Decolonization and Nationalism Triumphant: Crash Course World History #40

Crash Course: World History
https://youtube.com/watch?v=T_sGTspaF4Y
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/T_sGTspaF4Y

Hi, I'm John Green. This is Crash Course World History, and today we're going to talk about decolonization. The empires European states formed in the 19th century proved about as stable and long-lasting as Genghis Khan's [Mongol music] leading to so many of the nation states we know and love today. Yes, I'm looking at you, Burundi. [singing] DID YOU EVER KNOW YOU'RE MY BURUNDI? YOU'RE EVERYTHING

[Intro plays partly, and John cuts it off]

John: STAN, DON'T CUT TO THE INTRO! I SING LIKE AN ANGEL!

[Intro restarts playing and finishes]

So unless you're over 60-- and let's face it, Internet, you're not-- you've only ever known a world of nation states. But as we've seen from Egypt to Alexander the Great to China to Rome to the Mongols, who, for once, are not the exception here, to the Ottomans and the Americas, empire has long been the dominant way we've organized ourselves politically-- or at least the way that other people have organized us.

Past John: Mr. Green, Mr. Green! So to them Star Wars would've been, like, a completely different movie. Most of them would've been like, Go Empire! Crush those rebels!

Yeah, also they'd be like what is this screen that displays crisp moving images of events that are not currently occurring? Also, not to get off-topic, but you never learn what happens AFTER the rebel victory in Star Wars. And, as as we've learned from the French Revolution to the Arab Spring, revolution is often the easy part. I mean, you think destroying a Death Star is hard? Try negotiating a trade treaty with Gungans. Right, anyway.

So, the late 20th century was not the first time that empires disintegrated. Rome comes to mind. Also the Persians. And of course the American Revolution ended one kind of European imperial experiment. But in all those cases, Empire struck back… heh heh, you see what I did there? I mean, Britain lost its 13 colonies, but later controlled half of Africa and all of India. And what makes the recent decolonization so special is that at least so far, no empires have emerged to replace the ones that fell.

And this was largely due to World War II because on some level, the Allies were fighting to stop Nazi imperialism. Hitler wanted to take over Central Europe, and Africa, and probably the Middle East-- and the Ally defeat of the Nazis discredited the whole idea of empire. So the English, French, and Americans couldn't very well say to the colonial troops who'd fought alongside them, "Thank you so much for helping us to thwart Germany's imperialistic ambitions. As a reward, please hand in your rifle and return to your state of subjugation." Plus, most of the big colonial powers-- especially France, Britain, and Japan-- had been significantly weakened by World War II, by which I mean that large swaths of them looked like this.

So, post-war decolonization happened all over the place: The British colony that had once been India became three independent nations. By the way, is this Gandhi or is this Ben Kingsley playing Gandhi? In Southeast Asia, French Indochina became Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. And the Dutch East Indies became Indonesia. But of course when we think about decolonization, we mostly think about Africa going from this to this.

So we're gonna oversimplify here, because we have to, but decolonization throughout Afro-Eurasia had some similar characteristics. Because it occurred in the context of the Cold War, many of these new nations had to choose between socialist and capitalist influences, which shaped their futures. While many of these new countries eventually adopted some form of democracy, the road there was often rocky. Also, decolonization often involved violence, usually the overthrow of colonial elites.

(For now, let's turn to the most famous nonviolent decolonization-- or supposedly so, anyway-- that of India. So the story begins, more or less, in 1885 with the founding of the Indian National Congress. Congress Party leaders and other nationalists in India were usually from the elite classes. Initially, they didn't even demand independence from Britain. But they were interested in creating a modern Indian nation rather than a return to some ancient pre-colonial form, possibly because India was-- and is--hugely diverse and really only unified into a single state when under imperial rule by one group or another, whether the Mauryans, the Guptas, the Mughals, or the British. Okay, let's go to the Thought Bubble.

