

Topic 8.1

Setting the Stage for the Cold War and Decolonization

You Will Learn To:

- Describe how increasing anti-imperialist sentiment contributed to the dissolution of empires and the restructuring of states.
- Describe how the technological and economic gains of nations that were victorious in the Second World War shifted the global balance of power.

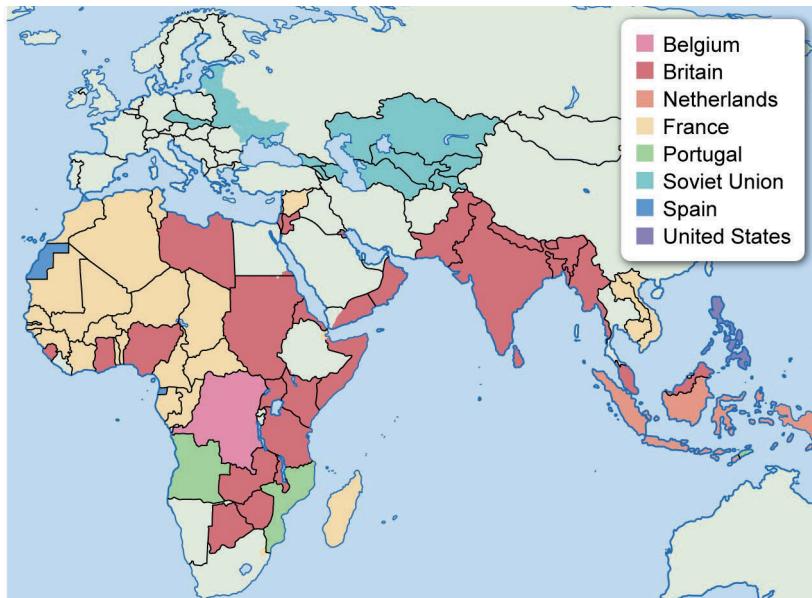
WWII had a tremendous impact on the global political landscape in two ways:

- WWII shifted the global balance of power as traditional forces like Britain and France were surpassed by the new superpowers, the US and USSR.
- Colonial territories in Asia and Africa increased their demands for self-government, which had been largely unfulfilled after WWI.

Post-WWII independence movements

In the 16th–19th centuries, European empires established colonies worldwide. Over time, anti-imperialist sentiments increased among colonists and indigenous people, contributing to their desire for independence.

During WWII, colonies in Africa and Asia provided the Allies with soldiers and other resources in their fight against the Axis Powers. After the war, many colonial subjects and Europeans believed the colonies had earned the right to independence. This strengthened the anti-imperialist sentiments and resulted in the political restructuring of numerous states in Asia and Africa between 1946 and 1991.



Although the processes of restructuring were similar in the postcolonial states, the level of success varied between them. In some states, the movement resulted in civil war, and even when war was avoided, the newly formed governments ranged from democratic republics to dictatorships.

Decolonization efforts in Asia

WWII exposed political and economic weaknesses in Britain and other colonial empires, as well as a desire for self-determination among colonized populations.



Gandhi on a peace walk with supporters in Noakhali, 1946

Under increased pressure, Britain granted independence to its colonies, including India in 1947, and British power eroded as the empire lost valuable territories, resources, and markets. India's shift toward independence exemplified the dissolution of colonial empires due to political challenges following WWII.

Like Britain, other colonial powers faced liberation movements in this period, including France, whose colonial occupation of Vietnam was challenged by Vietnamese forces in the First Indochina War.



First Indochina War (1946–1954)

That war concluded with a Vietnamese victory at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, resulting in international recognition of North Vietnam's independence at the Geneva Conference. Furthermore, efforts by Ho Chi Minh and other Vietnamese nationalists encouraged independence movements elsewhere in former French Indochina, including Cambodia and Laos, whose independence was also recognized in 1954.

Decolonization efforts in Africa

France's loss of colonies was not confined to Asia; its African colonies also rose in opposition. By 1900, France had controlled much of West Africa and parts of North Africa, stemming from the European Scramble for Africa. Within its colonies, France established military corps of native infantrymen, including the Senegalese Tirailleurs, to supplement French combat units.



