

Connecting Decolonization and the Cold War

By Trevor Getz

The Cold War and decolonization were two trends that happened in parallel. Was it just by chance that two enormous global episodes began as the Second World War ended? Or did these two trends contribute to each other?

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Timelines of the Cold War and the End of Empire

The Cold War and decolonization happened in roughly the same period of time and were, to many people, one experience rather than two. Because the Cold War and decolonization occurred around the same time, and were equally global in their impact, each influenced the way that the other developed. For these reasons, we tend to study these two trends together.

In many ways, the Cold War began before the Second World War even ended. The leaders of the big victorious powers, especially the United States and the Soviet Union, but also Great Britain, met several times during the last years of the Second World War to try to figure out what the post-war world would look like. The last meeting between the Allied powers during the war was held in Yalta, Russia in February 1945. The US, the USSR, and Great Britain attended. It became clear to many people that this meeting was really about dividing much of the world into two separate spheres, one communist and Soviet-dominated, the other capitalist and US-dominated.



British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, US President Franklin Roosevelt, and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin meeting at the Yalta Conference in Russia. Public domain.

Some leaders, like US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, believed that a hard division could be avoided, at first anyway. But British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was less optimistic. After WWII was over, Churchill declared in a 1946 speech that he saw an "Iron Curtain" descending across Europe as Soviet Premiere Joseph Stalin began to establish governments he wanted to control throughout Eastern Europe.

The Cold War Timeline

In 1947, US President Harry Truman said he would support anti-communist governments anywhere in the world. What followed were a series of confrontations, beginning with a Soviet blockade in Berlin, Germany in 1949. The victory of communist forces in China in 1949 helped spread this conflict to Asia, resulting in the Korean War of

1950-1953. Also in 1953, US-supported military leaders overthrew the Prime Minister of Iran, whom they suspected of supporting the Soviet Union. In early 1959, communist rebels in Cuba overthrew a US-aligned government, and the conflict quickly expanded in Central America and the Caribbean.

Throughout the 1960s, US-supported forces and Soviet forces faced each other across the border between eastern and western Europe. Meanwhile, conflict spread to Southeast Asia with US forces supporting southern Vietnam as communist China and the Soviets supported northern Vietnam. In the late 1970s, Cold War confrontations really flared in southern Africa, but also picked up steam in the Americas. Both of these regional conflicts continued into the 1980s. The communist governments of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union collapsed between 1989 and 1991.

The Decolonization Timeline

At the same time, much of the world was decolonizing. That is, societies everywhere were rejecting their colonizers to become independent, self-ruling nation- states. Movements to end colonialism had been in motion for a long time, but they only really took hold at the end of the Second World War. When Italy was defeated in 1945, some former Italian colonies—including Libya—became independent. Similarly, the former Japanese colony of Korea became two independent countries, although dominated by the US (in South Korea) and the Soviet Union (in North Korea).

In the late 1940s, a few other countries began to win their independence, including the Dutch colony of Indonesia in 1949. Probably the biggest change was the successful independence of the British colony of India in 1947, along with a partition that allowed Pakistan to be its own country. In 1954, in the French colony of Indochina—made up of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia—a Vietnamese force defeated the French military at Dien Bien Phu. Vietnam became independent with elections planned for 1956.

Colonized people everywhere took heart from these events, especially in North Africa where decolonization movements gained power. In 1957, Ghana became the first independent sub-Saharan African country. The "year of Africa"—1960—saw seventeen colonies gain independence from the British, French, and Belgian imperial powers. Then over in the Caribbean, Jamaica won its independence in 1962, as did many other islands soon after. But the process was slowed where there were European settlers, and in southern Africa, in particular, it continued into the early 1990s.



Prime Minister Julius Nyrere celebrates decolonization in Tanganyika (later known as Tanzania), 1961. By The National Archives UK, OGL v1.0.

Entanglements I: The view of anti-colonial leaders

Why did we give you these two, condensed, possibly confusing timelines? If your eyes just moved over those dates quickly, hardly taking in any details, we don't blame you. But go back and just see how those two timelines coincided. You may see a remarkable overlap between the decolonization and the Cold War timelines.

The Cold War and decolonization didn't just coincide in terms of the timing. They also overlapped in at least two other ways.

First, each trend was linked by the actions of the leaders of anti-colonial movements. These leaders, often including veterans of the Second World War, were always looking for allies to help them achieve independence for their own colony. They found that their own struggle was happening in the battleground of a different conflict between two great powers. Naturally, they thought that one or both of those powers might help them. So, many leaders of decolonization movements tried to get either the United States or the Soviet Union on their side. Leaders who leaned towards socialism turned to the Soviet Union, China, or Cuba. Many truly believed that communism was a model for their own nation's development. Others just felt that since the United States was allied to the big imperial powers—in many cases their former colonizers—the Soviets were their best chance for support.

Because the United States was allied with many of the great empires—such as Britain and France—recruiting their help with decolonization needed a different approach. Other, more conservative anti-colonial leaders appealed to the United States for support by saying that, as leaders of new independent nations, they could help stop the spread of communism in their region. During the Cold War, of course, that was the number one item on the American wish list.

Entanglements II: The view from the two superpowers

The Cold War and decolonization were also linked by the actions of the two superpowers. The US proclaimed that it supported democracy and free markets. The Soviet Union promised to liberate workers from the shackles of capitalist, imperial rule. That meant both the US and the USSR *could* be recruited to help anti-colonial movements. Both superpowers declared themselves to be anti-empire, though some historians argue they were really building empires of their own. The Soviets treated Eastern European states almost like colonies, and often tried to dominate their allies around the world. The United States practiced a kind of informal imperialism where they replaced leaders they did not like in other countries—Patrice Lumumba in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Salvador Allende in Chile were prime examples. As a result, many leaders of independence movements in the 1960s and 1970s tried to be "nonaligned"—to not pick a side. But in the end, many of these leaders faced interference from either the Americans or the Soviets, so they had to turn to the other side for help anyway!

Whether you were a superpower or the leader of an independence movement, you needed allies. That's how the Cold War and decolonization became so deeply entangled.

Differing perspectives

Again, from the perspective of many people engaged in these struggles, the Cold War and decolonization seemed like one experience, not two separate things. A farmer in Vietnam, supporting her country's independence from French rule, likely saw the intervention of United States forces in the 1960s as just a continuation of colonial rule by western powers. It would not have felt like something new. Another example is when Angolan fighters in southern Africa saw Cuban military forces armed with Soviet material arriving in the 1970s, and they believed they were there to help them achieve their independence. In reality, Cuba's and the Soviet Union's main motivations were their own Cold War struggle against the United States. In each case, there were multiple motives for the events that were happening, but as historical narratives go, it really amounts to one series of events.

Looking back, historians are able to separate these two long conflicts because we can see different motives from different people. It seems so obvious that the Cold War was a fight between two superpowers with different economic systems and a desire for supremacy. We can also clearly see how and why people in colonies craved independence. But at the time, decolonization and the Cold War were as entangled as two forest vines.

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Prime Minister Julius Nyrere celebrates decolonization in Tanganyika (later known as Tanzania), 1961. By The National Archives UK, OGL v1.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_National_Archives_UK_-_CO_1069-166-21.jpg

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