can Ctrl+Click on the name of each article to go directly to the corresponding page in the reader.

# Unit 8 Introduction: Cold War & Decolonization, 1945-1990

Trevor Getz

After the flames of World War II died down, a new and colder conflict divided the victorious powers. Soon, colonized peoples rose up and shed the chains of empire. These historical events—the Cold War and decolonization—were not isolated events, they were intertwined.

## Shifting global power

In the last three units of this course, the action that made up the global story seemed centered on Europe. While the period 1200–1450 CE had seen a world in which China and South Asia were really the global economic powerhouses, overseas empires allowed Europeans to leverage themselves into a strong position in the period from 1450 to 1750 CE. By the eighteenth century, the Industrial Revolution had started in Europe, and many of the political ideas behind the liberal political revolutions of the long nineteenth century were emerging there as well. As a result, European nation-states were able to create most of the vast industrial empires that ruled much of the world well into the twentieth century. Europe was center stage in the First World War, and it was one of two major areas of conflict in the Second World War. We can’t make this point too strongly: *important events were happening everywhere during this period, not just Europe*. Yet, it certainly seems that Europe played an outsized role.

Then, the end of the Second World War changed global power dynamics once again. The major European states had been devastated by six years of conflict and massive death tolls due to both war and genocide. So maybe it’s no surprise that the two great powers that emerged from the conflict, the United States and the Soviet Union, were both outside of Europe (or, in the case of the Soviet Union, *mostly* outside). China, a rising power, was even further away. And if European leaders were hoping to use the profits from their colonies to buy their way back to power, as some had done after the First World War, they would be disappointed. The people living in their colonies throughout Asia, the Caribbean, Africa, and the Pacific were now ready and able to end colonial rule in their own lands.

Historians typically describe the events of the half-century or so after Second World War ended in 1945 through two separate processes. The first was the Cold War, in which the United States and the Soviet Union led rival coalitions—politically active alliances— that confronted each other on every continent and ocean of the planet. The second was decolonization, as the people of colonies everywhere sought to gain independence and create their own nation-states. To some degree, we can see that these were different trends with different motives. The Cold War was a struggle over military and economic supremacy, whereas decolonization was a struggle for political independence and sovereignty. Then again, bees and flowers are also two different things, but it’s pretty hard to study one while ignoring the other.

It turns out that many of the events of this period involved both of these conflicts. Whether they were described as Cold War struggles or decolonization depended on your perspective. If you had been a colonial subject in Africa, for example, your attempts to create your own country would feel like a decolonization struggle. From this perspective, calling for US or Soviet help was just a way to get the support you needed. The same events, viewed from the United States or the Soviet Union, could look quite different. For the leaders of these superpowers, supporting an independence movement, or opposing it, could feel more like a strategic move to gather allegiances that could be leveraged in their Cold War rivalry.

Thus, while the Cold War and the decolonization process are often studied separately, in this unit, we ask how studying them together gives us a different and possibly more nuanced understanding of this era.

## Understanding the Cold War

We begin this unit by looking closely at the Cold War. To some, the conflict looked like just another clash of titans: two rising, immense superpowers confronting each other in the hope of dominating global politics for their own interests. At the same time, the Cold War was a real ideological struggle. The United States said it championed both the political freedom that democracy promised and economic freedom in the form of the capitalist system. The Soviet Union said it was fighting for the rights of workers and for economic equality, in the form of communism and socialism. Both countries felt that they had the better system, and both found allies and supporters in many places.

Not everyone picked sides in the struggle. Some countries and people tried to be neutral. But because groups around the world found that they agreed with one side more, much of the world was drawn into this conflict. With two superpowers at odds, smaller countries and groups found it convenient—even prudent—to ally with one side. As a result, a timeline of the Cold War can look like it jumps from crisis to crisis around the world, from Central Europe in the 1940s, to Korea and then Cuba in the 1950s, to Vietnam in the 1960s, and then Latin America and Africa soon after. In 1989, the communist side of the struggle began to break up for a variety of reasons. Communism finally ended in the Soviet Union soon after, bringing the Cold War to an end.

To understand these events, and how they are connected in a bigger story, we consider the perspectives of people who saw them as one long struggle, especially in the United States and the Soviet Union. But we also try to look at many events from the perspectives of those who experienced and participated in them as individual episodes. People in East Asia probably lived a very different Cold War than those in the Caribbean or any other part of the world, for example. Looking at these different perspectives helps us resist the “single story” problem that so often limits historical studies.

## Understanding decolonization

After looking closely at the Cold War, we investigate decolonization, a term that describes the process by which colonies became independent nation-states and great global empires came to an end. Of course, it’s not like *everything* changed. We can still see some legacies of empire in the world today. But political independence did bring about changes in the way the world was organized—in global economies, in migration patterns, and in daily life.

If we were to study each of the dozens and dozens of struggles for independence, finishing this unit would take longer than the Cold War. So instead, we’ll begin by describing the broader global pattern of decolonization, and why it happened in this era. It is also important to examine how these patterns were different in some parts of the world. We look at India, where decades of resistance to British rule suddenly came together in a massive movement for independence in 1947–1948. The result was not one but several newly independent countries. We also focus on the Middle East, where competing interests after the war led to tensions that continue to shape the region today. In addition, we explore events in South Africa, where the descendants of European settlers held on to political power—and the overtly racist system called *apartheid*—decades after other parts of Africa became independent. Finally, we look at the role of women in independence movements around the world, and how their role and experience in these movements differed from men’s.

## Understanding how they were entangled

Throughout each of these two parts of this unit, the stories we explore are never strictly decolonization stories or strictly Cold War stories. Whether we are looking at events in China, or Iran, or Cuba, we are almost always looking at events that were, simultaneously, struggles for independence *and* Cold War conflicts. It’s up to you to use the evidence in the unit to work out for yourself how these two big trends were tangled together in the complicated stories of different regions, and in the global story for this era. You may also begin to consider how these events, many of which took place in your grandparents’ and parents’ lifetimes, have impacted the world you live in today. We will make some of those connections clearer in the last unit of the course, as well.

## Author Bio

Trevor Getz is a professor of African and world history at San Francisco State University. He has been the author or editor of 11 books, including the award-winning graphic history *Abina and the Important Men*, and has coproduced several prize-winning documentaries. Trevor 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.

# The Spread of Communism

Alejandro Quintana

China and Latin America offer two contrasting stories of the global spread of communism—and fear of it—during the interwar period.

## Introduction

The Russian Revolution of 1917 created the first communist country in the world. For many people today, communism means tyranny, rejection of basic human liberties, and dependency on government giveaways. However, for millions of European workers at the time, communism meant hope against exploitation. Between the two world wars, European governments used repression and labor reforms to lower the risk of more communist revolutions in Europe. However, communist ideas still became increasingly popular not only in Europe but all over the world.

## The appeal of communism

The horrors of World War I, the misery of millions of workers and peasants, and the Great Depression together made many people wary of capitalism and democracy. Communism and fascism emerged as serious alternatives.[[1]](#footnote-1) This article focuses on China and Latin America to explain the global spread of communism during the interwar period.

Karl Marx had predicted that communism would arise in fully industrialized states. He believed that industrial workers would fight a class war against factory- owners. Ironically, Latin America and China (and Russia in 1917) were not fully industrialized. They were mostly agrarian (farming) economies. So there were far more peasants than workers available to fight a revolution. Global industrialization increased the demand for raw materials and food produced in agrarian societies.

Landowners had taken advantage of this economic opportunity to maximize their profits, but it exploited peasants. Naturally, many peasants identified with Marx’s concept of class conflict. Communist leaders around the world were able to convince many peasants to support their revolutions.

## Communism in China during the interwar period

As you have seen, the Opium Wars and other conflicts led to foreign control of the Chinese economy. This situation paved the road to communism. Some Chinese still defended the superiority of Chinese traditions. But many reformers believed that China could only survive by adopting capitalism and democracy. In 1911, reformers replaced the Qing Dynasty with the pro-democracy Republic of China, under the Guomindang (the Chinese Nationalist Party, or GMD). The GMD was a conglomeration of various reform groups, which began to break apart in the 1920s. A communist faction saw an opportunity to gain power as the GMD began to weaken and declared war on the GMD in 1928.

The industrial working class was only two percent of the Chinese population, but there were far more peasants. One of the leaders of the communist faction, Mao Zedong recognized that Chinese peasants, not the workers, could bring about a communist revolution. To attract peasant support, Mao talked about peasant class conflict against the landlords. In communist-held territories, he redistributed the landlords’ lands to peasants. He ordered his soldiers to protect them. Meanwhile, the GMD leader, Chiang Kai-Shek, unwittingly helped the communists by breaking his democratic promises to the peasants.

Militarily, Mao outsmarted the GMD army by using hit-and-run guerilla tactics. However, in 1934, Chiang Kai-Shek successfully encircled the communists in the south and was poised to destroy them. Mao refused to surrender. Instead, he led 100,000 supporters across the blockade through a 6,000-mile-long roundabout to the north. Only 20,000 survived. Technically, this “Long March” was a communist defeat, but Mao turned it into a story of determination and resilience.

Then, Japan invaded China. Initially, the GMD and the PLA (the Peoples Liberation Army, Mao’s guerrillas) allied against Japan. However, between 1937 and 1945, the GMD bore the brunt of Japan’s attack, while the PLA’s hit-and- run tactics were more effective and they took fewer casualties. Also, the GMD army was taking food and resources from peasants while the communists continued to protect them. After World War II, the communists emerged more popular and organized. In 1949, Mao defeated the GMD and created the communist People’s Republic of China.

## Communism in Latin America during the interwar period

Like the Chinese, Latin American peasants had been exploited by both domestic and foreign elites, particularly from the United States. Latin America had inherited a very unequal society from the Spanish Empire. After independence from Spain, the leaders of the independence movements removed some Spanish laws that had restricted their power and economic opportunities. One law in particular protected lands of indigenous communities. The new governments removed this law and began selling these lands to wealthy capitalists, both domestic and foreign. Indigenous peoples were being forced to trade their ancestral lands for poorly paid and backbreaking jobs. They protested the abuse, sometimes violently, but usually they lacked the unity needed to defend their lands. Meanwhile, Spanish, German, and Italian workers migrating to the Americas brought communist ideas, talking of class war to end exploitation. The message helped many peasants and workers organize for revolution.

Unlike China, Latin America is a complex set of states. That made it more difficult to have one charismatic leader leading one revolution. Instead, numerous leaders promoted alternatives to end the abuse of the lower classes. Radical movements such as the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920) and the election of Hipólito Yrigoyen in Argentina (1916–1922) fought for democracy, not communism. But, like Chiang Kai-Shek in China, democratic leaders often fell short on their promises. So, peasants and workers considered the communist alternative.

The United States was instrumental for both the expansion and containment of communism in the Americas. Their aggressive presence in Latin America expanded after the Spanish-American War (1898). In the Caribbean and Central America, the US used “gunboat diplomacy”, claiming the right to invade anywhere they considered American lives—or interests—to be at risk. With over a dozen invasions in the 1910s and 1920s, the US systematically took control of national economies and politics, despite resistance. Some leaders who resisted American intrusion in this period were devoted communists, like Agustín Farabundo Martí in El Salvador.[[2]](#footnote-2)

To destroy anti-American opposition, the US supported infamous dictators in replacing elected leaders.[[3]](#footnote-3) These dictators authorized themselves to kidnap, torture, and kill anyone who challenged their authority. Especially anyone suspected of organizing peasants or workers. For example, in 1932 in El Salvador, after a peaceful pro-communist demonstration, dictator Maximiliano Hernández Martínez ordered the massacre of anyone involved. Its leader Farabundo Martí was killed, as were some 10,000 to 40,000 followers. This event became known as *La Matanza* (the killing). The US praised these actions, considering them necessary to remove communism from the hemisphere.

The rising popularity of communism in Latin American helped produce domestic Marxist intellectuals. The Peruvian José Carlos Mariátegui, for instance, adapted Marxism to Latin America’s social reality. He argued that the extreme inequalities in Latin America could be resolved through a communist revolution. But instead of a violent revolution, he suggested a gradual return to pre-Columbian *collectivism*, meaning the community ownership of wealth. Other Marxist intellectuals ran for president as a way to avoid bloody revolutions, but the elites rigged the elections or forced them out of politics.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Populism was the closest Latin America got to communist rule in this era. In the 1930s, populist leaders benefited from a surge in democratic activism and the US Good Neighbor Policy that promised a friendlier US attitude in Latin America.[[5]](#footnote-5) These populist leaders were familiar with Marxism but were social democrats, not communists. Their goal was to help peasants and workers through progressive policies. These included tax reform, redistribution of land, education reform, freedom of the press, and allowing labor unions. But they also invested in national industries and protected factories and land-owners from foreign competition. They hoped to secure the support of elites and workers alike.

