African Independence Movements

Africa in 1914

European domination since 1400s

Slave trade and economic exploitation

1950 - Only four independent African countries

1970 – Almost entire continent was free of European rule

Belgian
British
French
German
Italian
Portuguese
Spanish
Independent

Parts of coastal Africa had been controlled by Europe ever since Prince Henry of Portugal had sent explorers to Africa's west coast in the 1400s. At first, Europeans were lured to Africa by the slave trade and precious minerals, such as gold.

During the Age of Imperialism, Europe set out to conquer the interior of Africa in order to begin exploiting the continent's wealth on a grand scale. The major European powers met in Berlin in 1884 to divide up the continent with no regard to Africans. By 1914, Africa was occupied by the colonial powers, as shown in this map. Although Germany lost its colonies after World War I, these territories were simply redistributed to the winners of the war. The colonial powers no longer engaged in the slave trade, but they did exploit Africa's wealth for their own gain, often using African labor.

The map of Africa remained relatively unchanged until after World War II. Even in 1950, there were only four independent African countries: Ethiopia, South Africa, Liberia, and Libya. By 1970, almost the entire continent would be independent.

[Map courtesy Eric Gaba. Image of Jomo Kenyatta courtesy German Federal Archive.]

Year of Independence

pre-1949
1950–1959
1960
1961–1964
1965–1969
1970–1975
1976–1979
1980+
n/a
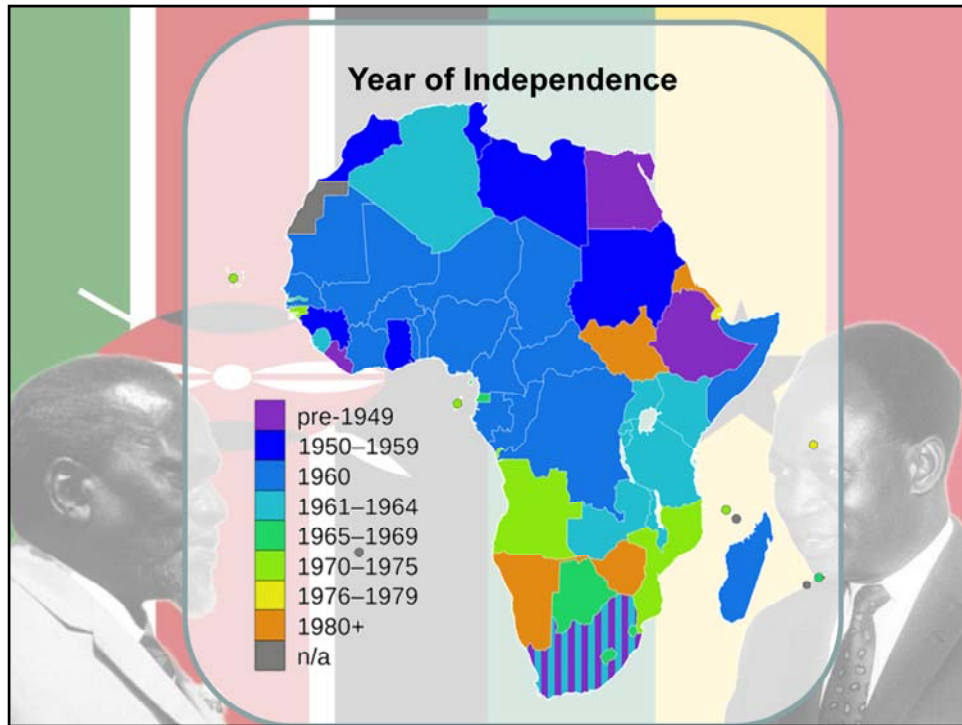
This map shows the approximate year each country gained independence. Note that most of the countries became independent in the 1960s, and many gained their freedom in 1960.

[Map courtesy Nobelium.]

