

## Case Study | How did BRITAIN adapt to its new POST-WAR INTERNATIONAL ROLE? 1945-1951

After the Second World War ended in 1945, Britain emerged victorious but bankrupt, and the next 20 years witnessed significant political and social changes in British society and its place in the world. Notably, nation-building in the 1945-51 period was intrinsically linked to the redefinition and reassertion of **Britain's status in a radically changed world order**. What were therefore some of the political and social changes, and how did BRITAIN adapt to its new POST-WAR INTERNATIONAL ROLE? It is important to assess the nature of **Britain's new global role**, how Britain struggled to redefine a new place for itself on an international scene dominated by the superpowers and the Cold War, as well as the significance of Britain's attitude towards the budding **European Coal and Steel Community**. Finally, it is important to explore the evolving **relationship between Britain and its colonies** in a period which marked the beginning of the end of the British Empire.

### I) Challenges of post-war reconstruction and how Labour addressed them

To begin with, Britain in 1945 both at home and at an international scale faced the challenges of post-war reconstruction. “The first step in the re-creation of the European family must be a partnership between France and Germany”, declared Churchill in Zürich in 1946. Until the 1960s, Britain's hope of RECONSTITUTING & PRESERVING its EMPIRE kept it apart from the EUROPEAN ECONOMIC COMMUNITY. Already, during the war, important innovations, such as the **Beveridge Report of 1942**, which aimed to provide a comprehensive system of social insurance 'from cradle to grave', or the **Education Act of 1944**, which provided free secondary education for all pupils, signalled the desire for reform and change across many sections of the British public. This resulted in the landslide **Labour victory of July 1945**. Labour then instituted a radical programme of nationalisation in transport and heavy industry as well as the establishment of a free **National Health Service (NHS)**. But the war had stripped Britain of virtually all its foreign financial resources, and the country had built up “sterling credits”— debts owed to other countries that would have to be paid in foreign currencies—amounting to several billion pounds. The economy was in disarray and with nothing to export, Britain had no way to pay for imports or even for food. This forced the government to continue with rationing and controls throughout the late-1940s, which in turn provoked increasing opposition in the country as people chafed under the restrictions and shortages. Indeed, industries needed to switch quickly from wartime to peacetime products if export drive was to be met. While rationing was used in the short term, through nationalization, the government hoped to maintain full employment in the long term. Indeed, through what was called “the common ownership, the means of production, distribution and exchange”, Labour succeeded in taking into public ownership 20% of economic enterprises, employing 2 million of the force, and by 1950, the balance of payments was in surplus meant that Britain no longer needed Marshall Aid.

### II) Cold War Context

Britain also faced the manifold dilemmas occasioned by the “end of Empire” and tried to recast itself through the emerging politics of the Cold War. Indeed, the emergence of a state of COLD WAR between the US-dominated capitalist West & the USSR-led communist East, the two “superpowers” in the post-war world, initially gave a renewed impetus to British imperialism. In the aftermath of the war, Churchill adopted an aggressive anti-Communist stance that saw him cooperate with US President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his successor, Harry Truman. By 1946, the pretense of having any civilised relationship with the Soviets was up; Churchill’s “Iron Curtain” speech condemned the Soviet Union’s policies in Europe on 5 March. This had a massive influence on the Truman Doctrine, and later the Marshall Plan, which served to further solidify the UK’s relationship with the US, thus creating a united front against the Soviet Union and the Communism it championed.

Moreover, Britain had emerged from the war as a strong ally to the USA and liked to think of itself as an equal partner – referred to as a “special relationship” – but Britain was, in practice, limited by its financial and military dependence on the USA. The US Marshall Plan of 1948-52 provided Britain with 3.3 billion dollars of support. Britain also relied on the NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANISATION (NATO) of 1949 & US NUCLEAR CAPACITY (despite developing its own nuclear weapons in 1952) for DEFENCE - Britain cooperated with the USA in the KOREAN WAR (1950-53) but, despite a United Nations mandate, the command was AMERICAN. Notably, the formation of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) in 1954, bringing together Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, Britain & USA in the wake of the Korean War, was an acknowledgment of the need for an american-led protective alliance.

### III) Decolonization

On the international front, Macmillan stated in 1960 that Britain was blowing through Africa, signalling the end of colonial rule by European powers and the move towards independence. Between 1947 and 1965 Britain divested herself of her Empire and the period witnessed prolonged debates about the future of Britain's role in the world, a debate exacerbated by the **Suez Crisis of 1956–57**, during which Britain realized her great imperial power years were past her. Alongside decolonization was the Cold War, during which again, Britain sought to maintain its position, alongside the United States, as a major nuclear power, exploding its first atomic bomb in 1952. But, Cold War realities demonstrated Britain's relative decline as an independent world power.

### IV) Concluding statement

Overall, post-war Britain was able to witness unprecedented changes, eventually a dramatic rise in prosperity, living standards as well as radical initiatives in health, welfare provision and in education until 1965, but most importantly the loss of an empire and the need to adapt to a new international role. Indeed, the year 1965, with Winston Churchill’s passing, seems to symbolize the passing of an old order. The previous year Harold Wilson and the Labour Party had won the general election. After a decade of Conservative rule, it is questionable to which extent Wilson’s new progressive and reforming government during the “swinging sixties” changed British society.