

Topic Page: [decolonization](#)

Summary Article: **decolonization**

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Gradual achievement of independence by former colonies of the European imperial powers, which began after World War I. The process of decolonization accelerated after World War II with 43 states achieving independence between 1956 and 1960, 51 between 1961 and 1980, and 23 from 1981. The movement affected every continent: India and Pakistan gained independence from Britain in 1947; Algeria gained independence from France in 1962, the 'Soviet empire' broke up 1989–91.

British decolonization Although in 1945 Britain still had the largest empire in the world, over the next 25 years the British Empire was almost completely dismantled, with independence granted to nations across the globe.

Britain was under intense pressure from the USA in 1945 to grant independence to its colonies. The USA did not accept the existence of Britain's empire, and made its views public. Britain itself recognized by 1945 that the British Empire was no longer a viable or desirable asset, and the election of a Labour government in 1945 made the empire politically unacceptable – the new government began almost immediately to work towards its end. Throughout Britain's colonies an increasing number of armed movements had begun to fight for independence, and the government accepted that any attempt to hold on to the vast British Empire would have been impossible.

Although decolonization began in Asia in the 1940s, the vast majority of Britain's colonies became independent nations during the 1960s. By the end of the 1960s Britain's empire had shrunk to a tiny fraction of its 1945 size, with Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) the only large colony remaining in British hands. The end of the 1980s saw Britain's empire reduced to a number of small islands in the Caribbean, Pacific Ocean, and Atlantic Ocean – Gibraltar and Hong Kong also remained as outposts of the Empire, although the latter returned to China at the end of its 99-year lease in 1997. Many of Britain's former dominions, colonies, and dependencies remained within the Commonwealth, a voluntary association of nations, after gaining independence.

Asia The first country to gain independence from Britain after 1945 was India in 1947. British India was split into two dominions, with a Hindu-dominated India and a Muslim-dominated Pakistan. India was the largest of Britain's colonies, and the decision to grant independence was a combination of the success of the independence movement led by Mahatma Gandhi and Britain's recognition of the right to self-rule. In 1948 Burma (now Myanmar) and Sri Lanka gained independence, effectively ending Britain's colonial role in Asia. Malaysia was formed out of a number of former British colonies in 1963 – Malaya (which had achieved independence in 1957), Singapore (self-governing since 1959), and two territories in northwestern Borneo, Sarawak and Sabah. Singapore later seceded from Malaysia in 1965, when it became a republic.

Africa After Britain's major colonies in Asia received independence in the 1940s, the next continent to see a wave of newly independent countries was Africa, starting with Ghana in 1957 (formed out of the Gold Coast and British Togoland). African nations to win independence in the 1960s included Nigeria in 1960 and Kenya in 1963. Bechuanaland became an independent state as Botswana in 1966. The Seychelles became an independent republic in 1976.

The 1960s saw a unilateral declaration of independence by the white minority government of Southern Rhodesia. Britain wanted to grant independence to Southern Rhodesia with the black majority taking control following democratic elections. The white minority led by Ian Smith refused to accept this and a brutal civil war began in 1970. Throughout the 1970s, Southern Rhodesia was Britain's main colonial problem. In 1980 Southern Rhodesia became an independent republic as Zimbabwe, ending Britain's colonial presence in Africa.

Middle East and the Mediterranean In 1949 Britain granted independence to Jordan in the Middle East. Kuwait gained independence in 1961 and Aden became part of independent South Yemen in 1967. In 1971 Bahrain and Qatar became independent.

Independence was granted to Britain's Mediterranean colonies of Cyprus in 1960 and Malta in 1964.

South America and the Caribbean Many island nations in the West Indies gained their independence in the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1960s these included Jamaica, which received full independence in 1962, and Barbados in 1966. The Bahamas became an independent sovereign nation in 1973; Dominica became an independent republic in 1978; St Vincent and the Grenadines gained full independence in 1979; and St Lucia achieved full independence in 1979. Antigua and Barbuda became an independent sovereign nation in 1981 and St Kitts and Nevis became a federal state in 1983.

The South American colony of Guyana received independence in 1966, and in 1981 British Honduras became independent as Belize, ending Britain's colonial presence in South America.

Oceania A number of Pacific islands became independent in the 1970s, including Fiji and Tonga (as an independent hereditary monarchy) in 1970. Papua New Guinea became independent from 1975, and the Solomon Islands became a constitutional monarchy from 1978. In 1984 Brunei became fully independent, leaving Britain with only Hong Kong as a colony in Asia until 1997.

Britain's remaining colonies The 1990s were a period of relative calm in the process of decolonization that had been going on since 1945, and the remaining colonies of Britain stay under the rule of Britain for the foreseeable future. Some are entirely populated by British settlers, as in the case of St Helena and the Falkland Islands in the south Atlantic. Others, such as Bermuda and Anguilla, have made decisions not to become independent. In 1982 Britain fought Argentina for continued possession of the Falkland Islands after the Argentineans invaded and occupied the islands during the Falklands War. Gibraltar, a colony on the southern tip of Spain, is claimed by the Spanish, but the local population is adamant that they want to remain under British rule; independence is not a viable option.

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