

DECOLONISATION

The process whereby a colonial society achieves constitutional independence from imperial rule. It is the reverse of colonisation – a process whereby one state occupies the territory of another state and directly rules over its population. Although it has a very long history (the Greeks, for example, set up colonies around the Mediterranean several hundred years before Christ), it is the period of European expansion into Africa, Asia, the Americas, and the Pacific between the fifteenth and the early twentieth century that is generally associated with colonialism as a system of rule.

There are a number of reasons why European states pursued such a policy. They were driven by the desire for raw materials and natural resources, new markets and investment opportunities, and concern over the imperial ambitions of their rivals in Europe. **Balance of power** considerations often helped to fuel European colonialism.

As a system of rule, colonialism was often violent and repressive. It tended to undermine indigenous cultural and religious beliefs, led to the emergence of new class structures, and weakened traditional social bonds. People in the colonies were sometimes forced to speak languages other than their own, to conform to legal and political norms foreign to them, and were often regarded as racially inferior by their colonial overlords. However, some would argue that colonialism has not been a wholly negative occurrence. In some cases it brought economic **development** and **modernisation**, advancements in medicine and agriculture, and political liberalism and democracy to the less-developed world. Whether these 'positives' outweigh the long-term suffering of the colonised societies is a debatable point.

Decolonisation amounts to the granting or return of **sovereignty** to the colony. In contemporary terms, decolonisation is most often associated with the achievement of political independence of Africa and much of Asia from the European states after 1945. It began in earnest in the early 1950s and continues up to the present day. Between 1980 and 1989, for example, Britain granted independence to Zimbabwe, Belize, Antigua, and Brunei. East Timor has only just become independent after 25 years of colonial occupation by Indonesia. One might also regard the end of Soviet rule over Eastern

Europe as part of a process of decolonization. There are a number of reasons why decolonisation occurred during this period. First, the European states were financially and militarily exhausted after the Second World War and could no longer endure the costs of maintaining colonial empires in faraway corners of the globe. France and Belgium are exceptions here. They hung on to their colonies with much more determination than the British. Second, the United States pressured the European states into divesting themselves of their colonies. Third, **self-determination** was an important political ideal in international relations throughout the twentieth century and it took root in the colonies and fed resistance movements. The British in India (1940–47), the French in Indo-China (1946–54) and Algeria (1954), the Dutch in Indonesia (1945–49), and the Belgians in the Congo (1959–60) are just some of the many examples where the colonial states became involved in difficult and protracted struggles against local insurgents. Fourth, public opinion within Europe began to turn against colonial domination. Finally, the **United Nations** began to support the process with its 1960 Declaration on Decolonisation.

Five aspects of decolonisation are worth highlighting. The first is the role played by **nationalism** in arousing and maintaining popular support against colonial rule. Second, the speed at which colonies achieved independence after 1945 varied greatly. In some cases, it was achieved relatively quickly. In others the transition to self-rule was a gradual process. Third, it is quite difficult to determine when decolonization begins and ends. Does it begin with revolutionary opposition in the colony and end the moment the colonising power departs? Or does it also include the long period of adjustment after the imperial power returns control to the colony? Fourth, different colonies have had to employ different strategies to achieve independence. The Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) has used international **terrorism**, Mahatma Gandhi preached non-violent resistance to British rule in India, and Ho Chi Minh had to fight a long guerrilla war, first against the French and then the United States. Fifth, decolonization has not always been accomplished easily or been successful.

Exiting colonial states often left the former colonies ill-equipped for self-rule, power vacuums have been created leading to vicious and intractable civil wars, and local economies and markets have withered. It is perhaps worth making one final point. Achieving independence has not necessarily meant the end of foreign intervention. Economic ties have continued through trading relations, and European **multinational corporations** (MNCs) have continued to flourish in former colonies. Indeed, some scholars argue that the formal end of colonialism was followed by subtle forms of *neo-colonialism*.