Introduction

Unlike other empires in history — such as the Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman, or Habsburg — the collapse of the British Empire was remarkably rapid. This was especially true of the British Empire in Africa, which was largely dismantled in the years 1957-1965. Historians continue to disagree on the importance of metropolitan, colonial and international causes of this withdrawal. This article will argue that colonial nationalism and an increasingly hostile international environment contributed to the timing of independence in British Africa, but these influences must also be understood against a background of changing metropolitan circumstances and the deliberate calculations of British policy-makers. This causal interlock will be demonstrated in relation to several episodes of decolonisation between 1957 and 1965, including the Gold Coast in West Africa, the East African territories of Tanganyika, Uganda, and Kenya, and the collapse of the Central African Federation.

Colonial Nationalism

Historians like D. A. Low have emphasised that without pressure from nationalism Britain would have been more reluctant to quit its African colonies. According to this view, without colonial resistance neither the impact of international politics nor the process of domestic reassessment would have been enough to undermine British imperial power. African nationalism was stimulated by the Second World War, which required Britain to tighten control over its colonies in order to harness essential resources for the fight against the
Axis powers. In 1942 the Governor of Uganda, Sir Charles Dundas, suggested the war would have a 'rousing influence, chiefly political and social, and it will be sheer blindness not to foresee the logical consequences'. Africans wanted to be rewarded for their services to the British Empire with greater economic and political opportunities, but they were bitterly disappointed when these failed to materialise. When Charles Arden-Clarke took over as Governor of the Gold Coast following riots in 1948, the Colonial Secretary, Arthur Creech Jones, told him that the colony stood on the edge of revolution. An investigative commission concluded that 'a substantial measure of reform is necessary to meet the legitimate aspirations of the indigenous population'. However, time for reform was running out. In 1950 Kwame Nkrumah's Convention People's Party (CPP) orchestrated a campaign of civil disobedience in support of self-government, and Nkrumah was imprisoned for a brief period. However, Arden-Clarke recognised that the CPP embodied popular political aspirations and he therefore released Nkrumah. In the 1951 elections the CPP won 34 out of 38 seats and Nkrumah soon became prime minister. As a result of further CPP electoral victories in 1954 and 1956, the colony became independent under Nkrumah's leadership as the state of Ghana in 1957.

One British official observed that Ghana had become independent 'with less bitterness' than former colonies in Asia, yet within a short time Nkrumah became a spokesman for anti-colonialism and African unity, which embarrassed Britain in Commonwealth meetings and at the United Nations. Lord Home, then Commonwealth Secretary, wrote that Nkrumah regarded himself as 'a Messiah sent to deliver Africa from bondage'.

In contrast to West Africa, British colonies in East and Central Africa contained significant white settler populations, who dominated local politics and the economy. They sought to maintain their dominance by denying universal suffrage to Africans, and persuading the British government to consolidate colonial territories into federations. In East Africa the attempt to establish a federation of Kenya, Uganda, and Tanganyika founded on the rocks of African opposition. Julius Nyerere and the Tanganyika Africa Union capitalised on discontent generated by local government reorganisation and agricultural improvement schemes. The Governor, Sir Richard Turnbull, warned that local nationalism would undermine British rule unless there was a rapid transfer of power. The Colonial Office appreciated that swift decolonisation would encourage Nyerere and other nationalists to collaborate with the UK, which Britain sought as a substitute for direct control. By 1960 the Conservative government was increasingly worried that the effects of violent confrontations with nationalism in the Belgian Congo and French Algeria could spill over into British colonies. It was against this background that the British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan delivered his famous speech to the South African Parliament in February 1960, in which he declared: 'The wind of change is blowing through this continent and whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact. We must all accept it as a fact, and our national policies must take account of it.' Iain Macleod, Colonial Secretary in 1959-61, acted more
Above: Iain Macleod, Britain's progressive Secretary of State for the Colonies, talks with Julius Nyerere, leader of TANU (the Tanganyika African National Union), in Dar-es-Salaam. Tanganyika became independent, under Nyerere's leadership, in 1961. In 1964 it joined with Zanzibar to form present-day Tanzania.

quickly than even Macmillan had envisaged. He accelerated the original timetable for independence in East Africa by a decade, so that independence was granted to Tanganyika in 1961, Uganda in 1962, and Kenya in 1963.

