Decolonization, the global South, and the Cold War, 1919–1962

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In 1900, most of Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and the Middle East were ruled directly or indirectly by the Euro-American colonial powers. As late as the outbreak of World War II, almost a billion of the world's people lived under direct colonial rule. But in the two decades after 1945 imperial order collapsed. At times peacefully, but often after protracted warfare and violence, the imperial powers eventually ceded independence to most of South and Southeast Asia and the Middle East by the mid-1950s. Independence movements ruptured much of the rest of the imperial world over the next decade. In Africa, the year 1960 alone brought independence to seventeen former colonies. Ten more African states would gain their independence over the next several years, as would former colonies in the Caribbean and Latin America. One dramatic measure of the rapidity and scope of this shift in the constitution of world political order was the enlargement of the United Nations. At its founding in 1945, the UN included 51 member states. In 1965, the number had more than doubled to 117, with a majority of the increase made up of states in the global South that formerly had been colonies.

Making sense of these complex events and processes—which crossed time, space, and cultures and were just as much highly contingent and local as they were part of larger shifts in global power and sensibilities—has presented conceptual difficulties for historians. The very terms by which to analyze the phenomena of decolonization have been unusually vexed. For historians of Euro-American empire, decolonization marks the final chapter of high imperialism. It is often viewed through the lens of actors in the metropole and colonial administrators on the ground, emphasizing the ways they shaped both the timing and the trajectories of independence. Historians of Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America, more concerned with the experiences of the colonized than the colonizers, have argued that such a narrative risks reinscribing patterns of Western imperial power and denies agency to local actors. In this view, independence was not so much given as taken, and anticolonial actors and their construction of postcolonial states and society become central elements of the story. More recently, the meanings of empire and its dissolution have been seen as overlapping and intertwined processes in which the historical experiences of metropole and colony, albeit under considerable differentials of power, mutually constituted one another.

This vantage point is suggestive for approaching the interpretive puzzle at the heart of this chapter: the relationship between decolonization in the global South and emergence of the Cold War. From the Manichean perspective of most Cold War policymakers in the United States and the Soviet Union as well as some scholars, the movements for independence in the colonized world after World War II were seen as a subset of the bipolar geopolitical order dominated by the Soviet-American rivalry. Without question, the Cold War affected decolonizing states at multiple levels. They were, particularly after 1950, a central Cold War battleground, most dramatically illustrated by the Cuban setting of the missile crisis that marked the apex of Soviet-American tensions. More generally, the high modernist models of US liberal capitalism and Soviet (and later Chinese) state socialism offered powerful and competing ideological paths for realizing the efforts of postcolonial states to remake their societies. The Soviet-American rivalry also presented revolutionary movements and newly independent states with the benefits and the dangers of superpower patronage through weapons and arms, advisers and funds for civil and military development, and direct military intervention. Furthermore, it contributed to the intensity of wars of national liberation and the rise of repressive regimes under superpower sponsorship, producing massive human rights abuses and profoundly destabilizing the decolonizing world.

At the same time, however, the global move toward decolonization was rooted in local particularities that long preceded, ran parallel with, and ultimately persisted beyond the Cold War. Colonized peoples renounced imperialism and sought to escape from it in considerably less fixed ways than a Cold War framework would suggest. The Cold War, therefore, tends to obscure the significance of transnational postcolonial visions in the global South that imagined a world apart both from the bipolar international system and from the imperial order. This chapter limns the porous boundaries of the imperial, the postcolonial, and the Cold War to explore and situate the meanings of decolonization for the structures of international order between 1919 and 1962.
Imperialism and its discontents

The high imperialism of the nineteenth century encountered almost immediate resistance from many colonized peoples. Avoidance, sabotage, and flight were among the most common ways that ordinary people responded to the harsh conditions that colonialism imposed upon them. More organized forms of elite-led rebellion, sometimes aimed at restoring the precolonial order, confronted imperial authorities directly and violently. If some local elites collaborated with colonial powers, they frequently did so to serve their own ends. But beginning in the early twentieth century a more sustained challenge began to dominate the anticolonial politics of the imperial world. The nationalist movements that emerged in this period, with their diverse range of radical thought and action, directly shaped the wave of postcolonial independence after 1945.

World War I and its aftermath were critical in shaping the sensibilities of nationalist leaders. Hundreds of thousands of colonial subjects were conscripted during wartime. They returned from the battlefields of Europe with a deepened suspicion of the civilizational promises of their colonial masters and with an expanded political and social consciousness. The dynamics of Wilsonian peacemaking in the aftermath of the war and the potentialities of the Russian Revolution further radicalized anticolonial thought and action.