Populism seemed like a great alternative to communism, but the Cold War destroyed this opportunity. After World War II, communist paranoia in the US reached new heights. Any leader prioritizing the interests of workers or peasants was branded a communist. Once again, the US was supporting anti-communist dictators. Not surprisingly, anti-American and pro-communist guerrillas mushroomed. These dictators reacted aggressively, kidnapping, torturing, and killing tens (possibly hundreds) of thousands of people, suspected of being communists. In this way, communism in Latin America was contained during the Cold War (with the exception of Cuba).

## Conclusion

During the interwar period, communism spread throughout the world, mainly in agrarian societies. The main appeal of communism was to end the exploitation of peasants and workers by domestic and foreign elites. China and

Latin America show the complexity in which communism spread. China’s economic leadership was overtaken by industrialized powers; a new model was necessary. It could have been democracy or communism, but communism had a more effective and charismatic leader. By contrast, Latin America’s complex set of states had a wide variety of leaders ranging from pro-democratic to populist to communist. Communist leaders there faced the fury of US- backed dictators. Not surprisingly, communist leaders organized guerillas to fight these dictators. This made Latin America a hot spot during the Cold War.

## Sources

Allan, Tony. *The Long March: The Making of Communist China*. Chicago: Heinemann Library, 2001.

Arnold, James R, and Roberta Wiener. *The Industrial Revolution*. New York: Grolier, 2005.

Binford, Leigh, Lesley Gill, and Steve Striffler. *Fifty Years of Peasant Wars in Latin America*. New York: Berghahn, 2020.

Conniff, Michael L. *Populism in Latin America*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012.

Downing, David. *Communism*. Oxford, UK: Heinemann Library, 2009.

Eakin, Marshall Craig. *The History of Latin America: Collision of Cultures*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Haugen, David M. *The Third World: Opposing Viewpoints*. Detroit: Thomson/Gale, 2006.

Kruijt, Dirk, Eduardo Rey Tristán, and Alberto Martín Álvarez. *Latin American Guerrilla Movements: Origins, Evolution, Outcomes*. New York: Routledge, 2020.

Murphy, John. *Socialism and Communism*. New York: Britannica Educational Publishing, 2015.

Naden, Corinne J. *Mao Zedong and the Chinese Revolution*. Greensboro, NC: Morgan Reynolds Pub., 2009.

Uhl, Xina M, and Theodore Link. *Communism*. New York: Rosen Central, 2019.

Wallenfeldt, Jeffrey H. *A New World Power: America from 1920 to 1945*. New York: Britannica Educational Pub. in association with Rosen Educational Services, 2013.

## Author Bio

Alejandro Quintana is an associate professor of history at St. John’s University in New York City. His research and teaching focus on state formation, nation-building, nationalism, revolutions, and social movements in Latin America, with a special emphasis on Mexico.

# Devastation of Old Markets

Bennett Sherry

World War II broke the world. As the United States and Soviet Union tried to put it back together, they clashed in the Cold War. While many economies recovered and grew, the Cold War also produced a global system of inequality between rich and poor nations.

## Rebuilding the World: Origins of the Cold War

The Second World War changed how humans made, traded, and consumed goods. The war devastated the nations of Europe and East Asia. As many as 80 million people died in the war. After the war, nations sought to rebuild and rethink the global system, but there was disagreement over how best to rebuild. The biggest disagreements were between the United States and the Soviet Union.

The tensions between the two superpowers sparked the Cold War. It was called a "cold" war because the two superpowers rarely fought directly against one another. Instead, they engaged in an arms race and tried to spread their influence around the world. Each superpower championed their economic model as the path to prosperity and peace. Each portrayed the other as evil. The Soviets believed in state-planned economies (where decisions and ownership are collectively held by the state rather than private owners). But the Americans were champions of free markets. In their attempts to win over other countries to their side of this debate, both governments sent huge amounts of financial and military aid to their allies.

After the Second World War, the Soviet Union was expanding in Eastern Europe and Asia. The United States wanted to rebuild Western Europe and Japan to create a buffer against the Soviet expansion. So in 1948, the United States launched the Marshall Plan, named after Secretary of State George Marshall. This plan gave billions of dollars in economic aid to seventeen countries in western and southern Europe. The Soviet Union and its allies in Eastern Europe refused aid from the Marshall Plan. But American efforts were a huge success in Western Europe. Immediately after the war, the infrastructure of England, France, Germany, and Japan was in ruins. The bombs and tanks of both Axis and Allied powers had destroyed whole cities. In 1945, millions of Germans were homeless, and their money was nearly worthless. Yet with aid from the United States and the implementation of new policies, within two decades, the Germany economy was the largest in Europe. Japan, the United Kingdom, France, Greece, and other American allies underwent similar economic "miracles" as the world rebuilt.

Historian David Landes wrote about the Japanese and German recoveries. He insisted they were built on "work, education, determination," and American financial assistance. The aim of American aid to these countries was to "parry [block] the perceived Russian threat." The sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein, however, disagreed. He argued that the post-war recovery of Europe and Japan was less idealistic on the part of the Americans. Instead, he claimed that the Americans helped because the "world-economy needed the re-entry of these countries both as major producers and as major customers for US production." The Americans embraced the idea of a "free world" in opposition to the communist world of the Soviet Union. They hoped that the success of their allies would convince more countries to join the American side. By the 1950s, the American government saw all foreign policy in the context of the global Cold War.

## Decolonization and economic dependency

One of the most important changes after World War II was the collapse of European empires in Africa and Asia. With their economies in shambles from the war, European governments couldn't maintain the costs of empire. In 1945, over a third of the world's people lived in a colonized nation. Between 1945 and 1970, nearly every colonial nation gained their independence.

As European nations lost their colonies in Africa and Asia, several things happened. The importance of Europe in global politics declined. From 1946 to 1970, membership in the United Nations grew from 35 states to 127. The leaders of the newly independent nations of Africa and Asia travelled to the United Nations. They spoke out against economic exploitation. They also spoke against racial inequality around the world. In the 1960s, the Non-Aligned Movement emerged. It was led by Indian prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. Members of this movement refused to side with either the United States or Soviet Union. Instead, they decided to invest in their own countries.

West European and Japanese economic revival was built on the exploitation of Europe's former colonies. Europe and Japan used American money to rebuild their countries. But they also needed raw materials. Under European imperialism, Europeans relied on people in Africa, Asia, and Latin America to produce cash crops. Cash crops were sold abroad to profit the empire rather than consumed locally. Some examples include sugar, cacao, rubber, and cotton. These crops were shipped from former European colonies to the rich nations of Europe and North America. There, they were turned into consumer goods like chocolate bars, car tires, and cheap t-shirts and resold at a profit. This is how African cacao and the labor of workers (many of them children) becomes candy bars in American grocery stores.

African farmers used their best land to produce cash crops, on which they were economically dependent. With less land left for food crops, many African nations depended on food imports or aid from wealthy countries. This created a system of dependency. Wealthy countries became richer by turning resources from poor countries into consumer goods. Poor countries became dependent on foreign trade, foreign loans, and foreign aid to feed their people. The political dominance of imperialism quickly turned into the economic dependency of neo-colonialism, a term coined by Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah, to describe this cycle of inequality between rich and poor nations.

Leaders in Africa, Asia, and Latin America tried to escape this cycle of dependency. They did this by building industry in their own countries. Often, they would try to do this by nationalizing industry. Nationalizing industry means taking private industries and placing them under the public ownership of the government. Iran's prime minister Mohammed Mosaddeq nationalized his country's oil industry. Until 1953 Iran's oil industry had been controlled by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (today known as BP). In Egypt, President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956. That ended almost a century of British ownership. Other leaders such as President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and President Salvador Allende of Chile engaged in similar projects of state-led industrialization.

The American government saw all foreign policy as part of the Cold War. As a result, they were suspicious of these kinds of policies aimed at economic independence. The US suspected them of being associated with communism and the Soviet Union. American presidents, Congress, the military, and intelligence agencies therefore often acted to combat these policies of nationalization. They saw the policies as the spread of communism. Mosaddeq, Nkrumah, and Allende were all removed from power in coups. In each of these coups the CIA played a role or is suspected of doing so. In all three cases, the new governments realigned their countries with the United States and privatized their nation's industries. Often, the rise of dictators followed the fall of nationalist leaders. In Iran, for example, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi ruled his country after 1953 as a strongman until the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

## Consumption and inequality

The revival of Western Europe and Japan and new American wealth created a boom in consumerism. Americans moved to the suburbs to live in houses that they filled with washing machines and new plastic consumer goods. They bought cars to drive them from their houses to jobs in cities. These cars needed oil, first from Texas, and later from countries in the Middle East. As consumerism increased in wealthy countries, demand skyrocketed for raw materials like cacao, coffee, and rubber from poorer countries.

But inequality was also a problem within wealthy nations. For example, as white consumer classes thrived in the United States, black consumers found themselves excluded from the new American dream of cars and homes in the suburbs. In many cases, such as Jim Crow segregation in the south and redlining[[6]](#footnote-6) in the north, official policies and laws systematically denied equal economic opportunity.

The end of the Second World War also signaled setbacks in gender equality in the United States. Women had kept American factories running while men fought in Europe and the Pacific. Historian Lizabeth Cohen writes that women had driven the wartime economy with their labor and consumption. But they were relegated to the domestic sphere as men returned from the battlefields to the factories. In fact, there were new tax systems in the US They encouraged traditional patriarchal (male-dominated) households "of male breadwinner father and homemaker mother, thereby making women financially dependent on men."

The period from 1945 to 1970 saw the rebuilding of some of the world's largest economies. One third of the human population was liberated from the bonds of empire. However, this period also started the Cold War and the system of dependency. Both produced decades of conflict. They also produced massive inequalities between the richest and poorest nations and people. These inequalities would only worsen in the 1970s and 1980s, and many continue today.

## Sources

Cohen, Lizabeth. *A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America.* New York: Vintage books, 2003.

Landes, David. *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor.* New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1999.

Wallerstein, Immanuel. “The World-System After the Cold War.” *Journal of Peace Research* 30, no. 1 (1993): 1-6.

Weisener-Hanks, Merry. *A Concise History of the World*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

## Author Bio

Bennett Sherry holds a PhD in history from the University of Pittsburgh and has undergraduate teaching experience in world history, human rights, and the Middle East at the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Maine at Augusta. Additionally, he is a research associate at Pitt's World History Center. Bennett writes about refugees and international organizations in the twentieth century.

# The End of Old Regimes

Trevor R. 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:

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.

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[[7]](#footnote-7) 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.

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[[8]](#footnote-8) 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!

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.

## Author Bio

Trevor Getz is a professor of African and world history at San Francisco State University. He has been the author or editor of 11 books, including the award-winning graphic history Abina and the Important Men, and has coproduced several prize-winning documentaries. Trevor 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.

# The Cold War: An Overview

Burleigh Hendrickson

The aftermath of World War Two shifted the global balance of power and created a bi-polar world led by two competing superpowers: The United States (US) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). We call this global competition the Cold War.

## What was the Cold War?

The destruction of World War II reduced many European cities to rubble. It also led world leaders to seek new ways to protect against future attacks. While the United States and the Soviet Union had worked together to defeat the Axis powers, their partnership quickly turned to a 50-year-long confrontation. They disagreed about how to rebuild Europe, and their efforts to increase their own security often conflicted. This fierce conflict is called the "Cold War" since the two superpowers never directly engaged in combat ("hot war"). Instead, they increased their military capabilities, tried to expand their global influence, and undermined the other's way of life in the eyes of the world. While the United States believed in a capitalist system of free markets and multiple political parties, the Soviet Union was founded on a communist system controlled by a centralized state and a single political party.

The Cold War came down to some basic differences between the world-views of the United States and the Soviet Union. Communist societies believed in redistributing wealth (taking from the rich and giving to the poor) and promoted workers and state-run economies. These resulted in low unemployment rates but sometimes led to the unequal distribution of consumer goods. They also viewed organized religion as dangerous. The US capitalist system let free markets determine the production and distribution of goods, and promoted freedom of religion. This led to more productivity but often created massive economic inequalities. Both sides also used propaganda to paint a negative picture of their enemies. From 1945 until the collapse of the USSR in the 1990s, these two nations competed for global influence in the areas of military, economics, politics, and even culture.

Three key features defined the Cold War: 1) the threat of nuclear war, 2) competition over the allegiance (loyalty) of newly independent nations, and 3) the military and economic support of each other's enemies around the world. The United States showed its global military dominance when it dropped two atomic bombs on Japan to end the war. This act prompted the USSR to seek nuclear technology to discourage American aggression. The United States held other advantages as well. Having entered World War II late in the conflict, it lost far fewer soldiers and civilians. The USSR lost 8-10 million soldiers (25 million including civilians) yet the United States lost 300,000 in the war. While the Soviet Union faced a devastating invasion, most of the United States emerged unscathed from the war. Finally, the US economy expanded during the war as it made profits selling weapons and supplies to the Allied forces.

