Decolonization: The End of Empire?

Transcript

Date: Tuesday, 27 March 2012 - 6:00PM
Location: Museum of London
This evening, in the last of this year’s series of lectures on Empire, I want to ask why the European global empires collapsed so suddenly in the third quarter of the 20th century. The collapse of the European empires is easy enough to relate, but much harder to explain. By the end of the 1930s, the European empires had actually reached their largest extent; the end of the First World War had seen the parcelling out of Turkish possessions in the Middle East, giving Syria and Lebanon to France, Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq to Britain, and part of Somalia to Italy, ratified by the Turks in 1923 at the Treaty of Lausanne. In the 1930s Italy acquired Ethiopia. Only Germany had been excluded from the imperial club. Yet within three decades almost all of this had gone. Italy was deprived of its colonies, and Ethiopia became independent once more; but whereas this had been the general pattern after the end of the First World War, when the victorious powers gobbled up the overseas colonies of the losers, in the aftermath of the Second World War it was the victors who lost their colonial empires.

This was a global process, affecting all the European empires and every part of the world. It began in Asia, and in particular in the countries occupied by the Japanese. The Japanese began by incorporating European colonies into their own empire, and harshly repressed any attempts at resistance, but when things started going badly, the Japanese tried to encourage nationalist uprisings against the European colonial powers by declaring the occupied territories independent – Burma and the Philippines in 1943, Indonesia in 1944. In all these areas this was widely recognized as a sham, but nevertheless the Japanese ousting of the colonial power had destroyed its legitimacy, demonstrating that Asians could defeat the European occupiers; so it stimulated nationalist resistance movements. In 1948 the British agreed to Burmese independence, not least because the function of Burma as a buffer state to the east of India had now disappeared with Indian independence; in the Philippines the Americans had already announced the intention of granting independence in 1935 and the Japanese invasion merely delayed the event until 1945; the Dutch in Europe urged Dutch troops to sign up to free the Dutch East Indies from Japanese control, meaning to get them back under Dutch rule; but Indonesian nationalists led by Sukarno declared independence, and after a lengthy and bitter war, costing the lives of more than 20,000 Europeans and many more Indonesians, international pressure forced the Dutch to withdraw and recognize Indonesian independence in 1949.

In French Indo-China, also conquered by the Japanese, the situation was similar. French rule began to disintegrate as the Kingdom of Siam or Thailand, which had managed to remain independent by playing off the British in Burma to the west against the French in Cambodia and Vietnam to the east, persuaded the French to return some territory in 1938, and then invaded in 1940-41 to reconquer some more. The Japanese invaded Thailand later in the year, winning over the Thais with promises of further territorial gains; when the Japanese were defeated, the Thais retained their independence by aligning themselves with the Americans as a bulwark against the Communist threat from China and the Soviet Union. Everywhere, Japanese conquest cut off European colonies from the colonial metropoles for several years, enabling resistance movements to emerge focused on independence rather than reconnection with the imperial power, as might have happened had these colonies been full of large numbers of European settlers. There was an obvious parallel here to the impact of the Napoleonic Wars, which cut off Spanish colonies in the Americas for years on end.

In French Indo-China itself, the Japanese were discredited as the result of a widespread famine in 1944-45, in which between one and two million out of a population of ten million died of starvation and related diseases. The Communist resistance under Ho Chi Minh, a founder member of the French Communist Party during his years in Paris in the early 1920s, gained support by encouraging raids on food stores. After the end of the war elections were held in 1946 giving the Communists victory in central and northern Vietnam, but the French refused to accept this, and as the Cold War began, armed conflict ensued, lost by the French in 1954 at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. This was already a rearguard action since conflicts had broken out all over Indo-China, forcing the French to begin withdrawal the previous year. In neighbouring Cambodia, the royal family had survived under French rule and declared independence at the request of the Japanese towards the end of the war. Although the French reimposed control, the disintegration of their Indo-Chinese empire led to a negotiated independence in 1953. And in Laos, the same process took place, with Japanese conquest followed by a declaration of independence, French re-occupation, and French withdrawal in 1953. In all these places, therefore, the Japanese invasion had given the impetus to independence movements already in existence but previously without a great deal of influence. The sight of Europeans arrested, interned and maltreated by the Japanese, as in this illustration of an internment camp in the Dutch East Indies, destroyed any lingering sense of deference to them or sense of European superiority.