Woodrow Wilson's promotion of self-determination as one of the fundamental elements of the postwar peace brought a number of anti-colonial leaders to Paris in 1919, hoping to wrest some form of autonomy from colonial rule. Anticolonial figures from the Egyptian nationalist leader Sa'd Zaghlul to Bal Gangadhar Tilak of India and Nguyen Ai Quoc (later better known as Ho Chi Minh) of Vietnam presented petitions that drew on Wilsonian language to ask for relatively moderate reforms of colonial rule leading to gradual self-government and independence. Their entreaties met with silence from Wilson and the other European imperial powers. At the same time, the peace conference declined to support Japan's efforts to insert a racial equality clause into the provisions of the peace settlement. But, by articulating self-determination as an international norm, Wilsonianism both inspired anticolonial activists and opened up a space through which they could make claims for the legitimacy of movements for independence.

When it became clear that Wilson and his European colleagues had no intention of immediately extending self-determination, some of these frustrated leaders from the colonies began looking to the Bolshevik Revolution as a more alluring path to political independence and social transformation. Anticolonial figures such as Jawaharlal Nehru in British India, Tan Malaka in the Dutch East Indies, and Ho Chi Minh in French-controlled Vietnam all became active in projects sponsored by the Comintern, the entity created by the Soviet Union in 1919 to foster worldwide revolution. Some Chinese Communist leaders, such as the cosmopolitan Zhou Enlai, were part of these global revolutionary networks. But Josef Stalin's commitment to revolution outside the West was uneven. He ordered dramatic changes in the Comintern approach to revolution, with sometimes disastrous effects for local Communist Parties in the colonized world. Nonetheless, the Comintern organized training schools in the Soviet Union and brought thousands of activists from the colonial world to Moscow. They saw the Bolshevik Party and the Soviet state as models for organizing anticolonial action and postcolonial state-making.

Others in the colonial world were drawn to alternative paths out of colonialism beyond Wilsonian internationalism or international socialism. Their efforts point to the persistent inclination of non-Western peoples to use the shared experiences of oppression to organize transnational anti-imperialist movements. In 1919, just as the great powers were meeting to map the postwar world, the first Pan-African Congress opened in Paris, with delegates from Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States. The congress was part of a broader pan-African movement that had its origins two decades earlier in the 1900 Pan-African Conference in London. Organized to influence the deliberations over German colonies in Africa at the Paris Peace Conference, the congress issued a series of resolutions to secure rights to land, capital, labor, education, medicine, hygiene, and culture for colonized peoples in Africa and sought their protection under the nascent League of Nations.

The transnational solidarities of the pan-African movement would continue to play a powerful role in African and Caribbean affairs in the interwar period and beyond. Many of the activities of the movement in this period centered on the African diasporic community in London and Paris. Among them was the Négritude movement led by Aimé Césaire of Martinique and Léopold Senghor of Senegal, who articulated expressions of shared African identities in the Francophone world in a variety of literary, philosophical, and political registers. In the English-speaking world, a radical form of pan-Africanism under the leadership of the West Indian George Padmore in the late 1930s combined Marxism, trade unionism, anti-imperialism, and an elastic definition of “coloured” that included Asians. Along with Césaire and Senghor, political and cultural elites from Africa, among them Kwame Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta, and from the Caribbean and the United States, including...
I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson, C.L.R. James, and W.E.B. DuBois, were actively engaged in pan-African politics in this period. Nkrumah and Kenyatta would come to lead the anticolonial struggle and the first postcolonial states in Ghana and Kenya respectively.

Pan-Islamic and pan-Asian sensibilities also emerged in the first half of the twentieth century. In northern Africa and the Middle East, the pan-Islamic reform movement first emerged among the urban, educated Turks of the Ottoman Empire, but gradually spread to Cairo, Damascus, and other urban centers in the region. It sought to encourage Muslims to collapse their political and religious differences to unite against European imperialism by rethinking the principles and practices of Islam. Al-Azhar University in Cairo attracted students from throughout the Islamic world and became the center for the development and dissemination of pan-Islamic ideas. In Asia, during the first two decades of the century, some elites in China, Korea, and Vietnam responded to the dangers posed by European, American, and increasingly Japanese colonialism through a transregional dialogue and non-Western solidarity that looked to Egyptian reformism of the middle of the nineteenth century, the 1898 Philippine revolution against the United States, and the Turkish constitutional experiments of 1908–10 as sources of inspiration.

Against the impact of World War I and transnational currents of anticolo­nial thought, radical political and nationalist sentiment emerged more directly in British, French, and Dutch colonies throughout the 1920s and, with the coming of the global Depression, deepened in the 1930s. In Africa, the pan-African movement shaped anticolonial politics in Ghana, Nigeria, and Kenya in the 1920s, including the formation of the West African Students’ Union in 1925 as a regional vehicle for reclaiming political control from the imperial powers. In the 1930s, labor strikes and organizing pushed anticolonial politics in more radical social and economic directions. In French-controlled Africa, the Islamic-inspired Rif war and Istiqlal Party in Morocco and the Néo-Destour Party in Tunisia sought independence. Egypt emerged as a semi-independent state in the wake of massive demonstrations and strikes in 1919, but continuing British influence limited political independence and stymied efforts by secular and modernist Egyptian political elites to undertake political and economic reform. The 1930s brought a religious revival that sought to restore the supremacy of Islam in Egyptian public life. The Society of Muslim Brothers, which attracted a wide following among students and industrial workers, channeled popular opposition to the continuing British presence and offered proposals for economic reform based on Islamic and socialist principles. In the British West Indies, colonial subjects began to seek racial equality in the franchise and civil services in the 1920s. A rising black and working-class consciousness in the 1930s further radicalized their demands for independence and socioeconomic change.

