Part II: African Resistance Grows

Africans resisted colonialism throughout the colonial period. In the first few decades of European control, the goal of resistance for most Africans was to preserve their right to rule themselves. Groups fighting colonialism led revolts and rebellions to overthrow the colonial system.

The aims of African resistance began to shift as European powers established their control over more of the continent. After World War I, anticolonial leaders focused more on working within the colonial system, pressing for reforms that would improve conditions for Africans. International events and the European powers' unwillingness to make significant changes would eventually push Africans to demand independence in the years after World War II.

> ## Part II Definition
> **Nationalism—**Nationalism is a strong devotion to the interests of one's country and people. In the case of African anticolonial movements in the twentieth century, nationalism was a broad term used to describe the desire of Africans to gain independence from European influence and control.

Colonial governments often responded to resistance with brutal force. For example, in Tanganyika (present-day Tanzania) the response of the German authorities to the Maji Maji rebellion of 1905-1907 left as many as 75,000 people dead. As the century progressed, many groups began to resist the colonial system in less confrontational ways.

African Responses to Colonialism

In the first few decades of European colonialism, the strongest resistance was in rural areas. For example, rural communities in regions of present-day Morocco, Kenya, Angola, and Mozambique were able to retain their sovereignty until after World War I. In other areas, African militaries were able to drive out colonial authorities temporarily.

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This photograph from the late nineteenth century shows ivory collected in East Africa. Like many European photographs of Africa from that time period, it depicts what European leaders viewed as an achievement of colonialism—exploitation of Africa's natural resources for European gain.

What did people in Europe think about colonialism?

In Europe, the governments of the colonial powers initiated campaigns to drum up support for colonialism. In some countries, governments declared public holidays for empire, held exhibitions and fairs to showcase imperial greatness, and printed new maps that highlighted the extent of Europe's foreign possessions. The majority of Europeans saw Africans as "backward" and colonialism as necessary to bring them to "civilization." Nevertheless, most Europeans were far more concerned with local issues than they were about what happened in their countries' colonial territories.

There were Europeans who criticized colonialism by focusing on extreme cases of abuse, such as the violence of authorities in the rubber industry in the Congo Free State. In most cases, critics blamed other religious denominations, rival companies, or other European governments for colonial abuses. Few were willing to recognize that violence and oppression were key elements of all forms of colonialism.

How did Africans oppose colonialism?

Rural Africans resented forced labor, oppressive taxation, and European confiscation of African lands. Many opposed the attempts by missionaries to repress African religions and cultures. In some cases, resistance took the form of attacks against symbols of the colonial system, such as plantations, tax collectors, and mission priests. Some communities overthrew traditional leaders who they believed were cooperating with the colonial authorities. In other cases, resistance was more passive. For example, workers would refuse to follow orders, fake illness, work slowly on purpose, or not show up for work at all. Some migrated across colonial borders to avoid taxes, forced labor, or abusive colonial officials. Others resisted colonialism by rejecting European cultural impositions, such as European churches, schools, clothing, and languages.

In rural areas, most resistance was led by traditional leaders. But in the cities, a new, educated elite began to take leadership roles. These individuals, many of whom had attended mission schools and studied in European universities, returned to Africa armed with new ideas about democracy and civil rights.

Educated Africans joined with urban workers and formed societies, political parties, and unions to organize against the abuses of the colonial system and advocate for reform. Using newspapers, pamphlets, petitions, strikes, and boycotts, these leaders called for better working conditions, the expansion of services such as schools and hospitals, an end to discrimination, and for African representation in government. In some regions, urban leaders sent delegates to Europe to speak to European policymakers about their concerns.

Despite these efforts, African resistance saw limited success in the early part of the twentieth century. In general, the European powers were not willing to make any significant reforms, and responded to African resistance with violence and repression.

How did World War I contribute to African frustration with colonialism?

In 1914, war broke out and quickly engulfed all of Europe. France, Britain, Portugal, Russia, and others fought against Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire. World War I (1914-1918) turned regions of Africa into battlegrounds between the colonial powers. In particular, Britain and France, hoping to gain additional territory, invaded Germany's African colonies.

