Epilogue: African Independence

European colonialism in Africa unraveled quickly. At the end of World War II, Liberia, Ethiopia, Egypt, and South Africa were the only countries not under colonial rule. (Although South Africa was independent, it was ruled by an undemocratic, white government.) By 1964, thirty-seven African countries had gained independence, including seventeen that gained their independence in 1960 alone.

In this section, you will read about the end of colonialism in Africa. You will consider the challenges facing African leaders after independence, as well as the legacies of colonization and independence today.

**Demanding Sovereignty**

African calls for independence came first in North Africa, and quickly spread throughout the continent. While independence was won peacefully in many colonies, Africans in places like Algeria and Angola only gained their independence after long, violent struggles. There were a number of places where colonialism dragged on into the 1970s.

*How did colonial powers respond to calls for independence?*

The end of colonization in Africa was a complicated process. In large part, the way colonial powers responded to African demands for independence determined whether the transition would be peaceful. African nationalists used violence as a last resort when colonial powers refused to give into their demands for self-rule.

The willingness of a colonial power to agree to the independence of its colonies was affected by a number of factors, including the colony's relationship with the colonial power, the power's experience with other independence struggles, and whether the colonizing power believed that it could protect its interests there without direct control. For example, while France refused to grant independence to Algeria—a colony it considered part of mainland France—until 1962, it offered all of its colonies in West and Central Africa the option of self-rule under the guidance of the French president in 1958. Similarly, Britain began to negotiate independence for the Gold Coast in the early 1950s at the same time it was sending troops to fight the Mau Mau revolt in Kenya.

Tanzanians celebrate independence in 1961. Africans in this region were ruled first by the Germans as part of German East Africa, and later by the British in the colony of Tanganyika. The country's first president, Julius Nyere, is shown in this photograph, boosted on the shoulders of members of the crowd.
The response of a colonial power to independence demands in a specific colony was also affected by the presence of European settlers. Colonies like Kenya, Algeria, and Southern Rhodesia (present-day Zimbabwe) had large populations of Europeans who had long pressured their governments to give them special privileges over the African population. These groups were strongly opposed to African nationalism because it threatened their political and economic privileges and control. White settlers in Southern Rhodesia thwarted African nationalists by declaring independence in 1965 under a white-ruled government. In Algeria and Kenya, settler groups pushed their governments to get involved in bloody struggles to protect their interests.

**What factors influenced British and French leaders to accept African independence?**

As their economies improved after World War II, European leaders began to build stronger economic relationships within Europe. Colonial possessions became less important to the economic health of the colonial powers, and they became more willing to consider self-rule in their overseas territories.

Britain and France were the first to realize that they could preserve their economic and strategic interests even if their colonies gained independence. During African transitions to independence, British and French leaders supported moderate African politicians who in many cases allowed European businesses to continue to operate after independence. In some cases, the departing colonists negotiated agreements to keep their military bases in Africa. Each country also invited its former colonies to join international organizations—the British Commonwealth and the French Community—that would allow them to maintain some influence over affairs in their former colonies.

One important factor driving this change of policy was the experiences these two countries had with independence struggles in the 1940s and 1950s. In particular, the violence of the Mau Mau revolt in Kenya, the humiliating defeat of French forces by nationalists in Indochina (present-day Vietnam), and the brutality of the war in Algeria made European leaders more willing to negotiate with African nationalists. In addition, mounting criticism by delegates at the United Nations (UN) and by governments around the world convinced the powers that the era of colonialism was ending.

Belgium took heed from the experiences of France and Britain and granted its colonies independence in 1960, but Portuguese leaders initially refused to accept the idea of African self-rule. Portugal was the weakest and poorest European colonial power, and feared that it would not be able to preserve its interests in Africa after independence. Simultaneous independence wars undermined Portuguese rule in Mozambique, Angola, and Guinea-Bissau in the 1960s and 1970s. These led to the eventual collapse of Portugal’s African empire. In turn,
events in Africa also sparked a revolution in Portugal, ending more than forty years of authoritarian rule in 1974.

