Why Independence Became Possible

AiCE Africanism & Pan-African Studies — War, ideology, and Cold War leverage

The Second World War: Colonialism's Contradictions Exposed

The Second World War (1939-1945) was the crack through which African independence finally broke through. The war exposed the fundamental contradiction of colonialism in a way that could not be ignored: Britain and France — the two largest colonial powers — fought a war ostensibly for democracy, freedom, and the right of peoples to self-determination, while simultaneously denying all of those things to hundreds of millions of people in their African and Asian colonies. Over half a million Africans fought for Britain in the war. Nearly 600,000 Africans fought for France. They returned home having defeated fascism in Europe — and found colonialism still firmly in place at home.

The experience of the war changed African soldiers and their communities in ways the colonial powers had not anticipated. Africans who had fought in Burma, North Africa, and Europe had seen that Europeans were not invincible. They had seen European cities bombed to rubble. They had taken European prisoners. They had watched European nations beg each other and beg America for help. The mystique of European supremacy — the psychological foundation of colonial authority — was shattered.

The war also created new external pressure on the colonial powers. The United States, which emerged from the war as the dominant Western power, was ideologically opposed to European colonialism — partly out of genuine anti-colonial principle, partly because American capitalism wanted access to African and Asian markets without the barriers erected by colonial preference systems. The Atlantic Charter of 1941, signed by Churchill and Roosevelt, affirmed 'the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live.' Churchill insisted this applied only to European peoples under Nazi occupation; Africans and Asians noted that the document said no such thing.

The founding of the United Nations in 1945, with its Charter affirming the self-determination of peoples and equal rights of nations large and small, gave African

independence movements an international legal and moral framework that they used with great skill. The UN became a platform from which African voices — initially those of the few independent African states, Ethiopia and Liberia — could advocate for the decolonisation of the rest of the continent.

The Pan-African Congresses: Building the Intellectual Framework

The intellectual and political foundation of African independence was built through a series of Pan-African Congresses — gatherings of African and African-diaspora intellectuals and activists that began in 1919 and culminated in the landmark Fifth Pan-African Congress in Manchester in 1945. These congresses were not mass movements. They were elite gatherings of educated Africans and diaspora figures. But they hammered out the ideological framework — Pan-Africanism, African self-determination, African unity — that the mass independence movements of the 1950s and 1960s would translate into political action.

The Fifth Pan-African Congress, held in Manchester in October 1945, was the pivotal moment. Organised by George Padmore and Kwame Nkrumah — who was then a young Ghanaian student in London — it brought together an extraordinary gathering of future African leaders: Nkrumah himself, Jomo Kenyatta, Hastings Banda, and many others. For the first time, the congress explicitly demanded full independence — not just political reform within the colonial system, but the complete end of colonial rule. Its final declaration stated: 'We affirm the right of all colonial peoples to control their own destiny. All colonies must be free from foreign imperialist control, whether political or economic.'

Timeline of African Independence: Key Milestones
1919 — First Pan-African Congress, Paris: W.E.B. Du Bois organises the first gathering of African and diaspora intellectuals.
1945 — Fifth Pan-African Congress, Manchester: full independence explicitly demanded for the first time.
1952 — Egyptian Revolution: Nasser and the Free Officers end the British-backed monarchy.

Timeline of African Independence: Key Milestones
1954 — Algerian War of Independence begins: the FLN launches armed struggle against France.
1957 — Ghana independence: the first sub-Saharan African country to gain independence.
1960 — Year of Africa: 17 African nations achieve independence in a single year.
1963 — Organisation of African Unity (OAU) founded in Addis Ababa.
1974-75 — Portuguese colonies gain independence after armed struggle.
1980 — Zimbabwe independence: the last major independence struggle in southern Africa concluded.
1994 — South Africa's first democratic election: Mandela becomes President.

The Cold War: A Double-Edged Sword

The Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union — which dominated global politics from 1947 to 1991 — had a profound and deeply ambiguous impact on African independence movements. On one hand, it created space for African leaders to manoeuvre: both superpowers competed for influence in newly independent African states, and African leaders were able to play them off against each other, extracting economic and diplomatic support from both sides without committing fully to either. Ghana's Nkrumah, Tanzania's Nyerere, and Egypt's Nasser all practised variants of this non-alignment strategy with considerable skill.

On the other hand, the Cold War made African independence enormously dangerous. Any African leader who adopted socialist economic policies — nationalising foreign-owned industries, implementing land redistribution, seeking economic independence from Western capitalism — was liable to be labelled a Communist by the United States and targeted for destabilisation or removal. The fate of Patrice Lumumba of the Congo, examined in the next lesson, is the definitive illustration of what the Cold War meant for African leaders who tried to pursue genuinely independent policies.

Key Takeaways

African independence became possible through the convergence of three forces: the Second World War's exposure of colonialism's moral contradictions and the shattering of the myth of European invincibility; the intellectual and political framework built by decades of Pan-African Congresses, culminating in the pivotal 1945 Manchester Congress; and a Cold War environment that gave African leaders room to manoeuvre between superpowers even as it made genuinely independent policy dangerous. The next lesson profiles the individual leaders who translated this opportunity into liberation.