World War II
And the
Origins of Decolonization
Two major ‘watersheds’ in the early colonial world:

- The Great Depression (1929-1935)
- World War II (1939-1945)

WWII grew from Great Depression (in Europe and by extension, in Africa):

- altered impetus of Colonialism,
- created new roles for ‘Colonial Africa’.
The 1930s

Economic situation arising from Great Depression revealed degree to which Africa was dependent on healthy functioning of world economy:

For example --

- Uganda: cotton 80% exports
- Gold Coast: cocoa 79% exports
- Gambia: peanuts 98% exports
- Zanzibar: cloves 61% exports
The 1930s

When Depression caused prices to drop for all commodities produced in Africa:

- colonial governments attempted to ‘recoup’ Europe’s losses from Africa:
  - cuts to education, health, welfare
  - reduction local wages
Colonial economics now clear:

- where profits were made, bulk of money invested NOT in Africa but in Europe!
The 1930s: for the benefit of... WHO?

Northern Rhodesia:

- 1937 more than 4 million pounds in profits, 540,000 pounds returned to country through taxes but colony was “too poor” to afford schools.
Gold Coast:

- 1920s-1949 more than half of all profits from mineral exports went directly to Britain yet colony had only one higher education institution (Achiomota College, 1924)

- Most companies foreign owned therefore profits ‘profited’ Europe not Africa
“Population, Area, Trade and Investment: A comparison (produced for official purposes during the war)

[French Equatorial Africa and the Cameroons (Native Intelligence Division 1942): 417]
The 1930s: Africa responds

Combination of:

- economic crises everywhere

- increasing frustrations of educated Africans with no place in either the economy or the society

Began to ‘radicalize’ political movements!
The 1929 “Abba women’s riots”: 
- response to threatened taxation in a moment of economic decline, was typical (Southern Nigeria)
The 1930s: Africa responds

Cocoa Hold-Ups in Gold Coast (1930, 1938):
- important for showing emergence of class difference

[referred to in the Davidson video: ‘Magnificent African Cake’]
World War II and Aftermath

Video Presentation:

Basil Davidson
“Africa: Rise of Nationalism”

[see ‘Additional Readings’]
“The Straw that broke...”

Italian Invasion of Ethiopia:

- economic consequences of depression (in turn, legacy of WWI)

- led to rise of Fascism in Germany, Italy

Mussolini, like 19th predecessor Bismarck, wanted place in ‘The African Sun’
“Voices of discontent”

On the eve of WWII:

-the ‘voices of discontent’ had begun to multiply in number

-and change in tone . . .

Throughout the continent.
“... Nationalism was a way to become less poor, to send their children to school, benefit from better roads, prices, public services.

They [the majority of the people] looked to nationalism for social gains, while the educated few mostly had their eyes on political gains.”

[B. Davidson, Modern Africa, p. 130]
"The African is conditioned, by the cultural and social institutions of centuries, to a freedom of which Europe has little conception, and it is not in his nature to accept servitude for ever.

He realizes that he must fight unceasingly for his own complete emancipation; for without this he is doomed to remain the prey of rival imperialisms, which in every successive year will drive their fangs more deeply into his vitality and strength."

Jomo Kenyatta, Facing Mount Kenya

(from ‘BBC Story of Africa– Between the Wars’, Additional Readings)
Political parties in 1930s less accommodating than earlier ‘moderate’ elite because of:

- impact of Great Depression, lowered prices paid for agricultural produce & higher prices demanded for imported goods

- falling wages, unemployment

- impact of long-term cash cropping felt on environment and food-supplies
Voices of discontent

Impact of long-term labour migration:

- creating new class of ‘semi-permanent’ workers in cities

- undermining self-sustainability of rural areas (turning into ‘labour reserves’, housing women and children, elderly and sick workers)

- same time, radicalizing urban politics through workers’ strikes
Sudan: Tramway men On Strike

"There was a lightening strike of tramway men this morning and many official and businessmen were obliged to use other means of transport... This appears to be the first strike of its nature in Sudan and it is all the more regrettable as the tramway men seem to have no legitimate grounds for striking."

[British-owned Sudan Daily Herald, 19 Dec 1936]
(from ‘BBC Story of Africa – Between the Wars’, Additional Readings)
Nigeria - Strikes Of Inspectors Threatened

"Streams of sanitary inspectors were seen early this morning moving to and fro with evident signs of dissatisfaction on their faces. One of their main grievances is reported to be the placing of an untrained and illiterate sanitary inspector to supervise their work. A petition has been addressed to the Senior Resident of the Province."

[Nigeria Daily Times, 2 Dec 1936.]
(from ‘BBC Story of Africa – Between the Wars’, Additional Readings)
“Voices of discontent”

South Africa - Strike At Krugersdorf

“Thirty nine natives on shaft sinking contracts at East Champs d'Or, Krugersdorf, refused to start work and tried to prevent others working... they wanted higher pay, although they had signed up to contract.”