The best known Indian nationalist, Mohandas K. Gandhi, was a fascinating character. A British educated lawyer born to a wealthy family, he's known for making his own clothes, his long fasts, and his battles to alleviate poverty, improve the rights of women, and achieve a unified Indian independence from Britain. In terms of decolonization, he stands out for his use of nonviolence and his linking it to a somewhat mythologized view of Indian history. I mean, after all, there's plenty of violence in India's past and in its heroic epics, but Gandhi managed to hearken back to a past that used nonviolence to bring change. Gandhi and his compatriot Jawaharlal Nehru believed that a single India could continue to be ruled by Indian elites and somehow transcend the tension between the country's Hindu majority and its sizable Muslim minority.

In this they were less practical than their contemporary, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League who felt-- to quote historian Ainslie Embree-- "that the unified India of which the Congress spoke was an artificial one, created and maintained by British bayonets." Jinnah proved correct and in 1947 when the British left, their Indian colony was partitioned into the modern state of India and West and East Pakistan, the latter of which became Bangladesh in 1971.

While it's easy to congratulate both the British and the Indian governments on an orderly and nonviolent transfer of power, the reality of partition was neither orderly nor nonviolent. About 12 million people were displaced as Hindus in Pakistan moved to India and Muslims in India moved to Pakistan. As people left their homes, sometimes unwillingly, there was violence, and all tolled as many as half a million people were killed, more than died in the bloody Indonesian battle for independence. So while it's true that the massive protests that forced Britain to end its colonization of India were nonviolent, the emergence of the independent states involved really wasn't. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

All this violence devastated Gandhi, whose lengthy and repeated hunger strikes to end violence had mixed results, and who was eventually assassinated by a Hindu nationalist who felt that Gandhi was too sympathetic to Muslims. Oh, it's time for the open letter? [harp music]

An Open Letter to hunger strikers.

But first, let's see what's in the secret compartment today. A cupcake? Stan, this just seems cruel. These are from Meredith the Intern to celebrate Merebration, the holiday she invented to celebrate the anniversary of her singleness.

Dear hunger strikers,
Do you remember earlier when I said that Gandhi hearkened back to a mythologized Indian past? Well it turns out that hunger striking in India goes back all the way to, like, the 5th century BCE. Hunger

strikes have been used around the world including British and American suffragettes, who hunger struck to get the vote. And in pre-Christian Ireland, when you felt wronged by someone, it was common practice to sit on their doorstep and hunger strike until your grievance was addressed. And sometimes it even works. I really admire you, hunger strikers. But I lack the courage of your convictions. Also, this is an amazing cupcake.
Best wishes, John Green

Since independence, India has largely been a success story, although we will talk about the complexity of India's emerging global capitalism next week.

For now, though, let's travel east to Indonesia, a huge nation of over 13,000 islands that has largely been ignored here on Crash Course World History due to our long-standing bias against islands. Like, we haven't even mentioned Greenland on this show. The Greenlanders, of course, haven't complained because [in a whisper] they don't have the Internet.

So, the Dutch exploited their island colonies with the system of cultuurstelsel, in which all peasants had to set aside one fifth of their land to grow cash crops for export to the Netherlands. This accounted for 25% of the total Dutch national budget and it explains why they have all kinds of fancy buildings despite technically living underwater. They're like sea monkeys. This system was rather less popular in Indonesia, and the Dutch didn't offer much in exchange. They couldn't even defend their colony from the Japanese, who occupied it for most of World War II, during which time the Japanese furthered the cause of Indonesian nationalism by placing native Indonesians in more prominent positions of power, including Sukarno, who became Indonesia's first prime minister.

After the war, the Dutch-- with British help-- tried to hold onto their Indonesian colonies with so-called "police actions," which went on for more than four years before Indonesia finally won its independence in 1950. Over in the French colonies of Indochina, so called because they were neither Indian nor Chinese, things were even more violent. The end of colonization was disastrous in Cambodia, where the 17-year reign of Norodom Sihanouk gave way to the rise of the Khmer Rouge, which massacred a stunning 21% of Cambodia's population between 1975 and 1979.