Looming large over all these processes, and encouraging nationalists all over south-east Asia, was Indian independence, achieved in 1947. I described in my last lecture how the conditions that had enabled Britain to acquire and rule the vast area of the Indian sub-continent, with its huge population and resources, were coming to an end after 1918. In particular, a new educated Indian elite began agitating first for self-governing Dominion status and then for independence. British concessions in the form of elected legislatures were matched by
Indirect rule meant the support of collaborating elites in colonized societies, maintaining hierarchical and organization imported from Europe. Indonesia, or Buddhism in Indo-China, or Hinduism in India, could provide a basis for continued resistance, but surviving indigenous religious or cultural traditions, such as Islam in North and West Africa, Malaya and powers, but the resistance that eventually destroyed colonial rule seldom came from this direction. Strong and colonized. Traditional political structures in the colonies had been destroyed, adapted or co-opted by the colonial European rule in Asian and African colonies remained ultimately based on force, and was never accepted by the trigger. Unlike colonies with a significant European population, such as Canada, Australia or New Zealand, conquest and Japanese encouragement of nationalist movements – however insincere – had been a significant British, Dutch and French rule in Asia was the first stage in the collapse of the European empires. Japanese and a million people, and seven and a quarter terrified refugees fled in either direction.

Worst of all was the situation in Bengal. The complacent and inefficient colonial administration in India did nothing to curb inflation, speculation and hoarding, even when Burma fell, depriving the sub-continent of 15 per cent of its rice supply. Provincial governments in India reacted by banning the export of food to other provinces, strangling the machinery of trade in food in what one food controller called an outbreak of ‘insane provincial protectionism’. The winter rice harvest of 1942 failed because of a fungal disease that spread rapidly in an unusually warm and humid spell of weather. No measures were taken to impose rationing or force hoarders to disgorge supplies, for fear of provoking political dissent in the economic elites. Churchill ordered a 60 per cent cut in military and civilian shipping to the Indian Ocean, commenting that Indians should not take food supplies that could be used by the mother country; for him, as for cartoonist Illingworth, it showed that the Indians were incapable of governing themselves and that Congress’s sympathizers in Britain and the USA were unrealistic idealists who failed to recognize that the colonial power was all that stood between India and ruin. As many as three million people may have died from starvation and diseases, such as cholera, associated with the movements of large numbers of people across the country. The government imposed strict censorship to stop news of the famine spreading, and it was only when Viscount Wavell was appointed Viceroy of India in September 1943 that, worried about morale among the Indian troops charged with the recapture of Burma, that decisive action was taken. Even so, Wavell had to overcome considerable resistance from Churchill and the government in London. The famine seriously undermined popular support for the British Raj.

In the 1920s the civil disobedience campaign led by Gandhi frequently spilled over into demonstrations, riots and violence, met by the British authorities with growing repression, and as economic problems spread, so the educated elite’s campaign gained more widespread popular support. The Government of India Act of 1935, extending the electorate to 30 million people, still very limited, and giving more rights to legislatures, led to sweeping electoral victory for Congress in 1937. The limits of Indian influence were graphically underlined in 1939 when the British government declared war on behalf of India without any consultation. Congress leaders resigned their government posts in protest and were arrested. At the end of the war, as they were released, events were rapidly spinning out of British control. British cartoonists ridiculed Gandhi’s policy of non-violence during the war; but in fact it had led to major changes, perhaps accelerated by the threat of violence should it fail.

