# Decolonization in the British Empire

At the end of the Second World War, Britain still controlled the largest empire in world history. Thanks largely to the empire, Britain raised enough supplies to sustain its war effort and took its place at the top table of the victorious powers alongside the United States and the Soviet Union. It was, however, a Pyrrhic victory; the war drained Britain's finances and significantly lowered its prestige in the colonies. Less than two decades later, the British had given up almost all of their empire. This reading examines the period from 1945 to 1963, when the British surrendered almost all of their overseas colonies. There will be special focus on India, Kenya, Malaya (Malaysia), and Egypt. Finally, we will examine the legacy of empire for today's Britain.

*The Effects of the Second World War*

The experience of the Second World War was not the sole reason that Britain eventually lost its colonies, but without the war the decolonization process doubtless would have taken longer.

It is worth noting, however, that the origins of nationalist and anticolonial revolt across the British Empire were often rooted in the early twentieth century. After the First World War, British imperialists still preached about the superiority of Western (especially British) civilization, but their arguments often fell on deaf ears. Many subject peoples, especially Indians, had fought on the Western Front in the First World War. They saw that the British were no more immune to machine guns than any other group of people. They also observed Britain's weakened state after the First World War and during the economic crisis of the 1930s. These observations combined with the growth of nationalism among British subject peoples during the Second World War. India, in particular, proved to be increasingly restive for British administrators as the ascetic Mahatma Gandhi's pleas for a nonviolent revolution became increasingly popular.

If Britain's prestige – crucial for remaining in control of the empire – was waning before the outbreak of the Second World War, by the end of the war it had all but disappeared. Britain's worst defeats at the hands of the Axis Powers came in East Asia, where Japan conquered many British territories. Perhaps the worst defeat was at Singapore, which was supposed to be an impregnable fortress. After a week of fighting, the Japanese captured the city and 80,000 British, Indian, and Australian prisoners – the most British prisoners ever captured in one battle. Britain only recovered the territories thanks to the firepower of the American armed forces. Although the Japanese never conquered the critical territories of Burma, India, and Australia, the myth of British invincibility had been forever broken.

The situation at home also made the maintenance of a far-flung empire difficult. The British Empire did have some major victories in the Second World War – in the Battle of Britain, the British managed to turn away the vaunted German air force, and they were a crucial member of the Allied invasion force that landed in Normandy and eventually helped to conquer Germany – but these victories proved costly. During the Battle of Britain, the German air force caused much damage in urban areas, including flattening most of Coventry, an industrial city. Including soldiers from imperial

possessions, the British suffered more than 400,000 casualties in the Second World War; though they were lucky compared to most other European countries, this was still a horrible loss.

The financial situation was the main problem, however. Churchill had thrown every British resource at the Germans in the effort to win, and he borrowed madly in order to do it. At the end of the war Britain owed more than any other country; its debt, mostly to the United States, was four times its 1939 level. Unlike almost all other European countries, the British used their Marshall Fund aid to repay debts to the U.S. instead of for reconstruction. But Britain's finances would not have been so strained had it not been retaining its responsibilities as a Great Power. In addition to the empire, which became much more costly, due to unrest in the years after the war, the British also assumed control of one-quarter of Germany. Because of this, the government introduced strict rationing on many products even *after* the war. In the years to come, Britain's diminished circumstances would play a major role in the end of the British Empire.

*India*

For more than a century, India had been the crown jewel of the British Empire. Indian soldiers and resources played a major role in both world wars, and the British initially hoped that Indian wealth would help the empire regroup after the Second World War. Its complex mixture of vibrant cultures, and its vast and varied resources, provided British merchants endless opportunities for trade and new products. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the British aggressively guarded against threats to India. For decades Britain engaged in the "Great Game" with Imperial Russia, since the British feared Russia's southward expansion. They also tried to carefully balance relations with Muslims across their vast empire in the Middle East and Asia, fearing that a Muslim backlash against British rule could threaten their control of India, which had a large Muslim minority.

The greatest threat to British control in India, however, came from inside the country. The Indian independence movement gained strength throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The movement was principally under the leadership of Mohandas (nicknamed Mahatma) Gandhi, who espoused nonviolent civil disobedience, but many smaller factions also worked towards independence. The independence movement became quite popular, and in 1942 Gandhi led an effort to convince the British to leave India and let its people out of their war obligations. The British immediately jailed Gandhi and most other nationalist leaders until the end of the war, but this proved to be only a temporary solution. When the nationalists were released at the end of the war, they began their calls for independence again – and this time the British heeded them.

Considering the situation of British finances, it is not surprising that within a year of the war's end, the British had accepted the necessity of Indian independence. In the spring of 1946, a British Cabinet Mission met independence leaders in Delhi to discuss terms. After almost two months of negotiations, it was agreed that when the British surrendered control of India – which comprised a mix of directly-controlled provinces

and states under the control of a subservient monarch – *two* countries would take its place: India, a Hindu-majority country, and Pakistan, a Muslim-majority country.

Though Hindus and Muslims had lived in relative harmony in India for centuries, often side-by-side in the same villages, the independence movements created a new antagonism between adherents of the two religions. In addition to the Gandhi's mostly Hindu Indian National Congress, one of the main independence groups was the All-India Muslim League, led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Though Gandhi advocated respect for all religions in India, many of his supporters did not. Thus Jinnah and other Muslims feared that the Hindu majority would make the Muslims subservient in an independent state. Tensions ran extremely high as Lord Mountbatten, the last British viceroy in India, arranged the hasty handover of power, which took place in 1947. Massive population transfers followed; millions of Hindus and Sikhs travelled from the new Pakistan to India, while millions of Muslims went the other way. The transfers were accompanied by severe violence. Discord was on the horizon as the British were arranging the handover of power, which was part of the reason for Britain's exit – since they could not prevent the unrest, they simply tried to avoid it.

