

Was British Decolonization after 1945 a Voluntary Process?

Written by Jonjo Robb

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Addressing the House of Commons in July 1943, the then Secretary of State for the Colonies, Oliver Stanley, declared that his Government was 'pledged to guide Colonial people along the road to self-government within the framework of the British Empire'.^[1] At the time Mr Stanley made his statement, the majority of Britain's South East Asian empire was under Japanese occupation.^[2] Nevertheless, the Secretary of State made it clear that following the war, the British Government would endeavour to maintain the empire whilst allowing territories to govern themselves, perhaps in similar circumstances to those enjoyed by the Dominions. Just eight years later, the then Secretary of State made a similar statement to the Commons, albeit referring to 'self-government within the British *Commonwealth*', a telling distinction given the events and processes that developed in the aftermath of the War.^[3] The rapid transformation of Britain's colonial empire in 1945 to a 'Commonwealth of Nations' of dwindling relevance by the 1970s is particularly curious when one considers John Darwin's observation that 'before 1939 it was usual to suppose that even if the pattern of rule in the colonial world was modified, ultimate European control would continue indefinitely almost everywhere'.^[4]

With this in mind, this essay will discuss the nature of decolonization that occurred throughout the British Empire in the post-WW2 era, with the intent of understanding the extent to which this process was voluntarily aided by British policy. It will do this by systematically analysing the decline of Britain's imperial domination in three regions of significance; Asia, Africa and the Middle East, and will illuminate the various ways in which decolonization was often contradictory to Britain's interests. It will then consider the intrinsic link between Britain's colonial empire and notions of British world power, in an attempt to understand Britain's reliance on its imperial presence to maintain global power and influence, and as such the extent to which decolonization eroded its claims to be the world's 'third great power'.

'The largest capitulation': Britain's Asian Empire

Initially, the transfer of power in India appears to validate the notion that Britain embraced decolonisation as a voluntary process. Less than two years after gaining power, Clement Atlee's government had already announced a date upon which the Raj, the 'jewel in the crown' of Britain's empire, was to be terminated in favour of an independent Indian state.^[5] This hurried retreat, unsurprisingly described by Churchill as a 'scuttle', was complete by August 1947.^[6] The most prestigious of Britain's colonial possessions had been hurriedly liquidated in an act that signified Britain's unwillingness to maintain its imperial burden.

This is, of course, a rather inaccurate account of the end of British rule in India. Indeed, the transition was rushed, and Atlee's government had made a clear declaration of its intent to relinquish British control over the subcontinent. Arguably, however, this was done out of necessity rather than choice. The immense growth in nationalist sentiment in India throughout the Second World War effectively guaranteed that immediate Indian independence was a *fait accompli*. As David Sanders notes, Atlee's government 'had recognized that the Raj could not be preserved in the face of continued and growing nationalist-inspired civil disorder'.^[7] Given Britain's enhanced defence obligations in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, Atlee held that 'in view of our commitments all over the world we have not the military force to hold India agst [*sic*] a widespread guerrilla movement or to reconquer India', and that

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'we should have world opinion agst [*sic*] us and be placed in an impossible position at UNO [United Nations Organisation].'[8] Fundamentally, Britain's position in India following 1945 was untenable. Britain lacked neither the manpower nor the political support to hold India against its will any longer. Ronald Hyam's statement that 'the transfer of power in India must be considered a geopolitically prudent response to the realities of declining power' reflects the realism of the situation.[9] Britain, put simply, had no other choice. It would therefore be quite inaccurate to state that India was voluntarily 'given up'.

Much like in India, the impact of the Second World War on the colonies of South East Asia was profound. As previously mentioned, Japanese forces had by 1942 effectively confiscated Britain's South East Asian possessions. Burma, Hong Kong, Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak, Brunei and North Borneo all fell victim to Japanese conquest and occupation. Churchill famously described the fall of Singapore (the so called 'Gibraltar of the East') as 'the worst disaster and largest capitulation in British history'.[10] Though Japan's gains were indeed a strategic disaster for the British during the war, the effect they had on Britain's ability to govern its Asian territories is of greater long-term significance. Indeed, 'the cataclysmic blows struck by the triumphant Japanese in Hong Kong, Malaya, Singapore, and Burma grievously undermined the myth of European invincibility.'[11] The pretense of prestige on which Britain's rule so heavily relied was destroyed.