**How were independence struggles connected globally?**

African independence was part of a wider, international movement for independence on the part of colonized people around the world. The success of independence movements in Southeast Asia, with popular leaders such as India’s Mohandas Gandhi, made a big impression on nationalists in Africa. Similarly, independence for Arab countries in the Middle East (which were also under the control of France and Britain) in the 1930s and 1940s inspired nationalists in places like Tunisia and Morocco. In forums such as the Bandung Conference of Afro-Asian States, first held in Indonesia in 1955, newly independent countries pledged their support for African independence.

African nationalists were also inspired by the success of earlier African independence movements. The experience of Ghana—the first country after 1945 in Sub-Saharan Africa to gain independence and majority rule—was particularly influential. Not only had the country won independence, but the transition had been peaceful, with little resistance from Britain. British leaders had not intended to signal a major shift in their colonial policy when they agreed to Ghanaian independence in 1957. But people across the continent, particularly in colonies controlled by the British, took it as a promising sign that Europe had finally accepted the idea of African self-rule.

**What was the All-African People’s Conference?**

African leaders also encouraged the growth of independence movements. The All-African People’s Conference, which met three times between 1958 and 1961, brought together leaders of nationalist anticolonial movements and newly independent states to pledge unity and support for African independence.

"The All-African People’s Conference in Accra declares its full support to all fighters for freedom in Africa, to all those who resort to peaceful means of non-violence and civil disobedience, as well as to all those who are compelled to retaliate against violence to attain national independence and freedom for the people."

—from the “All-African People’s Conference Resolution on Imperialism and Colonialism,” December 1958

Figures like Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Patrice Lumumba of the Congo, and Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt became important leaders who promoted Pan-African solidarity and, in the case of Nasser, provided weapons and money to independence movements.

But while some connections encouraged African independence, other forces on the continent worked against it. In Southern Africa, the influence of white-rulled South Africa helped make that region the last to gain full independence and majority rule. For example, Southwest Africa (present-day Namibia), a former German colony that was taken over by South Africa after World War I, did not gain its independence until 1990.

The South African apartheid government intervened in multiple countries in an effort to thwart African nationalist movements. It sent its military forces into Angola weeks before Angola’s independence in November 1975 in an effort to influence the ongoing struggle for power. It supported the white-dominated Rhodesian government in the 1970s in its war against African nationalists and initiated covert operations to destabilize the newly independent government of Mozambique in 1975.

**How did the Cold War play a role in African independence struggles?**

After World War II, international public opinion moved firmly against European colo-
nialism. Part of the reason for this shift was the rise of the Soviet Union and the United States as world powers. Each wished to extend its influence around the world as the promoter of its own economic system—communism in the case of the Soviet Union, capitalism in the case of the United States—and both saw in the end of colonialism a rich, new opportunity to do so. These new world superpowers became outspoken public advocates of political freedom for previously dependent populations.

But in practice, these countries were more interested in expanding their influence than supporting African independence. African colonies that had not gained independence by the start of the Cold War became the scenes of superpower conflict in the 1960s and 1970s. This superpower involvement in Africa’s independence struggles and conflicts prolonged and intensified violence (see box).

"One of our paramount objectives is to avoid the buildup of an arms race with the Soviets in Africa. On the other hand, we must be prepared to supply some arms to the newly emerging states of Tropical Africa if U.S. interests are to be advanced and Communist encroachment frustrated. The newly emerging African states will insist upon exercising what they view to be their sovereign prerogatives of establishing some military forces, and they will turn to Communist sources of supply if assistance from Western sources is not forthcoming...."