## A divided Europe

After a long history of enemy invasions, Soviet leader Josef Stalin wanted to expand its territory and build a buffer between the Soviet Union and Europe. He also wanted control in Central and Eastern European countries that the Soviets had helped liberate. As a result, Stalin quickly established strong communist parties that took power in Central and Eastern Europe (the Eastern Bloc). They took orders from the USSR. Meanwhile, the United States provided over $12 billion in aid for rebuilding Western European nations who agreed to open trade.

This divided Europe, breaking trade networks and splitting communities between East and West. These economic divisions spread to separate military alliances in each zone. This further divided Europe along an imaginary line called the Iron Curtain. Travel and cultural exchange across the Iron Curtain became increasingly difficult. It separated previously connected communities and created new ones living either under a communist or capitalist system.

Germany became a Cold War battleground. East and West Germany had separate governments and capital cities. Families were separated based solely on where the lines were drawn. The city of Berlin became a microcosm (small-scale representation) of the Cold War, with British, French, and Americans controlling West Berlin while the Soviets controlled East Berlin. To prevent defections (people leaving one state for another), the communists built the Berlin Wall in 1961. It divided the city. They set up checkpoints to control border crossings. At some points, guards even had orders to kill unarmed East Germans seeking to cross illegally. The wall became the most important symbol of the Cold War.

## The Cold War heats up around the world

The Cold War started in Europe. From 1945 to 1953, the USSR expanded its influence by creating the Eastern Bloc across states like Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. Stalin set up puppet communist governments that he could control. He repressed anyone who resisted. The United States likewise began to meddle in the affairs of foreign nations where it feared communist regimes would gain control. This became known as a policy of containment.

In the 1950s, competition had spread to the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America, with each side trying to establish control. By the 1960s, the Cold War reached Africa. Many former colonies achieved independence from European empires (decolonization). These new nations sided with the Americans or Soviets to receive economic and military aid. Both superpowers supported dictatorships that came to power through violence and repressed their societies—all to gain an edge in the global Cold War.

Some of the most important Cold War conflicts took place in Asia. Communists took power in China in 1949, and the Americans feared other countries would soon follow. In 1953, Korea had been divided into two zones, with a communist government in the North and an American-leaning government in the South. To contain the spread of communism to South Korea, the US sent troops. The Chinese responded by sending their own troops to the border. The war killed nearly 5 million people but ended in a stalemate, leaving a divided Korea that remains today.

Perhaps no conflict illustrates the policy of containment better than Vietnam. Like Korea, Vietnam was divided into a communist north and pro-West south. To contain the communist north, the United States invaded in the 1960s. The Soviet Union sent money and weapons to the communist forces. By 1975, with the help of the Soviets and China, a small, poor nation defeated the strongest military superpower in the world. Over 58,000 Americans died in the conflict. The war divided Americans who were for or against the war. The US intervention in Vietnam exposed the hypocrisy of US policies that claimed to promote self-determination, and it inspired other small nations to determine their own futures.

After the Vietnam War, Cold War tension briefly decreased. The Americans' defeat in Vietnam, the threat of nuclear war, and new Soviet leadership led to open discussions between the sides. But much like the Americans had in Vietnam, the USSR intervened in Afghanistan in the 1980s. It wanted to ensure the victory of a communist-leaning group and sent troops to assist them. Just as North Vietnam received aid and military assistance from the USSR, the United States backed Soviet enemies in Afghanistan with money and weapons. Ultimately, the USSR was equally unsuccessful, and US-backed forces emerged victorious. After much infighting, Islamic extremists called the Taliban claimed power in the region, thanks to American aid.

## The end of the Cold War

The Cold War finally ended in the 1990s. The USSR could no longer keep up with US military spending. Meanwhile, economic problems in the Eastern Bloc meant that goods were in short supply. To keep citizens from revolting, the new Soviet leader, Mikhael Gorbachev, proposed reforms to stimulate communist economies. The economic reforms were known as *perestroika*, or "restructuring." He also relaxed restrictions on freedom of expression, a policy called *glasnost*, or "openness." These reforms were too little too late.

In 1989, the most iconic symbol of the Iron Curtain, the Berlin Wall, which divided the German city, was torn down by Germans on both sides seeking to unify Germany. Similar waves of anti-communism spread throughout the Eastern Bloc. The end of the Cold War was marked by the disintegration of the USSR into over a dozen independent nations.

Fear of a nuclear war likely prevented direct combat between the Americans and the Soviets. Though they did not engage in all-out warfare, the two superpowers supported many of each other's enemies in combat. They created a bi-polar system of global power that forced other nations to choose sides and ripped communities apart. The economic troubles created by the Soviet war in Afghanistan left the USSR unable to maintain control of the Eastern Bloc. Once self-determination was possible in the 1990s, many Eastern European countries chose a different path. They elected non-communist parties and joined the European Union. Outside of Europe, communists in places like Cuba and China have remained in power while other nations removed pro-US dictators. Whichever path nations have chosen since the collapse of the USSR, the Cold War has left a major imprint.

## Author Bio

Burleigh Hendrickson is a visiting assistant professor in French and Francophone Studies at Dickinson College. He holds a PhD in world history from Northeastern University, and taught survey courses in the history of globalization at Boston College. Burleigh has published several peer-reviewed articles on transnational political activism in the Francophone world.

# The Cold War Around the World

Burleigh Hendrickson

We called it a “cold” war because there were fewer guns and bombs than usual. But the ideological rivalry of two superpowers enabled violence and tensions in smaller, newer nations around the globe.

## Decolonization and the Cold War

The US-USSR Cold War rivalry began just as traditional European empires came to an end. With decolonization in Asia and Africa, plus the already independent states in Latin America and elsewhere demanding sovereignty, there were a lot of fresh young governments out there. Two superpowers with very different governments, the US and the Soviet Union[[9]](#footnote-9), were eager—and competitive—in their efforts to influence them.

In Southeast Asia, independence movements that grew into civil conflicts were sponsored by one superpower or the other. In Latin America, American companies influenced government and economic affairs, even as Soviet movements emerged in the same places. The US military intervened often with covert operations to protect American interests. They wanted to stop socialist or communist governments from reclaiming land in Latin America owned by American companies. Over in Africa, the US and the USSR vied for economic and political influence in newly independent countries. As in Latin America, the US wanted to prevent African governments from handing control of private industries—like those profitable mining companies—to the state. It meant that right after these decolonized nations liberated themselves from European control, they had to face the intrusion of American and Soviet interests.

## The Cold War in Asia

China's path to communism in 1949 and the violent conflict in Vietnam are well documented, but the Cold War mattered in other parts of Asia. Mohandas Gandhi led a mostly peaceful independence movement against British control in South Asia. But decolonization produced horrific violence between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, who had been pitted against each other under British rule and now competed for political power. More than a million people were killed. In an effort to end civil war, in 1947 British India was partitioned (divided) into Hindu-majority India, as well as East and West Pakistan, which were dominated by powerful Muslim majorities.

Also in South Asia, Pakistan joined a trade alliance with the US and others in 1954 designed to contain the spread of communism. Meanwhile, India became a key player at the 1955 Bandung Conference in Indonesia, which encouraged new nations to avoid taking sides with the US or the USSR. The Cold War heated up along the India-Pakistan border over disputed territory in Kashmir in 1965. When the United Nations called for a diplomatic solution, the US halted arms supplies to the region. This worked in India's favor as it already had a stronger military. It was able to maintain control over Kashmir after a ceasefire, though the region remains in dispute to this day.

A civil war between East and West Pakistan in the early 1970s also involved India, the US, and the USSR. Most Pakistanis were Muslim, but they did not share a language. West Pakistan forced its language, Urdu, on Bangla[[10]](#footnote-10) speaking East Pakistanis. West Pakistan also controlled resources, education, and the military. When East Pakistan sought to create its own nation, Cold War powers took sides. The US supported West Pakistan, while India and the USSR supported East Pakistan. Indian forces defeated West Pakistan in less than two weeks. With India's help, East Pakistan gained its independence in 1971, becoming the new nation of Bangladesh. The conflict split East and West Pakistani communities. Violence between Muslims and minority Hindus increased, leaving scars that still impact multi-cultural harmony in South Asia.

And if you're thinking we forgot Central Asia, the Cold War was just as chilly there. Though the British Empire gave up full control of Afghanistan in 1919, the arbitrary line they drew on that nation's southern border divided communities. Peoples like the Pashtuns and Uzbeks preferred tribal or regional allegiances over a national identity. Their extremely rough terrain and remote regions made it easy to resist foreign powers and do their own thing. But in the late 1970s, when a group of communist sympathizers tried and failed to unify Afghanistan with socialist ideas, the USSR invaded. Fearing the spread of Soviet influence, the US funded Islamic jihadists, who viewed the Soviets as foreign invaders and infidels. This conflict lasted nearly a decade, bankrupting the USSR and contributing to its collapse in the early 1990s. While this US strategy had short-term benefits of weakening the Soviet Union, it also helped bring to power Islamic fundamentalists who suppressed women's rights and ruled through threat of violence.

## The Cold War in Latin America and the Caribbean

On to another continent (same Cold War, though). Three centuries of Spanish colonial rule left Latin American communities divided along ethnic and economic lines. In Guatemala, indigenous Mayas were marginalized in favor of a minority of European descendants. Two percent of people owned three quarters of the farm land. They also welcomed foreign investment. By the middle of the twentieth century, the American-based United Fruit Company became the largest single land-owner in the country. Local banana farmers were forced out of business. In the 1940s, discontent led to election victories for socialists seeking more equitable distribution of resources. Then in the 1950s Guatemalan leaders gave farm land back to a half a million poor people and allowed workers to organize for better wages (similar to land reform in China). Fearing the loss of land and spread of communist ideas, powerful American businessmen convinced the US to work with opposition leaders in Guatemala to overthrow the socialist government.

With the help of the C.I.A.[[11]](#footnote-11), armed Guatemalan rebels overthrew the government in 1954. They put a staunch anti-communist in charge, who returned most of the seized land back to the United Fruit Company. Political divisions continued between poor indigenous and wealthy elites who were backed by military dictatorships. From the point of view of US businesses, things ended well in Guatemala. That success emboldened US intervention in places like Costa Rica and Honduras, where it wanted to protect American-owned banana plantations.

Cuba was another story, since the US failed to prevent communism there. The USSR supported Fidel Castro's Communist government, which took power in 1959. While Castro nationalized industries, the US authorized the C.I.A. to begin working with Cuban resistance groups. Castro had learned from Guatemala, and was able to thwart a coup attempt in 1961. US-backed rebels came to Cuban shores in what became a high-profile embarrassment for the US known as the "Bay of Pigs." Outside of China and the USSR, Cuba—an island about the size of Florida—was perhaps the most influential communist nation during the Cold War. The following year, under Castro, Cuba even briefly harbored Soviet nuclear missiles only 90 miles from Florida. Known as the "Cuban Missile Crisis" this was one of the tensest 13 days of the Cold War with both US and USSR leaders in a military standoff. Cooler heads prevailed, but many believe nuclear war was narrowly avoided.

Not all of Castro's policies were popular with Cubans. Many fled to the US as Castro's regime seized the property of wealthy citizens. Under Communism, many Cubans have lived in poverty without access to many modern technologies. However, the state promotes education and health, with many residents of neighboring countries traveling to Cuba for medical care. It remains a communist country today.

Overall, the course of Latin American history was certainly altered by the multiple, destabilizing interventions from the US and the USSR. Since the collapse of the USSR in the early 1990s, countries like Columbia and Argentina have undergone the painful process of reconciliation to address past atrocities of Cold War dictatorships. Others like Honduras have fallen into economic dependency on the US with little long-term benefit to poor people[[12]](#footnote-12).

## The Cold War in Africa

As in Latin America and Asia, communist and socialist ideas held great sway over decolonizing populations in Africa. Anti-imperial and pan-African[[13]](#footnote-13) sentiment was fierce immediately following World War Two. European presence had accelerated ethnic conflicts and pillaged (robbed) Africa's vast natural resources. Pan-Africanists felt a strong cultural pride in their African heritage. This thinking reached all the way to the US, where many African Americans began wearing traditional African clothing and growing out their natural hair instead of straightening it to appear more European. Pan-Africanists began connecting at international conferences to exchange cultural and political ideas.

The Belgian Congo in central Africa witnessed some of the greatest Cold War competition. A charismatic young leader, Patrice Lumumba, led a movement against Belgian rule. A pan-Africanist with communist sympathies, Lumumba became independent Congo's first Prime Minister in 1960. He immediately faced a chaotic situation. The US and Belgium wanted to maintain foreign businesses in resource-rich places like Katanga, a state that was threatening to secede from the Congo. Violent clashes followed, and some Congolese soldiers carried out atrocities against certain ethnic groups and also against Belgians.