Two problems now accelerated events. First, the globalization of food supplies within the British Empire now turned against it. In the absence of rationing or price controls such as had been imposed in the UK, rising demand fuelled by the need to buy up supplies for British troops fuelled inflation which soon put many foodstuffs out of reach of the poor in many parts of the empire. Food supplies were cut off by wartime activity. Worried about morale among the Indian troops charged with the recapture of Burma, that decisive action was taken. Even so, Wavell had to overcome considerable resistance from Churchill and the government in London. The famine seriously undermined popular support for the British Raj.

Secondly, the British had encouraged Hindu-Muslim rivalry in order to weaken the Indian nationalist movement. Thus, for example, the mainly Hindu nationalism of the Indian National Congress was counterbalanced by the All-India Muslim League, founded in 1906 on British initiative. By 1945 suspicions between the two religious communities had deepened to such an extent that pressure at both extremes was beginning to overwhelm Gandhi’s attempts to keep the nation together and lead it into independence as a united state. The Muslim leader Jinnah rejected Congress leader Nehru’s offer of five seats in an all-India government claiming of Hindu oppression of Muslims. Violent incidents meshed with growing political tensions between Congress and the Muslim League to force the British government’s hand as civil war seemed to loom alongside famine while the politicians dithered, bickered and drew up elaborate plans from a distance; partition between a Hindu-dominated India and a Muslim Pakistan, focused on the north-east and north-west, was agreed, the princely states were left free to choose their allegiance as the British abandoned their claim to suzerainty over them, and in June 1947 the last Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten, announced independence for August, before the lines of demarcation had been finally drawn, leaving areas like Kashmir still in dispute. Although there were safeguards for minorities, a huge wave of violence overwhelmed the new states, as massacres of religious minorities killed between half a million and a million people, and seven and a quarter terrified refugees fled in either direction.

British, Dutch and French rule in Asia was the first stage in the collapse of the European empires. Japanese conquest and Japanese encouragement of nationalist movements – however insincere – had been a significant trigger. Unlike colonies with a significant European population, such as Canada, Australia or New Zealand, European rule in Asian and African colonies remained ultimately based on force, and was never accepted by the colonized. Traditional political structures in the colonies had been destroyed, adapted or co-opted by the colonial powers, but the resistance that eventually destroyed colonial rule seldom came from this direction. Strong and surviving indigenous religious or cultural traditions, such as Islam in North and West Africa, Malaya and Indonesia, or Buddhism in Indo-China, or Hinduism in India, could provide a basis for continued resistance, but this required political mobilization as well, and this had to come from new ideologies and forms of political organization imported from Europe.
undemocratic political structures, but in addition to traditional elites it was also necessary to train up new elites educated in the colonizers’ language, English or French or Dutch, to act as modern administrators; this education, even if begun in mission schools, was usually taken to an advanced level in the colonial metropolis. A typical example here was Hastings Banda, who studied medicine in Edinburgh and read History at the University of Chicago before returning home to Nyasaland and leading the country to independence as Malawi. It is not surprising that many nationalist and Communist leaders in the colonies began their political careers by joining radical political groups in London, Paris, or wherever they were studying, then taking radical political ideas back home; Ho Chi Minh, the Vietnamese Communist leader who joined the Communist Party in Paris in the early 1920s, was a classic example of this. These did not have to be extreme ideas: even a moderate belief in equality before the law, for example, would be bound to run up against the existence of different legal systems for Europeans and non-Europeans in the colonies; a commonplace belief in elections and parliamentary sovereignty would be bound to run up against the absence of these things in the colonies; and above all from 1918 onwards the principle of national self-determination, which swept all before it in the peace settlement of 1919 and was dominant in Europe through to the end of the Second World War and beyond, was utterly confounded by the experience of colonial rule.