In Asia, Mohandas Gandhi came to lead a mass nationalist party in British India capable of mobilizing millions for its revolutionary noncooperation or satyagraha campaigns, most notably his march to the sea in 1930 to protest the colonial salt tax, aimed at securing Indian independence. In the Dutch East Indies, anticolonial parties drew on supralocal religious faith, socialist internationalism, and emergent discourses of the nation in an effort to transcend the diverse local particularities of the Indonesian archipelago, undertake socioeconomic reform, and ultimately drive out the Dutch. Similarly, in Burma, activist monks in the Young Men’s Buddhist Association and later students in the Dobama Asi-ayone (We Burmans Association), whose influences included Irish nationalism, Fabian socialism, and Marxism-Leninism, challenged British colonial rule.

Vietnamese anticolonialism and visions of postcolonial independence in the interwar period reveal some of the larger dynamics and fluidities that animated and constrained anticcolonial thought and practice more generally before World War II. The 1920s brought a new generation of nationalists to the Vietnamese political stage, among them the future leaders of Vietnamese Communism. Many of these young radicals were students, sons and daughters of traditional elites, who were impatient at the pace of change. They were as critical of French rule as they were of the precolonial Confucian political order and of what they perceived as the inability of an older anticolonial generation to effectively respond to the predicament posed by French colonialism. The movement also drew on a new social group in urban Vietnam, one that bitterly resented French colonialism. This urban intelligentsia was made up of shopkeepers, smaller traders, clerks, primary-school teachers, journalists, and technicians whose livelihoods emerged in the context of French colonialism. But they deeply resented their economic marginality and the limits the French placed on their opportunities for education and political participation.

Self-consciously experimental and iconoclastic, Vietnamese radical thought was never fully anchored around a body of shared principles. The radicals’ disparate search for individual and societal transformation rested on an almost romantic belief in revolutionary heroism. Within this intellectual milieu, Ho Chi Minh founded the Viet Nam Thanh Nien Kach Menh Hoi (Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth League) in 1925, which became the precursor of the Vietnamese Communist Party. The ideology of Thanh Nien emphasized the
transform the political, social, and economic prospects of their urban and rural citizens.

Although the experiences of Latin American nations are usually separated analytically from these events, the sharp challenge to repressive regimes in the region from 1944 to 1946 and the calls for far-reaching societal restructuring paralleled these efforts to break away from the colonial order in Asia and the Middle East. In 1944, only five Latin American states—Colombia, Costa Rica, Chile, Uruguay, and Mexico—could call themselves even nominal democracies. In three short years, dictatorships throughout the region fell as popular democratizing forces were mobilized. In 1946, only El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Paraguay, and the Dominican Republic continued to be ruled by dictators. In the rest of the region, social democratic populist and progressive movements came to power, supported by vocal and muscular labor unions as well as Communist Parties whose ties to the Soviet Union before the 1940s had been muted during the wartime period. Like anticolonial leaders in Asia and the Middle East, Latin American actors were emboldened by World War II to attempt to effect change by drawing upon strong liberal and socialist political traditions that predated the war itself.

These early struggles to transform colonial and illiberal states emerged against the acceleration of transnational discourses of human rights, anti-imperialism, and racial solidarities during and after World War II. The year 1945 marked major international conferences of colonized peoples as well as deliberations at the San Francisco Conference over the place of the colonized world in the United Nations Charter. The fifth Pan-African Congress that met in Manchester, England, in October 1945 brought together Africans, including the future leaders of almost all of decolonized British Africa, as well as African-American and Afro-Caribbean delegates. The congress condemned imperial economic exploitation, but focused on political independence in the African context, calling colonial freedom "the first step toward and necessary prerequisite to complete social, economic and political emancipation."

