

BBC Bitesize GCSE History – The British Empire

Episode 8 – The end of the British Empire and decolonisation

Announcer: BBC Sounds, music, radio, podcasts.

Katie: I'm Katie Charlwood.

Datshiane: And I'm Datshiane Navanayagam.

Katie: And this is BBC Bitesize History.

Datshiane: In this final episode, we'll bring together our knowledge and understanding of the British Empire. So, have a listen back to previous episodes in this series if it helps.

Katie: Throughout, we've seen many interlinking factors which influenced decolonisation. There were three main ones. Firstly, the increase in nationalism which created more resistance and opposition to colonial authority.

Datshiane: The second, was the economic change and the decline in Britain's wealth which meant that Britain could no longer afford the Empire.

Katie: And thirdly were the ideas like democracy and freedom which undermined the very concept of the Empire. In the previous episode, we saw that by the time the Second World War broke out Britain was weak both economically and militarily. This made it harder to maintain its empire. Yet, many countries within the British Empire had contributed troops and resources to help Britain end both wars. Some did it out of loyalty. But, also with the hope of independence and self-determination. And, when things didn't change, it increased support for nationalism and independence movements in their countries.

Datshiane: There were also other political events which made the ideology of an empire seem almost old-fashioned. For example, the Atlantic Charter of 1941...

Katie: ...during the Second World War.

Datshiane: Yes, this was signed between Britain and the USA. And it emphasised self-determination. Although it wasn't specifically aimed at British colonies, it gave an additional reason for many of the other colonies to push for independence. In fact, one of the Charter's eight points declared that the Allies would respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live. Which, kind of directly references self-determination.

Katie: And many people also challenged the outdated and clearly wrong assumptions that people in Africa and Asia were somehow racially inferior.

Datshiane: So, after the end of World War II in 1945, you get nationalist movements in India, Africa and the Caribbean. They gain momentum leading to a wave of decolonisation up until the 1970s.

Katie: So, the world was changing politically, ideologically and as well for Britain economically. Britain itself after World War II had lost so much of its wealth because of the cost of war. These pressures meant that Britain could no longer maintain its empire. Okay, so let's analyse two different sources which were written after the War about the issue of decolonisation and self-determination. Even if your exam board doesn't ask you questions where you have to compare sources, it's a useful way to understand history through different viewpoints. Source A is a British Government Foreign Office memo from 1945 and says: 'The Second World War has brought about great change. The people of India who fought with us against the Axis powers now demand self-governance. We must prepare for the possibility of granting independence.'

Datshiane: Source B is a speech from Kwame Nkrumah, the Ghanaian nationalist leader, in 1946. He says: 'Our victory in this war has shown that we are capable of standing on our own. We no longer need Britain to rule us, and we demand immediate independence.'

Katie: These two sources are useful because they show just how much the war accelerated decolonisation. The British Government are admitting in 1945 that decolonisation is on the horizon. And Nkrumah's highlighting the Ghanaian support for the War shows that they deserve independence.

Datshiane: We can use those sources and our own knowledge to write an essay about the extent to which World War II accelerated decolonisation. Katie, how might you start this off?

Katie: Well, I'd do something like - The Second World War had a significant impact on the British Empire, particularly by accelerating the process of decolonisation. Sources A and B provide evidence that World War II acted as a catalyst for independence movements in India and Africa as colonial subjects, after fighting alongside Britain, demanded greater autonomy.

Datshiane: I think that's excellent. Good start. See if you can continue from there after the podcast. Right. So, between 1945 and the 1960s many colonies finally gained independence from British rule. The first of these was India in 1947, which was split into two countries - India and Pakistan - by partition.

Katie: Mahatma Gandhi was the central figure in India's independence. He united diverse groups across India, mobilising millions in peaceful campaign against British colonial rule. His emphasis on non-violence, self-reliance and moral courage left a lasting impact on India as well as freedom movements worldwide.

Datshiane: Let's step back a little though. We've seen that many former British colonies gained their independence after World War II. And that one reason for this was the declining power that Britain exerted on the world stage. Now, one key event that demonstrated this was the Suez Crisis which occurred in 1956 in Egypt.