The war brought many Africans into close contact with Europeans. Africans served as soldiers and military officers. They also worked as porters, moving supplies through interior regions of the continent where there were no railroads. In North Africa, colonial officials recruited workers to replace European factory workers who were fighting in the war.

The war was a pivotal experience for many Africans. For the first time, they witnessed Europeans fighting amongst themselves. African officers trained European military recruits and fought alongside European soldiers. Most importantly, Africans saw that Europeans could be challenged and defeated.

The war provoked widespread frustration with the colonial authorities. Many African soldiers were conscripted, or forced to join the military. Some migrated to other colonies or even mutilated themselves to avoid serving in European armies. In some parts of the continent, blockades disrupted trade, causing economic hardship and frustration for many.

The war drew many European soldiers and officials away from their colonial posts. Some African communities took advantage of the instability to rise up against the authorities, and some were able to regain a great deal of independence during the war.

Africans who participated in the war effort thought they would be rewarded with additional social, political, and economic rights when the war was over. In particular, the ideas promoted by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson gave hope to many among the educated African elite. Toward the end of the war, Wilson proposed a fourteen-point peace plan that included the idea of self-determination, or the right of a people to choose their own government.

It soon became clear that Europe and the United States did not believe that Africans deserved this right. Instead, in the newly formed League of Nations, European countries continued to argue that it was their duty to "civilize" non-European people. Germany's former colonies became mandates—territories administered by foreign countries on behalf of the League. Britain, France, Belgium, and South Africa each took control of one or more of Germany's African territories. The League also designated former provinces of the Ottoman Empire—including much of the Middle East—as mandates, despite European promises of independence for these countries after the war.

> **"***To those colonies…which are inhabited by peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world, there should be applied the principle that the well-being and development of such peoples form a sacred trust of civilization and that securities for the performance of this trust should be embodied in this Covenant.***"**
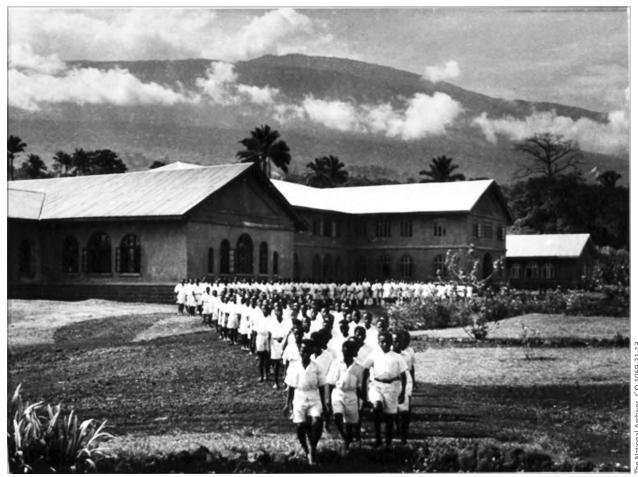> —League of Nations Covenant, Article 22

This European denial of Africans' right to rule themselves only increased African frustration with the injustices of colonialism.

How did African anticolonial nationalism grow in the 1920s?

In 1900, the first Pan African Congress was held in London to discuss the common plight of people of African descent. Delegates from Africa and other countries around the world called for an end to racism, discrimination, and racial oppression. The colonization of Africa was a chief topic of concern. Criticism of colonialism grew louder in Africa and around the world after World War I. Four conferences between 1919 and 1927 helped bring international attention and support to anticolonial nationalist movements in Africa.

One of the most influential figures in the Pan-African movement was a man named Marcus Garvey. Born in Jamaica, Garvey started an organization called the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). At the UNIA's first international convention in 1920, delegates wrote the "Declaration of Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World," which, among other things, demanded "Africa for the Africans." Anticolonial activists called for change and organized in their own countries.