Roots of Independence

U.N. charter supported all peoples' right to self-determination
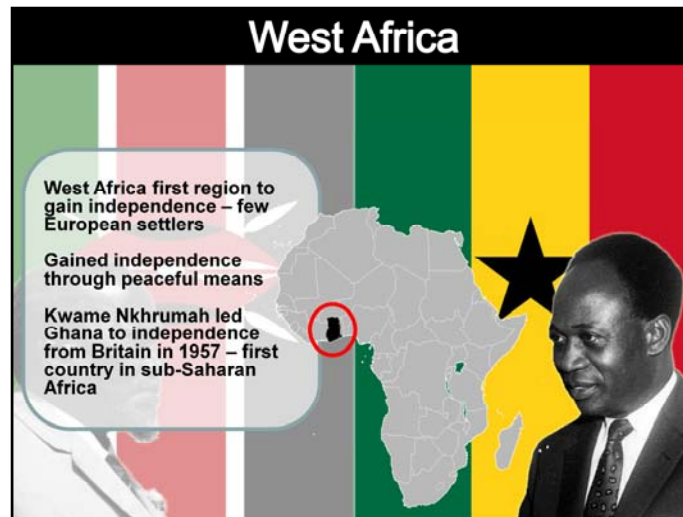
Europe's colonial powers would lose a large source of wealth

African intellectuals returned from abroad and formed nationalist movements

Africans had pride in their culture and heritage and resented exploitation by Europe

U.N. Headquarters

Although the United Nations charter supported every country's right to self-determination, the European colonial powers did not grant independence without a struggle. If the colonized territories became independent, the large colonial powers, Britain, France, Belgium and Portugal, would lose a great source of wealth.

A number of Africans had attended the top universities in Europe and America. Upon returning to their home countries, many started nationalist movements with the goal of creating their own governments. These intellectuals had great pride in their own culture and heritage, and did not believe they were inferior, which was the attitude of many Europeans. These Africans wanted to rule themselves, not live under imperialist rule. They also resented the economic exploitation whereby the Europeans took the wealth of Africa. These nationalists began to form organizations that pushed for independence from Europe.

West Africa

West Africa first region to gain independence – few European settlers

Gained independence through peaceful means

Kwame Nkhrumah led Ghana to independence from Britain in 1957 – first country in sub-Saharan Africa

While all of Africa would eventually become independent, some of the struggles were peaceful, and some were violent.

West Africa was one of the first regions to gain independence. Although the Europeans had traded with this area for centuries, very few Europeans actually lived there. Instead, the colonial powers simply ruled over the territories through either local or colonial governments. As a result, the Europeans offered little resistance to the independence movements, since there were almost no European settlers in the region.

The relatively peaceful independence movements were headed by some of the best-known African intellectuals from that era including Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Leopold Senghor of Senegal.

In 1957, Ghana was the first country in sub-Saharan Africa to become independent from Europe, under the leadership of Kwame Nkhrumah. He had studied in the United States during the 1940s. Upon his return to Ghana, he founded a nationalist organization which pushed for independence from Britain. Commonly referred to as the "black star of Africa" for its flag, this small country became a symbol of hope to the rest of the continent. Once Ghana was granted independence, many countries soon followed.
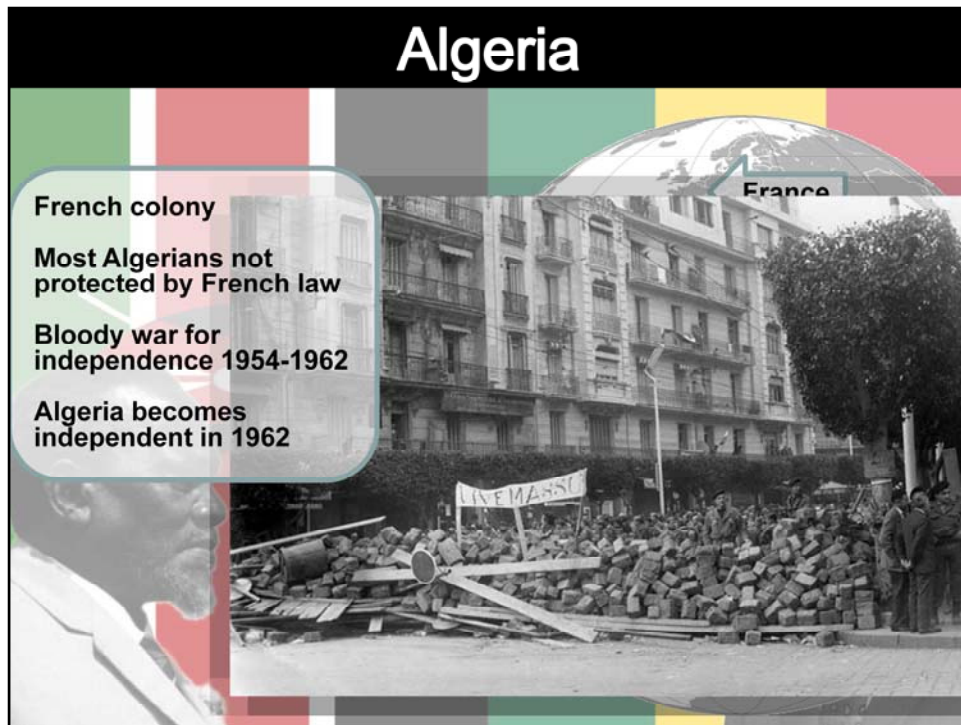
Not all independence movements were peaceful. Some colonies had to fight wars of liberation to gain independence. This was the case in Algeria.