*Spread of National Separation Movements*

Having lost India, the British were reluctant to part with any of their other imperial possessions. While British prestige may have been diminished in the colonies, at home in Britain the empire was still a widespread source of pride. This helps to explain why, over the course of the 1950s, the British engaged in several bloody attempts to prevent their colonies from gaining independence.

When the British regained their holdings in Malaya from the Japanese at the end of the Second World War, they faced a dismal situation. The Japanese occupation had disrupted the economy, and the majority Malay people had grown stronger as part of the resistance. Moreover, memories of disastrous British losses in the war with Japan made the returning empire seem weak. The British quashed widespread protests, which led the militant arm of the Malaysian Communist Party to declare war on the British Empire in 1948. The resulting conflict is termed the Malayan Emergency (because the British declared a state of emergency). Communist parties were outlawed, and their members could be arrested and imprisoned without trial. The Communists began a guerrilla war against the British. With the help of many Malay soldiers the British isolated and defeated the Communists, who were never particularly popular.

Britain's colony in Kenya was not as important economically as India or even Malaya (which was a major rubber producer). Nonetheless, tens of thousands of Britons had settled there, the colony had become a major producer of coffee and tea, and it also became a key base for British forces in their attack on Italy during the Second World War. British rule remained unchallenged until 1952, when the bloody Mau Mau Rebellion began. The Kikuyu, the largest ethnic group in Kenya, had been mostly excluded from colonial governance, and while many of them supported peaceful protest, some grew frustrated and embraced violence. The Mau Mau (as the rebels were called) resorted to torture, mutilation, and assassination in an attempt to destabilize the colonial regime. In response, the British imposed martial law on Kenya and declared war on the

insurgents. By 1956, the rebellion had been crushed, but the British Empire's methods brought international condemnation.

Britain's aspirations to remain the third world power (behind the United States and the Soviet Union) took another major blow in the 1956 Suez Crisis. That year, Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized and restricted access to the Suez Canal, which allows vessels to travel from Europe to Asia without going around Africa. Since access to the canal was paramount to British shipping interests, the British hatched a secret plan with the French and Israelis to get control of the canal. According to plan, the Israelis invaded Egypt. Next, the British and French declared that the situation was unstable and tried to take control of the canal. The Americans in particular were furious, and forced the conspiring countries to withdraw. Under a Canadian plan the United Nations took control of the canal. The Suez Crisis underscored the British Empire's new place in the world – it was no longer a global force that could do whatever it wanted.

## The End and the Legacy of Empire

While the British may have been successful in retaining their holdings in the Malayan Emergency and the Mau Mau Rebellion, they often endured criticism abroad for their heavy-handed methods. Imperialism was developing a bad name – partly because of British counterinsurgency wars in the colonies and partly because many people around the world, especially in the United States, believed that the European empires should end. In 1960, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on Decolonization, which asserted the right of all peoples to self-determination and called for a quick end to imperialism. Such worldwide moral pressure was important, but likely the main reason why the British abandoned most of their colonies was because they could no longer pay for them. Even though fierce revolts had been put down in Malaya and Kenya, nationalists had surged in popularity. The British thus disposed of most of their colonies; today what remains of the British Empire are several small islands, the largest of which is Bermuda.

The British did not abandon their empire entirely, however. As India was leaving the empire in 1947, the British instituted the Commonwealth of Nations, in which all former colonies could take part. Today, the Commonwealth consists of all of Britain's former imperial possessions, excepting Ireland, which withdrew, and Zimbabwe, which was suspended. The monarch of England is still the head of state of most of these countries, though there are some exceptions. The Commonwealth is loosely organized, but there are some linkages aside from common aspects of culture. Leaders of the Commonwealth countries meet every two years, and every four years the Commonwealth Games are held in a member country.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the Commonwealth, however, is that membership in it entitles a member country's citizens to the right to live and work in the United Kingdom and in some other countries of the Commonwealth. Though recent changes in visa structure have made this more difficult, the fact remains that immigration from Britain's former colonies have made a noticeable difference in the ethnic makeup of Britain's population. These changes have been quite recent; while the

2001 census showed that most immigrants from Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean lived in Greater London, over the ensuing years such immigrants tended to move to or resettle in most of the UK's cities in large numbers. The 2011 census results revealed that there are nonwhite British communities entrenched across the country. The reaction to this has been mixed; while many are pleased with the positive contributions of the newcomers, and with the reputation of London in particular as a multicultural haven, others do not welcome the influx of immigrants, most of whom have darker skin than native Britons. The debate over whether to welcome these immigrants has become one of the great societal issues for Britain in the twenty-first century.

*Summary*

- The Second World War significantly eroded Britain's ability to keep its empire. The war nearly bankrupted Britain, and British losses on the battlefield shattered the myth of the empire's invincibility.
- Though for decades the British Empire had guarded against all external threats to its control in India, it was massive internal unrest that forced the British to leave rather abruptly in 1947.
- In the 1950s, British forces were involved in conflicts around the world in an attempt to preserve the remnants of the country's influence. Nonetheless, Britain's heavy-handed tactics in the Malayan Emergency, the Mau Mau Rebellion, and the Suez Crisis earned the country international condemnation.
- Eventually, nationalist movements became too strong and too expensive to resist. The British abandoned most of their empire by the early 1960s.
- Today, Britain has many formal and informal links with its former colonies. Ties are maintained partly through involvement in the cultural activities of the Commonwealth of Nations. Citizens of these former colonies also often settle in Britain, which is struggling to cope with its new status as a haven for immigrants.