Neither the United Nations nor other Western powers would assist Lumumba in putting down the rebellion in Katanga, so he turned to the Soviet Union. The anti-communist members of his new government were so aggravated by this, Lumumba was captured by opposition leaders and executed in 1961—with the help of Belgian and US intelligence. Congolese military leaders assumed power and cut all ties to the USSR. After his death, the Soviet Union created the Patrice Lumumba University in Moscow in 1961 to educate Third World students and attract them to communism.

This period of Cold War tensions and targeted attacks dramatically altered life in the Congo. Most European settlers fled, and out of the chaos of independence a strong military dictatorship emerged in 1965. This left a legacy of anti- communism, corruption, and authoritarian rule.

Other African nations like Egypt ended western alliances in the 1950s and 1960s. Nationalists took control of British and French imperial interests like the Suez Canal, a vital waterway for trade. Egyptian leaders engaged in socialist projects without necessarily taking sides with either the US or the Soviet Union, but also accepted military aid from the Soviets. The government managed to get economic assistance from *both* superpowers for major construction projects like the Aswan Dam on the Nile River. They maintained a general neutrality in the Cold War until the 1970s, when Egypt began to strengthen ties to the US.

In summary, decolonization and the Cold War were intertwined in many ways. New nations faced difficult political growing pains after European imperialism. As they pursued trading relationships, they were often forced to side with either American or Soviet interests when they needed economic, technical, or military assistance. Both superpowers intervened often, determining political outcomes in decolonizing nations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Results varied, but Cold War rivalries often produced chilling instability, corruption, and authoritarian rule.

## Sources

Hunt, Michael H. *The World Transformed: 1945 to the Present.* Oxford University Press, 2013.

Seybolt, Peter J. *Throwing the Emperor from His Horse: Portrait of a Village Leader in China, 1923-1995.* New York: Westview Press, 1996.

Barfield, Thomas J. “Problems in Establishing Legitimacy in Afghanistan.” *Iranian Studies* 37:2 (2004): 263-293.

## Author Bio

Burleigh Hendrickson is a visiting assistant professor in French and Francophone Studies at Dickinson College. He holds a PhD in world history from Northeastern University, and taught survey courses in the history of globalization at Boston College. Burleigh has published several peer-reviewed articles on transnational political activism in the Francophone world.

# Chinese Communist Revolution

Eman M. Elshaikh

China was never really colonized, but an anti-colonial vision drove much of its history in the twentieth century. Let's look at their unique route through empire, nationalism, communism and economic success.

## Carving up the melon

In the early 1900s, there was one image that kept popping up in Chinese newspapers and magazines: the melon. No, it wasn't a diet craze. The melon was China. It was a time when foreign influences were exploiting China's weak state more and more. That created an anxiety that China was being "carved up like a melon" by greedy imperialists.

Anxiety about imperialism is understandable. But China has a complicated relationship with imperialism. For much of its history, China was an empire itself. In the nineteenth century, however, it struggled against foreign imperialism. Decades of unequal treaties with Western nations and rising Japanese power meant that China had lost control of key ports, cities, and spheres of influence. The government was also forced to borrow money from foreign banks. Although in most cases not technically colonies, large regions of China were in reality under foreign control.

This situation was a large part of the reason why, in 1911, rebels started the Xinhai Revolution, overthrowing China's last imperial dynasty. The actual trigger came when the government gave control of China's railways to foreign companies. The revolt overthrew the six-year-old Emperor Puyi, and in 1912 opposition leaders established a Chinese republic.

## Nationalists vs. Communists (except during WWII)

After declaring a republican government, the new nationalist party, called the Guomindang (GMD)[[14]](#footnote-14), tried to rebuild the country. Under the leadership of the first president, Sun Zhongshan, they set about modernizing and unifying the country. But they struggled to maintain unity, and in reality warlords ran the different regions of China. In 1921, revolutionaries inspired by socialist anti-imperialist ideas formed the Communist Party of China (CCP).

At first, the Communists allied with the GMD against the warlords, but it didn't last long. By 1927, shortly after Sun Zhongshan's death, things fell apart. The GMD became willing to ally with any warlords or landlords, no matter how they treated the peasants, as long as they agreed to fight the Communists. In the meantime, the Communists encouraged peasants to overthrow their landlords.

Between 1927 and 1937, Communists tried to gain power for themselves, with the nationalists suppressing them. Meanwhile, another danger was looming. While the Chinese had ended their own imperial government, outside empires were still a threat. At the end of the First World War, the Treaty of Versailles had recognized some Japanese claims in China as a reward for Japan fighting alongside the victorious powers. By the 1920s, Japanese armies were pushing into Manchuria in northeast China. After 1937, China was officially at war with Japan. Reunited once again against imperialists, the GMD and CCP fought the Japanese invaders.

Fast forward to the end of WWII, and the Japanese were forced to surrender in China (as elsewhere), but only to the GMD.[[15]](#footnote-15) Their alliance of convenience ended, and for three years, 1946-1949, China was divided in a brutal civil war between the nationalists and the Communists. The Communists were the underdogs for many reasons, including US support for the GMT Nevertheless, they nevertheless emerged victorious in 1949. The Communist leader, Mao Zedong, declared a new socialist nation: The People's Republic of China (PRC). The nationalists and their leaders—about two million people— retreated to the island of Taiwan and established a rival Chinese nation, the Republic of China (ROC).

## Rise of the Communist Party of China

So, the Communists had their revolution in China, only it took twenty-eight years for them to hold power. But better late than never. They had won a great deal of support among the common people, especially peasants, who were glad to escape from the control of wealthy landlords and corrupt warlords. And they were seen as anti-imperialist heroes for their efforts against the Japanese. The PRC, led by Mao Zedong, embarked on the huge task of building a socialist state.

Chairman Mao (as he was known) had a plan to lower rent, redistribute land, energize industry, and uphold women's rights. But that required him to restructure society completely—an uphill battle, and a violent one. In the early 1950's, the PRC began its land reform process, mobilizing hundreds of thousands of poor peasants to liberate land from wealthy landlords and redistribute their resources. The landlords were subject to humiliation and violence. The struggle led to hundreds of thousands, possibly millions, of deaths. The process, as Mao admitted, was "not a dinner party."

Mao Zedong is reported to have said that "women hold up half the sky" and should be treated equally. During the early PRC days, he was true to his word. Marriage and land reforms gave women more rights, and women were encouraged to enter the work force—though there was a temporary reversal when urban women were encouraged to be good socialist housewives.

Following in Soviet footsteps and with Soviet support, the PRC also set out to centralize its industries, using five- year plans to set the pace of development. Focused on heavy industry, this commitment to industrializing continued with the Great Leap Forward. The what? Glad you asked…

## The Great Leap Forward

So, you know how on TV, when someone is doing something dangerous—and usually awesome—they say: don't try this at home! Well, the Chinese government gave the opposite advice, when it came to making steel. People were encouraged to build furnaces in their communities to make steel, in order to help China grow its industries. That's because China had been the biggest manufacturing center in the world before about 1750, but now they were way behind other parts of the world in industrial production. To catch up, they figured, why limit factory work to factories?

Homemade steel wasn't the best idea ever, but it was part of new initiatives launched during the Great Leap Forward campaign. Mao introduced the campaign in the late 1950s to industrialize the countryside, usually with small-scale factories and workshops. The campaign also called for educational reforms and the use of people's communes, where people lived and worked collectively.

Though stay-at-home steel-making didn't pan out, other things did. Infrastructure, like railroads, bridges, canals, reservoirs, mines, power stations, and irrigation systems, were built and modernized. However, agricultural output was pretty bad. There was a period of bad weather, plus a lot of the grain that people managed to grow was exported to the Soviet Union to pay for industrial equipment. As a result, China experienced catastrophic famines that killed tens of millions of people.

## The Cultural Revolution

Now if you're thinking: another revolution? Didn't China have two already?—don't worry. This wasn't that kind of revolution. It was another one of Mao's initiatives introduced in the mid-1960s: The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. The Great Leap Forward hadn't worked, and the economy was slow. Mao thought perhaps capitalism was still the culprit, so he started a social movement to weed it out of Chinese society.

He organized the "Red Guards," a militarized group of mostly teenagers. The goal was to destroy the "Four Olds" of pre-Communist China: Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits, and Old Ideas. Much of China's cultural heritage was destroyed, as it was—said the campaign—associated with capitalist, feudal, or backwards ways of thinking. That included religion, and this was especially tough on religious minorities. Also, those young people in the Red Guard who suddenly had so much power were an unruly bunch, and central authorities did not really have control of them.

During the Cultural Revolution, Mao and the PRC claimed to have achieved the goal of giving women equal rights, with Mao declaring, "The times have changed; men and women are the same." Women sported short hairstyles, wore army clothing, and worked alongside men. Despite this declaration, women continued to experience discrimination and abuse, but it was harder for them to speak up when Mao's message was that the battle for equality had already been won.

In the end, the Cultural Revolution caused a lot of problems. Schools suffered as students denounced their teachers as "bourgeois intellectuals"—but don't try that with your teachers. Many industries came to a halt as experts were driven off by the Red Guards. Even the Chinese Communist Party later called the policies "a great catastrophe", and many leaders believed it was really just Mao's way of eliminating his rivals within the party.

## China and the world

After the Cultural Revolution, however, things began to stabilize. Despite some disastrous policies, between 1949 and Mao's death in 1976, China's economy vastly improved. Its residents during this time became on average wealthier, more educated, and healthier. China was also becoming a more powerful regional and global actor once again—just in time for decolonization.

Anti-imperialism had been a huge part of Chinese nationalism for most of the century, and China committed to fighting imperialist powers abroad. But the face of imperialism had changed since WWII, with the United States and the Soviet Union vying for control. And though the PRC was on good terms with the Soviets initially, the relationship had soured, and China was more or less on its own by the 1960s. It joined the Non-Aligned Nations—who were committed to not taking sides in the US - Soviet Union rivalry—and practiced a policy of overall opposition to imperialism and colonialism.

Equipped with nuclear power after 1967, China emerged as the most powerful of these non-aligned nations. With a growing economy and a strong military, it became a powerful world actor. In fact, it was the PRC and not the Soviet Union that was the main socialist backer of Communists in the Korean and Vietnam Wars for a while. As its economy and power grew, China effectively became the third-strongest global power. And for a long time, it sponsored decolonization in many places. Ultimately, this powerful nation enacted policies that others claimed were Chinese imperialism—like taking over Tibet and trying to culturally change Muslim citizens in the south-west of China. Some might question, therefore, whether late twentieth-century China was becoming an empire once again.

## Sources

“1750-1919: China and the West: Imperialism, Opium, and Self-Strengthening (1800-1921) | Central Themes and Key Points | Asia for Educators | Columbia University.” Accessed July 18, 2019. <http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/main_pop/kpct/kp_imperialism.htm>.

Duara, Prasenjit, Sun Yat-Sen, Ho Chi Minh, Jawaharlal Nehru, Frantz Fanon, Jalal Al-I. Ahmad, Kwame Nkrumah, et al., eds. *Decolonization: Perspectives from Now and Then*. Re-Writing Histories. New York: Routledge, 2004.

Duara, Prasenjit. *Culture, Power, and the State: Rural North China, 1900-1942*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988.

———. “Modern Imperialism.” *The Oxford Handbook of World History*, March 31, 2011. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199235810.013.0022>.

———. *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uchicago/detail.action?docID=471849>.

———. *Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern*. State and Society in East Asia. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003.

Duara, Prasenjit, and Sugata Bose, eds. *Asia Redux: Conceptualising a Region for Our Times*. New Delhi, India: Manohar, 2013.

Ebrey, Patricia Buckley, and Anne. Walthall. *Modern East Asia: From 1600: A Cultural, Social, and Political History*. Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2014.

Eisenman, Joshua. *Red China’s Green Revolution: Technological Innovation, Institutional Change, and Economic Development under the Commune*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.

“Everyday Life in Maoist China.” Accessed July 18, 2019. <https://everydaylifeinmaoistchina.org/>.

FitzGerald, C. P. “Religion and China’s Cultural Revolution.” *Pacific Affairs* 40, no. 1/2 (1967): 124–29.

Fraser, Cary. “Decolonization and the Cold War.” *The Oxford Handbook of the Cold War*, January 1, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199236961.013.0027>.

Goodman, David S. G. “Revolutionary Women and Women in the Revolution: The Chinese Communist Party and Women in the War of Resistance to Japan, 1937–1945.” *The China Quarterly* 164 (December 2000): 915–42. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741000019238>.

Goscha, Christopher. “Global Wars and Decolonization in East and South-East Asia (1937–1954).” *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire*, December 6, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198713197.013.16>.

Hershatter, Gail. *Women and China’s Revolutions*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019.

———. *Women in China’s Long Twentieth Century*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007.