Senegalese Tirailleur troops, 1918

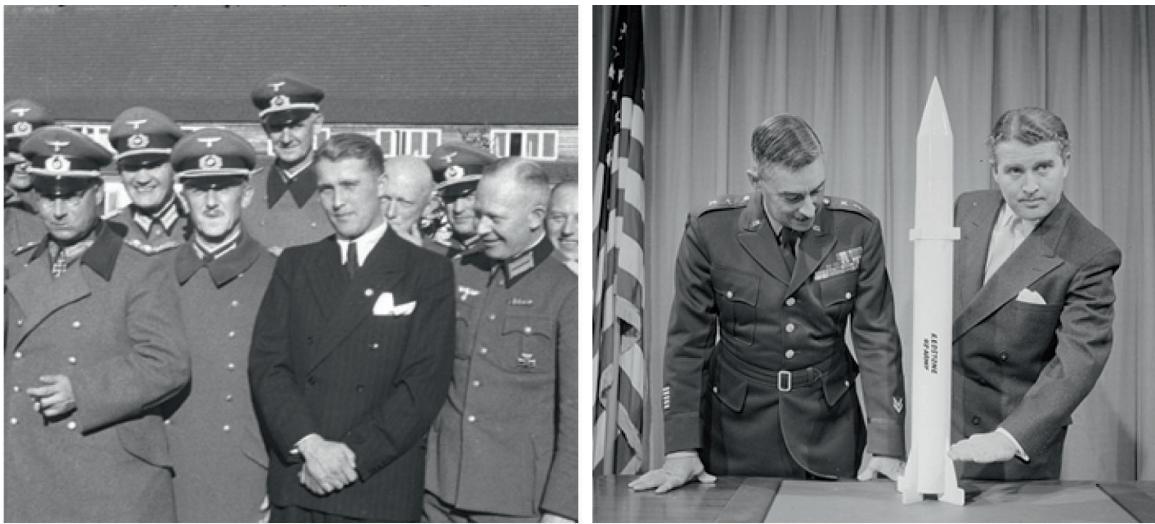
After WWI, many African troops hoped that their contribution to the French military during the war would result in self-government of their home nations. However, these hopes were unfulfilled.

In WWII, France again ordered the African regiments to fight. Toward the war's end, African nationalists, especially those who fought, renewed their call for independence. During the Brazzaville Conference in 1944, it was determined that African political representation in France should increase after WWII; however, independence was once again denied.

Post-WWII shifts in the global balance of power

Technological innovations developed during WWII resulted in an unprecedented show of military force across Europe and Asia. Nazi Germany financed secret military projects; after Germany's defeat, the US and the Soviet Union (USSR) actively recruited German scientists and engineers who had worked on the Nazi projects.

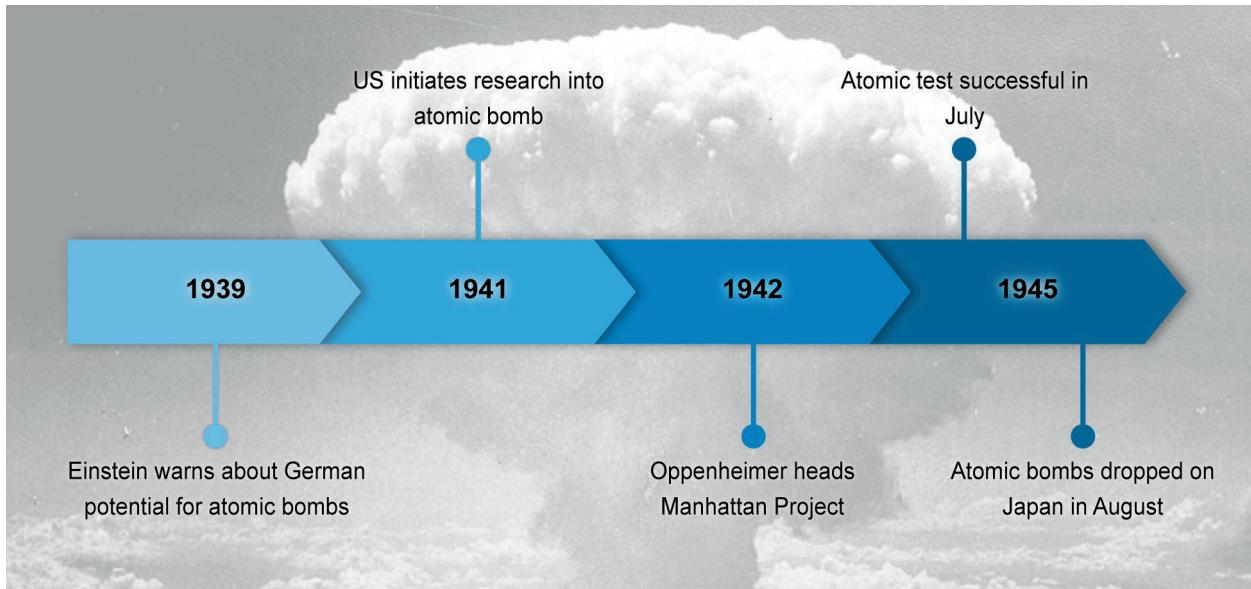
In the years that followed, they assisted in significantly advancing military technologies for both postwar superpowers, helping to shift the global balance of power and contributing to Cold War tensions. Among the German scientists was Wernher von Braun, who would be employed by the US Army for 15 years after the war to develop ballistic missiles.