British decolonisation in Kenya was especially traumatic. The Mau Mau uprising (1952-60) appeared to illustrate the strength of African nationalism. However, the Mau Mau were drawn only from the Kikuyu tribe, who constituted just one-fifth of the population, and not all Kikuyu agreed with the violent methods of the Mau Mau, which showed the limits of African nationalism in Kenya. In this instance Britain was willing to resort to a policy of coercion, which partly reflected the political influence of the white settler population over the Conservative government. A state of emergency was declared and the authorities imprisoned the charismatic leader of the Kenyan African Union, Jomo Kenyatta. The British Army also mounted counterinsurgency operations. During Operation Anvil (April 1954), the Army rounded up thousands of Kikuyu in the capital, Nairobi, and sent them to holding camps for questioning and 'political rehabilitation'. However, the brutality of the counterinsurgency campaign stained the reputation of the British Army and the colonial police force. The revelation that 11 prisoners were beaten to death at the Hola detention camp in March 1959, and that there had been an attempted cover-up, generated cross-party indignation in Parliament and a wave of revulsion among the British public. Consequently, the British government ordered the release of Kikuyu detainees and an end to the prison policy of 'compelling force'. The Governor of Kenya, Sir Patrick Renison, continued to regard Kenyatta as 'darkness and death', but in 1961, as a result of popular pressure in Kenya, he came round to the view of British officials who thought that he ought to be released from prison and independence granted on the basis of African majority rule. Kenyatta became President of Kenya in 1963.

In 1953 the British Government established the Central African Federation, which the historian Ronald Hyam has described as 'the most controversial large-scale imperial exercise in constructive state-building ever undertaken by the British government'. The Federation consisted of the territories of Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia, and Nyasaland. The European population constituted a tiny minority (8 per cent in Southern Rhodesia, 3 per cent in Northern Rhodesia, and just 0.3 per cent in Nyasaland) but their social, economic and political dominance stimulated the growth of African nationalism. Racial tension increased throughout the Federation and in January 1959 there was widespread rioting in Nyasaland, which prompted the authorities to declare a state of emergency.
Macleod sought to calm down the situation in Nyasaland by instigating the release of the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) leader, Hastings Banda. In December 1959 Macleod wrote to Macmillan advising that 'There are no more moderate leaders likely to emerge than Banda himself' and an early move towards independence was the best course of action. Banda was released on 1 April 1960, and a new constitution was agreed in July 1960. Elections in August 1961 resulted in a majority for the MCP and internal self-government was achieved in the spring of 1963. Meanwhile, in October 1960, the Monckton Commission recommended an African majority on the Northern Rhodesia Legislative Council and concluded that the Federation could not be maintained in its present form. Macleod wrote to the Federal Prime Minister, Sir Roy Welensky, telling him: 'We cannot hold the position by a Canute-like process of ordering tides to return ... move we must'. The Federation was dissolved on 31 December 1963. Nyasaland became independent as Malawi in July 1964, Northern Rhodesia became independent as Zambia in October 1964. The white settlers in Southern Rhodesia declared themselves independent in November 1965, but legal independence under African majority rule was not achieved by the state of Zimbabwe until April 1980.

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The frequency with which local political unrest punctuated the final stages of British rule suggests that it is a significant factor in explaining British withdrawal from Africa. At its height British imperialism had derived its strength from the ability to recruit local collaborators, but during the 1950s the British found that they could no longer rally enough collaborators and that African nationalists were becoming more successful in mobilising popular support. Although Britain was able to contain even violent local challenges to its rule, as in Kenya, there was a growing concern among policy-makers that similar confrontations might become worse in the future. This concern was reinforced by the domestic and international instability that had accompanied French reversals in Algeria and Indochina. As discussed below, the British government calculated that attempts to prolong colonial rule in Africa on the basis of force would be a dangerous strategy against the background of changing metropolitan conditions and the developing Cold War.