“Introduction to China’s Modern History | Asia for Educators | Columbia University.” Accessed July 18, 2019. <http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/timelines/china_modern_timeline.htm>.

Ip, Hung-Yok. “Fashioning Appearances: Feminine Beauty in Chinese Communist Revolutionary Culture.” *Modern China* 29, no. 3 (2003): 329–61.

Kerr, Gordon. “A Short History of China: From Ancient Dynasties to Economic Powerhouse.” Harpenden, UK: Oldcastle Books Ltd., 2013.

Lee, Christopher J. “Anti-Colonialism.” *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire*, December 6, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198713197.013.24>.

Li, Yuhui. “Women’s Movement and Change of Women’s Status in China.” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 1, no. 1 (January 18, 2013): 30–40.

Ma, Tehyun. “The Eclipse of Empire in China.” *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire*, December 6, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198713197.013.14>.

McNeill, John, and Kenneth Pomeranz, eds. *The Cambridge World History Volume 7 Part 1 Production, Destruction and Connection, 1750–Present*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139196079>.

———, eds. *The Cambridge World History Volume 7 Part 2 Production, Destruction and Connection 1750–Present*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316182789>.

Mitter, Rana. “China and the Cold War.” *The Oxford Handbook of the Cold War*, January 1, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199236961.013.0008>.

———. “Nationalism in East Asia, 1839–1945.” *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Nationalism*, March 1, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199209194.013.0014>.

Ropp, Paul Stanley. *China in World History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Rowe, William T. *China’s Last Empire: The Great Qing*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009.

Schmalzer, Sigrid. *Red Revolution, Green Revolution: Scientific Farming in Socialist China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Shaffer, Lynda. “Modern Chinese Labor History, 1895-1949.” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 20 (1981): 31–37.

Strayer, Robert W. *Ways of the World: A Brief Global History with Sources; Volume 2: Since the Fifteenth Century.* Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2019.

Wagner, Rudolf. “‘Dividing up the [Chinese] Melon, Guafen 瓜分’: The Fate of a Transcultural Metaphor in the Formation of National Myth.” *The Journal of Transcultural Studies*, no. 1 (October 10, 2017): 9–122. <https://doi.org/10.17885/heiup.ts.2017.1.23700>.

Yang, Wenqi, and Fei Yan. “The Annihilation of Femininity in Mao’s China: Gender Inequality of Sent-down Youth during the Cultural Revolution.” *China Information* 31, no. 1 (March 1, 2017): 63–83. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0920203X17691743>.

Zarrow, Peter Gue. *China in War and Revolution, 1895-1949. Asia’s Transformations*. New York: Routledge, 2005. <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/uchicago/docDetail.action?docID=10273050>.

Zhao, Gang. “Reinventing China: Imperial Qing Ideology and the Rise of Modern Chinese National Identity in the Early Twentieth Century.” *Modern China* 32, no. 1 (2006): 3–30.

Zheng, Wang. “Communism and Gender in China.” In The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies, 1–8. American Cancer Society, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118663219.wbegss761>.

## Author Bio

Eman M. Elshaikh holds an MA in social sciences from and is pursuing a PhD at the University of Chicago, where she also teaches writing. She is a writer and researcher, and has taught K-12 and undergraduates in the US and in the Middle East. Eman was previously a World History Fellow at Khan Academy, where she worked closely with the College Board to develop curriculum for AP world history.

# Apartheid

Jeff Spoden

Legalized racism has occurred in many places and many eras. One of history's most glaring and most recent examples was the system known as apartheid in South Africa. Keyword: was.

## What is apartheid?

Back in the 1980s, one issue brought the world together as few had done before. Activists from every corner of the Earth, inspired by the actions of black South Africans, demanded an end to an unjust system known as *apartheid*. Apartheid is an Afrikaans[[16]](#footnote-16) word meaning "apartness." It was a policy of legal discrimination and segregation directed at the black majority in South Africa.

The oppression of black African communities, even within Africa, was nothing new. European colonial governments had placed restrictions on almost every aspect of their lives, from marriage to employment to housing. In South Africa in particular, the white minority had used their colonial authority and weaponry to control the majority population as early as the eighteenth century. Under British rule, they had passed a series of laws that gradually brought most of the land of South Africa under their control, and forced the indigenous people to become poorly paid laborers.

But after WWII, independence was in the air. Britain, France, and other European colonial powers were weakened from the devastating war against Germany. At the same time, countries all over the world that had been colonized and exploited for decades now wanted their freedom. Between 1946 and 1970, over 60 countries declared their independence from foreign rule.

Of those, 44 were in Africa! It was good timing. This passionate movement toward decolonization and self-determination was happening along with a global spirit of cooperation that emerged from the devastating effects of WWII. Many parts of the world were coming together in calls for freedom and justice. The South African black majority, inspired by these calls and fed up with discriminatory laws, demanded equality. Of course, the powerful rarely give up anything without a fight, and the white majority in South Africa were no exception. In 1948 the National Party became the ruling political party in South Africa. Frightened by increasing black activism and fueled by racism, they passed a series of laws to make the oppression of black South Africans perfectly legal. This discriminatory legal system was called apartheid.

Some of these laws included:

* Classifying all South Africans into racial categories: "white," "black," and "colored" (mixed race).
* Making it illegal for people to marry across those categories, or even to have sexual relations.
* Mandating segregation (separation of races) in schools and all public facilities.
* Moving all black South Africans into small areas referred to as "homelands" or Bantustans. In total, 30 million black South Africans—over 70 percent of the population—were moved onto 13 percent of South Africa's land.
* Restricting freedom of movement, requiring black South Africans to always carry a "pass book" showing their assigned race and "homeland." Being outside of one's "homeland" was cause for arrest.
* Forbidding black South Africans from owning land outside of the Bantustans.
* Forbidding black labor unions from striking.
* Making it illegal to protest, or to gather in groups large enough to start a protest.
* Denying black people the right to vote, except for local authorities in their Bantustans.

Historians have noted how similar these laws were to the Jim Crow laws in the American South from the 1870s through the 1960s. The Jim Crow laws forced segregation, second-class status, and political disenfranchisement (taking away the right to vote) on African Americans. Apartheid did the same thing, but to a black majority within South Africa. As the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum in the U.S., the federal government slowly began to dismantle these legal restrictions. But about the same time, South Africa's national government was writing inequality and injustice deeper into the law of the land.

## The anti-apartheid movement

The anti-apartheid movement in South Africa was fought on many fronts. Political parties were formed such as the African National Congress (ANC), the South African Communist Party (SACP), the South African Indian Congress, and the South African Congress of Democrats. In the 1950s, most of these parties formed a multi-racial alliance against apartheid.

For many years these groups used nonviolent activism. But as National Party laws became more racist and restrictive, the opposition groups called for stronger action. They organized strikes, boycotts of white businesses, and protests of all kinds. In 1955 they issued the Freedom Charter. This document called for an end to apartheid and new freedom and opportunity for black South Africans. It stated that all people were entitled to an education and a decent job. Also, since many influential leaders had embraced the idea of African socialism, the Freedom Charter called for worker control of industry and a sharing of all the nation's land and wealth.

The Freedom Charter was controversial. Some black activists disliked the references to all people having rights, wanting it to focus exclusively on the rights and freedoms of black Africans. Others were uncomfortable with the charter's socialist language. They feared that any link to socialist or communist ideas would discredit the entire anti-apartheid movement. And that's pretty much what happened. The white minority government sounded the alarm that all activism—protests, strikes, and boycotts—was communist-inspired. Remember that this was taking place during the 1950s and 1960s, when many were panicked about the spread of communism. The U.S. and U.S.S.R. were in the midst of the Cold War. Governments, as well as some dictators, were using the excuse of "fighting communism" to crush rebellions of workers who rose up to battle poverty and injustice. It was easy for the National Party to do the same. They claimed that their brutal tactics against black activists were simply attempts to stop a communist takeover.

And brutal they were. As opposition to apartheid gained momentum across the country, the government unleashed the power of their well-armed police and military. In 1960 police opened fire on peaceful protesters in the township[[17]](#footnote-17) of Sharpeville, killing 69 people. Shortly after these killings in 1962, Nelson Mandela, a lawyer and president of the ANC, was imprisoned along with other leaders of the opposition movement. At his trial, Mandela inspired future generations of activists with his three-hour "I Am Prepared to Die" speech in court. While Mandela would spend 27 years in prison, both he and others continued the fight against apartheid. In 1976, in the township of Soweto, thousands of students took to the streets to protest new educational restrictions. The police responded with tear gas and gunfire, which resulted in the deaths of over 100 schoolchildren.

These and other actions were creating the type of inspirational figures that authoritarian leaders fear. Stephen Biko was a leader of the South African Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), which shared ideas about black pride and empowerment with people of color around the world. In the same way that the American Civil Rights Movement inspired anti-apartheid struggles, African American groups like the Black Panther Party were motivating the BCM from many thousands of miles away. The term "Black is Beautiful" may have originated in America, but it was Biko who used it to inspire a generation of young black Africans. When he was jailed and beaten to death in Port Elizabeth, 20,000 people attended his funeral and he became a beloved martyr of the movement.

## A global response

Nelson Mandela was also beloved. His decades-long imprisonment became a symbol of the ongoing repression by the South African government. The resistance to apartheid by youth in Soweto and elsewhere was discussed all over the world. It broadened the anti-apartheid movement into a powerful international network. As more people became aware of the horrors of apartheid, the international community began to act. In the 1970s and 1980s, South African teams were banned from participating in the Olympics, FIFA World Cup, and the Rugby World Cup, among others. Activist groups, in particular university students in America and Europe, began asking their schools to "divest" from South Africa. Divestment is basically the opposite of investment, so this movement called for companies to stop doing business in South Africa and for individuals to boycott any companies that refused. This became a major focus of the movement within the United States, with students on campuses nationwide staging demonstrations. Their message: Americans must sever ties to anyone conducting business in South Africa.

Inspired by the continued struggle of the black community in South Africa, people around the world became determined to bring about change in South Africa. The frequent television reports of black South Africans taking to the streets and being met with brutal government retaliation helped to keep attention on the situation. In many countries, schools, churches, city councils, union halls, and corporations were all demanding an end to apartheid. Some leaders, like President Ronald Reagan in the United States and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom, resisted these calls. They claimed that the black activists supported communism. But the international movement managed to overcome their objections.

South Africans felt supported and encouraged, and their political power grew while the South African government became financially and politically more isolated. Finally, in 1990, the world watched as the new president of the National Party, F. W. de Klerk, released Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners. The party began to overturn segregationist laws and recognized the ANC as a legitimate political party. Within four years, Mandela became president of the country. Though the new majority government faced many challenges, it was a new day in South Africa. Apartheid was over.

The country continues to grapple with the problems faced by many nations: economic development, poverty, crime, access to education, and discrimination. But its ability to end the policies of apartheid are still an example of how people can come together to overcome years of mistreatment and work to create a just society. It has also shown how the fight for equality in one nation can move to a global stage and gain support. Had the activists in South Africa not been able to bring on board global support, would apartheid still be the law of the land in South Africa?

## Sources

“ANC and the early development of apartheid 1948-1950s.” *South African History Online*, 2018. Accessed May 14, 2019. [www.sahistory.org.za/topic/anc-and-early-development-apartheid-1948-1950s](http://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/anc-and-early-development-apartheid-1948-1950s)

Hadfield, Leslie Anne. “Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement.” *Oxford Research Encyclopedias*, 2017.

History.com Editors. “Apartheid.” *History*, 2019. Accessed May 14, 2019. [www.history.com/topics/africa/apartheid](http://www.history.com/topics/africa/apartheid)

Kurtz, Lester. “The Anti-Apartheid Struggle in South Africa (1912-1992).” *International Center on Nonviolent Conflict*, 2010. Accessed May 14, 2019. [www.nonviolent-conflict.org/anti-apartheid-struggle-south-africa-1912-1992/](http://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/anti-apartheid-struggle-south-africa-1912-1992/).

Michigan State University. “South Africa: Overcoming Apartheid Building Democracy.” *African Studies Center Michigan State University*. Accessed May 14, 2019. <http://overcomingapartheid.msu.edu/unit.php?id=65-24E-1>

Nodjimbadem, Katie. “A Look Back at South Africa Under Apartheid, Twenty-Five Years After Its Repeal.” *Smithsonian Magazine*, 2015. Accessed May 14, 2019. [www.smithsonianmag.com/history/what-did-apartheid-south-africa-look-180956945/](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/what-did-apartheid-south-africa-look-180956945/)

One Bold Idea. “How students helped end apartheid: The UC Berkeley protest that changed the world.” *University of California*, 2018. Accessed May 14, 2019. [www.universityofcalifornia.edu/news/how-students-helped-end-apartheid](http://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/news/how-students-helped-end-apartheid)

## Author Bio

Jeff Spoden is a retired social studies teacher, having been in the classroom for 33 years. He taught US history, world history, sociology, international relations, and history of American popular music. He loves music, film, travel, the Golden State Warriors, and the number 32.