Of course the concept of a ‘nation’ was problematical, to say the least, in huge conglomerates of widely differing geographical and climatic zones and political and social systems like, say, Nigeria. But European education helped create new, modernizing elites who were able to push aside traditional collaborating elites and unite the colonized in opposition to European racism and colonial domination and argue powerfully for a greater say in the government of whichever colony they happened to be located in. Economic development accelerated these processes, as denser and faster communications, from the railway to the airplane to the telephone, helped nationalist movements to bind together disparate tribes and communities. Urbanization and education led to the rapid growth of new indigenous economic and professional elites and created impoverished urban masses ready to listen to the nationalist message as a way out of their oppression. It was in India that all these processes were at their most advanced, since they had been in train for the longest period of time, and could build on powerful indigenous religious and cultural traditions; and India frequently acted as a model for other colonies. Within the British Empire, the emergence of self-governing Dominions provided another model that was followed by the nationalist movement in India and then other colonies as well.

For the British themselves, the evolution of self-governing Dominions also provided a model to follow, provided they conceded the fitness of a colony to govern itself; something they did with only extreme reluctance in India and Africa since those demanding self-government were not Europeans. The legitimacy of imperialism had been undermined already in the First World War, but the new more idealistic atmosphere of international relations after 1918 still left European powers convinced that they could control the pace and nature of the slow emergence of structures of self-government in the colonies. In any case, up to the Second World War, nationalist and anti-colonialist movements grew only relatively slowly and had, except perhaps in India and Ceylon, relatively little impact. What made the crucial difference was the impact of the war itself; not just in the form of the Japanese demonstration that an Asian power could destroy European empires, but more generally. European powers retained control over African colonies throughout the war, but knowledge of European defeats in the Far East and in Europe itself encouraged nationalist movements, and the barbarous and genocidal behaviour of the Germans in Eastern Europe and their exploitation of a huge area of Europe more generally severely damaged the moral legitimacy of empire itself. Within Britain, France and other countries, critics of empire increased in number and persuasiveness as a consequence. Nazi racism largely destroyed the legitimacy of racism in Europe itself, and with it the claim of Europeans to be morally superior to Africans or Asians on which so much of the legitimacy of European colonialism rested.

Conversely, of course, many colonies made a major contribution to the war effort of the British and their Allies in fighting the Nazis and the Japanese, increasing the legitimacy of demands for self-government after the fighting stopped. Above all, the war brought two superpowers, the USA and the USSR, to prominence, and one of the few things they had in common was opposition to colonialism. The rapid emergence of the Cold War between the two superpowers created a competition for the support of what came to be known as ‘Third World’ countries, with liberation movements frequently backed by the Soviet Union and the USA and the ‘West’ more generally seeking to defuse them by making concessions to demands for independence. Only where a European colony seemed to be a bulwark against Communism did the Americans support it.

It is sometimes said that the British economy was exhausted, even bankrupted, by fighting the Second World War, and so Britain was unable to devote resources to retaining its colonial Empire, but this is drastically to oversimplify a much more complex situation. What happened, rather, is that the British economy became more dependent on the much larger US economy when sterling was made fully convertible with the American dollar as a condition of wartime and post-war loans. Previously, sterling earnings could only be spent in sterling-based countries. Britain's reaction to this opening up of world markets was to require colonial currencies to maintain fixed exchange rates with sterling, to sell their currency earnings to the UK in return for sterling, and to allow free transfers of sterling. Yet in 1949 when the British government devalued sterling it did not consult the colonies. In addition, the British belief that the wealth of the colonies could help its own economy led to much more vigorous exploitation of plantations, mines and other colonial resources. All this had damaging and sometimes inflationary effects on colonial economies and helped fuel colonial nationalism. As the Empire became more difficult and more expensive to control, British politicians wondered increasingly whether it was worth it at a time when more and more money was being spent on the creation of the welfare state at home.
Finally, the violence with which colonial powers often confronted movements of national liberation also fuelled growing protests and opposition to colonialism among liberals at home, appalled for example by the forcible relocation of half a million Malayans to so-called ‘model villages’ in the ‘Malayan Emergency’ war against Communist guerrillas – originally armed by the British to fight the Japanese - from 1948 all the way up to 1960. The counter-insurgency operation was hugely expensive. In one action, ‘Operation Nassau’, carried out from December 1954 to January 1955, 60,000 artillery shells, 30,000 rounds of mortar ammunition, and 2,000 aircraft bombs were expended, but only 35 terrorists killed or captured. Each one represented 1,500 man-days of patrolling or waiting in ambushes. Such operations succeeded, for the insurgents were relatively few in number – around 8,000 – and did not have much support among the population. Still, in order to undermine their claim to be a movement of national liberation rather than a movement of communist revolution, the British rapidly introduced measures of self-government, ending in 1957 with full independence followed by an end to the war three years later.

