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The Impact of WW II on African Nationalism and Decolonization

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African Colonialism 4020

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Analyses of World War II's Impact on African Nationalism

Who was the true victor that emerged from the Second World War? General consensus among academia is that the United States and USSR were the chief benefactors from the downfall of the Axis, as they became the foremost states among the global community, in part due to the regression of traditional powers such as Britain and France. However, Africa as a whole was profoundly changed by the war and the most destructive conflict in history propelled the continent along the path to self-determination. Without the contribution of Africa to the allied cause, both in manpower and material, the eventual triumph of the Allies would have been very much in doubt. Not only did the war cripple many of the nations who had subjugated the majority of African peoples, proving to be a death sentence for vast overseas European empires, but key intellectual, philosophical and economic advances were made by Africans because of their participation in the conflict. The fledgling nationalism movements in colonies across the continent gained traction with the demise of the mother countries of repressive colonial regimes. Out of the largest war the world has seen, Africans acquired the sense of unity, direction and equality which would prove necessary to their efforts in throwing off the yoke of imperialism.

By the dawn of the Second World War, Africa had experienced nearly 70 years of European dominance. The economic importance of the land mass had made its colonization a priority of multiple European powers, and their military occupation to ensure the productivity of the colonies had definite impacts on the psyche of Africans as a whole. Resistance to European rule was met by total, and often bloody, failure. The Maji Maji rebellion of 1905 in German East Africa, an effort to resist implementation of harsh German policies concerning cotton production, was ultimately unsuccessful. The reliance on “magic” in the face of German machine guns proved unwise and led to the deaths of over 200,000 Africans. The Dervish War, which pitted Somali Muslims and their leader, Sayyid Mohamad Hasan, against British, Italians and Ethiopians looked promising for a time. Limited success enabled the Dervishes to resist European rule for nearly 20 years, but they too were eventually overcome by British

technological advantages. The massive losses on the side of Africans effected little change on the part of their European rulers, slowing the development of unified nationalism movements and feeding the myth of the invincibility of the Imperialists.

After the First World War, inklings of nationalism were visible but they lacked significant strength. "A defining feature of the nationalist movement during the inter-war years was that it could hardly, in the strict sense of the term, be described as nationalism... Its leaders... sought accommodation within the colonial order, rather than a recovery of their sovereignty."¹ While total independence was not the ultimate goal of intellectual resistance in the early 20th century, that is not to say the first movements were complete failures. Pan-Africans and the National Congress of British West Africa did enact some change from colonial governments, notably the creation of small legislative bodies within the colonies which had limited administrative powers and were run by Africans themselves. Yet, the impact of early successes was still minimal, in part because: "Another key feature of nationalism during the inter-war years was its elitist nature. It was dominated by the small western educated elite. As such, it was limited in its geographical spread and operation."² The elitism of early nationalism movements meant the average African was excluded from efforts to obtain their own sovereignty. In addition, the lack of consensus between colonies on the issue of nationalism can also be attributed to the colonial system itself. Because of the heavy hand European states played in the governance and trade of African colonies, contact between individuals in different areas was minimal. "African countries are more like islands lying off the coast of Western Europe than like parts of a single continent... normally only around 8% of the trade of African countries was with other African countries."³ This lack of movement of goods and ideas greatly inhibited the development of an international African effort towards independence.

¹Toyin Falola, *Africa Volume 3: Colonial Africa 1885-1939*. (North Carolina, Carolina Academic Press 2002) Page 282.

² Ibid., Page 283.

³ Samuel Kidane, *The Economics of pre-independence African Economy*. (Askum University)

The only individuals who did generate that contact were the Pan African elites such as J.A. Casely-Hayford and Henry Sylvester Williams. They did not always have the trust or support of the masses, in part because of their western education and feelings of elitism. The overall African nationalism movement at this time was all but stagnant. It needed a spark to revitalize popular support for the cause and the coming world war provided exactly that.

