

Decolonisation

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At the end of the Second World War, the major European colonial powers — France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Belgium — were left weakened and ruined. Accordingly, in 1945, two new superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, dominated the international stage and lent their support to the process of decolonisation. The first wave of decolonisation therefore coincided with the Cold War years. The USSR and China did not hesitate to provide vital aid to a number of national liberation movements in the hope of weakening the Western camp and drawing these new states closer to them.

Aware of the new favourable international context in which they found themselves, colonised peoples began their fight for independence. For some, this colonial liberation would take place through negotiation; for others, it would occur by force.

Peaceful decolonisation: India

The campaigns of civil disobedience led by Gandhi in India during the interwar years had exasperated Great Britain. India, a poor country but one with a large population, intended to play a role on the world stage by making itself the primary advocate of neutralist anti-colonialism. However, at the end of the Second World War, the British Government did not have the means to face a new colonial war. As a result, it finally granted independence to the Indian sub-continent in August 1947, although the country was obliged to undergo a partition that gave rise to a new state, Pakistan. Once the Constitution had been drafted, the Republic of India was proclaimed in January 1950, but it remained a member of the British Commonwealth.

Decolonisation by force of arms: Indo-China and Algeria

In South East Asia, France had thought that it could retake Vietnam, where its troops had been fighting the Viet Minh (the Communist League for the Independence of Vietnam) since 1948, but its strategists were predicting a long war at high human cost. In order to justify this colonial war before the bar of world opinion in general and before the US Administration in particular, France therefore defined it more as a fight against Communism than as a colonial war. Thus, as from 1950, the United States declared itself ready to give material aid to the French war effort by supplying arms. But the French position in Indo-China continued to deteriorate. After the catastrophic surrender of its Dien Bien Phu stronghold on 7 May 1954, France realised that it could no longer pursue this distant and costly war solely in the name of the fight against Communism. France therefore accepted the conclusions of the Geneva Conference, which established the independence of the Indo-Chinese peninsula. And, whilst northern Vietnam fell under the Communist control of Ho Chi Minh, a nationalist dictatorship took power in the south. As soon as France had freed itself from the powder keg that was Indo-China, it lost an important part of its colonial prestige, which only served to strengthen further the independence movements already active in French North Africa. Unlike France, the United States would not accept the outcome of the Geneva Conference and remained firmly behind the cause of independence for South Vietnam.

France also had to face a serious crisis in North Africa which began with the uprising of the National Liberation Front in 1954. The war then spread to Morocco and Tunisia and eventually even threatened the French Republic itself. The protectorates of Morocco and Tunisia were granted independence in March 1956, without any armed struggle. In Algeria, however, the existence of a powerful minority of European colonists vehemently opposed to the creation of an Islamic Algerian Republic prevented the emergence of any amicable solution. As the country was divided into administrative *départements*, it was effectively considered to be an inalienable part of French national territory. It was not until the end of a painful eight-year-long war, which lasted from the 1954 insurrection until the Evian Accords of March 1962, that Algeria became an independent state. More than 800 000 colonists then hurriedly left Algeria and took refuge in France.

The Algerian war presented France with serious problems and might even have turned into a civil war. It led to a crisis in the French Government marked by the fall of the Fourth Republic and the return to power in 1958 of General de Gaulle, who was determined to restore national unity.

A number of newly independent Asian and African countries, finally freed from colonial domination, refused to align themselves with the great powers and attempted instead to promote their common interests, quite apart from the divisions opposing the Communist bloc and the Western bloc.