In other parts of the world too, violent opposition created almost insurmountable problems of control. British control in Palestine became shaky when the mass migration of many Jews from Europe after the war led to demands for the fulfilment of the Balfour Declaration of 1917, when Britain had promised the Jews a homeland. Britain was caught between the feeling that this promise should be honoured, and its reliance on Arab states for oil supplies alongside with its continued role in states such as Iraq at a time when Arab nationalism too was becoming more vocal. Increasingly violent action by extreme Zionist terrorist groups including the bombing of the British Palestine headquarters at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem was paralleled by growing violence between Jews and Arabs. Unable to control the rapidly spiralling violence, Britain resigned its mandate in September 1947 when the United Nations recommended separate Arab and Jewish states, leading to full-scale war and the declaration of Israeli independence in May 1948.

British public opinion was divided over events in Palestine, as it was over violence elsewhere. The repression of the Mau-Mau uprising in Kenya from 1952 to 1956, with mass arrests and 10,000 African deaths, aroused criticism in the UK, while in France the divisions opened up by the Algerian war of independence from 1954 onwards, marked by torture and assassination on both sides, were so deep – largely because of the fact that the northern provinces of Algeria were actually part of France, and settled by large numbers of French colonists – that they led to the overthrow of the Fourth Republic in a coup by General De Gaulle in 1958, followed, much to the dismay of his backers, by independence in 1962.

By this time, much of the rationale for the retention of colonies by European powers had more or less disappeared. British control of East Africa had been motivated not least by the desire to protect the sea route to India following the opening of the Suez Canal, but now India was independent this was no longer of much importance. Britain, France and the other colonial powers did not believe in the post-war years that African colonies were ready for independence, and initially at least liberation movements were less strong than they were in Asia. European policy in the Middle East and North Africa, mostly former provinces of the Ottoman Empire, had rested on indirect control through client states. The British Protectorate over Egypt, previously effectively an independent state, was established in 1882 but resistance to British rule had been more or less continuous; with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the proclamation of national self-determination at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, this had reached new heights, with mass demonstrations in which Egyptian women for the first time played a prominent part. British attempts to suppress anticolonial riots failed despite the extensive use of violence in which some 800 people were killed. In 1922 Egypt became an independent Kingdom with the Suez Canal remaining under the control of the British and French owned and protected Suez Canal Company and the British continuing to control things from behind the scenes. However, the monarchy lost legitimacy as a result of its incompetence in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and was overthrown in 1952 by Colonel Nasser, who declared a republic and nationalized the Suez Canal. There followed an ill-advised Anglo-French invasion, backed with military force by Israel, and prompted not least by British Prime Minister Eden’s belief that appeasement of Nasser, who had wide-ranging ambitions to lead the Arab world, was no better than appeasement of Hitler. It was successful militarily but defeated politically by the joint action of the USA and the USSR, acting through the United Nations; the two superpowers were anxious not to have to deal with the Middle Eastern powder-keg at a time when they were focusing their attention on the Soviet suppression of a liberal uprising in Hungary. The invasion also opened up deep divisions in British politics and Eden was conscious that British public opinion was not fully behind him. The British and French withdrew, followed somewhat later by the Israelis; the Canal remained nationalized; and the result was complete humiliation for the imperialist powers.