Anticolonial leaders were a visible presence at the San Francisco Conference in June 1945 and sought language in the UN Charter that would directly advance the immediate prospects for colonial independence. While the charter fell short of guaranteeing self-determination for the colonial world, its guarantees of human rights, and the full elaboration of these rights in

World War II and the coming of the Cold War

The experiences of World War II dramatically shifted the fortunes of many anticolonial movements in the imperial world. Even more than World War I, the war played a critical role in inspiring independence movements and in fostering radical change in the international system. The coming of war in the Pacific, especially the initial defeat of Western imperial powers by the Japanese, had a strong and immediate psychological effect on colonial peoples in Asia. Japanese occupation of much of Southeast Asia also dislodged the region's British, French, and Dutch rulers and revealed the tenuous nature of European control. As the war came to a close and the United States and the Soviet Union emerged as the victorious powers, anticolonial actors sought to harness American and Soviet wartime commitments to a postcolonial future. In the power vacuum at the time of the Japanese defeat in August 1945, anticolonial forces in the global South moved to assert their independence. Aung San's efforts to create a provisional independent government in Burma, Sukarno's establishment of an Indonesian republic, and Ho Chi Minh's proclamation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in the summer and fall of 1945 were among the earliest manifestations of the impending wave of decolonization. In British India, sustained negotiations between Indian anticolonial leaders and British imperial agents began in 1945 about the terms of independence, discussions complicated by the increasing schism within Indian nationalism between Hindus and Muslims. At the same time, anticolonial actors in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan put pressure on Great Britain and France to relinquish their control in the Middle East. The most radical of these challenges to colonial order brought with them a commitment not only to independence, but also to the construction of postcolonial states that would
the drafting of the 1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, provided a powerful new vocabulary for making anticolonial claims and imagining the new postcolonial world. The Universal Declaration and its promises of political, economic, and social rights were the product in large measure of the work of social democrats from Latin America as well as delegates from newly independent Lebanon, India, and the Philippines. Neither the charter nor the declaration included enforcement mechanisms, but they provided another source of legitimacy for efforts of colonized peoples to remake colonial societies and to gain the sympathy of world opinion.

These transnational aspirations were quickly tested in an international environment hostile to the rhetorical promises of decolonization. The transfer of political authority from the colonizers to the colonized was sometimes peaceful but often collapsed into protracted violence in the immediate postwar period. If Nehru marked the moment of Indian independence in August 1947 by claiming at “the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom,” the subcontinent was quickly fragmented by the partition of India and Pakistan and consumed by the religious and sectarian violence that followed in its wake. The proclaimations of independence by anticolonial elites in Southeast Asia were greeted by imperial powers unwilling to give up their colonial possessions. Both the Dutch and the French sought to reclaim their empires in protracted wars beginning in 1946, with Dutch forces attacking Sukarno’s Indonesian republic and the French challenging Ho Chi Minh’s DRV. The British too sought to maintain their control of Malaya and Singapore as well as their territories in Africa and the Middle East.

In the fast-moving and chaotic environment that marked the first wave of decolonization in the immediate aftermath of World War II, the coming of the Cold War in the global South was an almost unimaginable contingency for anticolonial and imperial actors as well as for the Soviets and Americans themselves. Preoccupied with events in Europe—the occupation of Germany, the reconstruction of Western Europe, the fate of Eastern Europe, and the Greek Civil War—Soviet and American policymakers initially saw decolonization as peripheral to their growing rivalry and antagonism. More concerned by the contours of his postwar relationship with the Western allies, Stalin offered little significant material support to the most important

Communist-led movements in this early period. Despite wartime Soviet interest in establishing friendly regimes in Kurdistan and Iranian Azerbaijan, Stalin withdrew his forces from Iran in May 1946 after significant American pressure and kept his distance from the Iranian Communist party, the Tudeh. In China, Stalin insisted that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) maintain an alliance with Jiang Jieshi’s Guomindang (GMD). He did not provide vigorous military or material support for the CCP in its ensuing civil war with the GMD. Given Stalin’s distrust of what he saw as Ho Chi Minh’s bourgeois nationalist proclivities and the lower priority he ascribed to developments in the colonial world, he provided almost no material assistance to the Vietnamese in their war against the French and only muted rhetorical support of their anti-imperial cause.

The United States was also initially slow to cast events in the global South in Cold War terms. US policymakers increasingly recognized the radical nature of many movements for independence, and did not like it. But they remained wary of giving overt support to British, French, and Dutch efforts to maintain their empires in the postwar period. American policy favored anticolonialism of a kind, but one in which racialized perceptions of backward non-Western peoples undercut support for immediate independence. A 1947 cable by Secretary of State George Marshall about Vietnam illustrates this larger American dilemma over its response to decolonization. While Marshall acknowledged that the United States had “fully recognized France’s sovereign position” in Indochina, he could not understand “the continued existence of an outmoded colonial outlook” and the inability of the French to recognize the realities of a postcolonial future. Equally concerned by what he perceived as Ho Chi Minh’s Communist connections, Marshall argued that it “should be obvious that we are not interested in seeing colonial empire administrations supplanted by a philosophy emanating from and controlled by the Kremlin.” Confounded by the perceived impossibilities of choosing between a radical political regime and an archaic colonial one, Marshall could offer no clear American policy toward the French war in Vietnam.

