Decolonization: Crash Course European History #43

Crash Course: European History
https://youtube.com/watch?v=FlMKqRCNX9c
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===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

Hi, I'm John Green, and this is Crash Course European History.

So today we're talking about the rejection of European rule in colonies which resulted in a process called decolonization. By the 1970s, the majority of Europe's colonies had gained independence and formed new nations.

And areas like China that were less formally controlled but did feel the heavy hand of European domination similarly had loosened ties to Europe and the United States.

During the second World War, Europeans continued to confiscate goods, seized colonized peoples for forced labor and, in many cases, decimate their homes and farmland. "The Lord is my shepherd, and I am in want," one African wrote about post-war life. And then after World War II, literally millions of colonized subjects rose up in differing ways to achieve independence and in doing so they brought the colonization of the world's peoples, which had filled Europeans with pride and profits to an end. Sort of.

So there was no one decolonization process. It was sometimes prolonged and often extremely violent. At other times, it was accomplished quite quickly.

The first big pieces of the post-war empire to achieve independence were India and Pakistan, which became independent nations in August, 1947 after decades of civil disobedience and independence activism. So although the British had claimed South Asia as a single colony, they had also stirred up Muslim-Hindu rivalries on the subcontinent with the aim of preventing people from having a unified movement for independence.

That divide to continue conquering strategy persisted even as many in South Asia raged at being dragged into World War II, a war fought on behalf of their colonizers, and also at the imposition of high wartime taxes and at the constant British excuses for not granting home rule and, most horrifyingly, at the British created Bengal famine of 1943.

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The Partition (the name of the South Asian settlement of 1947) arranged for the creation of two new nations: India (a majority Hindu state) and Pakistan (a majority Muslim one). But it led to a violent nightmare. Religious and other south Asian interest groups organized their own ad hoc armies to lay claims to land and resources.

Sexual violence and murder were so common during the contested partition that, as one woman explained, “My three sisters swallowed poison - our hospital compounder distributed poison to anyone who wanted it.”

Other women escaped rape and torture through other methods of suicide. That same person also recalled, “My bua,” that is, aunt, “gave the signal to the other women to jump by jumping off the bridge first. Then other aunts, my bhabis,” that is, aunts and cousins, “six in all, killed themselves. No one tried to stop them, no even my father.”

More than a million people would die in the wars that followed partition and eventually the two countries became three, with Bangladesh becoming independent in 1971. India would become, and remains, the largest democracy in the world.

China threw off the formal grip of the European and US powers when Mao Zedong and his communist forces helped in the World War II defeat of Japan and then took control from the opposing nationalists in 1949. This victory heightened cold war tensions as the new People's Republic of China initially allied itself with the USSR. Communist forces aimed to defeat U.S. and Western European influence in Vietnam and Korea in the post-war period.

The Korean and Vietnamese wars are often seen as proxy wars between the superpowers, but if you shift perspectives, they can also be seen as wars of liberation. Less violent scenarios also materialize with activists launching strikes and civil disobedience or negotiations to achieve independence: Ghana, Morocco, and Tunisia are examples of comparatively peaceful liberation.

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In contrast, where there were numerous white settlers, like Algeria or Kenya, Europeans fought tenaciously to keep their colonies. They employed torture, confiscated farms and houses and incarcerated surviving local people in concentration camps with very high mortality rates.

Kenyans, for example, swore solemn oaths to fight for freedom and in doing so became part of the Land and Freedom Army, or Mau Mau Movement. The British fought back, destroying villages and massacring the population while driving others into those lethal concentration camps.

One Kenyan teenager returning home from school in another town was walking absentmindedly along the road toward his house when, quote, “Instinct suddenly tells me that I have gotten home...or where home should be...Our homestead is a rubble of burnt dry mud, splinters of wood, and grass...I suddenly realise that the whole village of homesteads has disappeared.”

But despite Britain's wars to retain colonies, they eventually did have to grant Kenya Independence in 1963.

In the war to liberate Algeria, where some 3 million Europeans had settled on the land of local people, French military resistance to the National Liberation Front of Freedom Fighters was especially vicious. The FLN, as it was known, was weak in armed power compared to the French, so it gained its strength from simply depicting the French torture of local people in detail.

It ensured, for instance, that militant Algerian nationalist Djamila Boupacha’s account of her torture reached a worldwide audience in February 1960. Now some of this account is too barbaric to repeat here, but I will share an abridged version with the caveat that some listeners may just want to skip ahead thirty seconds.

She wrote “I received terrible blows that made me fall to the ground. That was when the soldiers, led by a parachutist captain, crushed my ribs with their boots.” Boupacha was then transferred to

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Quote, “receive the second decree. I soon found out what that meant: electric torture to begin with...then they burned me in the same way on my legs, groin, genitals, and face. Electric torture alternated with cigarette burns, punches with fists, and water torture: suspended over a full bathtub, I was made to drink until suffocating.”