Despite the collapse of the foundations of Britain's rule in South East Asia, London remained committed to a colonial presence in the region. Malaya was of particular importance to the British for its dollar-earnings, as was Singapore for its strategically located naval base.[12] On taking office as Governor-General of Malaya in 1946, Malcolm MacDonald spoke of the need to 'retain full trust in British leadership in this region which is the main base of the British position in the Far East'.[13] The Malayan Emergency, a bitter guerrilla war fought against communist forces of the Malayan National Liberation Army from 1948, demonstrates Britain's will to preserve its economic and strategic assets in the region.[14] The communist threat in Malaya was particularly pertinent given the onset of the Cold War, in which South East Asia was a crucial arena, and 'the insurgency served to sharpen British perceptions of the wider international significance of South East Asia to the general government aims of raising dollars and containing communism'.[15] Though independence was granted in 1957, Britain continued to guarantee Malaya's security with a defence treaty, allowing it to continue basing troops and equipment in this strategically important region[16]. A somewhat diluted version of this treaty remains in force today.[17] Given Britain's desperate need for Sterling area Dollar earnings, the importance of strategic military bases and a desire to contain communism, it is clear that the end of Empire in the Far East was inconsistent with Britain's interests and therefore far from voluntary.

'Wind of Change': British Decolonization in Africa

As in Asia, the impact of the Second World War was of great significance in determining the pace and nature of the decolonization process. An undeniable growth in nationalistic feeling and political literacy was the first and foremost outcome of the conflict, as 'African political consciousness had been stimulated by the war, and the white man's prestige destroyed as an instrument of government'.[18] The changing nature of world opinion was in itself another tide against which the British were swimming, in particular the anti-colonial outlook of many states in the aftermath of the Second World War, and their ability to amplify these views through the recently established United Nations.[19]

Notwithstanding the growth of nationalism and the changing international context, Britain had, in the immediate aftermath of the war a least, two primary reasons for desiring the preservation of its colonial supremacy on the African continent. The first incentive was London's desire to utilise its colonial possessions as a means to aid economic recovery. A.V. Alexander, the Minister of Defence in 1949, spoke of achieving 'the most rapid development practicable of our overseas possessions, since without such Colonial development there can be no major improvement in the standard of living of our own people at home'.[20] Thus, in the tropical African colonies, 'Britain's interests were as vital as ever, or more so', and 'this more intensive exploitation of her colonies by Britain tightened her grip on them'.[21] Ernest Bevin, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs 1945-51, saw an intensification of exports from Britain's African colonies as a means with which Britain could reduce its financial dependence on the United States.[22] Britain's second motivation to retain its colonial possessions in Africa was a concern that the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) would take Britain's place as the preeminent power on the continent, considerably enhancing the perceived communist threat. Following Sudan's independence in 1956 a British official spoke of the

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importance attached by the USSR to the new state as the 'gateway for the offensive against Black Africa which they are now visibly preparing'.[23] This was a view shared by Britain's usually anti-colonial Cold War ally, the United States. Even before the end of the Second World War, the Director of the Office of Near Eastern and African Affairs at the US Department of State had realised that in facing the spread of communism 'the continuance of the British Empire in some reasonable strength is in the strategic interests of the United States'.[24]