The character of diplomatic initiatives undertaken by Ho Chi Minh’s DRV illuminates the fluid possibilities of this period and the marginality of the Cold War to it. In the face of unsuccessful efforts to win support from the Soviet


4 On Stalin’s relationship with the emergent global South, see Vladimir 0. Pechanov’s chapter in this volume.

Union and the United States, the DRV hoped to capitalize on widespread professions of moral support from nationalist leaders in India and Southeast Asia. Through its diplomatic mission in Bangkok and later in Rangoon, the Vietnamese state tried to establish closer ties with Thailand, Burma, Indonesia, India, and the Philippines as well as more informal ties with radical nationalists in Malaya. Vietnamese diplomats were active in the 1947 Asian Relations Conference in India and participated in the establishment of the Southeast Asia League which aimed to formalize networks of nationalist regional cooperation. Although these efforts brought few immediate material rewards, they served to foster ties of nationalism and anticolonialism in the region that facilitated the organization of clandestine networks to obtain arms and military supplies and that provided a platform to mobilize international sympathy for their war against the French.

The Cold War in the global South

The rise of Mao’s China in 1949 and the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 brought the dynamics of the Cold War more fully into the processes of decolonization and increasingly influenced superpower politics toward the global South. In Vietnam, the Soviets largely ceded the field to China, whose military and economic support for the Ho Chi Minh government after 1950 was substantial. The United States came to fully support the French war effort in Vietnam, the result of Cold War pressures in Europe and Asia and their impact on domestic politics, ultimately paying for as much as three-quarters of the cost of the war. For the Americans and Chinese, however, the financial and military support of their allies was fraught with tension, illustrating the complex ways in which the Cold War could play out in the decolonizing world. American policymakers’ contempt for French colonial methods and military abilities were matched by French fears that the United States was seeking to gain control of Vietnam for its own political and economic purposes. Their Cold War partnership was far from smooth or harmonious.

Tensions and hostilities also emerged in the Sino-Vietnamese relationship. The massive influx of Chinese advisers, weapons, and supplies for the war effort, as well as a Chinese political advisory group that sought to involve itself in the making of DRV domestic policy, seemed to overwhelm the Vietnamese. Disputes over military tactics and strategy quickly emerged, deepened by the personal antipathies between senior Chinese and Vietnamese military leaders. The fragile contours of Sino-Vietnamese relations in this period were also shaped by the manner in which Chinese national and geostrategic interests could sometimes clash with and supersede fraternal ideological ties. New evidence from Chinese sources suggests that Mao’s willingness to support the Vietnamese against the French was prompted not simply by his ideological commitment to anti-imperialist solidarity but also by his fears of an American-led invasion into southern China at a time when Mao felt his fledgling regime remained vulnerable.

The deep suspicions that colored the relationship between the Chinese and the Vietnamese did not prevent a Vietnamese victory in 1954 in which Chinese support played a key role in defeating the forces of French colonialism. The psychological resonance of the Vietnamese triumph was a powerful one in the decolonizing and postcolonial worlds, emboldening anticolonial actors elsewhere in their struggles against imperial powers. In its wake, the Soviet Union, the United States, and China became more deeply engaged with the processes of decolonization and postcolonial state-making.

Stalin’s death in 1953 prompted a fundamental reassessment of Soviet diplomacy and the place of the global South in it. In his 1956 speech at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev emphasized that decolonization was a “postwar development of world-historical significance.” He intended to support progressive non-Marxist movements for national liberation under the larger rubric of “peaceful coexistence.” Confident that Soviet anti-imperialism and models of economic growth would appeal to decolonizing elites, Khrushchev began to donate billions of rubles in military and economic aid to states such as India, Indonesia, and Egypt, which would become leaders of the Non-Aligned Movement, in an effort to draw them into the Soviet orbit.

For these early recipients of Soviet aid, the economic aspects of the Cold War were frequently more important than its political dimensions. The Soviet Five-Year Plans, along with centralized planning, huge new steel plants and dams, and the mechanization of collective agriculture, offered postcolonial elites alluring strategies for economic growth and rapid industrialization. Indian prime minister Nehru, who visited the Soviet Union in the late 1920s

6 On these developments, see Niu Jun’s chapter in this volume.


and was deeply impressed by Soviet industrial progress, strongly favored state planning as a model for India’s economic development after independence. Accordingly, in the 1950s, Nehru deemphasized investment in agriculture and small-scale village industries and favored the development of heavy industry and the construction of major steel complexes. In drawing on Soviet models, advice, and money to launch these efforts, Nehru nonetheless rejected Soviet political ideology and pursued an independent diplomatic course. Indonesia and Egypt also received hundreds of millions of dollars in Soviet aid and welcomed aspects of Soviet economic models but remained cool to the bloc politics of the Cold War.