[Rand Daily Mail, 5 Dec 1936].
(from ‘BBC Story of Africa – Between the Wars’, Additional Readings)
Even in British Colonies where an educated professional elite was slowly growing:

"It is the policy to appoint Africans to take the place of Europeans, but the real point of disagreement is as to the rate this process should proceed. The government feels this process is too fast. The people, that it is too slow."

[Sierra Leone Daily Mail, 3 Dec 1936]
(from ‘BBC Story of Africa – Between the Wars’, Additional Readings)
Colonialism cultivated political activity among ‘moderate’ elite who were closer to British (socially, education, culture) than to illiterate and semi-literate, working class and rural Africans:

- First major ‘British Colonial’ political party organized along these lines, exemplifying policy: United Gold Coast Convention

- initial political ‘birth’ of Kwame Nkruma
“Voices of discontent”

Typical of early, educated, professional ‘elitist’ political party: US Education

Kwame Nkruma Student Visa for Univ. Pennsylvania, 1935
“Voices of discontent”

Kwame Nkruma, University of Pennsylvania, 1935
Association with educated elite in London, especially George Padmore, led him to Pan-Africanism:
‘Address to the Nations of the World’: 1st Pan-Africanist Conference (London, 1900):

“Let the German Empire, and the French Republic, true to their great past, remember that the true worth of colonies lies in their prosperity and progress, and that justice, impartial alike to black and white, is the first element of prosperity.”

“Let the Congo Free State become a great central Negro State of the world, and let its prosperity be counted not simply in cash and commerce, but in the happiness and true advancement of its black people.”
“Let the nations of the World respect the integrity and independence of the first Negro States of Abyssinia, Liberia, Haiti, and the rest, and let the inhabitants of these States, the independent tribes of Africa, the Negroes of the West Indies and America, and the black subjects of all nations take courage, strive ceaselessly, and fight bravely, that they may prove to the world their incontestable right to be counted among the great brotherhood of Mankind.”
Work with Pan-Africanists shifted Nkrumah’s beliefs:

- upon return to Gold Coast: found United Gold Coast Convention too conservative, “accommodating” to British

- established Convention Youth Organization (activity significant post-WWII)

Typical evolution of many educated Africans (British and French, to limited extent in ‘Settler Societies’) in inter-war years
“Voices of discontent”

At Fifth Pan-African Congress (Manchester, 1945):

- pronounced that armed struggle could be justified to overthrow colonialism

- Kwame Nkrumah was a leader at this Congress.

[see 1963 Reprint of Documents from 5th PAC’, complete with ‘Messages of Good Will’ from leaders like Nandi Azikiwe (below) and Jomo Kenyatta; Pan Africanism’, Resources]
“Voices of discontent”

The Fifth Pan-African Congress (Manchester, 1945):
“Voices of discontent”

Nnamdi Azikiwe: educated in the US (Howard, Lincoln Universities; Masters from Univ. Pennsylvania)

- contemporary of Nkruma from southern Nigeria

- strongly influenced by black radical American journalism
Voices of discontent

- 1934 returned to job with the *African Morning Post* (Accra, Gold Coast): successfully politicized ‘the masses’

- charged with sedition for publishing the article “Has the African a God?”

- established *The West African Pilot* (Lagos, Nigeria): dedicated to achieving independence from the British

*[newspapers both shown in Video on changing attitudes in 1930s]*

[Please note: there are some inaccuracies in the BBC Story of Africa account of Azikiwe on the ‘Between the Wars: Newspapers’ page]*
“Voices of discontent”

Francophone World: Leopold Senghor and ‘Negritude’
- ‘cultural’ resistance, gained political weight
- ideology developed in 1930s by three French ‘colonials’ (from Martinique, Fr. Guyana and Senegal) who met in Paris
- valued ‘being Black’: Senghor emphasized a universal valuation of being black and African and carrying that culture forward into modernity, independence
“Voices of discontent”

- Leopold Senghor would later become the first president of Independent Senegal (just as Nkrumah would do in Ghana)

[For more on ‘Negritude’, see article of same name in Resources]
Rising Expectations

Atlantic Charter (1941):

Article Three:

“They [President of the United States, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom] respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live; and they wish to see sovereign rights and self government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them…”
Rising Expectations

Atlantic Charter (1941):

Article Five:

“[And] … they desire to bring about the fullest collaboration between all nations in the economic field with the object of securing, for all, improved labor standards, economic advancement and social security…”

- further inflated expectations!
- inflamed frustrations!
World War II (1939 - 45):

- many argue that WWII actually began in Africa, in 1935, with Italian invasion of Ethiopia
  [Adu Boahan in ‘This magnificent African cake’]

- as in WWI, so-called voluntary enlistment had to actually be ‘forced’ by chiefs in many areas

- situation fully addressed in local media
Enlist today!