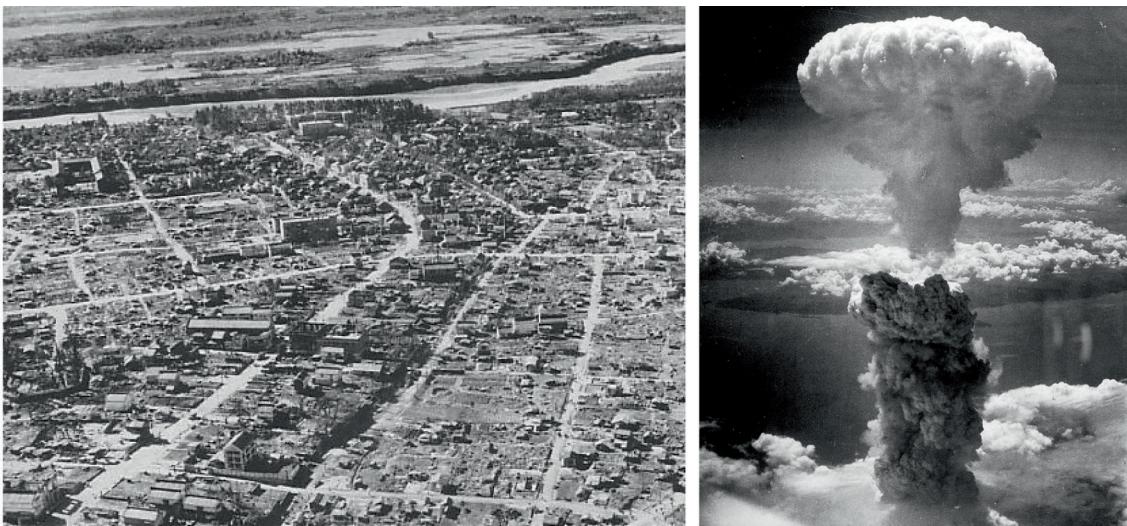
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Wernher von Braun as part of Nazi Germany's military, 1941, and later the US military, 1956

By August 1945, WWII was nearly over. Four months earlier, Germany had surrendered to the Allied Powers, and the US military was preparing for an invasion of Japan to end the war. However, the US had been developing atomic weapons through the Manhattan Project since 1939, which ultimately made invasion unnecessary.



This development resulted in the dropping of two atomic bombs on Japan in 1945, leading to the country's unconditional surrender and ushering in the Atomic Age. Although the bombings effectively ended the war, they proved catastrophic for Japan and demonstrated the unprecedented dangers of nuclear warfare.



The defeat of the Axis forces, including those of Japan, resulted in a global power shift toward the Allied nations. This was especially true for the US, which was relatively unscathed by the conflict. America's political and economic influence expanded, due in part to its postwar occupation of various territories.

The Allied occupation of Japan, led by the US, resulted in significant reforms of the Japanese government and economy. Due to pressure from American authorities, economic reforms in Japan favored US corporate interests, further shifting the global balance of power. By the mid-1950s, US corporations such as the Studebaker car manufacturer and the Coca-Cola Company were making deals with Japan.

In response to the technological and industrial successes achieved by the US, the USSR pushed to catch up with the American arsenal, largely by developing its own atomic weapons programs. After the US dropped the two atomic bombs on Japan, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin ordered the development of a nuclear weapons program to keep pace with the US. In 1949, this program resulted in the USSR's successful test of its first nuclear bomb, solidifying the Soviets' place as a superpower in the changing post-WWII balance of power.

Things to remember

After WWII, increasing anti-imperialist sentiment contributed to the political restructuring of states in Africa and Asia. For example:

- anti-imperialist movements in the French colonial territories of West Africa led to greater political autonomy in the colonies and increased calls for independence.
- the independence movement in India against British rule illustrated the dissolution of European empires and their position in international affairs.

After WWII, the global balance of power shifted in the favor of the US and Soviet Union, both of which recruited German scientists after the war. For the US, this development:

- enabled technological gains that helped the American economy and sphere of influence grow after WWII.
- stimulated post-WWII geopolitical gains, giving American companies unprecedented access to foreign markets, such as in Japan.
- resulted in the development of nuclear weapons during WWII, which pressured the USSR to pursue its own nuclear weapons program, thereby creating an arms race in the following decades.

8.1 Check for Understanding

- 1. Which of the following is a result of colonies in Asia and Africa providing the Allies with soldiers to fight against the Axis Powers during the Second World War?**
 - A. Asian and African colonies experienced higher birth rates after the Second World War.
 - B. Asian and African colonies experienced decreased nationalism after the Second World War.
 - C. Colonial subjects believed they earned the right to independence after the Second World War.

- 2. After the Second World War, _____ recognized the independence of its former colony in _____.**
 - A. Britain; Syria
 - B. France; Vietnam
 - C. Germany; Senegal

- 3. Which of the following was the immediate outcome of the Brazzaville Conference in 1944?**
 - A. A decrease in African colonies' political representation in France
 - B. The rejection of complete independence in France's African colonies
 - C. The continued entrenchment of the authoritarian Vichy France regime

- 4. Near the end of the Second World War, the US was planning an invasion of Japan. Which of the following made the US invasion unnecessary?**
 - A. The Soviet Union's invasion of Japan
 - B. The tensions surrounding the Cold War
 - C. The advances from the Manhattan Project

- 5. Which of the following was a result of the US dropping atomic bombs on Japan?**
 - A. The USSR began its own nuclear weapons program
 - B. Japanese officials successfully rejected US occupation efforts
 - C. The global balance of power shifted in favor of former colonies