Developments in the global South were increasingly viewed through a Cold War lens in the United States. Like the Soviets, Americans were also actively engaged in efforts to promote development in Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. Under the guise of modernization theory, US policymakers posited a spectrum from traditional to modern societies in which the American economy, society, and culture provided a universal model for development. Max Millikan, the director of a prestigious think tank, expressed the typical sentiment of the period: “A much extended program of American participation in the economic development of the so-called underdeveloped states can and should be one of the most important elements in a program of expanding the dynamism and stability of the Free World and increasing its resistance to the appeals of Communism.”

For US policymakers in the 1950s and the 1960s, billions of dollars in economic development—whether in the form of miracle rice and agricultural assistance or import substitution and the development of a consumer economy—appeared as a necessary bulwark against Communist-led political insurgency and social engineering in much of the decolonizing world. Despite its anti-Soviet cast, modernization theory shared key attributes with Soviet models. It mirrored the Marxist-Leninist formulation of a move upwards from feudalism, albeit to liberal capitalism rather than socialism; it also reflected the Soviet insistence on enlightened elites leading an inevitable historical progress. At the same time, more than a bit of racialized paternalism informed American conceptions of the divide between developing states and capitalist modernities, recalling the Social Darwinian discourse of high imperialism that pitted non-Western barbarism against Euro-American civilization.

The impact of modernization theory and US economic assistance sometimes replicated the results of Soviet development projects and aid. In Korea, Vietnam, Taiwan, and the Philippines, economic aid did sustain deeper political relations even if the impact of American development practices was generally uneven and sometimes disastrous. But for states that sought to remain outside the Cold War divide in the late 1950s and early 1960s—such as India, Indonesia, and Egypt—interest in American economic models did not usually extend to making political and diplomatic alliances.

11 Along with greater US attention to economic and social development, the intensification of Cold War pressures prompted a considerably more activist policy of direct intervention in the global South. In 1953, the Eisenhower administration orchestrated the overthrow of the government of Mohammad Mossadegh in Iran. The CIA-led operation was prompted by a number of factors, including Mosaddeq’s nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company and its ramifications for Great Britain. But US officials also feared the Tudeh Party’s Communist orientation, its seemingly growing strength, and its dependence on Soviet patronage. Although the Tudeh Party was far weaker and considerably more divided than the Americans understood at the time, and although the domestic political situation in Iran was far more complex than a Cold War lens would allow, the Soviet-American rivalry axiomatically shaped US perceptions and policy.

In Latin America, the postwar run to democracy was reversed almost entirely by 1954 when dictators again came to rule most of the countries in the region. In 1947 and 1948, there was a regionwide crackdown on organized labor and local Communist Parties. Authoritarian governments repressed militant labor leaders, marginalized and disbanded some unions, introduced antistrike legislation and formally outlawed Communist Parties. In subsequent years, reformers and populist leaders who championed social democracy were contained and repressed.

The reemergence of conservative elites and their military allies in Latin America was not entirely driven by the Cold War. They had not been eviscerated by the rise of social democracy after World War II, but had
been forced temporarily on the defensive. As the Cold War came to dominate US diplomacy in the global South, local developments intersected with the rising concern of American policymakers over Communism in Latin America. In some cases, US support for the military coups that brought illiberal conservative regimes to power was indirect. In others, direct involvement can be carefully documented, as was the case with the overthrow of the government of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954. Although the relationship between the social democratic Arbenz, local Communists, and the Soviet Union was fluid, the Eisenhower administration insisted that the Arbenz government was a beachhead of Soviet Communism. The administration authorized Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) support for the invasion of Guatemala from Honduras and put immense pressure on the Guatemalan army, which proved decisive in the collapse of the Arbenz government. It was followed by a reign of “Cold War terror,” in which supporters of Arbenz in the countryside were arrested, tortured, and killed.12 This precursor of the “dirty wars” in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s drew directly on the advice and support of US intelligence operatives. The CIA supported repression in Guatemala through a variety of means, including manuals with detailed instructions on how to torture insurgents.

**Bandung and revolutionary nationalism**

An intensifying Cold War and its impact on global struggles for decolonization prompted many anticolonial leaders to rethink the terms of their engagement with the international system. In April 1955, leaders from thirty newly post-colonial states, along with observers from national liberation movements throughout the colonial world, gathered in Bandung, Indonesia. The meeting provided an opportunity for Third World leaders to discuss transnational anticolonial ideologies of regional, race, and class solidarities and to create an international space apart from both the imperial and the Cold War orders.

The speeches at Bandung focused on shattering the bipolarity of Cold War politics. The head of the Indian delegation, Prime Minister Nehru, argued, “If I join any of these big groups, I lose my identity ... If all the world were to be divided up between these two big blocs what would be the result? The inevitable result would be war.”13 Indonesian president Sukarno, who

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presided over the conference, called upon governments to follow “the highest code of morality and ethics” and warned against the urge to “indulge in power politics.” An alternative conception of global relations, Sukarno continued, rested on the commonalties that joined those gathered at Bandung: “Almost all of us have ties of common experience, the experience of colonialism ... Many of us, the so-called ‘underdeveloped’ nations, have more or less similar economic problems ... And I think we may say we hold dear the ideals of national independence and freedom.”