# The Collapse of Communism

Jeff Spoden

From a literal wall in Berlin to the figurative "iron curtain" its territories created, the rise and fall of the Soviet Union is a dramatic story of the barriers we build and unbuild with ideological tools.

## Introduction

The world saw dramatic political changes in the late 1980s and early 1990s. One of history's most iconic images is the 1989 dismantling of the infamous wall that had divided Germany since 1961. East Germany and West Germany reunified as one country. The wall's destruction came to symbolize the abandonment of communism in East Germany as well as the disintegration of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union itself. How did this come about? Was socialism inherently flawed? Had a power-hungry communist bureaucracy disregarded its own people? Were people in eastern Europe fed up with being dominated by the USSR?

All of the above, and more! But this essay will focus on the fall of the Soviet Union as part of the global movement against empire. It was a time when people the world over demanded freedom and an end to domination by outside nations.

## Empire or union?

Did the Soviet Union have an empire? If we accept a basic view of an empire as a group of peoples or countries controlled by a larger, more powerful country, then it certainly was. For centuries, Russia had been gaining control of its surrounding territories. However, in 1922, shortly after the Bolshevik revolution, those territories became part of the Soviet Union. By conquering its neighbors, the Soviet empire was unlike other European empires. The British empire, for example, consisted of countries all over the world. India, Egypt, Nigeria, South Africa, Yemen, Indonesia, Pakistan, Hong Kong, and many other countries were colonized and controlled by England. But while these nations were part of the British empire, they were not part of England itself—like a big house that had a lot of extra smaller houses scattered around the property. The Soviet Union just kept building on to the main house, incorporating its territories right into the country! Kazakh, Uzbek, Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine, Moldavia, Belarus, Turkmen, Tajik, and Azerbaijan became republics in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. So did Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, known as the Baltic states because of their position along the Baltic Sea. In essence, Russia expanded and maintained its empire by incorporating the various pieces into the new country—the USSR. Geographically, this made the empire easier to control, but it also sowed the seeds of the country's eventual collapse. The republics had different languages, cultures, and histories. Soviet leaders tried to force all of these different peoples to adopt a unified, "Soviet" identification, but they also knew that they couldn't wipe out cultures that had existed for thousands of years. They allowed people to hold on to their ethnic identities, and they gave the republics a degree of autonomy (just as states within the US have separate governments and rights to make some of their own laws).

## An informal empire?

Some suggest—and others disagree—that the Soviet Union had an informal empire. The eastern European nations that did *not* become part of the USSR became known as Soviet "satellites". These were Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, and East Germany. The USSR used them as a buffer between itself and Europe, since about 30 million people had died in invasions by European powers in recent decades. That buffer was part of what Winston Churchill would call the "iron curtain" symbolizing the western attitude toward Soviet expansionism. To Soviet leaders it was a defensive wall separating them from hostile western powers. So the governments of these "buffer" countries were thoroughly controlled by the USSR, who made it clear that any hint of rebellion would be crushed immediately. Soviet tanks rolled into Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968 to violently put down movements toward autonomy \[independence\] for those countries. In the United States, popular opinion accused the USSR of attempting to expand its empire by supporting socialist and/or communist movements around the world. This is debatable, for while the Soviets did lend support to leftist movements in Vietnam, Angola, Mozambique, Nicaragua, and other countries during the 1970s and 1980s, it's not clear whether they wanted to control these nations, or just help them survive. After all, fledgling (new) socialist governments faced relentless attacks by the United States and its European allies.

## Internal empire?

This brings up an interesting contradiction. Here was the USSR, supporting movements of national liberation and revolutions against tyranny around the world. At the same time they had no problem ruling their own people with an iron fist. Economist Richard Wolff claims that this was because an understandable paranoia gripped Soviet leaders. Fearing destruction at the hands of hostile enemies, it sought to stamp out all opposition to its socialist path. Dissidents—meaning individuals opposed to state policy—were imprisoned, exiled to Siberian work camps, or killed. Land that had been given to peasants after the revolution was taken back. The idea of freedom for women that had been embraced in 1920 was abandoned. Early attempts to respect and work with the many ethnic minorities in the nation were also cast aside. And perhaps most telling, given the foundational Marxian idea that workers should control factories and economic decisions, worker committees set up in the 1920s were abolished. Decisions were made by increasingly powerful bureaucrats and "central committee" members. They spoke the language of revolution, but acted like cogs in an ever more dictatorial machine.

## From repression to liberation?

Resistance to Soviet power beneath the surface of society was probably pretty common, but it only appeared dramatically in an occasional way before the 1980s. After the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, people in several eastern European states tried to pull away from the Warsaw Pact. This was most dramatic in Hungary, where the government announced the country would allow additional political parties outside of the communist party and would be withdrawing from the Warsaw Pact in 1956. Despite widespread popular support, this rebellion was quickly crushed by Soviet troops. Czechoslovakia tried to go its own way in 1968. The government of Alexander Dubček introduced reforms aimed at creating a democratic government. But they, too, were ousted by armed force and more obedient leaders were put in place. It seemed the Soviet Union wasn't going to allow any country to leave its sphere of influence, a policy known as the "Brezhnev Doctrine".

However, things started to change when Mikhail Gorbachev became leader of the country in 1985. He knew his nation had big problems—economic stagnation, lack of individual freedoms for its people, massive expenditures to keep up with continued US nuclear build-up, and further massive expenses to maintain its hold on eastern Europe. So Gorbachev put forth a two- pronged approach to changing the Soviet system: *glasnost* and *perestroika*. Glasnost can translate to "openness" or "publicity", and it simply meant opening the Soviet system up to greater discussion, freedom of the press, permission of criticism, and government transparency. Perestroika means "restructuring", which is what Gorbachev wanted for the Soviet economy and political system. These two programs brought major changes. Many companies were now allowed to decide what to produce and how much to produce, and some farmers were given the same freedom. Co-ops were formed, basically as privately owned entities. Companies were allowed to engage in foreign trade without permission. Workers were able to push for greater protections and rights. Newspapers could publish what they wanted, and citizens—hungry for information they'd long been denied—lined up for blocks to read the commentaries of writers who would have been jailed just a few years before. The first democratic elections since 1917 were held. The Soviet military would withdraw troops from eastern Europe, finally loosening its grip on Warsaw Pact countries. This loosening was what millions of people had been waiting for, and for the next six years they let loose like never before.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1986 | * Protests and riots in Kazakhstan.
 |
| 1987 | * Demonstrations in all three Baltic states.
* Major anti-Soviet protests in Lithuania.
* Demonstrations in Armenia.
 |
| 1988 | * Demonstrations and deadly fighting between Azerbaijanis and Armenians.
* Demonstrations and calls for independence in Georgia.
* Protests in the Ukraine.
* Rallies in Belarus.
 |
| 1989 | * Demonstrations and rioting in most of the Soviet republics; same in satellite countries.
* Soviet troops clash with protestors, leaving many dead, and the local people furious.
 |
| 1990 | * Six republics declare their independence from the Soviet Union: Armenia, Estonia, Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Moldova.
* Soviet troops try to maintain order and keep the country from falling apart. It doesn’t work.
 |
| 1991 | * The dam breaks, with all of the satellites, the Baltic states, and most of the republics declaring either independence or political autonomy. The Soviet Union is defunct.
 |

Many say Gorbachev thought he was saving the Soviet Union with a few minor reforms, and that he never imagined these reforms would get out of hand. But out of hand is exactly where they got! After decades of brutal repression, people finally got the right to criticize and protest, and they held back nothing.

As the Soviet system was unravelling within and without, Gorbachev could have taken a hard line and used his powerful military to crush both internal and external rebellion. He chose not to. In fact, Leon Aron of *Foreign Policy* magazine, wrote that it was actually the morality of Gorbachev and his closest allies that led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Aron states:

The core of Gorbachev's enterprise was undeniably idealistic… It was the beginning of a desperate search for answers to the big questions with which every great revolution starts: What is a good, dignified life? What constitutes a just social and economic order? What is a decent and legitimate state? What should such a state's relationship with civil society be?

Of course Mikhail Gorbachev deserves credit for moving his country toward democracy, but we can't forget that the Soviet Union's collapse also related to a more global movement for national liberation. What started with independence movements of Latin American countries in the 1920s and continued with African and Asian nations in the 1950s to the 1970s, finally worked its way to the surprising spasm of freedom in the Soviet sphere. Hopefully, this "arc toward justice," as Martin Luther King, Jr. stated, will continue with developing countries throwing off their economic shackles as they did their political ones.

## Author Bio

Jeff Spoden is a retired social studies teacher who spent 33 years in the classroom. He taught US history, world history, sociology, international relations, and the history of American popular music.

# And Then Gandhi Came: Nationalism, Revolution, and Sovereignty

Anita Ravi

How did nationalism contribute to the Quit India movement? What about the idea of being a member of a community, and sovereignty? Historical sources help us understand the fight for Indian independence from British imperial rule.

Over the last 100 years, millions of people were led to action, rose up, and fought against foreign, colonial governments. They've started new, independent nations. Since 1945 alone, more than 50 newly independent states have formed. The twentieth century could be called the century of "power to the people." But how and why did these revolutions occur? What motivated so many people in so many different places to come together and insist on independence? What are the features of successful independence movements?

## What is nationalism?

Benedict Anderson was a historian and political scientist who wrote about nations and the development of nation-states in the modern era. In his book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, he talks about the features of nationalism and the idea of the nation. Anderson writes that the nation is something that is imagined. This is because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow- members, meet them, or even hear of them. It's only in their minds that they can see themselves coming together. In fact, Anderson writes, all communities larger than a small village are imagined. What distinguishes communities is not how false or genuine they are, but in which style they are imagined.

Anderson is saying that in order to feel part of a nation, you have to imagine that you are part of something that includes people you will never meet and never know. You must imagine that it is bigger than yourself, your city or your neighborhood. He's also saying that the "style" in which a nation is "imagined" is important. By "style," he means the features or characteristics of the nation. Will it be a democratic one where all people have a say? Will it be authoritarian where there is a ruling elite, but the rest of the people go along with it because the nation gives them a sense of importance or power? This is what the Nazis did in Germany.

Anderson goes on to explain that if a nation is imagined as independent and self-governing it's because it was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were spreading. It's at this time when the idea of a ruler being appointed by God or born into their role no longer seemed acceptable. Nations dreamed of being free. Even if they were ruled under God, they wanted to be directly so and not ruled by another land.

There may be a lot of inequality in any one nation. But it is still imagined as a community, Anderson explains. Ultimately it is this sense of brother and sisterhood that makes it possible for so many millions of people to willingly die for something they can really only imagine.

So he's saying that in the modern era, the imagined, new nations put the idea of independence at the center. The idea of freedom was tied to the idea of independence—you can't be free unless you are self-ruling. Lastly, he's saying that the idea of community is what unites everyone under a common vision. As a new, independent nation, citizens share a set of beliefs and ideas that they would die for. This sets them apart and defines them as a nation. This is nationalism. We can use Anderson's ideas of imagined, self-ruling, and community to look at one of the first modern revolutions for independence.

## Defining the new nation: Indian independence

By 1900, Europe had colonized many places. But the Atlantic revolutions had happened by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They had already introduced the idea that people could indeed throw off their colonizers and become independent. India had been under British control for almost 200 years. In that time, the British had taken control of commerce and government in most of the region. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Indians organized many uprisings against the British government's policies. This led the British to fear further resistance and to put in place harsher policies toward Indians. The turning point toward independence was an event called the Amritsar Massacre. It took place on 13 April 1919. The massacre was led by Reginald Dyer. He was appointed by the British government as a temporary brigadier general in the Punjab region of India. Here's a brief account of what led to the massacre from Vincent Sheehan, a historian of the period:

[General Dyer] ordered that all Indians passing through a certain street, where the English headmistress of a school had been beaten by a mob on April 10, must crawl on all fours. This applied to Indian families who had no other means of reaching their homes. Any Indian in a vehicle had to dismount and crawl; any Indian with a parasol had to furl it and crawl; any Indian was ordered to salute or salaam an English officer in these districts. A whipping post was installed at the spot where the school mistress had been beaten, and this was used for flogging such Indians as disobeyed any of the orders (Moore, 191).

From this account, it appears that an English headmistress of a school had been attacked. In response, General Dyer put in place really harsh punishments. Indians were forced to crawl down the street where she was beaten. They felt humiliated. Next, General Dyer ordered his troops to fire on a peaceful gathering in a park in the northern city of Amritsar. The park only had five exits: four of these were narrow pathways. Soldiers blocked the fifth, and largest, exit. Sheehan's account indicates that this gathering was a combination of two events. It was a rally for independence as well as a celebration of Baisakhi day, a national religious festival for Sikhs, Hindus, and Buddhists. General Dyer issued a statement prohibiting this meeting. Notices were posted throughout the city. However, Dyer's warning was not broadcast throughout the city or published in the newspaper. This meant that many people did not get the message, especially those who were traveling into the city of Amritsar from nearby villages. A British military committee investigated the Amritsar massacre. Here is part of General Dyer's testimony:

Q: When you got into the Bagh (clearing) what did you do?