In order to remain independent from superpower conflict, many African leaders forged relationships with other newly independent countries, creating what became known as the Non-Aligned Movement. The nations in this movement sought to remain independent from Soviet and U.S. influence in their economic, political, and social affairs. The Non-Aligned Movement became an important source of opposition to colonialism and other attempts by powerful countries to control the affairs of weaker countries. The organization still exists today, with 120 member countries primarily from Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

The Challenges of Independence

When African leaders took power, they found themselves facing significant economic, political, and social challenges. For example, most had to forge nations out of disparate groups joined together by colonial boundaries. They were under economic, diplomatic, and sometimes military pressure to allow the former colonial powers, the United States, and the Soviet Union to influence affairs in their countries. And they faced growing pressure from their populations to make good on the promise of a better life after independence.

The Assassination of Patrice Lumumba

The former Belgian Congo was one place where regional and international groups tried to gain influence. The Congo’s first prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, held power for less than two weeks before a military rebellion and regional uprisings fatally weakened his government in July 1960. Lumumba was assassinated in January 1961 by Congolese soldiers, with the support and backing of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (C.I.A.), Belgian officials, British intelligence, and other U.S. allies who were concerned about Lumumba’s alliance with the Soviet Union. For the next three years, the Congo would be in a state of crisis, with the United States, the Soviet Union, Britain, Belgium, France, South Africa, Egypt, Ghana, and other nations supporting the various factions fighting for power. The United Nations also became involved, sending the largest UN peacekeeping force to date in 1960.
Voters in the British Cameroons cast their votes in an election in 1959. In many colonies, elections were an important aspect of the transition to independence. In a few instances, voters had to choose which newly independent country to belong to. The case of the British Cameroons highlights the divisions that existed within many colonies. In 1961, voters in the predominantly Muslim northern region of the British Cameroons voted to become part of Nigeria, while voters in the predominantly Christian south voted to join with French Cameroon to form the country of Cameroon.

When European officials left the continent after independence, they took their financial resources, technical knowledge, and governing experience with them. Most newly independent countries faced severe shortages of capital (money to invest), as well as a lack of qualified professionals to run African governments and businesses. In many cases, colonial restrictions had allowed only a handful of Africans to have the education and experience they needed for these tasks. Due to colonial education policies, the majority of people in most countries remained illiterate. In all of Portugal’s former colonies, there was not a single university. Many new leaders found themselves with only a handful of qualified doctors for an entire country.

**What political challenges did African states face?**

While national independence movements were united in their aim to overthrow colonialism, this temporary unity often masked deep political and ideological divisions. New African leaders disagreed over things like economic priorities, the country’s relationship with its former colonial ruler, and which groups should have power and influence.

The state boundaries that Africa inherited from colonialism created additional divisions. Most African countries were strikingly diverse in ethnicity, class, religion, and language. In places like Nigeria and the Congo, there were as many as 250 different ethnic groups.

During the colonial period, colonial officials had often emphasized ethnic differences as a way of dividing the population and weakening opposition. After independence, political groups frequently competed for power along ethnic lines. Opposition leaders played upon these same differences to sow dissent and gain power for themselves. These divisions created significant political tumult,
and in some places resulted in violent civil wars or secession attempts.

In most cases, the African leaders who took over were elites who used their political power to gain the support of other powerful groups. This meant that the poor and marginalized still had little power to influence policy or have their demands addressed by new leaders.

**What economic challenges did African states face?**

For the majority of Africans, the key changes they wanted to see after independence were economic. The colonial system had impoverished many communities through taxation, loss of land, and low-paid wage labor. Many expected the end of colonialism to lead to an improvement in their standard of living. But when African leaders took control, they found that many of their countries’ economic problems ran deep, with no easy fixes.

African leaders inherited economies that were dependent on the international market. Colonialism had limited colonies to the production of raw materials, such as agricultural crops and minerals. Each colony exported only a handful of different goods, making them extremely vulnerable to fluctuations in price. At the same time, they depended on imports from Europe to supply the goods they did not produce at home such as food, consumer goods, and agricultural supplies.