What emerged at Bandung were the outlines of a nascent alternative international order made up of former colonial states and peoples that tilted neither to the Soviet nor to the American side in the Cold War. These leaders were deeply concerned with supporting ongoing independence struggles and realizing postcolonial political and economic justice. Their vision found more concrete expression in the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement established in 1961 by India, Indonesia, Egypt, Ghana, Yugoslavia, and Algeria; within three years the movement had more than fifty members drawn from former colonial states.

In the mid-1950s, the spirit of Bandung inspired further challenges to the imperial and bipolar Cold War international orders. In Egypt, a military coup in 1952 by young army officers, intent upon reducing continuing quasicolonial British domination and challenging social-economic inequality, brought General Gamal Abdel Nasser to power. He launched a radical program of economic nationalism. In 1956, Nasser challenged British control of the Suez Canal, a longstanding symbol for Egyptians of the limits on their sovereignty and a potential source of revenue for Nasser’s vision of economic development. Egypt’s stiff military resistance to a British-French-Israeli operation not only advanced Nasser’s domestic agenda, but also turned him and his revolutionary nationalist supporters into heroes in the colonized world. Nasser exploited his perceived dramatic victory over the British at Suez and capitalized on the neutralist sensibilities of Bandung to lead a pan-Arab movement. It supported oppositional politics in Syria, Iraq, and Jordan as well as Palestinian claims against Israel. The twin struggles against imperialism and Zionism catalyzed the formation of Nasserite parties in several Arab states, and, in 1958, culminated in a short-lived union between Egypt and Syria, a union that was envisioned as the basis for a single Arab state.

Bandung, the Suez crisis, and Nasser’s revolutionary nationalism further complicated and deepened the relationship between the Cold War and decolonization. Few American policymakers welcomed Bandung’s emphasis on non-alignment but they viewed developments in Egypt and the Middle East with far greater alarm. The Eisenhower administration’s opposition to the joint British-French-Israeli military campaign to retake the Suez Canal reflected both a sense of the passing of European empire in the region and a fear of Soviet intentions to gain regional advantage by supporting Nasser and the forces of Arab revolutionary nationalism. The perceived dangers posed by Nasser and pan-Arabism prompted Washington to intervene directly in the Lebanese civil war in 1958 and to offer substantial military and economic assistance to conservative, pro-Western leaders in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Libya, and Iraq. Outside the Middle East, the Cold War prism heightened American fears of decolonizing and revolutionary challenges. In the late 1950s, these worries led to the massive influx of US support for the Ngo Dinh Diem regime in South Vietnam.

While the Soviet Union and China greeted Bandung and Nasser more favorably than did the United States, their leaders disputed tactics and strategies for the decolonizing world. From the founding of the People’s Republic of China, Mao had always directed more attention to developments in the global South than had Soviet officials, and he espoused aggressive support for movements of national liberation. His envoys played a substantial role at the Bandung Conference and consciously sought to build a “united front” with newly decolonizing states against Western imperialism. Although Mao’s more public break with the Soviet Union in 1959–60 was largely driven by his domestic concerns, it also reflected his ideological tensions with the Soviets over policy toward the decolonizing world. In denouncing Soviet “revisionism” and “peaceful coexistence,” Mao argued that imperialism could be vanquished only through armed struggle and class conflict. Thereafter, he vigorously supported Ho Chi Minh’s struggle against the Americans in South Vietnam and nurtured deeper ties with radical regimes and movements in Africa.

China’s international activism pushed the Soviets toward more sustained commitments in the global South, not only in the Middle East but in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean as well. The competition between them.
meant their potential allies were faced with pressures from both states to side with one of the two parties. But for those who successfully navigated these treacherous shoals, such as the Vietnamese Communists, the material rewards could be very rich.

Decolonization and the global South

The late 1950s and the early 1960s marked the end of the great decolonizing wave of the first two decades of the post-World War II era. The outbreak of the Algerian war for independence against France, the Mau Mau rebellion in British Kenya, and Ghana’s independence in the mid-1950s ushered in the beginning of what would become a flood of postcolonial states in Africa and the Caribbean. As many as seventeen formerly colonial African states gained independence by 1960. Others would follow in the early 1960s, as would Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, and Guyana. In 1959, Cuban revolutionaries led by Fidel Castro triumphed and their assertive anti-imperialism and calls for revolutionary social and economic change became an inspiration for radical movements not only in Latin America but throughout the global South.

Cold War rivalries shaped these developments in critical ways, inspiring American efforts to overthrow Congolese prime minister Patrice Lumumba in 1960 and Cheddi Jagan’s government in Guyana in 1964, prompting Soviet support for Castro’s increasingly Marxist regime in Cuba, and motivating the Chinese to provide loans and advisers to newly independent African states. But countervailing currents, including legacies of imperialism and the interwar anticolonial struggle along with others new to the postcolonial era, served to limit the impact of the Cold War and circumscribed the actions of the superpowers in the global South.