Your country needs you!
Not for learning how to shoot the big howitzers

Or how to rat tat tat the machine guns

Or how to fly o'er peaceful countries
Dropping bombs on harmless people

Or how to fix a bayonet and charge at
The harmless workers of another clime.
World War II and Africa

Your country needs you!

For the rebuilding of your shattered homeland.

Your homeland ruined by exploitation.

By the tyrants of foreign nations Who would use you as their cats paw

While they starved you to subjection .

(African Standard, 28 July 1939)

World War II and Africa

First African Battleground:

- Ethiopia (1941)

- reclaiming land lost to Fascist Italy in 1935: symbolically important

- involved troops from West, East and South Africa
Africans in World War II

King’s African Rifles, collecting arms from defeated Italians, Ethiopia (1941)
Second major theatre: North Africa
- Italy invaded Egypt (1940)
- German ‘Afrika Corps’ (under Rommel) in western Libya (1941)
- British and Germans chased each other back and forth, next two years
World War II and Africa

Africa’s forgotten soldiers in WW2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COLONIAL POWER</th>
<th>Troop numbers (approximate)</th>
<th>Forces and countries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BRITAIN</td>
<td>334,000</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>289,530</td>
<td>King’s Africa Rifles: Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>243,550</td>
<td>Royal West Africa Frontier Force: Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Gambia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRANCE (both Vichy and Free French)</td>
<td>100,000</td>
<td>Egypt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>77,767</td>
<td>Southern Africa: Lesotho, Botswana, Swaziland, Zambia, Zimbabwe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITALY INDEPENDENT</td>
<td>6,500</td>
<td>Mauritius, Seychelles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BELGIUM</td>
<td>190,000</td>
<td>Colonial troops: Algeria, Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Benin, Chad, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Niger, Republic of Congo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>60,000</td>
<td>Eritrean colonial troops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>Ethiopia - Patriots</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>24,000</td>
<td>Congo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>1,355,347</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Source: Fighting for Britain: African Soldiers in the Second World War, Spring 2010]

[from BBC News ‘The Africans who fought in WWII’, Additional Readings]
World War II and Africa

Overall situation of discontent: worsened with impact WWII:
- return to forced labour
- shortages imported goods (food, cloth, other manufactured goods/equipment)
- ‘war effort priorities’ exacerbated problems (as in WWI)
- settler colonies, South Africa: ‘white’ servicemen left workforce open to black labourers – ‘colour bar’ breached
World War II and Africa

“The European merchant
is my shepherd,
And I am in want;

He maketh me to lie down
in cocoa farms,

He leadeth me beside the waters of great need;
The general managers & profiteers frighten me.

Thou preparedst a reduction
in my salary
In the presence of my creditors.
Thou anointest my income
with taxes;

My expense runs over my income
And I will dwell in a rented house forever!”

[The ‘African Morning Post’ of Accra, as submitted by Gold Coast serviceman, c.1944; cited in Basil Davidson ‘Modern Africa’ p.66]
1945, Nigerian serviceman writing to Nigerian Nationalist leader Herbert Macaulay:

“We all overseas soldiers are coming back home with new ideas. We have been told what we fought for. That is ‘freedom’.

We want freedom. Nothing but freedom”

[cited in Basil Davidson, Modern Africa, p.66; see also ‘Atlantic Charter’, Additional Readings]
French Colonies in unique situation, not anticipated by anyone (including British neighbours):

- France (and Belgium) fell to the Axis powers (Germany) in 1940

- France left in hands German puppet regime based in Vichy

- France’s colonies left without formal ‘Colonial Master’.
French West Africa (FWA or ‘AOF’):

- part of collaborative Vichy regime until 1942 when Allies took North Africa

- thereafter, supported “Free French” effort (see below)
French Equatorial Africa (FEA):

- supported ‘government in exile’, so-called “Free French” under General Charles de Gaulle, from outset

- Felix Eboue (Chad) critical in preventing Axis base in Africa

- FEA became base for Free French
FEA important in generating Brazzaville Conference (1944): promised ‘improvements’ to colonialism

**General principles:**

1. The French Empire would remain united.

2. Semi-autonomous assemblies would be established in each colony.

4. Citizens of French colonies would have the right to vote for the French parliament.

5. The native population would be employed in public service positions within the colonies.

6. Economic reforms would be made to diminish the exploitative nature of the relationship between France and its colonies.
But the Key Passage read:

“.. the colonizing work of France makes it impossible to accept any idea of autonomy for the colonies, or any possibility of development outside of the French empire.

Even at a distant date, there will be no self-government in the colonies.”
Clear that both British and French ex-servicemen had expectations of markedly different post war world than their colonial masters:

- *expected jobs, employment*

- *conditions equal to European co-workers*

- *pension payments*

- *freedom and democracy!!*