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| **Module code:** | HIST0583 | **Tutor:** | Saffron East | | |
| **Module Title:** | British History c. 1850-1997 Affiliate | **Module Type:**  *(EG: Thematic/Survey)* | Survey | | |
| **Student number:** | 20001775 | **Date:** | 28/03/20 | **Word count:** | 2230 |
| **Brief essay title:** | What accounts for British decolonisation: British policy, or anti-colonial resistance? | | | | |

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| British Decolonization, 1946-1997 by W. David McIntyre |

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Speaking at the Lord Mayor’s Luncheon in November 1942, Winston Churchill announced that he did ‘not become the King’s First Minister in order to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire.’[[1]](#footnote-1) Before the end of WWII, it appeared that Britain had no intention to let go of its colonial assets. However, in the years following the end of the war, the British Empire rapidly decolonized by granting independence to most of its major colonies. Not quite two decades later, the Prime Minister Harold Macmillan addressed the Parliament of South Africa in 1960 with his *Winds of Change* speech, stating that ‘the growth of national consciousness is a political fact.’[[2]](#footnote-2) A 1957 policy review analyzing the costs and benefits of maintaining the Empire had provided some evidence that the costs were starting to outweigh the benefits, though economic interests alone were ‘unlikely to be decisive’ in determining whether to grant independence or not.[[3]](#footnote-3) What were the reasons then for this relatively rapid decolonization process? Historian John Darwin observed that ‘before 1939 it was usual to supposed that …ultimate European control would continue indefinitely almost everywhere.’[[4]](#footnote-4) However, by the 1960s and into the 1970s it seemed that the process would not slow down until no colonies remained.

Ostensibly, decolonization was a decision of British policy, but no policy decision is made without considering and being influenced by changing social, political, economic, and cultural contexts. British policy did play a role in the decolonization process, but these political moves were reactive rather than proactive, and were largely driven in response to growing support for nationalism and the concept of nation-states. If we view the decision to withdraw or maintain British presence in the colonies as a cost benefit analysis, anti-colonial resistance coupled with changing views on imperialism globally made maintaining the colonies much more costly, politically and economically.

Growing nationalist resistance to British rule coupled with changing international opinion led the Atlee government to formally grant the Raj independence in 1947, creating the separate states of India and Pakistan. Externally, Britain’s economic and human resources ‘were exasperated by the war effort’ which forced the government to re-evaluate whether continued control over India was feasible.[[5]](#footnote-5) Internally, political resistance to British occupation accumulated. During the Quit India campaign in 1942, most of the nationalist leadership were imprisoned.[[6]](#footnote-6) Opposition to the political repression and economic conditions in the colony grew into Gandhi’s non-violent social movement, Swadeshi, that called for a boycott of British institutions and products.[[7]](#footnote-7) The peak of this anti-colonial resistance was reached during WWII, and put additional strain on Britain.

In 1946, Prime Minister Clement Atlee stated in a speech to the House of Commons that India was in a ‘state of great tension’ and that because India had ‘twice sent her sons to die for freedom…she should herself have freedom to decide her own destiny.’[[8]](#footnote-8) Additionally, Atlee worried that holding on to India any longer would cause world opinion to be against Britain and place them at an ‘impossible position.’[[9]](#footnote-9) As a result, in the face of declining military power and dwindling political support, Britain could no longer deny India its prize for its participation in the war and had no choice but to ‘help [India] attain that freedom.’[[10]](#footnote-10) Professor David Sanders notes that the Atlee government ‘had recognized that the Raj could not be preserved in the face of continued and growing nationalist-inspired civil disorder.’[[11]](#footnote-11) The existence of such anti-colonial resistance in the Raj made it much more costly to retain the colony, and only provided more reason for Britain to relinquish control.

In South East Asia, British policy attempted to maintain trade and geopolitical interests, but ultimately was influenced by various factors including anti-colonial resistance and changing international views on the strength of British imperialism. Malaya was especially important to Britain because of its dollar-earnings and Singapore was equally important because of its strategically located naval base.[[12]](#footnote-12) In terms of British policy, a beneficial strategy at the time was to maintain the colonies in order to raise money and contain the spread of communism.[[13]](#footnote-13) Governor-General of Malaya in 1946, Malcom MacDonald, stated that there was a need to ‘maintain full trust in British leadership in this region.’[[14]](#footnote-14) In 1948, a guerilla war called the Malayan Emergency was fought against communist forces as Britain strived to maintain its assets in the region.[[15]](#footnote-15) Following, Atlee declared in 1949 that ‘Britain’s ultimate goal’ was Malayan self-government and promised that there would not be a premature withdrawal.[[16]](#footnote-16) These sentiments all indicate that at the time, Britain was not considering relinquishing control and instead found both economic and political benefit in the region.

However, suffering losses in Hong Kong, Malaya, Singapore, and Burma during the war to the Japanese ‘undermined the myth of European invincibility’ and destroyed Britain’s ‘pretense of prestige.’[[17]](#footnote-17) As a result of the Japanese occupation, ‘Malay nationalism, in all its forms, was to acquire renewed vigor’ and British plans for colonial reorganization provided ‘widespread anger and discontent.’[[18]](#footnote-18) Because of these growing nationalist forces and the loss of British prestige, local groups and governance gained power and eventually made it more costly for Britain to maintain control.

