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Decolonization

Cold War

WHP AP | Unit 8 Overview | World History Project

Not all wars are fought in the traditional sense, with the soldiers of the warring nations on opposite sides, fighting with guns, bombs, and other weapons. Some—like the Cold War of the 20th century—were fought indirectly, capitalizing on the tension within decolonized nations to overcome the opposing political rival.

0:13

Narrator speaking in head bubble; photo of Madonna; photos of US and SU leaders shaking hands; photos of celebrations of independence

It was the summer of 1987. Madonna sat atop the Billboard 100. The Cold War was almost over. Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev had shaken hands in Iceland. No one knew it yet, but the Soviet Union would collapse just a few years later. And almost every country in Africa had won its independence from colonial rule.

World map

And yet, in Cuito Cuanavale—a small, sleepy farming town in southern Angola— two armies converged. Well, I say two armies, but it was more like nine or ten. Several factions of Angolan nationalists, Cuban, South African, and other soldiers from around Africa, faced off in the small town. But there were only two sides: the one secretly supported by the United States and the one secretly supported by the Soviet Union.

1:04

Text description

This seven-month battle was the largest in Angola's Civil War and it was the last battle in a decades-long struggle for independence. It was perhaps the final "hot" battle of the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

Text bubble: Unit Overview; transitional music

What can the battle of Cuito Cuanavale teach us about the entangled histories of the Cold War and decolonization? Let's find out.

Text bubble: Unit 8

Hi, I'm John Arthur, and this is Unit 8: Cold War and Decolonization 1900 to Present.

Two global struggles dominated the second half of the 20th century.

Text bubble: Cold War; photo of Soviet and US flag; photo of Decolonization + text bubble

One struggle was the clash between two alliances— one led by the United States and the other by the Soviet Union—in what is known as the Cold War. The other struggle was a conflict between the remaining global empires and their colonized peoples, who were fighting for independence.

2:03

Photo of world leaders; political cartoon; photos of military parades and politicians

This is known as decolonization. These two struggles are often studied separately, but the Cold War and decolonization are best understood together.

When the Second World War ended with an Allied victory, the world paused to take a deep breath. But almost immediately, new challenges emerged. The first was a confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. The two countries made stronger, rather than weaker, by the war. The United States and the Soviet Union emerged as the two new superpowers. But they had vastly different interests and values. These two governments distrusted each other and they competed for influence around the world, though they mostly avoided a direct conflict with each other—that's why we call it a "cold" war.

2:55

Photo of soldiers marching; text bubble: Thematic Overview; transitional music

The Cold War was entangled with decolonization struggles. You see, after World War II, colonized peoples wondered why they shouldn't benefit from the struggle for freedom. After fighting to preserve the world from fascism, they demanded their own independent nation-states. These feelings drove a flood of anti-colonial movements that brought down weakened European empires. Dozens of new independent nation-states rose all around the world.

Unit theme cards	The Cold War and decolonization were both continuations of some of the trends you saw at the end of Unit 7. And we can better understand the ways these two post-war struggles were entangled by looking at continuity and change through the course themes.
3:49 *Photo of SU and US flags* *Text bubble: the United States: free-market capitalism; text bubble: Soviet Union: command economy*	On the surface, the Cold War was a confrontation between the two most powerful states in the late 20th century as they sought to dominate international politics. Yet, this was also a struggle of economics and ideology, the United States was deeply supportive of a free-market capitalist world economy, while the Soviet Union championed communism and ran the world's largest centralized, command economy. But these ideologies extended beyond simple economics. Capitalism and communism developed as competing ideologies with very different understandings of the world and human morality. They each developed distinct ideas about how society ought to be ordered and who should control resources
4:39 *Photos of leaders of decolonized nations; text bubble: Non-aligned movement*	And these weren't the only two ideologies in the world. Some decolonized nations created the non-aligned movement—a promise to remain neutral in the cold war—to chart their own course and preserve their own cultural and economic preferences in the face of superpower pressure. Capitalism and communism each had their own strengths and weaknesses. But they also had similar needs. One of those needs was for raw materials. The battles to control the raw materials of former colonies helped draw both superpowers into decolonization conflicts.
Photos of world leaders	Both the United States and the Soviet Union saw decolonization conflicts as opportunities in their struggle against each other. They supported leaders who sided with them and targeted those who favored their enemies.
5:34 *Political cartoons; text bubble: Proxy war*	Nuclear weapons made direct conflict between the Soviets and Americans unimaginably risky. And so the two superpowers often engaged in proxy wars.
Text bubble: Illustrative Example; transitional music	In the Angolan Civil War, we can see one example of this strategy as the armies converged on Cuito Cuanavale in 1987.
World map; photo of European empires using forced labor	Angola is a country in Southern Africa, and it was a Portuguese colony from the mid-16th century until 1975. You'll remember from Unit 6 the stories of European empires using forced labor to extract resources from their colonies. The private companies that Portugal allowed to operate in Angola also use forest labor as they mined land for oil, diamonds, and other resources. Portugal was a dictatorship until 1975, and its colonial rule was brutally repressive
6:32 *Photos of resistances and new governments*	Nationalist resistance movements arose in Angola in the 1960s as people began demanding independence and an end to oppression. In 1975, the dictatorship was overthrown, and the new government announced their plans to withdraw from Angola.

Photo of nationalist factions fighting; member of MPLA party; text bubble: MPLA government...; photo of a UNITA rebel; text bubble: UNITA rebels...

As the Portuguese withdrew, several of the nationalist factions battled each other for control of Angola's future. The socialist MPLA party prevailed and led the new government of Angola. They aligned themselves with the Soviet Union, who had helped fund the Angolan struggle against the Portuguese. In reply, the United States and its allies, including the government of South Africa, supported an Angolan rebel group called UNITA.

7:19

Clips of soldiers running through forest and at war with each other

Throughout the 1970s, the Angolan government was backed by Soviet advisers and volunteers from other communist countries such as Cuba. They battled UNITA and its supporters, particularly South Africa. In late 1987, Angolan government forces finally closed in on the UNITA strongholds in southern Angola. The South African military quickly sent aid to the UNITA forces trapped there. In response to that move, Cuba sent tens of thousands of volunteers to aid the Angolan government forces.

Photos of soldiers of decolonized nations

As a result, the small town of Cuito Cuanavale turned into a massive battlefield as Cold War and decolonization conflicts collided. Throughout February and March 1988, Cuban and Angolan forces battled the UNITA rebels and troops from South Africa, eventually driving them off.

8:13

Photos of soldiers of decolonized nations

Neither the United States nor the Soviet Union were directly involved. Instead, their conflict was fought through their allies and local forces. But this was definitely a Cold War confrontation between the capitalist and communist worlds. And it was also the last battle for the decolonization of Angola.

The battle of Cuito Cuanavale is only one example of the ways in which the Cold War and decolonization overlapped. In this unit, you'll encounter many more as the superpowers challenge each other for dominance and emerging nations struggle against the forces of colonialism.