Pan Africanism inspired more Africans to join anticolonial groups, especially in West Africa where anticolonial nationalist leaders like Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria gained broad support. Anticolonial nationalist groups had a variety of aims depending on local conditions. While

In most colonies, colonial officials provided very limited educational opportunities for Africans. This image shows high school students from St. Joseph's College in the British Cameroons. The school, built in the late 1930s and run by Christian missionaries, was the first high school for Africans in the colony.

some called for outright independence, most called for increased representation in government, an end to racial discrimination and inequality, and reform of the colonial system to make it beneficial to Africans.

> ❝*Do we not pay taxes to the Government? Then we want a proper Government school, we want to see something for our money, we want proper schooling for our children.*❞
>
> —Activist calling for reform in
> Southern Rhodesia, 1929

How did the Great Depression strengthen opposition to colonialism?

The worldwide economic depression of the 1930s also strengthened African opposition to colonialism. Many Africans relied on international trade for their livelihoods. As European demand for African minerals and agricultural goods decreased, the risks of African dependence on European trade became clear. Prices for raw materials plummeted, and employers cut wages and fired workers.

Some Africans withdrew from the colonial economy entirely and returned to subsistence farming. Others left the rural areas to look for work in the cities, and ended up living in poverty in urban slums. Colonial governments also became strapped for cash, and were forced to cut services, fire staff, and increase taxes. These changes fostered deep discontent and pushed many Africans to join groups actively opposing the colonial system.

*How did Africans oppose colonialism
during the 1920s and 1930s?*

In the 1920s and 1930s, Africans organized a growing numbers of strikes and boycotts. Anticolonial activists also published newspapers, books, pamphlets, and petitions that criticized the colonial system. Africans formed groups to promote and revive African culture, including art, dance, theater, and music. Often unbeknownst to colonial authorities, African artists would use their talents to ridicule officials and express popular frustration with colonialism. Religion also remained an important vehicle for African resistance and African nationalism (see box).

These movements had some successes. For example, Egyptian nationalist protests pushed Britain to grant Egypt independence in 1922, although the British would continue to exert significant influence in their former colony until the 1950s. British colonial authorities also made constitutional changes in Nigeria and Ghana that allowed Africans to form their own political parties. But overall, the colonial powers remained resistant to change. They argued that these movements did not represent the views of the majority of Africans. To counter nationalist activities, colonial officials censored the press, imprisoned anticolonial leaders, and increased their restrictions on African political activities.

African anticolonial nationalist groups also faced internal struggles. While many in West Africa were successful in organizing people on a national and even regional level, people in other colonies struggled to unite diverse groups. For example, groups in Kenya did not see themselves as "Kenyan." In many regions, nationalist movements remained local. In addition, groups were often divided in their aims. While some leaders were satisfied with small and incremental changes, others wanted self-rule.

The Tide Begins to Turn

In 1935, Italy occupied Ethiopia, seeking to avenge its 1896 defeat at Adowa. The League of Nations condemned Italy's aggres-

Wikimedia Commons.

Women played important roles in anticolonial resistance. In this photo, women protest in Cairo in 1919. A colony-wide revolution that year eventually convinced Britain to grant Egypt limited independence in 1922.

sion, but did little to force Italy to withdraw. Africans and people of African descent throughout the world were outraged.

*How did Africans view ideological
shifts in Europe?*

Prior to Italy's invasion, many African leaders hoped that political developments in Europe would lead to reform of the colonial system. In the decades after World War I, new ideas about the ways in which society should be governed had spread across Europe. Liberals argued that the people should elect their representatives, and emphasized the rights and freedoms of individuals. Socialists hoped to create a classless society that would end

the exploitation of workers. New organizations formed to lobby for the rights of workers, women, and minority groups. Many Africans supported these political developments in Europe, and advocated for colonial officials to adopt these new ideas.

At the same time, the 1930s saw the rise of fascism and Nazism—ideologies that promoted racial superiority, imperialism, and the complete control of the state. Although many Europeans saw fascism as brutally repressive and morally repugnant, many Africans saw close similarities between this ideology and the racist colonial system operating in Africa.

Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 was an important event for those opposed to colonialism. Italy was ruled by the fascist government of Benito Mussolini. For many Africans, the invasion—and Europe's weak response—was proof that the colonial powers would side with fascism rather than support Africans. Many began to see colonialism not as something that could be reformed, but as something that had to be overthrown entirely.

Why was World War II a turning point?

World War II proved to be a turning point for colonialism in Africa. The war revealed the extent to which the European colonial powers depended on their colonies. During the war, the Belgian Congo provided 85 percent of the funds for Belgium's government-in-exile. African soldiers served on battlefields around the world, and Africa's raw materials were critical in supplying the war effort. In fact, the United

States built one of its atomic bombs—which ended the war in 1945—with uranium mined in the Belgian Congo.

Africans were more directly involved in this war than in World War I, with battles raging across North Africa and the Horn of Africa (including Ethiopia, Somalia, and Eritrea). Many were conscripted into the military and fought in battles in Europe and Asia, as well as in Africa. They learned new skills and trades, and had high expectations for new opportunities at the end of the war. African soldiers were also exposed to powerful anticolonial movements in places like India and Vietnam. Many African soldiers returned home to be leaders in national struggles against colonialism.

Why did African anticolonial leaders support the Allies?

During the war, African anticolonial nationalists supported the Allies, which included the colonial powers Britain, France, and Belgium. These activists believed that their demands for self-government would be much more successful in a world without the fascism supported by the Axis Powers of Germany, Italy, and Japan.

Developments during the war convinced many African leaders that European views on colonialism had begun to shift. In 1941, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill signed the Atlantic Charter, pledging their desire for

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Resistance Through Religion

Religion was an important element of African opposition to colonialism. Africans used Islam, Christianity, and traditional African religions to resist the colonial system. Religious leaders were key figures in many African resistance movements.

Beginning in the early twentieth century, Africans formed new churches and religious movements to oppose colonialism. These churches promoted African nationalism and the liberation of Africans from colonialism. Music and dance, often prohibited in mission churches, were central elements of anticolonial religious practice. African church leaders criticized the conservative, European-run churches that outlawed African culture, discriminated against African people, and supported the colonial system. African churches grew rapidly in regions where colonial abuses were particularly harsh, such as in South Africa and the Belgian Congo.

"sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them." At the end of war in 1945, the Allies formed the United Nations (UN). One of the UN's founding goals was to "develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples." Nationalists across Africa and around the world heralded these sentiments as support for the end of colonialism.

European leaders did not interpret these statements the same way. According to them, the independence of African colonies would not happen for many decades, if ever. After issuing the Atlantic Charter, Prime Minister Churchill made it clear that its principles did not apply to Britain's African colonies. In 1944, at a conference in Brazzaville, French Congo, the French laid out a plan to preserve France's empire after the war.

> **"The aims of the work of colonization as accomplished by France in the colonies exclude any idea of autonomy, any possibility of evolution outside the French Empire: the constitution of self-government in the colonies, even in the distant future, is to be excluded."**
> —The Brazzaville Declaration, 1944

Although France and Britain were unwilling to let go of their colonial empires, both recognized that some concessions needed to be made. Both countries instituted reforms during and after the war. Africans gained new political and civil rights, funds for welfare and development projects, and increased access to education. But these reforms increased discontent because they fell far short of the expectations for independence held by many Africans. By the end of the war, the idea that colonialism would continue in any form was unacceptable to a growing number of African activists.

How did world opinion turn against the European colonial powers?

By the end of the war, only France, Britain, Belgium, Portugal, and Spain still had colonies in Africa. (Germany had lost its African colonies after World War I.) Ethiopia regained its sovereignty after the war, and Italy's other colonies—Libya, Eritrea, and Somaliland—were taken over by Britain and France.

As the world worked to rebuild after the destruction of World War II, the colonial powers increasingly found themselves on the wrong side of world opinion. After fighting a world war against tyranny and conquest, people around the world—including in

The National Archives, CO 1069-15-19.