Other parts of the former Ottoman Empire had gained independence after the First World War but under Anglo-French control, which was re-established during the Second World War. Libya, under Anglo-French control since its capture from the Italians during the war, had already become independent again in 1951, under the usual conditions of a monarchy subservient to Western interests; the Lebanon had grasped independence in 1943 when Vichy France was occupied by the Germans; events in other former Ottoman provinces like Iraq and Syria took a similar course, with the Allies withdrawing again after World War II. In Morocco, nominally under the rule of a Sultan, but actually under Franco-Spanish control, nationalist uprisings in the 1920s had sparked a violent repression by the colonial powers, leading to the Rif War and ultimate victory for the Spanish legionaries, who later used Morocco as a basis for the invasion of Spain in the 1936 civil war under General Franco; but the examples of Libya, Algeria and Egypt led to a renewal of nationalism in the 1950s until independence was ceded in 1956; Tunisia also became independent in 1956 while the Suez crisis forced the British to leave Sudan.
In all the Arab states, the Suez crisis provoked political upheavals, but it was further south Africa that it had its greatest effect. In 1948 the British shot live rounds at a demonstration of African ex-servicemen in Accra, in the prosperous Gold Coast colony, later renamed Ghana, in 1948, killing or injuring 68 of them, and following this with the arrest of political leaders of the independence movement, including the American-educated Kwame Nkrumah. Leading a movement explicitly based on educated, middle-class Africans, Nkrumah exploited the collapse of British legitimacy, emphasised his moderation, and led a series of strikes and demonstrations that forced the British to introduce elections. Nkrumah became Prime Minister and led the country to independence in 1957. This was the first state artificially created during the Scramble for Africa to become independent; the others now followed rapidly, with thirteen French colonies gaining sovereignty or independence in 1958-60. The Belgian Congo, Nigeria, British and Italian Somaliland also gained independence in 1960, and the other British African states in 1961-63. A small number of colonies remained, mostly islands or territories thought too small to be viable on their own; problematic colonies or ex-colonies with a powerful white settler presence like Rhodesia, later Zimbabwe, or South Africa, continued to cause problems for a while, and occupied what some thought a disproportionate place in British political debate during the Wilson government in the later 1960s; Portugal held on to its empire until the costs, both political and economic, became too great and led to a revolution in 1974, overthrowing the long-term fascist dictatorship and freeing the colonies; Spain followed a similar if more peaceful course after the death of Franco; and finally when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1990 its colonies on the Baltic coast, in Central Asia and the Caucasus gained independence too, and its satellite states in Eastern Europe broke away from Soviet control. The former colonial powers, notably the British and French, retained loose associations of their former colonies, such as the Commonwealth, but these were based more on historic ties than on present-day political realities, designed above all perhaps to continue the illusion in Britain and France respectively that they were still global powers.

By the 1960s Western Europe was more concerned with building peace and prosperity through what became the European Union, than with continuing with the increasingly difficult task of maintaining global empires in the face of mounting demands for independence in the colonies, an ever greater concern with economic improvement at home, and the hostility of the USA and the USSR to the colonial enterprise as both competed for the allegiance of soon-to-be independent or newly self-governing parts of Asia and Africa. Indeed it could be argued that only by ridding themselves of their overseas empires were European powers able to devote more resources to prosperity at home. It was not lost on observers that the outstanding post-war economic successes, Germany and Japan, were unencumbered with colonial burdens, while prosperity did not come to Portugal until the end of empire in the 1970s. Of course, the end of empire more generally did not necessarily mean the end of European influence, whether political or economic. French political intervention in former colonies continued, and former colonial powers were often on the inside track for new economic investments to a degree that enabled them in many cases to exploit what came to be known as ‘Third World’ economies even more effectively than before, so that in some ways decolonization can be seen more as a transition from formal to informal colonial control of the sort that Britain had exercised in Latin America for example through most of the 19th century. Nevertheless, decolonization did mean the end of European political control, possession and domination, and as such it meant the end of an era of history that had begun nearly half a millennium before, with the Spanish conquest of the Americas in the 1490s and early 1500s.