And those reports did shape french public opinion, especially after being amplified by french intellectuals like Simone de Beauvior. The president of France, Charles de Gaulle, ended the war in 1962 and Algeria gained its independence. By 1980 most areas around the world had gained their freedom from European rule, but often at

great cost. Already weak infrastructure was, at times, further damaged by struggles for independence and many of these new nations were left with a system only to facilitate the extraction of resources rather than the improvement of communities. Building infrastructure that didn't focus on resource extraction would prove an exceptionally difficult and costly facet of decolonization, one that continues to be a problem for many impoverished post colonial states today.

But that's only one facet of decolonization. The end of empire affected Europe and the world enormously in many different ways. The Caribbean-born physician Frantz Fanon wrote globally influential books on race and the need for those ruled by Europeans to decolonise not just their countries, but also their minds of the many European influences that had been forced upon them.

Lets go to the Thought Bubble. Along these lines, liberation leader Funmilayo Ransome-kuti and other African women returned to traditional clothing, rejecting British dress codes and claims to cultural superiority. For Ransome Kuti, this meant wearing Yoruba garments. Others chose various local forms of cotton garb and headpieces. Frantz Fanon also argued that freedom fighters used violence because that was all they knew about conducting their lives. Europeans had ruled with violence, so violence endured

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In many newly independent nations as they struggled to create governments and societies out of the economic and psychological wreckage of colonial rule.

Some decolonizing people migrated to Europe to escape this turmoil and the impoverishment of their regions. Britain legislated that they could do so and, economically, this migration was a big blessing for the receiving countries because in most places, including the united states, immigrants could be taken advantage of which meant governments and businesses could cut costs.

In Europe, immigrants staffed the lowest levels of the welfare state, becoming janitors and sanitation workers even when they were trained and certified doctors and nurses. They also helped Europe rebuild its war torn buildings and roads and rail roads and other infrastructure. For decolonizing countries the loss of these workers was more complex because in many cases new nations lost their best educated and most highly skilled workers. Thanks Thought Bubble.

The exploitation of these immigrants continued that of empire itself as immigrants from the colonies arrived in Europe, European racism swelled and became an integral part of decolonization and its politics. In 1958, whites rioted when a black man struck up a conversation with a white woman. In 1968 British politician Enoch Powell gave his "Rivers of Blood" speech, announcing that because of immigrants' presence in Britain, specifically people of color, whites saw their property values decline and their access to healthcare given to immigrants.

So anti-immigration came to stand for curtailing the arrival of people of color, but to be clear, again, receiving nations benefited from this immigration

Meanwhile new forms of imperialism called neo-imperialism developed as newly independent governments needed to borrow money and sought experienced advisors to build the elements of state-hood such as schools and hospitals and harbors, roads and railroads.

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European and U.S. financiers and technicians exercised enormous control over these efforts and often manipulated development to support ongoing dependence that, if not exactly colonial, was at least neo-colonial. Hence the term.

Now I know there remains a widespread belief that communities were somehow better off as colonies than as newly independent nations, but the data just does not back that up. Average life expectancy in sub Saharan Africa in 1953 was under 40; by 1980, it was over 50.

Rates of malnutrition declined while far more children learned to read and attended school for longer. The same was real in south Asia and east Asia. Some Europeans did stay in their former colonies to continue their business and some administrators stayed to serve as advisors, but many also used the uncertain times to retrieve funds from colonies and begin the system of off-shore banking.

In the meantime, the superpowers targeted these new nations to gain their allegiance in the cold war. Egypt was an early pawn when it sought funds for the Aswan Dam, first attaining them from the USSR. And then the British, French, and Israelis invaded Egypt in 1956 in a failed attempt to prevent the leader Gamal Abdel Nasser from nationalizing the Suez Canal. The United States actually stopped that invasion by cutting off funds to the British. They did this out of a fear of strengthening the Soviet hand; emerging nations might worry about similar attacks by US allies and seek out the Soviets for protection.

And the superpowers continued taking sides by providing competing groups in Africa and Asia and in the Americas with funds perpetuating turmoil and ensuring that the newly independent countries would remain weak and at the mercy of superpower aid.

And this gets at something really important, which is that during the Cold War aid wasn't really designed to like minimize human suffering or to build infrastructure. Really, it was designed to increase dependence on either one way of thinking - the communist way - or another way of thinking - the capitalist way.

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And in that process, the superpowers encouraged not just big proxy wars like those in Korea and Vietnam, but also smaller local conflicts. But despite all this turmoil, as diversity and multiculturalism accelerated, so did the exchange of ideas.

To cite just one famous example, late in the 1950s, Trinidadian immigrant Lord Woodbine (Harold Phillips) took in aspiring musicians to learn steel band instruments, calypso, and the blues. Two white boys he trained used the imported musical style to break off and become the Beatles. Immigrant writers from around the world shared stories of colonial and post-colonial life, and in doing so began to give voice to those who had been structurally silenced.

And so the Columbian Exchange continued despite the ongoing racism and discrimination.

Much more exchange, this time in realms of science and technology, was also taking place, and we'll be talking about that next time. I'll see you then!

Thanks for watching Crash Course, which is filmed here in the Jaden Smith studios in Indianapolis, and thanks to everyone at patreon.com/crashcourse for making it all possible, we have many other Crash Courses for instance check out our video about Things Fall Apart. Thanks again for watching and, as they say in my hometown, don't forget to be awesome!