Katie: Egypt had been a colony of Britain but gained its own independence in 1922; although there were still British troops stationed there. In 1956, a flashpoint occurred at the then British-owned Suez Canal.

Datshiane: Now, the Suez Canal is one of the most important waterways in the world. Have a look at a map to see where it is. You can see that it is a shortcut because it allows ships to travel between Europe and Asia without the need to sail seven thousand kilometres all the way around the southern tip of Africa. So, control of the Canal was hugely important. Every time a ship used the canal, the Suez Canal Company, which was co-owned by Britain, got paid a tax.

Katie: Well, it was owned by Britain and France but in July 1956 the Egyptian President Nasser nationalised the canal, taking it under Egyptian Government control. A planned military invasion by Britain, France and Israel was strongly opposed by America and the

outcome was that the Suez Canal remained in the possession of Egypt. This was a clear sign though that Britain's global influence was in decline. Check out the Bitesize website for more details on this.

Datshiane: And another example of Britain's declining power after World War II was evident on the Gold Coast of West Africa. This saw increased political activity and demand for independence. In 1957, it became the first sub-Saharan African colony to gain independence from Britain. And it was renamed Ghana.

Katie: And, in Kenya between 1952 and 1960, violent uprisings against British colonial rule by the Kenya Land and Freedom Army, known as the Mau Mau, eventually led to significant political changes including more African representation in government, as well as allowing more Africans to own and farm land. Kenya gained its independence in 1963.

Datshiane: In fact, in 1960, the British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan announced that there was a 'wind of change blowing through Africa' that was bringing independence from the Empire. This was an acceptance from the British Government that decolonisation had to come to Africa.

Katie: And in the Caribbean, Jamaica became independent in 1962. But there were other reasons and pressures for Britain to give up its empire.

Datshiane: At the end of World War II there were two new superpowers, the USA and USSR, emerging. And they had different ideologies.

Katie: And to them, colonialism did not sit well with their ideals.

Datshiane: Oh, and we should also mention that the United Nations was formed in 1945. And this was another factor contributing to the final days of Britain's empire.

Katie: But why?

Datshiane: Well, at its heart is the UN Charter, the aim of which was to develop friendly relations amongst nations based on respect with the principle of equal rights and self-

determinations of peoples. And it also provided legal support for anti-colonial movements worldwide.

Katie: So, political and ideological changes across the world had also led to pressures to end the British Empire. So, after decolonisation, many of the now former British colonies joined the Commonwealth of Nations. This was a voluntary association of independent countries many of which were once part of the British Empire. In the Commonwealth these nations are considered equal. They cooperate with each other promoting culture, trade and supporting human rights. Today there are 56 countries in the Commonwealth; and the Head of the Commonwealth is the British monarch.

Datshiane: Decolonisation, coupled with British citizenship given to people living in former Empire nations, was fundamental to increase post war migration to Britain. As countries gained their independence, many people from those former colonies came to Britain. And they've become an intricate part of British society and culture.

Katie: Datshiane, isn't your family story linked to the British Empire?

Datshiane: Yes it is. So, both sets of my grandparents were born in Sri Lanka, which was a British colony. But they emigrated under the British to Malaysia, which was known as Malaya at the time and was another British colony. And then my dad came from Malaysia to Britain in the 1950s.

Katie: And do you know when Sri Lanka gained independence?

Datshiane: Yes, so it gained independence in 1948 and, before you ask Katie, Malaysia gained independence in 1957.

Katie: That is a great story Datshiane. And maybe our listeners have one too.

Datshiane: So, how about some more quick test questions? You know the rules - three questions, five seconds.

Katie: What was the first African country to gain independence from Britain and what year?

Datshiane: So, that was Egypt, and it was 1922.

Katie: What was the Suez Crisis?

Datshiane: The Suez Crisis was in 1956, and it was when Egypt took control of the Suez Canal from Britain.

Katie: What was the movement in Kenya fighting for independence?

Datshiane: So, they were the Mau Mau and there were violent uprisings between 1952 and 1960 against the British. Kenya gained independence in 1963.

Katie: Great. Well done everyone. Even though we can't see you, we know you got them right.

Datshiane: Thank you for listening along with us and good luck with your exam.

Katie: I've been Katie Charlwood.

Datshiane: And I've been Datshiane Navanayagam.

Both: Bye