Decolonization was a complex and uneven process difficult to reduce to a few simple formulae, but what is clear is that the causes have to be sought both in Europe and in the colonized parts of the world. In Europe itself, the age of empire above all in the nineteenth century was based on the maintenance of peace on the continent, as European powers, except for very brief and partial conflicts, did not become embroiled in any major wars with each other. As soon as they did, in 1914 and again in 1939, the foundations of empire began to crumble. The First World War propagated a belief that colonialism was not about domination or exploitation but about ‘trusteeship’, a notion underpinned by the mandating of the German colonies to various European powers by the League of Nations based on the claim that German colonialism had been brutal and violent so other countries such as Britain and France were not only capable of ruling more humanely but were also obliged to do so. This notion originated not least in outrage over Belgian rule in the Congo, and it was reinforced by further outrage over the Italian conquest of Ethiopia and Germany’s genocidal rule in Eastern Europe during the Second World War. The ultimate aim of colonization was now understood in the post-war world to be the education and development of colonial societies to a point where they could rule themselves, and in pursuit of this aim, new indigenous elites were encouraged to seek education in France or Britain or in the new schools and universities founded in many of the colonies in the interwar years.

These new elites themselves took the lead, above all after the Second World War, in campaigning for self-rule and eventually independence, encouraged by the Japanese demonstration during the war that European rule could be overthrown, and by the competitive hostility to European colonization shown after the war by the USA and the USSR in the emerging Cold War. As nationalist and independence movements gathered strength, European powers proved increasingly unable to suppress them, and the use of force to do so, very widespread during the final phase of Empire, ran into serious political difficulties in Europe itself, illustrated most dramatically by the deep divisions opened up in British politics during the Suez Crisis. To some extent there was a domino effect: each single act of decolonization encouraged nationalist movements in other colonies to push harder for independence. They gained support as increased European exploitation of the colonies after 1945 combined with the obviously growing prosperity of European societies in the post-war boom to fuel popular resentment in colonies across the globe, linked by the rapid spread of modern mass communications. Under all these influences, decolonization happened in the end much faster than anyone in Europe had imagined; and precisely
because it was in most cases precipitate and unplanned, it left many problems unsolved and was frequently accompanied or followed by bloodshed or civil unrest and ethnic or religious conflict.

Decolonization brought to an end a world order centred on Europe, and on the European belief in a cultural and to a degree also a racial hierarchy in which Europe and North America were progressive and the rest of the world stagnant. Europe exported manufactures and capital in return for raw materials from non-European parts of the globe. The language of superiority lost its legitimacy. A new informal American empire emerged from post-war American economic supremacy, and based on command of the seas, with strategic bases across the globe. Its rhetoric was very different from that of the old empires, proclaiming the virtues of democracy and freedom while silently subordinating them to anticomunist political stability under dictatorships where the new capitalist order seemed threatened. The age of empire perhaps isn’t over yet.

What was the legacy of the European empires? It’s been argued, particularly by Niall Ferguson, that their legacy – and particularly the British Empire’s legacy – has been overwhelmingly positive, spreading the benefits of the rule of law, responsible and incorruptible administration, democratic parliamentary politics, modern and effective science and medicine, a dedicated work ethic, respect for private property, and a free-enterprise economy across the globe. Yet this legacy has been in practice far from universal. Corruption is widespread in many administrative and political systems from Kenya to Kazakhstan, as the annual ‘corruption perception index’ indicates. The rule of law is flouted in many postcolonial states. The benefits of modern science and medicine still have to reach many parts of the globe and while they have improved almost everywhere, death rates are still notably in formerly colonized parts of the world. Dictatorships rule a whole swathe of former colonial states, and although concepts of freedom and unfreedom are inevitably relative, once again a global map of free and unfree legal and political systems shows up a large number of former colonial states in the unfree camp. Private property rights are violated, or not respected, in most of these.

The most obvious negative legacy of empire has been the outbreak of violent and often intractable conflicts, sometimes based on ethnic and religious hostilities between peoples lumped together in arbitrarily configured political units containing a variety of peoples with little in common: Nigeria for example, convulsed by a violent civil war and continuing religious conflict, or the Congo or Somalia, where the state has not been able to establish control and violence has continued with the loss of life running into the millions, or the Sudan, or Uganda, or Cambodia, or Kashmir and what is now Bangladesh, which gained its independence in a violent conflict with Pakistan, or the Middle East, with its repeated Arab-Israeli wars. States as far apart as Uganda and Fiji have seen violent ethnic conflict erupt with growing tensions between indigenous peoples and the descendants of imported Indian indentured labourers.