When one considers the intense pressures on Britain to decolonize, particularly the forces of nationalism and international opinion discussed above, it was inevitable that by 1960 Britain had to begin the process of African decolonization. Famously, Prime Minister Harold Macmillan declared during his tour of British Africa in 1960 that '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'.[25] Although Britain's African territories were by this time no longer economically vital to London, they remained important elements in the geostrategic struggle for influence between East and West. Though the maintenance of Colonial rule was initially seen as a way in which Britain could prevent the spread of communism in Africa, this strategy had the potential for unintended consequences. As pointed out by members of Whitehall's Africa Committee in 1959, 'If Western governments appear to be reluctant to concede independence to their dependent territories, they may alienate African opinion and turn it towards the Soviet Union'.[26] Thus, British policy makers of the 1960s were evidently more accepting of the need to decolonize than their predecessors in the 1940s and 1950s. However, that constitutional independence appeared inevitable did not result in the British 'throwing in the towel' and terminating their African imperial presence entirely. Indeed, as David Reynolds states, 'the British expected, as elsewhere, that formal empire would be replaced by informal influence, sealed by economic ties and defence treaties'.[27] Britain's optimism, in vain it now seems, that the Commonwealth would provide a vehicle with which it could maintain influence in its former colonies is a clear illustration of London's desire to maintain an informal imperial relationship with its past dependencies.[28] It is therefore difficult to agree with the contention that British decolonization in Africa was voluntary, but rather a reluctant response to the growing pressures of various forces, chief among them nationalism and international opinion.

The End of Britain's Informal Empire: The Middle East

Writing in September 1945, Baron Altrincham declared in a Colonial Office memorandum on British policy in the Middle East that 'as a funnel of communication between the western, eastern and southern peoples of the British Commonwealth...we cannot allow any other Power to dominate and must preserve for ourselves the maximum friendship and goodwill'. Altrincham went on to assert that the region was 'no less vital to Britain than Central and South America to the United States'.[29] The Government of the day concurred with this view, with Ernest Bevin stating in 1949 that 'the Middle East is an area of cardinal importance to the UK...Strategically the Middle East is a focal point of communications, a source of oil, a shield to Africa and the Indian Ocean, and an irreplaceable offensive base'.[30]

With these statements in mind it is clear that, discounting the unceremonious withdrawal from Palestine in 1947-48 (a so called 'impossible situation')[31], Britain was fully committed to maintaining its role as the preeminent imperial power in the Middle East in the post-war era. This policy took on many guises, including London's attempted use of the Baghdad Pact defence organisation as a vehicle with which it could preserve its regional influence in the mid-1950s.[32] The Suez Crisis of 1956, popularly perceived as the watershed moment with which Britain's regional supremacy ebbed, was arguably not as significant as generally professed. As Simon Smith asserts, 'Britain was prepared neither to relinquish its residual interests in the region, nor become subservient to the United States. For its part, America continued to perceive a significant role for the British in the Middle East'.[33] Post-Crisis, Britain's defence commitments 'East of Suez' actually took on a more prominent role in British defence strategy; Minister of Defence Harold Watkinson informed the Commons in 1962 that the base in the Colony of Aden would soon be one of three global locations where British forces would be concentrated.[34] There is therefore little evidence to suggest a waning in Britain's commitment to its 'informal empire'. It had conducted a military operation in 1961 to defend newly-independent Kuwait, and was covertly operating forces in Yemen throughout the 1960s in an attempt to prevent the Nasserite Civil War there from spilling over into its Protectorate, the Federation of South Arabia.[35]

Britain's eventual retreat from the Middle East, announced in January 1968 and complete by 1971, was, as Wm

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Roger Louis argues, an economic necessity rather than an intentional act. As he summarises, 'the decision to end the British presence in the Gulf in a narrow sense was the direct consequence of the collapse in Aden and the simultaneous sterling crisis', and that 'The British did not plan to leave the Gulf because they wanted to, or for reasons concerning the Gulf itself.' [36] The abrupt nature of this policy decision is reflected by the fact that just two months before the announcement of withdrawal, the Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs had travelled to the Middle East to reassure the Rulers of the Trucial States that 'the British presence would continue as long as it is necessary to maintain peace and stability in the area'. [37] The devaluation of Sterling by nearly 15% (from \$2.80 to \$2.40) [38] necessitated the reassessment of Britain's global defence commitments, resulting in the realisation that Britain simply could no longer afford to defend the Sheikdoms of the Persian Gulf and so had no choice but to terminate its treaty obligations to them. Put simply by Phillip Darby, 'ultimately lack of resources rather than intellectual rejection ensured its [Britain's role East of Suez] abandonment.' [39] Given its strategic importance for both British defence policy and the desire for energy security, it would be plausible to suggest that the Middle East was the region in which Britain was most reluctant to decolonize.