In Vietnam, the French fought communist-led nationalists, especially Ho Chi Minh from almost the moment World War II ended until 1954, when the French were defeated. And then the Americans learned that there was a land war available in Asia, so they quickly took over from the French and communists did not fully control Vietnam until 1975. Despite still being ostensibly communist, Vietnam now manufactures all kinds of stuff that we like in America, especially sneakers.

More about that next week, too, but now to Egypt. You'll remember that Egypt bankrupted itself in the 19th century, trying to industrialize and ever since had been ruled by an Egyptian king who took his orders from the British. So while technically Egypt had been independent since 1922, it was very dependent independence. But, that changed in the 1950s, when the king was overthrown by the army. The army commander who led that coup was Gamal Abdul Nasser, who proved brilliant at playing the US and the USSR off each other to the benefit of Egypt. Nasser's was a largely secular nationalism, and he and his successors saw one of the other anti-imperialistic nationalist forces in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood, as a threat. So once in power, Nasser and the army banned the Muslim Brotherhood, forcing it underground, where it would disappear and never become an issue again. Wait, what's that? …Really?

And finally let's turn to Central and Southern Africa. One of the most problematic legacies of colonialism was its geography. Colonial boundaries became redefined as the borders of new nation states, even where those boundaries were arbitrary or, in some cases, pernicious. The best known example is in Rwanda, where two very different tribes, the Hutu and the Tutsis were combined into one nation. But, more generally, the colonizers' focus on value extraction really hurt these new nations. Europeans claimed to bring civilization and economic development to their colonies, but this economic development focused solely on building infrastructure to get resources and export them.

Now whether European powers deliberately sabotaged development in Africa is a hot-button topic we're going to stay well away from, but this much is inarguably true: when the Europeans left, African nations did not have the institutions necessary to thrive in the post-war industrial world. They had very few schools, for instance, and even fewer universities. Like, when the Congo achieved independence from Belgium in 1960, there were 16 college graduates in a country of 14 million people.

Also, in many of these new countries, the traditional elites had been undermined by imperialism. Most Europeans didn't rule their African possessions directly but rather through the proxies of local rulers. And once the Europeans left, those local rulers, the upper classes, were seen as illegitimate collaborators. And this meant that a new group of rulers had to rise up to take their place, often with very little experience in governance. I mean, Zimbabwe's long-serving dictator Robert Mugabe was a high school teacher. Let that be a lesson to you: YOUR TEACHERS MAY HAVE DICTATORIAL AMBITIONS. But most strongmen have emerged, of course, from the military: Joseph Mobutu seized power in the Congo, which he held from 1965 until his death in 1997. Idi Amin was military dictator of Uganda from 1971 to 1979. Muammar Gaddafi ruled Libya from 1977 until 2011. The list goes on, but I don't want to give the wrong impression about Africa.

Because while the continent does have less freedom and lower levels of development than other regions in the world, many African nations show strong and consistent signs of growth despite the challenges of decolonization. Botswana for instance has gone from 70% literacy to 85% in the past 15 years and has seen steady GDP growth over 5%. Benin's economy has grown in each of the past 12 years, which is better than Europe or the US can say. In 2002, Kenya's life expectancy was 47; today it's 63. Ethiopia's per capita GDP has doubled over the past 10 years; and Mauritania has seen its infant mortality rate fall by more than 40%.

Now, this progress is spotty and fragile, but it's important to note that these nations have existed, on average, about 13 years less than my dad. Of course, past experience with the fall of empires hasn't given us cause for hope, but many citizens of these new nations are seeing real progress. That said, disaster might lurk around the corner. It's hard to say. I mean, now more than ever, we're trying to tell the story of humans… from inside the story of humans. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller. Our script supervisor is Meredith Danko. The associate producer is Danica Johnson. The show is written by my high school history teacher, Raoul Meyer, and myself. And our graphics team is Thought Bubble. Last week's phrase of the week was "Meatloaf's Career." If you want to guess at this week's phrase of the week or suggest future ones, you can do so in comments where you can also ask questions about today's video that will be answered by our team of historians. Thanks for watching Crash Course and as we say in my hometown, Don't Forget To Be Awesome.