Algeria was a French colony in North Africa directly across the Mediterranean Sea from France. France gained control of the area in the mid 1800s. With the approval of the French government, many French settlers moved to the colony to farm. France hoped one day to incorporate the colony into the nation, along with its other colonies.

Some Algerians became French citizens, but most did not. Those that did not become French citizens did not have as many rights as those who did. In 1954, some Algerians started a guerilla war to win independence. The French government resisted with military force, resulting in a war that lasted seven years. During this time, hundreds of thousands of Algerians and over 25,000 French soldiers lost their lives.

The war was becoming less popular in France and the colonial troops could not defeat the Algerians. In 1962, France withdrew its troops and granted Algeria independence. Over one million European settlers fled to France, along with some of the Algerians who had supported them.

[Image courtesy Christophe Marcheux.]
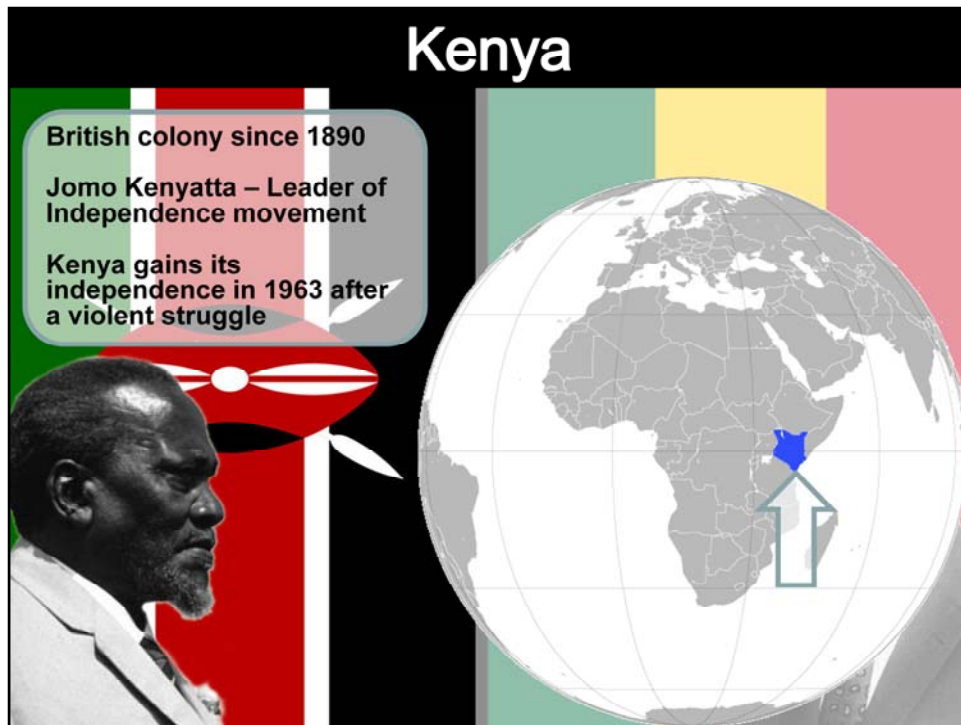
Since 1890, Britain controlled the East African colony of Kenya. Like Algeria, Kenya had a number of European settlers who lived there, mostly farmers. As was the case with other colonies that had a lot of European settlers, independence did not come peacefully.