While some precious minerals could earn high prices on the international market, most goods that newly independent countries exported earned far less than the goods they imported. This imbalance—paying more for imports than a country earns in exports—drove many African countries into debt.

In addition, infrastructure built during the colonial period—including roads, railroads, telephone lines, and harbors—directed all economic activity outwards. There was little infrastructure to support trade within Africa, especially in rural areas. This made it even more difficult for African leaders to change the nature of their countries’ economies.

Economic inequality was another significant problem. Colonial governments had put their resources toward developing the sectors of the economy critical to international trade. So while many cities had piped water, sanitation, hospitals, and schools, these services were virtually nonexistent in the rural areas.

Still, the experience of African countries after independence was not all negative. In order to be less dependent on foreign imports, many countries instituted development programs to build new industries such as flourmills, bakeries, oil refineries, and factories to produce goods like bricks, cement, paint, textiles, and clothing for the local market. In places like Kenya, where colonial policies had limited African access to fertile land, African farmers were able to boost their countries’ agricultural yields in the years after independence. Newly independent countries also formed regional trade and economic communities to increase trade within Africa.

Nevertheless, faced with the option of completely reworking the structure of their economies, most African leaders chose to work within the system that already existed. The former colonial powers, looking to protect their own economic interests, encouraged this process.

**How did foreign countries remain involved in Africa?**

Foreign countries maintained their influence in a number of ways. For example, foreign governments offered cash-strapped African governments loans with high interest rates, pushing these countries further into debt. Foreign governments used this debt to pressure African countries to give them trade benefits or contracts for their businesses. In other cases, foreign leaders or businesses offered capital, technical knowledge, and training to influence government policy. Some international companies bribed African leaders for contracts in mining or other valuable businesses.

Sometimes, foreign countries also became involved militarily. For example, foreign gov-
Economic frustration, ethnic and regional divisions, and foreign intervention all contributed to a period of political instability for many African countries in the decades after independence. Sometimes this resulted in military coups, popular rebellion, or civil war. In many cases, the only leaders who could hold onto power were authoritarian figures who controlled the army and ruled through dictatorship and repression. Foreign powers often took sides in these internal conflicts. They also helped undemocratic and sometimes violent dictators stay in power in return for economic and political influence.

**Legacies of Colonialism and Independence**

In April 1994, South Africa held its first free elections and became a political democracy, ending more than a century of white rule. This event marked the end of the colonial era in Africa. While some effects of colonialism have proved to be temporary, others continue to influence African development today.

In particular, the economic systems that the colonial powers established have proved difficult to change. Although Africa’s integration into the world economy occurred long before the colonial period, what made colonialism so significant was that it took away the ability of Africans to decide their own economic interests and priorities.

Colonialism also had significant cultural effects. Decades of racial oppression and European devaluing of African cultures took a toll on many Africans who lived through colonialism. For decades after independence, African scholars, politicians, and activists worked to counter the psychological effects of colonialism, and to rekindle pride in African cultures and perspectives.
“Our history needs to be written as the history of our society, not as the story of European adventures. African society must be treated as enjoying its own integrity; its history a mirror of that society, and the European contact must find its place in this history only as an African experience, even if as a crucial one.”

—Kwame Nkrumah, prime minister of Ghana, 1964

African leaders have also developed regional and international organizations to address the needs of the continent. For example, the African Union, an international organization made up of fifty-four African member-states, has played an important role mediating conflict, promoting good governance, and coordinating economic activity.

Still, one of the greatest challenges facing African leaders today is the negative view that many people around the world continue to hold about Africa. Although African leaders faced great economic and political challenges after independence, the continent has also experienced many successes and positive growth in the decades since colonialism.

Africans continue to contest European versions of colonial history. European attempts to airbrush over the negative aspects of this history have been challenged by African historians, activists, and political leaders. In some cases, Africans have taken European leaders to task, demanding apologies and reparations for colonial abuses. Although colonialism left an indelible mark on the history of Africa, African people continue to prove that the legacies of colonialism will not determine their future.