Dyer: I opened fire.

Q: At once?

Dyer: Immediately. I had thought about the matter and don't imagine it took me more than 30 seconds to make up my mind as to what my duty was.

Q: How many people were in the crowd?

Dyer: I then estimated them roughly at 5,000. I heard afterwards there were many more.

Q: On the assumption that there was that risk of people being in the crowd who were not aware of the proclamation, did it not occur to you that it was a proper measure to ask the crowd to (clear out) before you took that step of actually firing?

Dyer: No, at the time I did not. I merely felt that my orders had not been obeyed, that martial law was (ignored), and that it was my duty to immediately (clear them out) by rifle fire…

Q: Did the crowd at once start to (clear out) as soon as you fired?

Dyer: Immediately.

Q: Did you continue firing?

Dyer: Yes.

Q: What reason had you to suppose that if you ordered the assembly to leave the Bagh, they would not have done so without the necessity of your firing and continuing firing for any length of time?

Dyer: Yes, I think it quite possible that I could have (cleared them out) perhaps even without firing.

Q: Why did you not (turn) to that?

Dyer: They would have all come back and laughed at me, and I should have made what I considered a fool of myself… My idea from the military point of view was to make a wide impression (Saund, 151-153).

It appears that General Dyer ordered his troops to massacre hundreds, if not thousands, of Indians that day. He did this so that he would not make a "fool" of himself. The practices described above show how little regard he had for the Indians he supposedly ruled. By humiliating and then killing the local population, the colonial government itself helped bring about revolt. The policies and events described above pushed Indians further toward an imagined, independent nation. In their imagined nation, people would be treated with dignity.

In order to learn a bit more about how India gained its independence, we must examine the life of Mohandas Gandhi. Here's what independent India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, had to say about Gandhi's importance to India's independence in his book *Discovery of India*, which was first published in 1946:

We seemed to be helpless in the grip of some all-powerful monster; our limbs were paralyzed, our minds deadened. The peasantry were servile and fear-ridden; the industrial workers were no better. The middle classes, the intelligentsia, who might have been beacon-lights in the enveloping darkness, were themselves submerged in this all-pervading gloom…

What could we do? How could we pull India out of this quagmire of poverty and defeatism which sucked her in? …

And then Gandhi came. He was like a powerful current of fresh air that made us stretch ourselves and take deep breaths; like a beam of light that pierced the darkness and removed the scales from our eyes; like a whirlwind that upset many things, but most of all the working of people's minds. He did not descend from the top; he seemed to emerge from the millions of India, speaking their language and incessantly drawing attention to them and their appalling condition. Get off the backs of these peasants and workers, he told us, all you who live by their exploitation; get rid of the system that produces this poverty and misery.

Political freedom took new shape and then acquired a new content. Much that he said we only partially accepted or sometimes did not accept at all. But all this was secondary. The essence of his teaching was fearlessness and truth, and action allied to these, always keeping the welfare of the masses in view. The greatest gift for an individual or a nation, so we had been told in our ancient books, was abhay (fearlessness), not merely bodily courage but the absence of fear from the mind… at the dawn of our history, \[our leaders had said\] that it was the function of the leaders of a people to make them fearless. But the dominant impulse in India under British rule was that of fear — pervasive, oppressing, strangling fear; fear of the army, the police, the widespread secret service; fear of the official class; fear of laws meant to suppress, and of prison; fear of the landlord's agent; fear of the moneylender; fear of unemployment and starvation, which were always on the threshold. It was against this all-pervading fear that Gandhi's quiet and determined voice was raised: Be not afraid (Nehru, 391-393).

What Nehru is saying in this very powerful passage is that Gandhi brought fresh ideas about freedom, independence, and community. They weren't all new ideas. Some of these ideas came from Hinduism – the "ancient texts" Nehru refers to – such as abhay. Some of these ideas came from Indian history before the invasions of the Mughals and the British. These ideas came together in a single idea that was the basis of the Indian Independence movement. This idea was called satyagraha. Its three main ingredients were truth, nonviolence, and self-suffering. It was actually a plan for waging a revolution.

This central idea drove the Quit India movement, a nonviolent path toward a self-ruling India. Here are the strategies for nonviolent revolution as outlined by Gandhi:

1. Make every effort to resolve the conflict or address wrongs through negotiation and mediation; when that fails,
2. Prepare the group for direct action through exercises in self-discipline and, for Indian satyagrahis, purification fasting;
3. Start an active propaganda campaign. Hold demonstrations, mass-meetings and parades, and chant slogans;
4. Issue a final threat that offers a constructive solution to the problem. Make it such that offers the widest scope for agreement and face-saving;
5. Organize an economic boycott (agreement to stop purchasing British products) and forms of strike (refuse to work for British producers and distributors of goods); noncooperation such as nonpayment of taxes, boycott of schools and other public institutions, ostracism, or even voluntary exile;
6. Perform civil disobedience by breaking laws that are either central to the main complaint or symbolic; and finally,
7. Take over the functions of the government by force and form a parallel government.

Each step above is a strategy for challenging and winning power. Step two comes from Hindu traditions. When he says "self-discipline," he's referring to the principles of satyagraha. Individuals need to reflect on truth, promote nonviolence, and get ready for self-suffering, which means not fighting back. He's asking people to be problem- solvers and to demonstrate openly. He's also advocating economic boycotts and legal resistance. In step six, he specifically asks people to target unjust British laws by breaking those laws. This is a recipe for revolution.

## Conclusion

Let's return to Benedict Anderson's description of nationalism. Remember, it comprises three qualities: imagined, self-ruling, and community. How do these three qualities apply to India?

*Imagined*: The features of an imagined independent India are really defined by Gandhi's philosophy of satyagraha. This includes a plan that he developed to carry out revolution. In other words, there needs to be a guiding philosophy that produces the imagined nation-state.

*Self-ruling*: The Amritsar Massacre helped to solidify that Indians truly needed, and wanted, independence. Under British rule, they would remain unfree and afraid, as Nehru states so eloquently in the source above. This key event married the idea of self-rule to the idea of freedom. The massacre is the turning point or triggering event toward commitment to self-rule.

*Community*: Community was necessary for the success of the independence movement. Protests and boycotts against unjust laws would only succeed if everyone was united. Take, for example, the boycott of English cloth. Indians had to trust that if they boycotted in the northern city of Delhi, their countrymen in the southern city of Bangalore would do the same. A shared commitment to a protest plan is a main ingredient of successful revolution.

# The Middle East and the End of Empire

Eman M. Elshaikh

During the Cold War, Middle Eastern leaders sought to cast off the burden of old European colonialism. But they had to account for a Cold War between two new imperial superpowers.

## Middle from where?

What are the first words that come to mind when you hear the term "the Middle East"? Your answer probably depends on where you live. For a lot of Americans, "conflict," "oil," and "Islam" might come to mind. Many Americans think that Middle Eastern conflicts are inevitable and based on ancient religious disputes. But this is a misconception. The idea that conflict is inherent to the Middle East might be rooted in the fact that the United States has fought a series of seemingly unending wars in the region for the last two decades. Those wars, like earlier conflicts in the twentieth century, have a lot to do with oil. But they also have a lot to do with colonialism. What does colonialism have to do with the Middle East? The term "the Middle East" is itself a British colonial invention. It takes a European point of view, geographically speaking. Along with the "Near" and "Far East," British imperialists coined the term in the nineteenth century. During the Second World War, the American military adopted and popularized the term. But no one can seem to agree on where the Middle East is. Some argue it includes everything between Egypt and India. Others say that North Africa and Central Asia are included. No matter where you draw its borders, it's a contested term. Speaking of drawing lines, let's take a look at World War I, European colonialism, and how the modern Middle East came to be.

## Drawing lines on a map

By 1914, the Ottoman Sultans ruled a crumbling empire. For 600 years, the Ottoman Empire dominated much of what we now call the Middle East. Their influence shaped the cultural, political, and religious character of a vast region from Morocco to Iraq and from Egypt to Eastern Europe. But beginning in the nineteenth century, the empire began to decline, and many of its territories fell to European control. During the First World War, the Ottomans sided with the Central Powers against Britain and France. In 1916, British and French diplomats signed a secret treaty called the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which divided Ottoman territories into European spheres of influence. Basically, British and French diplomats got together in a room and drew lines on a map to determine which of them would control what Ottoman territories. At the same time, other British diplomats were meeting with Britain's Arab allies and promising them the same territories, but they didn't keep this promise. After World War I, British and French imperialists divided the Ottoman territories between them. The communities living in many of these territories would not gain independence until after World War II. The lines drawn by secret treaties like the Sykes-Picot agreement helped set the borders of many modern Middle Eastern nation-states. But the borders drawn by Europeans reflected European priorities. European imperialists drew the borders of the Middle East in ways that didn't really make sense and were disruptive to local communities. Some ethnic groups, like the Kurds, watched as their territory and populations were divided between several different nation-states. Some, like the Palestinians, didn't get a nation-state at all. Direct European control faded in the 1950s, but informal colonialism continued to shape regional politics. Soon, American and Soviet influence arrived as both superpowers sought to gain allies in their Cold War struggle against each other. Let's explore the connections between decolonization and the Cold War by looking at the two most populous Middle Eastern nations: Egypt and Iran.

## Egypt's canal

In the late nineteenth century, a new canal in Egypt reshaped global networks. Before 1869, if Europeans wanted to sail to the Indian Ocean, they had to travel about 12,000 miles around Africa. The Suez Canal cut that trip in half. This thin strip of water, and the events that surrounded it, captures a wide array of trends in the modern Middle East. Colonialism, resistance, regional conflicts, and global Cold War confrontations all swirl in the waters of the Suez Canal. The Suez Canal is in Egypt, but it was built by a private company—jointly owned by French investors and Egyptian leaders. When Egypt ran into money problems, the government sold off its shares to the British government. In effect, this meant that a British and French company now owned an incredibly important and profitable canal that cut 120 miles through Egypt. Control of the canal eventually led to a British occupation of Egypt and decades of colonial control. Even after Egypt gained independence in 1922, the Suez Canal Company continued to own and profit from the canal. Informal colonialism ensured that countries like Egypt remained dependent on European nations through treaties, concessions, protectorate or mandate status[[18]](#footnote-18), or economic influence. In 1956, the Suez Crisis collided spectacularly with the Cold War as one Egyptian leader sought to end Egypt's dependence on Europeans. In 1956, a charismatic Egyptian leader named Gamal Abdel Nasser seized control of the canal and nationalized it—placing the canal and its profits under Egyptian control. In response, Britain, France and Israel invaded. The crisis escalated until the United States and the Soviet Union intervened. In a display of how much global power had shifted away from European empires, pressure from the two superpowers forced Britain and France to back down. When President Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal, the Egyptian people—and Arab people in many nations—celebrated him as an anti-colonial hero. They gave him credit for defeating the British, French, and Israeli armies. But American and Soviet intervention had been the deciding factor. The face of global power had shifted dramatically. Leaders like Nasser now had to navigate new relationships with the superpowers.

## Iran's oil

One of the reasons the Suez Canal was so important was its ability to quickly move Middle Eastern oil from the Persian Gulf to European and American markets. European imperialists worked hard to control the Suez Canal, but they also sought direct control over oil in countries like Iran. Thanks to a concession signed 50 years earlier, by 1951, Iran's vast oil wealth was controlled by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, which despite its name, was a British company[[19]](#footnote-19). British control of the nation's most valuable resource became increasingly unpopular with the Iranian people. In 1951, three days after becoming Iran's prime minister, Mohammad Mossadegh nationalized control of Iran's oil, seizing production and profits from the British company and placing it in the hands of the Iranian government. The Iranian people celebrated this move, but the American government did not, siding instead with the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. The US decision was partly based on the misperception that Mossadegh was a communist. Without American support, Mossadegh failed where Nasser had succeeded. The American navy set up a blockade, preventing Iran from selling its oil. Unintimidated, Mossadegh refused to back down—so the United States organized a covert, CIA-planned coup. Despite Mossadegh's popularity, the coup removed him from power and reinstalled the unpopular shah (monarch), Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. While in power, the shah aligned himself with the United States and ran his country as a repressive dictatorship. In 1979, a revolution overthrew the shah and established a revolutionary government, which was suspicious of foreign involvement—especially American involvement.