To a degree too the violence used by the imperial powers in trying to impose their will from the start of empire to the end provided an unfortunate example to follow, as for example in the Congo. These violent clashes, like the genocidal civil war in Rwanda were the product of empire and its legacy; they did not represent the re-emergence of previous tensions which empire had suppressed. In many postcolonial states the political culture of democracy has been so thinly rooted and the army, with officers usually trained by the colonial powers themselves, has often been virtually the only united nationwide institution with the power to enforce its will, that military coups have been commonplace and the slide into dictatorship widespread. The army officer Jean-Bédel Bokassa, who ruled the former French colony of the Central African Republic from his coup d’état in 1966 to his overthrow by a military expedition sent by the French government in 1979, declared himself Emperor in 1977 and spent a third of his country’s income on a lavish coronation ceremony, as did also his contemporary the Ugandan dictator Idi Amin, who awarded himself the CBE (Conqueror of the British Empire) and married as his fifth wife a go-go dancer for the Ugandan Army’s Revolutionary Suicide Mechanised Regiment Band have seemed absurd, but European laughter may have been a nervous displacement of the recognition that their brutal and murderous regimes were based not least on an obsession with European models and modes of behaviour. The European political legacy includes not just Tom Paine but also Napoleon.

European domination in the nineteenth century rested above all on the power of industry, which gave Europeans the ability to roam the world with steamships and railways, carrying their armies and exports across the globe, and suppressing attempts at resistance including indigenous economic competition (as for example in the case of the Egyptian cotton industry in the early nineteenth century). The huge revenues generated by industry gave them the financial clout to sustain this vast global effort. Empire took many forms, from mass European settlement as in Australia or Canada, to mere occupation of coastal trading bases as in China or West Africa, to the takeover of pre-existing imperial structures and collaboration with existing elites as in India. Two world wars in the twentieth century and the rise of the USA undermined the superiority, generated during the Napoleonic Wars, that gave Europe its edge. What we have now is not so much imperialism as globalization: this does of course involve the diffusion across the globe of what were originally European technologies and cultural practices, European political systems and ideologies, European economic structures and processes; but globalization is increasingly levelling up – or possibly down – other parts of the world to the European standard in these areas, even if the processes are uneven and will for a long time be incomplete; increasingly major companies and enterprises are global rather than being based in a single country or region, and move capital and investment freely around the world to where it is most profitable.

In the end, however, there is no common agreement on how the new global order will be structured. The rationalism of the European Enlightenment has not triumphed; history has not come to a full stop, but on the
contrary, religion is more than ever a force to be reckoned with, from the Islamic republics of the Middle East to the voters of the Republican Party in America. Free trade has not brought uniform benefits across the world. Development has been uneven and some former colonies have failed to improve economically or descended into political chaos, conflict and dictatorship. The legacy of empire has been as diverse as empire itself was. Even in the age of globalization, there is no single agreed set of political, cultural or economic rules by which modernity is defined; on the contrary it looks very different in China from the way it seems in Iran, different in American from what it seems in Tanzania. One thing does seem certain, however, and that is that the idea of empire, for all the pleading of those who like Niall Ferguson have been urging the United States to recognise it has an empire and behave accordingly, has been discredited, probably for good. I hope in these lectures I have been able to give you some idea of how it came about, how it was expressed, and how it declined and fell.

My next series of lectures, next winter, will be devoted to another aspect of globalization, namely the spread of epidemic diseases and plagues across the globe, from the bubonic plague to HIV/AIDS, their impact and the ways in which human society has sought to prevent them or combat them when they have occurred. So I look forward to seeing you next September and in the meantime wish you all a very pleasant spring and summer.

© Professor Richard Evans 2012