Under the leadership of Jomo Kenyatta, Kenyan nationalism began to grow and a movement for independence began. A number of Kenyans took up weapons in support of the independence movement in what became known as the Mau Mau Rebellion.

The British accused Kenyatta of being one of the leaders of the rebellion. He was found guilty and imprisoned. By the time of Kenyatta's release in 1959, he was so popular that he won the election for president when the country became independent in 1963. Although the Mau Mau Rebellion wasn't nearly as bloody as the Algerian struggle for independence, it was still violent and lasted from 1952 to 1960.

NO NARRATION

South Africa

Settled in 1600s by Dutch East India Company

Dominated by British and Dutch settlers who made up about 25% of population

Became independent in 1931

South Africa's history was very different than any other African country. South Africa was settled by Dutch immigrants as part of the Dutch East India Company in the 1600s. As a result, generations of European South Africans grew up surrounded by a black majority. The Afrikaners even spoke their own language, which was based on Dutch.

This territory became a British colony in the early 1800s. With the discovery of diamonds in the late 1800s, conflicts broke out between the British and the Dutch descendents over the country's rich mineral deposits. In 1931, Britain granted South Africa independence. While independence was important to South Africans of European descent, it mattered little to the vast majority of people – blacks, Indians, and those people of mixed race who enjoyed few of the rights of citizens.
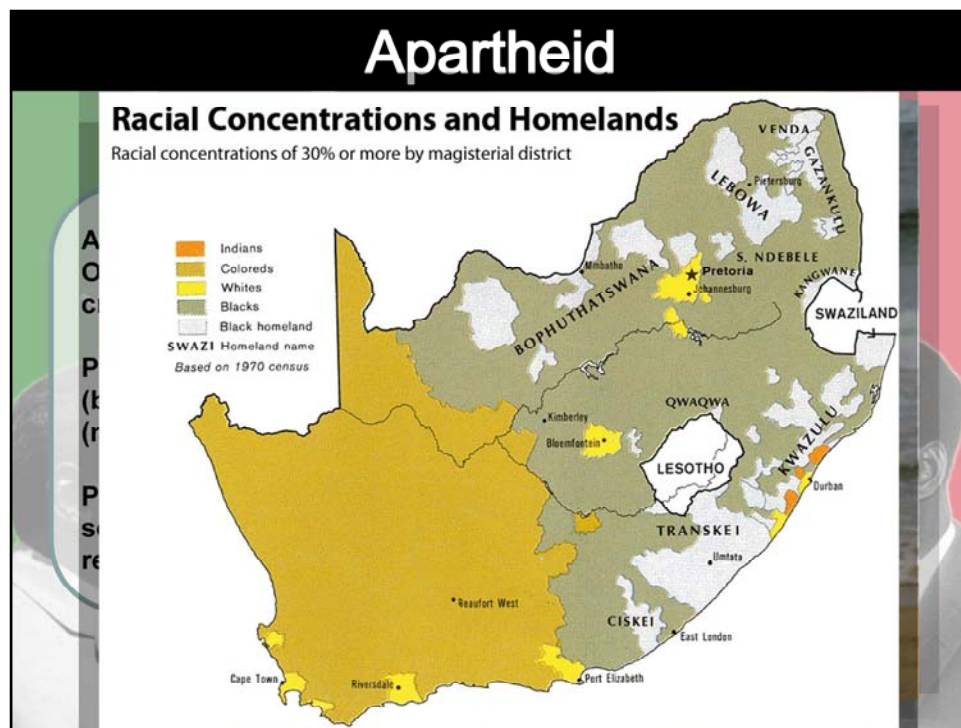
In 1948, while the rest of Africa was starting to move toward independence, South Africa was making discrimination against non-whites the official law. That year, the South African government created the policy of apartheid, which was a collection of laws intended to segregate all races. This legislation classified people into one of four racial groups – native, white, colored (of mixed race) and Asian – and people had to live in segregated areas based on their race.