Metropolitan Factors

The historian A.J.P. Taylor once remarked: 'The British maintained that they were no longer strong enough to maintain their Empire. It would be truer to say that they no longer believed in it.' Certainly, there was some disillusionment in Britain about African affairs. The rapid succession of African crises during 1959 and 1960 – the Nyasaland emergency, the Hola camp atrocities, and the Sharpeville massacre in South Africa – gave ammunition to imperial critics who fired on the moral bankruptcy of British imperial administrators and the racism of white supremacists. Yet despite the indignation of individual MPs such as Fenner Brockway and Barbara Castle, and pressure groups such as the Movement for Colonial Freedom, there is little evidence that African issues made a significant impact on parliamentary politics. Decolonisation tended to cause more debate within political parties than between them. This was particularly true for many Conservatives, who were anguished by the pace of withdrawal from Africa. The fact that imperial and Commonwealth issues were largely absent from general elections in 1959 and 1964 suggests that public opinion was not preoccupied by African crises. Nevertheless, the Conservative government did have to operate in a changing political environment. The British people wanted welfare, not warfare, and it is reasonable to assume that if the government had tried to hang on to African colonies the public would have been reluctant to countenance heavy expenditure on further emergencies resulting from confrontations with African nationalists.

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Doubt about the economic value of Britain's African colonies was another factor that conditioned the calculations of metropolitan policy-makers. In the 1950s Britain was experiencing an economic boom which led Harold Macmillan to remark in July 1957 that 'most of our people have never had it so good'. Yet Macmillan, who had been Chancellor of the Exchequer before he became Prime Minister, was not convinced that the Empire offered substantial economic benefits to the majority of the British population. He instructed Whitehall to carry out an audit of Empire and, although this cost-benefit analysis proved inconclusive, he made up his own mind that the Empire was fast becoming a liability. Doubts about the economic advantages of the Empire subsequently became more pronounced. Although British living standards were rising, other indicators – such as the sluggish rate of growth, regular balance of payments deficits, and a shrinking share of world manufacturing exports – suggested that the British economy was in relative decline. By the early 1960s it was also becoming apparent that a growing proportion of British exports were going to Europe rather than the Empire-Commonwealth, and at this point Britain accelerated decolonisation in Africa and applied to join the European Economic Community.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to...
assumed that all plans to reverse Britain's relative economic decline and modernise the economy hinged upon a reorientation of policy towards Europe. Indeed until 1965 Harold Wilson and the Labour Party favoured closer links with the Empire-Commonwealth to achieve this objective. Labour's 1964 election manifesto declared that a future Labour government would revitalise the Commonwealth through economic and technical co-operation. Wilson and the right wing of the Party also saw the Commonwealth as an essential vehicle for Britain's continued global role. However, the Rhodesian crisis wrecked these aspirations and once again Whitehall was asked to produce studies on the value of the Commonwealth. By then Britain's withdrawal from Africa was complete, with the exception of Southern Rhodesia (now simply 'Rhodesia'), which continued to cost Britain millions of pounds each year in lost trade as a result of economic sanctions.

Britain's strategic capabilities, including its ability to retain its imperial possessions in Africa, were conditioned to some extent by economic factors. In 1957 Britain became the world's third thermonuclear power, but its global position was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain as a result of the expense of modern military equipment, both nuclear and conventional. In 1960 it was estimated that Britain should spend around 7–8 per cent of gross national product on defence requirements, but this level of expenditure proved unsustainable, and by 1964 Britain's armed forces were seriously stretched by global commitments. The extent of Britain's over-stretch was partly responsible for the decision not to intervene militarily against the white settlers in Central Africa and for Britain's withdrawal from 'East of Suez' after 1968.

From a metropolitan perspective, then, the moral critique of Empire interlocked with a developing sense of its economic and strategic redundancy. Britain's economic weakness demanded greater domestic investment and modernisation, shifting the balance of exports away from colonial economies towards Europe, and reducing the burden of overseas expenditure. Taken together, these factors suggested that an Empire based on conventional colonial rule was less useful than a Commonwealth through which Britain could attempt to exert informal influence.

The International Environment

The struggle to maintain Britain's global influence became increasingly difficult as a result of international developments dating back to the end of the First World War. During the interwar period the League of Nations Mandate system introduced the idea of accountability into colonial administration, suggesting that imperial powers had a responsibility to develop territories for the benefit of the colonial population. Then the Second World War – a war against fascist and Japanese imperialism and racism – gave great hope to nationalist movements seeking autonomy and independence. Although Britain recovered its Asian colonial territories by 1945, Japanese victories had shattered the image of white racial superiority, thus encouraging African nationalists in their desire for independence. Then, after the Second World War, the United Nations provided a critical forum for anti-colonial pressure, and in 1960 the Afro-Asian bloc secured the passage of General Assembly Resolution 1514 (XV), the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial People, which emphasised the responsibility of imperial powers for bringing their colonies to independence without delay. This was a source of great pressure on Britain, especially in relation

Above: Jomo Kenyatta, the Kikuyu leader who was imprisoned by the British in 1951-61 but who became the first Prime Minister and then President of an independent Kenya. He pursued a policy of conciliation towards his country's white settlers.
to difficult racial issues such as those in the Central African Federation and Southern Rhodesia.