Similarly, British control in the Middle East was more of a reluctant withdraw forced by international conditions and resistance rather than a voluntary choice. Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin stated in 1949 that the Middle East was an ‘area of cardinal importance’ as it was a point of communication, a source of oil, and an offensive base for the Empire.[[19]](#footnote-19) Britain was overtly in favor of maintaining its role as an imperial power in the Middle East through various policies such as the Baghdad Pact in 1955 which was a pro-Western defense alliance.[[20]](#footnote-20) Even as attempts to maintain control culminated in the Suez Crisis of 1956, British decision makers continued to defend their interests in the region through the 1960s by conducting military operations in both Yemen and Kuwait.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Despite the desire to maintain a British presence in the region, growing nationalism and opposition forced Britain to reconsider its position. Reflecting at the beginning of 1957 on the growth of nationalism and xenophobia in the Arab world, British ambassador Sir Michael Wright indicated that the British presence in the Gulf was widely regarded as ‘imperialistic and anachronistic’, and that if Britain did not take a ‘new line’ it would ‘risk being charged with clinging to the past.’[[22]](#footnote-22) In Egypt, anti-imperialist Egyptian Free Officers seized power with a coup d’état led by Colonel Gamal Nassar in 1952.[[23]](#footnote-23) After this coup, Britain agreed to withdraw its troops and did so by 1956.[[24]](#footnote-24) Nassar, with radical ideas about political and economic self-sufficiency promoted solidarity within the Arab world, increasing support for liberation from the ‘imperial West.’[[25]](#footnote-25) Without these key figures and increased support to end British occupation, Britain may have had more motivation to maintain their presence in the region. In the end, it was more out of economic necessity that Britain decolonized the region. The devaluation of the Sterling prompted reassessment of the former commitments, and caused Britain to realize that economically, they could no longer afford to maintain operations in the region.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Regarding decolonization of the African colonies, British policy and anti-colonial resistance both played a large role, with British policy often inciting more violence and resistance. During the 1960s, British high policy focused greatly on preventing communism and allying with the United States, which severely critiqued European imperialism.[[27]](#footnote-27) In this sense, in order to align itself more closely with the other Western power, Britain may have already considered diminishing its imperial control. In 1959, a report titled *Africa in the next ten years* was released which concluded, ‘if Western governments appear to be reluctant to concede independence to their dependent territories, they may alienate African opinion and turn it towards the Soviet Union…if they move too fast they run the risk of leaving large areas of Africa ripe for Communist exploitation.’[[28]](#footnote-28) Thus, though conflicted, British policymakers were starting to realize that there was reason to decolonize and grant independence to certain colonies over time. Prime Minster Harold Macmillan’s 1957 policy review on the economic costs and benefits of retaining colonies also served as evidence that keeping the colonies may no longer be in Britain’s interests. Macmillan had stated that there were areas where ‘there is no United Kingdom interest in resisting constitutional change even if it seems likely to lead to secession from the Commonwealth.’[[29]](#footnote-29) It appears that Britain was already factoring the cost of anti-colonial resistance into their larger strategy to reduce imperial commitments.

Despite these intentions, anti-colonial resistance and challenges in decolonizing greatly accelerated the process. Gandhi’s success in achieving Indian independence inspired nationalist leaders in African colonies, such as Kwame Nkrumah in the Gold Coast.[[30]](#footnote-30)Nkrumah eventually became the leader of the Convention People’s Party (CPP) in 1950, which advocated the need for self-government and began a campaign that involved ‘nonviolent protests, strikes, and non-cooperation with British colonial authorities.’[[31]](#footnote-31) This eventually led to the creation of the independent state of Ghana. In other African colonies, such as Kenya, violent rebellions and massacres that took place helped to delegitimize British rule. The Mau Mau Rebellion in 1959 advocated for violent resistance to British rule, and the British Kenya government started 4 years of military operations against these “rebels” which killed about 11,000 rebels, 100 Europeans, and 2,000 African Loyalists.[[32]](#footnote-32) Historians have called the Hola Camp Massacre and Nkhata Bay Massacre that took place during the rebellion in as the ‘moral end’ of empire.[[33]](#footnote-33) As a result, it became costly to justify continued British presence in the region. Afterwards, Macmillan’s *Winds of Change* speech to the Parliament of South Africa in 1960 served to solidify the rapid need for decolonization; the process could not be delayed any longer. Macmillan stated, ‘The wind of change is blowing through the continent…Whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact. We must all accept it as fact.’[[34]](#footnote-34) Although Britain may have already been considering decolonization of the African colonies from an economic perspective, anti-colonial resistance that resulted in violence provided an additional political and moral need to grant independence.

Decolonization is a vastly complex process and one that is influenced by a multitude of factors both internal and external, and shaped by people in center of the empire as well as those in the territories being ruled. Historian Michael Collins sums up that the changes that occurred were ‘largely responses to political pressure from the periphery of empire, though they involved calculated concessions at the center.’[[35]](#footnote-35) And it was indeed anti-colonial resistance coupled with changing international opinion that generated the necessary pressure for Britain to make those concessions.

Just a year after his speech at the Lord Mayor’s Luncheon, Churchill gave a speech in 1943 at Harvard University. He stated, ‘The empires of the future are the empires of the mind.’[[36]](#footnote-36) This idea was that, in the future, the concept of empire would no longer only refer to the physical domination of land and space, but rather, an intangible force. It highlights the power of ideas and innovation. With the United Nations’ Universal Declaration in 1948, nationality was asserted as a human right and the ‘political potency of nation as the antidote to empire grew.’ [[37]](#footnote-37) In this sense, it may have been the surge in support for the abstract idea of nationhood and the undermining of the idea of empire that initiated and accelerated this process of decolonization.

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