The pan-African movement of the first half of the twentieth century continued to exert considerable power over African decolonization. Nkrumah, the vigorous leader of independent Ghana, had been active in local and transnational anticolonial politics since the 1930s, and he advocated a strong pan-Africanism designed to assist independence movements and to foster solidarity among postcolonial African states. In 1958, in the spirit of Bandung, he helped convene an All-African People’s Conference. It urged African states to close ranks against superpower Cold War politics and tried to promote mutual assistance in social and economic development. Subsequently, the overthrow and murder of Lumumba in 1961 accelerated the pan-African project. Lumumba had been a committed pan-Africanist, and the culpability of the United States in his death reinforced local and regional pressure for African unity. By establishing the Organization of African Unity in May 1963, pan-Africanists sought to institutionalize their transnational movement, but subsequent splits in the organization would diminish its regional impact.

Tensions with client states complicated superpower efforts to direct and manage the processes of decolonization and postcolonial state-making. In South Vietnam, the Eisenhower administration lavished money on the Ngo Dinh Diem regime in the late 1950s, lauding Diem as the “miracle man” of Southeast Asia. But with the rise of urban discontent against Diem’s regime and a heightened Communist insurgency in the early 1960s, US policymakers increasingly worried about his refusal to take American advice and direction. In supporting the coup that led to Diem’s murder in 1963, however, they ushered in a period of escalating chaos. Likewise, in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Castro backed away from his close relationship with the Soviet Union. Along with Che Guevara, he launched a competitive global campaign for influence with radical independence movements in Latin
America and Africa. And, at much the same time, the Sino-Indian border war complicated Chinese efforts to lead a united front of decolonizing states. Several years later, during their cultural revolution, the shrewd insistence of Chinese leaders on the primacy of Maoist models abroad frayed their ties with many of the states and movements in the global South, whom the Chinese had so assiduously courted earlier in the decade.

Finally, the wave of decolonization in Africa and the Caribbean brought with it even larger forces that none of the superpowers could fully contain and control. As Matthew Connelly has argued, the Algerian war unleashed a “diplomatic revolution” that fundamentally challenged the state-based scaffolding upon which the Cold War international order rested. In part, this was the result of the Algerian liberation movement, the Front de Libération Nationale, assuming the attributes and legitimacy previously accorded only to states. This shift in perception of the power and significance of liberation movements contributed to the increasing importance of the African National Congress in South Africa, al Fatah in the Palestinian diaspora, and similar groups in Angola and East Timor in the international politics of decolonization after 1962. The diplomatic revolution of the postcolonial moment, Connelly argues, went even deeper. The wider processes of decolonization—population growth, environmental scarcities, supranational institutions, new media forms, and the conscious agency of colonized peoples to promote radical systemic change—severely weakened the Cold War system even at the height of superpower confrontation, and ultimately gave shape to the post-Cold War world.

After 1962, the dynamics of the Cold War would continue to play a powerful role in the global South. Soviet, American, and Chinese intervention in postcolonial state-making took an increasingly intrusive and militarized turn, first in Vietnam and later in Angola, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Central America, and Afghanistan. As the leaders of the first wave of decolonization, such as Nehru, Ho Chi Minh, Nasser, and Nkrumah, passed from the scene, a generation of more militant local actors emerged—some radical such as Antonio Neto in Angola and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, others deeply conservative such as Augusto Pinochet in Chile or Joseph Mobutu in Zaire—whose worldviews heightened levels of confrontation and repression among and between states and peoples in the postcolonial world.

“The wars fought in the Third World during the Cold War,” writes Odd Arne Westad, “were despairingly destructive.” The violence and terror of war, and the authoritarian regimes of the Right and of the Left that emerged in their wake, destabilized and sometimes devastated many local societies. Significantly, if depressingly, the end of the Cold War has done little to ameliorate conditions. As Westad notes, when the Cold War ended fewer than one in four of the world’s population lived in areas with improving standards of living; today, that number is fewer than one in six. In Africa alone, per capita gross national product is now lower in some states than it was in the 1970s, and poverty, famine, HIV/AIDS, genocide, and predatory regimes crush people’s hopes for a minimum standard of well-being.

The present moment, like decolonization itself, remains rooted in the complex interplay of the imperial, the postcolonial, and the Cold War. This constellation of historical forces, however, offers not only burdens but also opportunities. From the interior and intimate spaces of the family to the national visions of postcolonial leaders, new and often radical calls for more just, equalitarian, and humane societies have emerged. Anticolonial and postcolonial thought, with its rich and fluid nature, reaches beyond the boundaries of the nation and imagines transnational and global spaces in which its larger emancipatory project can be advanced. The present moment, therefore, contains the possibility of realizing the vision of a world in which social equity and justice prevail as naturally as inequality, poverty, and war.