## Legacies of colonialism and decolonization

Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal worked out in Egypt's favor, but Mossadegh's nationalization of Iran's oil was undermined by foreign interference. Despite their different outcomes, both cases illustrate how the Cold War and decolonization shifted global and regional power. Many Middle Eastern nations fought against formal and informal colonialism. Leaders in decolonizing nations had to be strategic in order to survive. And they had to account for new kinds of imperialism, which no longer had a European face. The United States and Soviet Union competed against each other to gain allies and influence in the Middle East. But to people in the region, the Americans and Soviets were simply new faces on the old imperialism. So, the next time someone tells you "the Middle East is a violent place" or that "problems in the Middle East are the result of ancient religious conflicts," you should remind them that many of the worst conflicts in the region are direct results of twentieth-century colonialism and Cold War politics. Remind them of how quick imperial powers have been to incite violence whenever their access to Middle Eastern oil was threatened. How might this quite recent history factor into policy decisions today?

## Sources

Anderson, Betty S. *A History of the Modern Middle East: Rulers, Rebels, and Rogues.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016.

El-Fadl, Reem Abou. “Nasserism.” *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Middle-Eastern and North African History*, June 9, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199672530.013.18>.

Hall, Michael R., Birol Başkan, and Younes Abouyoub. “Middle East.” In *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern World.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Halliday, Fred. “Nationalism in the Arab World Since 1945.” The Oxford Handbook of the History of Nationalism, March 1, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199209194.013.0022>.

McNeill, John, and Kenneth Pomeranz, eds. *The Cambridge World History Volume 7 Part 1 Production, Destruction and Connection, 1750–Present*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Yaqub, Salim. “The Cold War and the Middle East.” The Oxford Handbook of the Cold War, January 1, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199236961.013.0015>.

## Author Bio

Eman M. Elshaikh holds an MA in social sciences from and is pursuing a PhD at the University of Chicago, where she also teaches writing. She is a writer and researcher, and has taught K-12 and undergraduates in the US and in the Middle East. Eman was previously a World History Fellow at Khan Academy, where she worked closely with the College Board to develop curriculum for AP world history.

# Civil Rights and Global Liberation

Bennett Sherry

A worldwide struggle for decolonization, plus a struggle for racial equality and civil rights in the United States, became entangled in the Cold War that followed WWII.

## Shared struggles: Civil rights, decolonization, and gender

If you live in the United States, you've probably heard about some of the major figures in the Civil Rights Movement. These include the struggles for racial equality, desegregation, and voting rights. You've probably encountered Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Selma, and the Million-Man March. You have heard these names and events and words. Still other names, like Fannie Lou Hamer and Bayard Rustin may have come up in your U.S. History course. Yet, while the Civil Rights Movement was a key struggle in American history, these people and organizations were also part of a wider global network. Each of these American activists connected their struggle at home to decolonization movements around the world. That's because in some ways, the Civil Rights Movement was also a decolonization movement.

## Twin victories: Racial equality and World War II

During the Second World War, the Allies made promises about racial equality and self-determination, for their citizens and people in their colonies. Both the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights contained guarantees of racial equality as a fundamental human right. But many African Americans fighting in the war distrusted these promises made by white, imperialist, and racist governments. Like people in the colonies, Black Americans had already been deceived after the First World War. Despite fighting for the U.S., they had come home to a campaign of discrimination that included the lynching of Black veterans in 1919. So why, asked many, should they fight Hitler and save democracy if they'd still return home to segregation, voter suppression, and lynching? Thus, during World War II, African American newspapers launched the Double-V Campaign: victory against Nazi racism abroad and victory against racism in America.

During the war, the American government tried to present itself internationally as the champion of democracy and human rights. But the country's system of racial segregation was at odds with this image. During the 1930s, Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's minister of propaganda, said: "Nothing will be easier than to produce a bloody revolution in North America… no other country has so many social and racial tensions. We shall be able to play on many strings there." Hitler hoped he might exploit these tensions to bring American fascists to power. He even sent Nazi agents to cooperate with the Ku Klux Klan. By the end of the 1930s, the U.S. Congress was investigating over 100 fascist groups in America. When Western leaders condemned the 1935 Nazi Nuremberg laws, the Nazi regime argued they were no different than the discriminatory Jim Crow laws in the United States.

It wasn't just America's enemies who saw this weakness. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay was a leader of the Indian independence and women's rights movements and a colleague of Mohandas Gandhi. She traveled across the American South in the 1940s, witnessing American racism first-hand when she chose to ride in the white-only section of a train. Gandhi remarked on this incident in a speech, saying, "I do not regard England, or for that matter America, as free countries. They are free after their own fashion, free to hold in bondage the coloured races of the earth." After the war, other foreign officials and dignitaries visited the United States and returned to their homes in Africa and Asia with similar stories.

## Global connections

Civil rights leaders in America were informed and influenced by anti-colonial leaders around the world. The Indian independence movement led by Gandhi strongly influential leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. Gandhi's philosophy of non-violent resistance was based on the concept of *Ahimsa*, a principle from Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism that means "non-injury." Gandhi and his followers used non-violent resistance and protests to end British colonialism in India after the Second World War. The American socialist and civil rights activist, Bayard Rustin, traveled to India in 1948 after Gandhi's assassination. When he returned home, Rustin became King's mentor and ally, teaching him about Gandhi's methods. In 1959, King traveled to India himself. This trip helped solidify his belief that non-violent resistance was the weapon to bring down imperialism abroad and vanquish racism in America.

Certainly, the fight against racism in America was entangled with anti-colonial struggles abroad. Entanglements are confusing, but this one can be seen much more clearly through the connections forged by women. Historian Keisha Blaine has highlighted the international connections and activism of Black women in the twentieth century. Blaine tells the story of women like Amy Jacques Garvey and Mittie Maude Lena Gordon, who connected their activism in America to international struggles for racial and gender equality. Dr. Blain writes:

Perhaps the most important aspect of black nationalist women's political life was their interest in and commitment to black internationalism. . . These women understood that the struggle for black rights in the United States. . . could not be divorced from the global struggles for freedom in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean, and other parts of the globe. Using a variety of avenues, including journalism, print media, and overseas travel, black nationalist women articulated and disseminated global visions of freedom and sought to build transnational and transracial alliances with other people of color in order to secure civil and human rights.

Women of color in the United States and in the colonized world were fighting, together, against *two* oppressions: one a struggle for independence against colonialism and racism, and the other a struggle against gender discrimination.

## Civil rights and decolonization in the Cold War

The Cold War started, and so did decolonization. American leaders watched as their French and British allies lost colony after colony. Suddenly, the Cold War and decolonization had transformed civil rights into a national security issue.

Many new nations in Africa and Asia emerged from decolonization and joined the United Nations. Both the Americans and Soviets wanted to groom these young countries as allies. American leaders were now trying to negotiate trade deals and alliances with formerly colonized people. In a single year, 1960, seventeen different African nations each gained independence. Throughout the 1960s, dozens of African and Asian leaders petitioned to move the UN headquarters from New York to a country where they would be treated as equals. Many of those leaders cited America's racial inequality as a reason to align instead with the Soviet Union, or to just stay neutral.

The Soviets were happy to point out the hypocrisy of American democracy. They published propaganda films, literature, and posters denouncing racial inequality in America. In 1954, President Harry Truman had worked hard to convince the U.S. Supreme Court to desegregate schools because Soviet propaganda was so damaging to American interests abroad. His Secretary of State, Dean Acheson wrote, "the undeniable existence of racial discrimination gives unfriendly governments the most effective kind of ammunition for their propaganda warfare." America's ability to gain allies in the Cold War now rested in its ability to appeal to non-white leaders and nations.

Civil rights leaders in the U.S. and decolonization leaders around the world understood that their futures were interdependent, and they often collaborated. Both King and Rustin traveled to Ghana to meet with Kwame Nkrumah in the 1950s. King was a vocal opponent of the Vietnam War, believing it was racist and imperialist. He also called for an end to nuclear weapons, observing: "What will be the ultimate value of having established social justice in a context where all people, Negro and White, are merely free to face destruction by Strontium-90[[20]](#footnote-20) or atomic war?" After the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962, King demanded that the government transfer funding from nuclear weapons to increase teachers' salaries and build schools in poor communities.

In 1960, a group of African American students in North Carolina formed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). SNCC connected their fight for civil rights to decolonization abroad. They circulated copies of books by anti-colonial leaders. In 1964 and 1965, several members of SNCC attended meetings of the Organization of African Unity and started campaigns against Apartheid in South Africa. In 1967, SNCC declared itself a human rights organization devoted to ending "colonialism, racism, and economic exploitation wherever these conditions exist."

## Conclusion

The Civil Rights Movement was actively linked with decolonization movements in Africa and Asia. And this influence flowed both ways. African and Asian leaders believed that the struggle for equality in the United States was part of their own struggle for international recognition and equality. Civil rights leaders in America understood that the rise and continued independence of African and Asian nations abroad was fundamental to their struggles at home. As civil rights leaders traveled abroad and anti-colonial leaders traveled to the United States, they shared ideas and strategies.

## Sources

Blain, Keisha N. *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017.

Burnett, Lynn. “The Global Context of the Civil Rights Movement.” *The Cross Cultural Solidarity History Education Project*. Accessed March 25, 2020. <https://crossculturalsolidarity.com/the-global-context-of-the-civil-rights-movement/>

Krenn, Michael L. *Race and US Foreign Policy during the Cold War*. Vol. 4. New York: Garland, 1998.

Lauren, Paul Gordon. *The Evolution of International Human Rights: Visions seen*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.

Lauren, Paul Gordon. *Power and Prejudice: The Politics and Diplomacy of Racial Discrimination*. Boulder: Westview, 1988.

Slate, Nico. “’I Am a Colored Woman’: Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya in the United States, 1939-1941.” *Contemporary South Asia: Annual Conference Edition of the British Association for South Asian Studies* 17, no. 1 2009: 7-19.

Slate, Nico. *Lord Cornwallis is Dead: The Struggle for Democracy in the United States and India*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2019.

SNCC. “African Liberation Movements.” SNCC Digital Gateway. Accessed March 25, 2020. <https://snccdigital.org/inside-sncc/international-connections/african-liberation-movements/>

SNCC. “International Awareness.” SNCC Digital Gateway. Accessed March 25, 2020. <https://snccdigital.org/our-voices/emergence-black-power/international/>

Wiesner, Merry E. *A Concise History of the World*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

## Author Bio

Bennett Sherry holds a PhD in history from the University of Pittsburgh and has undergraduate teaching experience in world history, human rights, and the Middle East at the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Maine at Augusta. Additionally, he is a research associate at Pitt's World History Center. Bennett writes about refugees and international organizations in the twentieth century.

1. World War II would largely end the threat of fascism, but communism—and the Soviet Union—would emerge stronger. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Others such as Cesar Augusto Sandino in Nicaragua fought for national liberation, but were not communist. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. These included Leonidas Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua, Maximiliano Hernández Martínez in El Salvador, and Jorge Ubico in Guatemala. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Two examples are Victor Manuel Haya de la Torre in Perú, and Vicente Lombardo Toledano in Mexico. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 5 Some populist leaders include Getulio Vargas in Brazil (1929–1945), Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico (1934–1940), and José María Velasco Ibarra in Ecuador (on and off 1930s–1960s). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Redlining is a financial and loan practice of excluding people from certain neighborhoods and denying public services to certain neighborhoods, often with racist motivations. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The VietMinh were members of a nationalist movement to end Vietnam's colonial relationship with France and install a communist, independent government. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Soviet Union is an abbreviated way to say Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Bangla (also called Bengali) is widely spoken in India, while Urdu is mostly limited to Pakistan. However, Urdu is spoken in some parts of India. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The C.I.A. (Central Intelligence Agency) is run by the federal government of the US It gathers global intelligence and information in the interest of US national security. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Two thirds of Hondurans live in extreme poverty (less than US$1.90 per day) according to a report from the World Bank in 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Pan-Africanism generally refers to the belief in a more socialist Africa as well as a rejection of non-African political and economic influences. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Sometimes known as the Kuomintang (KMT). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Under the terms dictated by the United States, they had to surrender specifically to the KMT. A full month after Japan surrendered, the Japanese fought the Communists, while the nationalists got ready to travel to the still-occupied territories. The Americans—who were supposedly neutral—provided transportation to the KMT. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Afrikaans is one of the official languages of South Africa. This language evolved from the Dutch, who settled in the area in the seventeenth century. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Townships in South Africa are sections within urban areas that are usually underdeveloped and nonwhite. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Concessions are special privileges granted to foreign companies or governments. A protectorate is a state that is controlled and protected by another—often involuntarily. A mandate was a legal status established by the League of Nations where some territories were temporarily controlled by another state. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The Anglo-Iranian Oil Company later changed its name to British Petroleum, now known as BP, and is currently one of the world's largest oil companies. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Strontium-90 is a radioactive isotope produced by nuclear fission. Its long half-life of 30 years was one of the factors that helped make the fallout from the Chernobyl nuclear plant disaster so deadly. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)