Decolonization and the Decline of British World Power

Thus far, this essay has illuminated the various ways in which the process of decolonization within the British Empire often ran counter to London's desires and interests. In Asia, Britain was forced to concede Malaya and Singapore, despite the evident economic and strategic advantages the two territories provided. In Africa, Britain reluctantly granted independence to its colonial possessions in face of the perceived threat of a Soviet-backed communist subversion of the Continent. In the Middle East, Britain was usurped from its last remaining (and so vital) strategic hub by the compulsion of economic crisis.

It is important to keep in mind that the case studies discussed in this analysis were not isolated events, but in fact components of the wider, global process of British decolonization. The decolonization process was occurring simultaneously with another phenomenon, that of 'British decline'. The two developments were, of course, intrinsically linked, given that Britain's imperial system was the foundation of its world power. As Bevin declared in a memorandum curiously titled 'The threat to Western civilisation':

'It should be possible to develop our own power and influence equal to that of the United States of America and the USSR. We have the material resources in the Colonial Empire, if we develop them, and by giving a spiritual lead now, we should be able to carry out our task in a way which will show clearly that we are not subservient to the United States of America or to the Soviet Union.' [40]

This is a far cry from what one might expect of a Government eager to liquidate its overseas possessions. Undoubtedly, Britain's ability to act as the world's 'Third Power' was chiefly reliant on its global empire, and the economic and strategic returns this empire provided. It is inconceivable that a small island nation like Britain would have been able to compete with the continental superpowers that emerged from the Second World War without its imperial connection. The preservation of empire was therefore crucial to ensure the continuance of Britain's relevance in the emerging sphere of superpower rivalry. Britain's post-war government was therefore convinced of 'the need to uphold Britain's material interests in the world', including 'the preservation of the empire in some form or another'. [41] The nexus between Britain's world power and its imperial system was as relevant at the culmination of the decolonization process as it was in the 1940s. When discussing the 1965 Defence Review which recommended a reduction in imperial defence commitments, Gordon Walker wrote to the Prime Minister that 'the problem is whether we are an island off the north-west corner of Europe or a world power'. [42] Without question, the process of decolonization eroded Britain's pretense of 'world power' status. Lacking economic clout or the strategic bases essential to independently project global military power, Britain was compelled to accept relegation to the status of a European middle power. Given the fact that successive British governments were committed in the post-war era to the maintenance of British power and influence were possible, it is inconceivable to suggest that London voluntarily deconstructed the very system on which it was reliant to retain its assertions to world power.

Conclusions on British Decolonization

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It has not been the purpose of this essay to explain the decolonization process, nor to identify its causation. Rather, it has intended to provide a general introduction to the economic and strategic imperatives which determined the importance to Britain of maintaining its empire and consequently the reluctant nature of British withdrawal. However, given the significance of the driving forces of the decolonisation process, Britain often had little choice but to concede that the constitutional independence of its dependencies was inescapable. The loss of prestige, on which British rule so often depended, signaled the beginning of the end of Britain's Asian empire, resulting in the loss of key economic and strategic assets in the dawning of the Asian Cold War. Nationalism, international opinion and the risk of Africa emerging as a Cold War battleground complicated British African policy, but meant independence was a *fait accompli*. The Middle East, 'the last province of the Pax Britannica'[43], witnessed an unwilling departure forced by economic necessity. Fundamentally, Britain's options were limited.

This is not to say that Britain was desperate to cling onto every colonial possession, every island, every enclave and every atoll that it had annexed. To be sure, there will have been a number of colonial territories in which Britain had little or no economic or strategic interests and so little desire to retain. Rather ironically, a few of the small islands making up the remnants of the British Empire, the renamed 'British Overseas Territories', may provide appropriate examples. We cannot, however, ignore the fact that decolonization in many places ran counter to British interests and the desires of the government in London. If we imagine a world devoid of nationalism, anti-colonial international opinion or even the impact of the Second World War, it is difficult to envisage Britain willingly liquidating its colonial possessions and, as we have seen, its vestige of world power status. This was a reluctant retreat indeed, and far from voluntary.

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Footnotes

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[3] Emphasis added. HC Deb 14 November 1951, vol 493, col 984

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[19] *Ibid*

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