



Unit 8 Overview

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



00:01

Colby Burnett and Kim Lochner in conversation

This was a decades-long post-World War II conflict between the U.S. and Soviet Union.

The Cold War.

Well, you have to phrase your response in the form of a question, like “Jeopardy!”

What is “Jeopardy!”?

Now you’ve got it!

Hi, I’m Colby Burnett, and along with Kim Lochner, we’re introducing Unit 8: End of Empire and Cold War. When the Second World War ended with an Allied victory, the world paused to take a deep breath. By September 1945, the authoritarian Axis powers were defeated by an international coalition led by the United States and the Soviet Union. Peace was restored. And the victorious powers wanted to create a new international forum to avoid future conflicts. They called it the United Nations. Many people had supported the war believing it was a fight to protect important values like national and individual sovereignty. So they had hope that this victory would create an opportunity to expand those rights across race, class, and gender lines in a peaceful, cooperative way.

Video footage of the United Nations

01:08

The signing of the last peace treaty in Tokyo Bay

The last peace treaty of the war was signed in Tokyo Bay. But almost immediately, new challenges emerged. The first was a confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. These were the two countries made stronger, rather than weaker, by the war. Germany and Japan had been defeated. France and Britain were struggling from the devastation of the conflict. And China was divided between nationalists and communists. So the United States and the Soviet Union emerged as the two new superpowers.

Photograph of an American automobile factory

But these two superpowers had vastly different interests and values. Most importantly, the U.S. was deeply supportive of a free-market, capitalist world economy, whereas the Soviet Union was the world’s largest centralized, command economy. So, in some ways, this was a confrontation between two systems of production and distribution.

01:59

A photo of a US army checkpoint

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

Kim Lochner

Photographs of previously colonized peoples

The Cold War had a global reach for another reason. The world was already turned on its head by decolonization. You see, the people of the colonies wondered why they, too, shouldn’t benefit from the struggle for freedom and national sovereignty. Why shouldn’t they get their independence? These feelings drove a flood of anti-colonial movements that brought down weakened European empires after the Second World War. From Africa to Indochina, from South Asia through the Pacific and into the Caribbean, local inhabitants found that they could use the tools of nationalism to forge internal solidarity. Colonial subjects created new political communities, then won independence from their imperial rulers.

03:05

Photos of US and Soviet leaders with local leaders of previously-colonized states

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

So how should we study these two great global trends, the Cold War and decolonization? Usually, they form separate chapters in a textbook. But in this unit, we will study them as intertwined episodes in history. So, why are we doing this? How does studying them together give us a different view of this era? Is our understanding better when we study them together?

04:01

*Colby Burnett
A chart shows money spent on the military by many large countries. There is a massive spike in US military spending between 1940 and 1950. Following the large spike, Russia and US show a steady climb in military spending*

We can find answers about the Cold War and decolonization by looking at the data: in this case, U.S. and Soviet military spending. Yes, this spending is evidence of the Cold War confrontation. But it also relates to the decolonization struggle. Some of the money spent on U.S. and Soviet militaries went to other countries, in the form of military aid or expeditions either in favor of, or against, anti-colonial movements. This chart shows us how much money was spent on the military by several large countries in the 20th century. For example, we can see a big spike in military spending around the Second World War. After the war, as expected, spending goes down almost everywhere. But then it begins to rise again for two countries, the United States and the Soviet Union. The two records are somewhat different, but generally, they rise together. In looking at this spending, we can identify how it corresponds with some Cold War and decolonization events.

04:59

For example, in the U.S. military budget, there was a big increase in 1950 as the Korean War began. There was another increase in the mid-1960s, as the Vietnam conflict ramped up. There was a third spike in the 1980s, as confrontation spread in Central America and other regions. Each of these was an important Cold War conflict. But each was also about decolonization, whether in Korea, which had been a Japanese colony, Vietnam, which had been a French colony, or the Central American states, which were part of an American informal empire.

You might have also noticed that Russian military spending increased at a steady rate until the end of 1988. Then, in 1989, it suddenly collapsed. What does this mean? What does it tell us about who “won” and who was “defeated” in the Cold War?

05:49

*Kim Lochner
Map shows Cuito Cuanavale
Map shows the alignment between Angola and the Soviet Union (both are in green); map shows alignment between US and the Angolan rebel group UNITA (both are in grey).*

To find more evidence to help us study the Cold War and decolonization, we can zoom in and take a closer look at specific historical events in this era. One of these is the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale. Cuito Cuanavale is a small, sleepy farming town in Southern Angola in Central Africa. Angola was a Portuguese colony until 1975. At that time, anti-colonial movements successfully ended Portugal’s overseas empire. A socialist party led the new government of Angola. This party aligned 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.

06:43

Photos of troops in South Africa

Throughout the 1970s, the Angolan government was backed by Soviet advisers and volunteers from other communist countries, such as Cuba. They battled UNITA and its supporters, particularly South Africa. In late 1987, government forces finally closed in on 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. As a result, the small town of Cuito Cuanavale turned into a massive battlefield. Throughout February and March 1988, Cuban and Angolan forces battled the UNITA rebels and troops from South Africa, eventually driving them off.

07:37

Now, neither the United States nor the Soviet Union were directly involved. Instead, the conflict was fought through allies and local forces. But this was definitely a Cold War confrontation between the capitalist and the 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 way in which the Cold War and decolonization overlapped. In this unit, you will encounter many. You will see how civil wars in China and Latin America combined Cold War face-offs with struggles to throw off the legacy of colonialism. You will explore resistance to colonialism in Southeast Asia, which found itself embroiled in the conflict between Marxism and capitalism. This, in turn, drew the United States into a war in Vietnam.

08:40

*Photos of anti-colonial leaders, including Gandhi; a photo of an anti-apartheid protest
Kim and Colby in conversation*

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

You know what's really consistent about the world from 1750 until now?

No, what's that?

Nothing. Not one thing. "Let's have countries instead of empires." "Oh, now let's bring back empires just to watch them fall." "And then let's have one war to end all wars and then a sequel." None of it makes sense.

Okay, but that's why we have to teach it.

Oh.