People from one racial group could not use those resources specified for the other groups. Those resources designated for non-white use were typically inferior or non-existent. Black people were also denied job opportunities and access to equal education.

Non-white political representation was completely abolished in 1970, and, starting in that year, black people were deprived of their citizenship. The government created ten tribally-based homelands with their own limited governments. All black people legally became citizens of these homelands, which made up about thirteen percent of the least productive land in the country.

[Image of beach courtesy Guinnog.]

Resistance to Apartheid

African National Congress (ANC) formed in 1912

Nelson Mandela - Lawyer who rose through the ranks of the ANC

Mandela became leader of the ANC's armed wing

He was sentenced to life in prison in 1962

Five representatives of the South African Native National Congress (which became the African National Congress) traveling to England in in 1914 to protest the 1913 Land Act

Non-whites in South Africa did not just accept the discriminatory policies of the white national government. They had a long history of fighting against this repression with the goal of creating a society based on equal rights.

One of the first national organizations devoted to resisting the government's policies was the African National Congress (ANC), created in 1912. Over the following decades, the ANC led many protests against the government, many of which were brutally repressed.

During the 1950s, a lawyer by the name of Nelson Mandela rose through the ranks to become one of the main leaders of the ANC. In 1961, he became the leader of the armed wing of the ANC, which was called the Spear of the Nation. This group was devoted to ending apartheid through violent means.

Mandela was captured in 1962 and put on trial. He was found guilty and spent the next twenty-seven years in prison. Despite being imprisoned, Mandela remained a popular figure of the resistance and became known throughout the world as a symbol of resistance to apartheid.

Resistance and Change

South Africa was an outcast

Pressure from other countries to end apartheid

1980s – Protests to end support in other countries

1990
- Ban on ANC lifted
- Mandela released from prison

1994 – Mandela becomes the first black president of the Republic of South Africa

South Africa was ostracized by much of the world community for its racist policies. Trade restrictions were placed on the country by a number of countries, including the United States. Its sports teams were not allowed to play in many international competitions.

In the 1980s, many college students in the U.S., Great Britain, and elsewhere began protests to end economic support of South Africa and companies doing business there.

Eventually, South Africa gave in to the pressures. In 1990, newly-elected President F.W. De Clerk lifted the ban on the ANC and released Mandela from prison. The policies of apartheid were gradually repealed. In 1994, free elections were held in South Africa, and Nelson Mandela was elected as the new president of South Africa. Although there would be many obstacles to overcome in order to erase the legacy of apartheid, at least all citizens in the country had equal rights.

[Image of rugby player courtesy Bob Skinstad. Image of bus courtesy R. Barraez D´Lucca. Image of De Clerk and Mandela courtesy Davos World Economic Forum.]

Cold War

Cold War rivalry influenced newly independent countries

Superpowers tried to win allies with aid – often military

Some countries switched sides to maximize advantage – others tried to remain independent

The Cold War also had an influence on Africa's quest for independence. As each country became independent, the two superpowers tried to get the country's leaders to ally with either the Soviets or the Americans. Often, the superpowers gave aid in the form of weapons, which some countries used to fight against their enemies, both inside and outside the country.

Some countries tried to use the rivalry between the Soviets and the Americans to their advantage. By switching their allegiance back and forth between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, they tried to get as much foreign aid as possible. Other countries tried to avoid allying themselves with either superpower in order to remain free of foreign influence. As a result of their desire to gain new allies in Africa, the Soviets and the Americans often ended up supporting corrupt rulers who did not act in the best interest of their citizens.

African Independence

Question 1 of 4 ▾ Point Value: 10

Nelson Mandela was a proponent of non-violent resistance as the best way to overturn apartheid.

○ True

○ False

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NO NARRATION