In this photograph from World War II, Sudanese soldiers enter Tripoli, the capital of Libya, to join Allied troops fighting in North Africa. World War II had a significant effect on Africans, and many expected African colonies to be granted independence when the war was over. For most of the continent, colonialism would last for fifteen or more years after the war's end.

places like France, Britain, and Belgium—began to recognize the injustice of maintaining colonialism.

> **"[D]uring World War II, the subject peoples were taught how to resist domination with their very lives, and this lesson would not have been so thoroughly taught and so well mastered in the absence of the threatening militarist and imperialistic Nazi regime. The big lesson learned was—DOMINATION BY ANY NATION IS WRONG—and this is still echoing throughout the world...."**
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> —Ndabaningi Sithole, author and minister
> from Southern Rhodesia, 1959

The newly created United Nations (UN) reflected changing international attitudes, and played an important role in the anticolonial struggle. More than half of the UN's founding members were from former colonies in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. China and India, with more than a third of the world's population and previous experiences of European imperialism, emerged as important global players. At the end of the 1940s, the bulk of new members were newly independent countries including India, Vietnam, Syria, and Iraq. These countries were outspoken critics of the colonial system. Delegates pressured the United Nations to incorporate principles such as the right to self-determination and racial equality in the organization's charter.

At the same time, the UN gained new responsibilities for monitoring the behavior of colonial governments. It also became a place where colonized peoples could bring their concerns to an international audience. As never before, the colonial powers were held accountable to the rest of the world.

The postwar era also saw a shift in international politics. France and Britain, the world's most powerful countries in the first part of the century, emerged from the war weakened and close to bankruptcy. The Soviet Union and the United States increasingly came to dictate the direction of international relations. After the war, the Soviet Union and the United States became locked in a global struggle for power and influence known as the Cold War. Their roles in Africa would grow increasingly complicated as the Cold War intensified.

Despite growing international calls for an end to colonialism, the colonial powers continued to resist African independence. For Britain and France, their survival as international powers depended on a quick economic recovery. This required the resources of their colonial empires. Britain and France focused their efforts on strengthening the colonial system at the very moment many African leaders—and a growing number of people around the world—were calling for its end.

Why was the emergence of mass political parties in Africa important?

Africans emerged from the war more determined than ever to secure independence. Economic hardship during the war and anger over colonial policies such as forced labor (which was revived during the war to produce raw materials for Europe's war effort) heightened African discontent with the colonial system. By the end of the war, anticolonial nationalist movements had the support of urban and rural workers, as well as traditional leaders who still had great influence in rural areas.

Reforms by British and French authorities after the war allowed many of these movements to form political parties to advocate for change. These parties enjoyed broad support, and were better organized and more unified in their demands than previous nationalist organizations. No longer interested in reform, many of these parties called for independence and an end to colonialism. They were led by new, radical leaders who became increasingly unwilling to compromise with the colonial authorities. These activists were prepared to use any means necessary to achieve their goals—including armed struggle. Trade unions also grew in strength and numbers, and strikes,

boycotts, and riots broke out across the continent.

As the calls for independence grew louder in Africa, British and French leaders began discussing plans for gradual decolonization. Leaders in both countries continued to argue that Africans were not ready for full independence, and needed the guidance and support of the colonial authorities. They also hoped to slow independence in order to protect their economic and political interests in the colonies. Belgium was slower to consider political reform, although it did allow political parties to form in its colonies starting in 1956. Portugal, ruled at home by an oppressive, authoritarian regime, would be the last to accept independence for its African colonies.

You have just read about African resistance to colonialism, and how this resistance evolved in the twentieth century. You have also considered how the actions of Europe, the growth of African nationalism, and major international events contributed to calls for independence in the 1940s and 1950s. In the next section, you will explore four case studies of colonization and independence in Africa. These case studies highlight the diverse experiences of Africans under colonial rule. They also emphasize the different ways that Africans and Europeans understood colonialism and later retold this history.