Britain also had to contend with contradictory impulses from the United States in the context of the Cold War. On the one hand, the USA was ideologically opposed to imperialism and put pressure on Britain to quit its colonies so that US businesses could gain access to new markets and resources. Successive American governments also believed that decolonisation was necessary to prevent communism from becoming more attractive to nationalist movements seeking international support. This partly explains why President Eisenhower was so angry with the Eden government during the Suez Crisis of 1956. On the other hand, it is important not to exaggerate the effects of American anti-colonialism. Macmillan moved quickly to restore Anglo-American relations after Suez and the United States was usually keen to help Britain in the management of difficult colonial problems, such as those in Central Africa. Until the demise of the Central African Federation the United States gave consistent support to British policy. A key reason for this was the fact that Cold War considerations were of only marginal relevance; there was no significant communist activity in any of the Federation territories and African nationalists actively sought American support, so the US government was relatively relaxed about British policy.

"British decolonisation in Africa can best be explained by the exigencies of the international environment"

During 1964 and 1965, however, some of the underlying factors that had shaped US policy in the earlier period began to shift. For example, as the discrimination against Africans in Southern Rhodesia showed no sign of abatement and Britain continued to profess its inability to intervene, opportunities for communist infiltration increased, which tended to alarm some sections of the US government. Also, whereas in the final years of the Federation there had been no threat to British and American economic interests, the prospect of a unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) by Southern Rhodesia raised the possibility of economic sanctions against Southern Rhodesia and Rhodesian retaliatory action against the economy of its neighbor, Zambia. Britain and the United States could not ignore this eventuality because they were heavily involved in and dependent upon Zambian copper production. These shifting circumstances prompted the United States to become more vocal in the period following the dissolution of the Federation. As the likelihood of UDI increased, Anglo-American relations became subject to greater strain, particularly because the British government was slow to formulate the details of its contingency plans. After UDI the United States continued to support Britain publicly, especially in the United Nations, but privately American officials grumbled about the imprecision in British policy.

Documentary evidence in Britain and the United States demonstrates just how closely the two powers collaborated on African matters, especially in assessing the extent of communist infiltration of the continent. Indeed Sir Andrew Cohen, a former Governor of Uganda and a British representative at the UN, was worried that 'killing communism' seemed to be the main objective of African policy in the 1960s, rather than preparing stable and viable regimes for independence. The preoccupation of British and American policy-makers with Cold War concerns has led some historians, such as Ronald Hyam and William Roger Louis, to conclude that British decolonisation in Africa can best be explained by the exigencies of the international environment.

Conclusion

British decolonisation in Africa in the period 1957-65 was influenced to some extent by nationalist movements in British colonies, and by the lessons learned from French and Belgian decolonisation. Policy-makers judged that the British public would not tolerate extensive British military commitments in Africa. Nor could Britain afford this in the context of relative economic decline and shrinking strategic capabilities. In concert with the United States, Britain decided that it was prudent to settle with African nationalists before war broke out between blacks and whites, or before the Africans turned to the USSR or China for assistance. Although Britain's withdrawal from Africa was rapid, the British government nevertheless enjoyed a fundamental advantage in dealing with nationalist leaders because they were ultimately willing to co-operate in order to secure independence. After independence they were broadly friendly towards Britain and the United States – despite the impact of Rhodesia's UDI – which suggests that the British had achieved a fundamental objective in their withdrawal from Africa.

Issues to Debate

• Did Britain withdraw from its African colonies because of pressure from African nationalists?
• How and why did attitudes towards African colonies change in Britain during the 1950s and 1960s?
• To what extent did the international environment become more hostile to colonialism and what effect did this have on British colonial policy in Africa?

Further Reading

Lawrence J. Butler, Britain and Empire: Adjusting to a Post-Imperial World (Tauris, 2002).


John Darwin, Britain and Decolonisation: Retreat from Empire in the Post-war World (Blackwell, 1988).


Ronald Hyam, Britain's Declining Empire: the Road to Decolonisation, 1918-1968 (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Nicholas White, Decolonisation: the British Experience since 1945 (Longman, 1999).

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