World War II and the Road to Independence

World War II was a devastating event in world history. Its consequences, in addition to the untold losses of life and the destruction of countless towns and villages, included broad changes in political priorities, groupings, and policies. At times, the effects of the war were direct and immediate and at other times, particular circumstances of the war provided the necessary impetus for change to occur. While World War II has been most closely associated with Europe and the Pacific region, it also bore extensive consequences for colonialism in Africa. Specifically, the war had a profound impact on African resistance movements, which eventually paved the way for independence. It is important to understand that African resistance, while constant and adamant throughout the colonial period, manifested itself in varied and distinct forms. Such changing demands, strategies, and tactics on the part of Africans were induced by distinct transformations of African thought with respect to their situations. Here, we will explore the role of World War II in reshaping such thought. In doing so, we place the role of World War II into the broader context of African resistance by tracing the development of that resistance. This approach allows for a reconsideration of some aspects of African resistance while simultaneously augmenting our understanding of that resistance.

All of Africa, with the exception of Liberia and Ethiopia, had been colonized by the beginning of World War I. By that time, African resistance to the initial colonization by and large had been overcome by the European powers. Over the following decades, as colonialism became more institutionalized and more and more repressive of African populations, African resistance to colonialism became more focused and intense. Three distinct periods of African resistance emerged, eventually leading to independence.

First Period of African Resistance

The first period of African resistance, 1890s to World War I, corresponded with the rise of African nationalism. While responses to European intrusion were not uniform, people took concerted actions to oppose colonialism. The most significant dichotomy existed between non-literate rulers in rural areas and the emerging educated elite in urban areas. Both groups developed different strategies for dealing with colonialism and maintained different objectives. In rural areas resistance was primarily reactive to specific colonial policies (e.g. tax imposition, land alienation, and cruel behavior of colonial administrators). Rural populations staged rebellions and insurrections in response to such policies, for example with the Chimurenga revolt (1896–1903) in Rhodesia and the Maji Maji rebellion (1905–1907) in Tanganyika. In urban areas the educated elite and wage workers did not attempt to overthrow the colonial system; their goal was to reform the colonial system. For example, in South Africa, under the
leadership of Pixley Ka Izaka Seme, educated elites formed the political party South African Native National Congress (precursor to the ANC) in 1912. Blaise Diagne formed the Republican Socialist Party in Senegal during this time period. These parties maintained conservative goals and attempted to work within the system of colonialism. The aim was to gradually increase the rights of blacks.

**Second Period of African Resistance**

The second period of African resistance stretched from 1914 to the end of World War II. The world wars sparked a shift in thinking among many Africans. Many Africans fought for the European armies in Africa and Europe. There, they saw whites killing whites, which altered their perceptions of black–white relations. Upon the soldiers’ return to Africa, these new perceptions spread, and Africans in general began to look beyond Africa and network with people in the US and Europe. The philosophies and ideas of such thinkers and activists, such as Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey, brought the notion of Pan-Africanism to the African continent. Also, U.S. President Wilson’s “14 Points,”¹ which introduced the idea of self-determination, was influential. Throughout Africa new organizations were formed, new alliances were created, and new demands were made. For example, Harry Thuku led the East African Association in Kenya; I.T.A. Wallace Johnson led the West African Youth League in Sierra Leone; and the Literary and Social Clubs of Sekondi formed in Ghana and Nigeria. While most of these alliances still operated in urban areas, several stretched into rural areas and were indeed territory-wide (e.g. East African Association). With a rise in political consciousness, people made significant demands on the colonial administrations. Demands for higher wages, representation in government, better education, abolition of racial discrimination, abolition of forced labor, and equal treatment demonstrate the full range of political goals. Violence was not a typical feature of this period of African resistance, yet rural protests, although peaceful in nature, were often violently crushed by the colonial governments.

**Third Period of African Resistance**

The third period of African resistance started with World War II and eventually led to independence for African states. World War II served as a major turning point as events surrounding the war had tremendous impacts on African populations and reinforced the principle of self-determination. During the war the colonial governments established marketing boards in the colonies. These marketing boards controlled the

¹ For the complete text of President Wilson’s 14 Points, click this link hosted by Yale Law School’s Avalon Project [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/wilson14.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/wilson14.asp).

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prices at which Africans could sell their crops. Naturally the prices were kept artificially low as Europe attempted to keep costs low (most resources went to the war machinery). Consequently, ordinary Africans suffered tremendously, because their income levels were drastically reduced. This created huge resentment for the colonial regimes.

The French and British colonial governments recruited thousands of Africans to fight for the French and British armies in Europe and Northern Africa; some African soldiers fought for the European militaries in places as far away as Burma. Over 80,000 African troops from French West Africa fought alongside French soldiers in Europe. In 1943, African troops comprised more than half of the French army. These soldiers were highly informed of the principles that the allied forces were fighting for in Europe. Colonial powers could not conceal the content of the Atlantic Charter\(^2\) (the 1941 joint declaration on the purpose of the war by U.S. President Roosevelt and the United Kingdom’s Prime Minister Churchill) from African troops in Europe and thereby Africans in the colonies. Especially clause 3 of the Atlantic Charter was a boost for African resistance movements. Clause 3 stated the following:

> they [the British and American governments and people] respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live; and they wish to see sovereign rights and self government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them.

While this statement was intended to apply only to the European countries which were overrun by German Nazi forces, Africans appropriated it and used it for their own purposes.

Therefore, the single most important ramification of World War II was the vast politicization of the African masses. Demands were no longer centered on an end to discrimination and more opportunity; now Africans demanded an end to colonial rule. Africans claimed the Atlantic Charter as a commitment on the part of the allies (at least Great Britain) to end colonial rule in Africa. Self-determination and independence became the goals of African resistance to colonialism. In 1945, the 5th Pan-African Congress took place in Great Britain. Nkrumah and Kenyatta (future leaders of independent Ghana and Kenya, respectively) participated and declared the need for an end of colonial rule and independence for Africa.

\(^2\) For the complete text of the Atlantic Charter, click this link hosted by the US Department of State [http://usinfo.org/docs/democracy/53.htm](http://usinfo.org/docs/democracy/53.htm).

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The European powers had no intention of granting independence to their African colonies. They foresaw a time in the future when Africans would be allowed to govern themselves, yet this time had not come. The colonial states believed that Africans first needed to be trained and educated before they could take on such responsibilities as governing themselves. Africans, however, begged to differ and through concentrated and intensified activism, they forced Europe to grant independence. The colonies experienced different paths to independence. The general pattern was that in colonies with large numbers of white settlers independence came about through violent conflicts; in colonies with no or few white settlers transitions to independence progressed rather rapidly and peacefully. The exception was the Portuguese colonies. Guinea-Bissau, Angola, and Mozambique had to fight prolonged wars to achieve independence. Portugal was the least wealthy of the colonial powers and felt that it had to hold on to its colonies for economic leverage within Europe. A change of political leadership in Portugal and the hardship caused by the prolonged fighting eventually brought independence to the colonies in 1975.

The process of decolonization was propelled by the concerted efforts of countless political leaders acting within the framework of political parties, trade unions, student unions, women’s groups, and alliances between ordinary people. For the first time, African resistance was not segmented into different factions; rather, in the aftermath of World War II, all sections of society became linked and agitated in unison through means of demonstrations, strikes, and negotiations. The goal of gradual change was abandoned in favor of immediate self-government. This demand energized the masses and guaranteed success. The manifestations of World War II, its political ramifications, and the interrelated experiences of Africans in association with the war were instrumental in shaping and reshaping African resistance movements.