Decolonisation of Africa

The decolonisation of Africa took place in the mid-to-late 1950s to 1975. The changes that came during the process was sudden and radical as the colonies made their transition towards independence at times marred by political violence.

Just like the decolonisation of Asia, the Second World War also a crucial factor that led to the Independence of the African nations.

This article will discuss at length the decolonisation of Africa within the context of the IAS Exam.

Africa during the 19th Century

Most European nations had been content to have trading colonies around the coast of Africa. Only the British and the Dutch (referred to as Boers) in South Africa had moved inland and set up new settlements. In 1880 less than five per cent of the continent was ruled by European powers. But within 20 years the situation had changed completely in what is known as the Scramble for Africa.

Seven European nations took control of the whole of Africa apart from Liberia and Ethiopia. They were helped to do this by the opening of the Suez Canal, which linked the Mediterranean to the Red Sea and cut many kilometres off the journey to the east coast of Africa and India.

The Industrial Revolution had led to an improvement in transportation, such as the transition from sailing ships to steamships, and medicine that made it possible for Europeans to survive some of the diseases they met in Africa.

By 1884 Belgium, Britain, France, Portugal and Spain had already started to claim new colonies in Africa or expanded their old ones. The newly-unified countries of Germany and Italy also wanted their share of the continent.

Fully aware that their ventures in colonialism would lead to an inevitable clash amongst themselves, they attended an international conference on Africa in Berlin in 1884. The conference allowed the European powers to divide Africa among themselves, with no regard for the African peoples, their cultures or any natural boundaries.

Any resistance by the Africans was crushed by the large and well-equipped European armies. Others suffered hardship and hunger as their traditional ways of life were destroyed and were forced to work as cheap labour in mines and on plantations, growing crops such as cotton, tea, coffee and cocoa for export to Europe. The European settlers even hunted many species of wild animals almost to extinction just to pass the time.

The British Empire and the German Empire built schools and medical centres for the local people in their respective colonies. Some were run by the government, others were run by missionaries who ten expected the local Africans to become Christians. In other colonies, however, the Africans were treated little better than slaves and nowhere did they have the right to vote or say how their country should be run.

African Independence

After the end of World War II, many of the countries of Europe found it difficult to maintain their African possessions. During the independence phase, some African countries achieved independence through non-violent means but in other places, they had to resort to violent means to regain the right to govern themselves. Regardless the decolonisation of Africa would begin in full swing

The occupation of French North African colonies by British and American forces during the war brought with its own set of problems when French rule was restored. Tunisia and Morocco were given independence in 1956. After eight years of brutal civil war between French settlers, Algerian nationalists, Islamic insurgents and the French Army, the French President granted full independence to Algeria in 1962 in order to avoid civil war back at home.

In sub-Saharan Africa, there were fewer challenges to European rule. But economic problems following the aftermath of the war in Europe encouraged vigorous exploitation of African resources, while in eastern and southern Africa there were large European settler communities anxious to suppress independence movements. But here too violence forced the hand of the colonial powers. The Gold Coast was freed in 1957, Nigeria in 1960. The bloody Mau-Mau rebellion in Kenya was followed by independence for Kenya and Tanganyika in by 1964 and in central Africa, for Malawi and Zambia.

Belgium withdrew from the Congo in 1960 and France from its tropical African possessions in between 1958 and 1960. Britain was the last to abandon its colonial holdings when it granted independence to Zimbabwe in 1980.

The aftermath of the Decolonisation of Africa

Although Africa was free by the beginning of the 1980s, civil wars erupted almost immediately due to the fact that the borders of the new states were drawn in such a way that hostile tribes were lumped within the same nation. As a consequence, colonial divide and rule policy, a legacy of political instability, religious and tribal conflicts have led to impoverishment and oppression.

Problems also occurred in countries where European settlers wanted to stay in control. This happened in Algeria, Zimbabwe and South Africa and in each case cost many lives and much bitterness between the two groups. It was especially difficult in South Africa where, from 1948 to 1990, the white government used a system by keeping the local Africans out of power through

denial of the vote. Once Apartheid was abolished, free elections were held and in 1994 Nelson Mandela (sentenced to life imprisonment by the Apartheid government on June 12, 1964) became the first black President of South Africa.

Cold War politics of the time also did much to ensure disunity among the African state leading to many secession movements such as that of Sudan and Eritrea. To this day violence continues to plague the nations of Africa bringing much suffering to its population.

The table below gives information about the independence of various African nations since 1951

Decolonisation of Africa	
Year	Events
1951	Libya becomes the first African nation to gain independence
1952	Mau-Mau insurgency in Kenya begins
1956	Morocco and Tunisia gained independence from France
1957	Ghana is the first British colony to gain independence
1960	Congo gains independence from Belgium. Nigeria and Somalia gain independence from Britain. Chad and Mali are freed from French rule
1961	Sierra Leone and Tanzania independent from Britain
1962	Uganda is independent of Britain. Algeria is independent of France. Eritrea becomes part of Ethiopia. Burundi and Rwanda independent from Belgium
1963	Kenya gained independence from Belgium
1964	Malawi and Zambia gain independence from Britain
1965	Gambia gained independence from Britain
1966	Botswana and Lesotho independent from Britain
1969	War breaks out as Biafra seeks independence from Nigeria
1975	Angola and Mozambique independence from

	Portugal
1980	Zimbabwe becomes independent from Britain
1993	Eritrea declares itself independent from Ethiopia