In the years leading up to World War Two, the signs that European domination of the globe was ending were mostly ignored. In fact, the desire for increased power and spheres of influence in places such as Africa were the main reasons some of the belligerent nations got into the conflict. The First World War had not only drained Europe financially and in man power, but spiritually as well. "The European economy was devastated... while the United States economy grew in response to the demands of the war. Economic leadership shifted from England and London to the United States and New York."⁴ Alarmed at their dwindling financial influence and with the majority of their populations opposed to another European conflict of similar scale, the traditional world powers focused their attention on rebuilding their prestige on the backs of their colonies. Despite the birth of the Pan African movement at the tail end of World War One, the weakened European nations' determination to retain the status quo rendered moot many of the social advancements made by Africans during the conflict. In addition, some of the motivation for the future Axis countries aggression was the acquisition of lands currently controlled by other Colonial powers. Benito Mussolini, dictator of Italy and one of the primary antagonists of the war, dreamed of a new Roman Empire in East Africa believing; "Italy would not only be the main center of European culture, but would also divide with Germany the control of much of Asia and Africa and use these territories as the basis for a new era of economic prosperity..."⁵ The economic benefits and pride offered by African lands were still too much for many nations to ignore. However, by

⁴ Norman R. West, *The European Economy in the Interwar Period*. (Suffolk Community College, Spring 2016)

⁵ James Joll, "Mussolini's Roman Empire." (New York Times, June 20, 1976)

the end of the war, expanding territorial gains and the continuation of the colonial system would prove to be an impossible task for Europe.

On September 1, 1939 the course of history was changed when Hitler launched his invasion of Poland. The world was at war and hundreds of thousands of Africans either volunteered or were drafted into armies on both sides. The economies of African colonies were fully mobilized for wartime production, often at the expense of the standards of living for those on the African home front, and the continent proved invaluable to the final victory of the Allied Powers. African colonial forces saw action not just in Africa, but in Europe and the Far East as well, with some units proving highly effective and capable of altering the tide of the wars' most critical battles. For the British, African forces were first used in the Eastern African Campaign (1940 – 1941) against the Italians. The Kings African Rifles, a highly trained unit composed mostly of indigenous Kenyans formed the backbone of the African army. Together with other regiments from Ghana and Nigeria they made up the 11th and 12th British African divisions.⁶ In a campaign captured on film in *World War II in Colour* they proved most effective in fighting against the Italian invaders of Ethiopia and British Somaliland. The movie notes how unlike their British allies, local Africans functioned well in the hot desert region and were particularly skilled at scaling mountains and charging through thick brush to launch surprise attacks.⁷ At a time when the British Empire was pushed to the brink, fighting alone against the Axis, these soldiers provided glimmers of hope, even gaining notoriety in the United States. They were praised by American newspapers, saying "While the army of the Nile stood behind a curtain of secrecy, other British forces in Africa kept up the fight against Italy's colonial empire. A dispatch from... Italian Somaliland, in British hands since last week, said a detachment of the Kings African Rifles... breached the River Juba at two points and are operating

⁶ Andrew Mollo, *The Armed Forces of World War II*. (New York, Crown Publishers 1987) page 133.

⁷ (Film) *WWII in Colour* (NM Productions, 2008)

satisfactorily from both bridgeheads.”⁸ By the time of the Italian surrender, African units had recaptured the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa along with 50,000 prisoners. The British also utilized their colonial troops against the Japanese, with the 81st and 82nd West African Divisions seeing significant action in Burma. These troops were entrusted with the critical job of maintaining and defending isolated jungle supply bases from attack by Japanese ambushers. They fought alongside the famous “Chindit” raiders of the British Special Forces and were educated in the ways of Guerrilla fighting, a skill that would be essential when they resisted colonial rule themselves in the years after WWII. By the end of the campaign, the West Africans had proved their worth at a high cost, as 82nd division had the highest casualty rates of any division in Burma.⁹

The French also relied heavily on troops recruited in their African colonies. As early as the initial German invasion of France, African colonial soldiers were fighting against the forces of the Nazis. Approximately 80,000 Algerian and Senegalese Africans were among those trapped in the Allied perimeter at Dunkirk. In such a desperate situation, the lives of Africans was a low priority and the majority of them manned the defenses while their British and French counterparts were evacuated from the beaches. Perhaps the most famous African soldiers of the entire war were the French Goumier. The Goumier were mostly recruited by Free French Forces in Morocco, and they were notorious among the ranks of Axis soldiers for their prowess in mountain fighting and nighttime surprise attacks. More than 20,000 “Goums” fought with Allied armies in Tunisia, Sicily and Italy. Their fame was born at the Battle of Monte Casino during the Italian Campaign of 1944. For nearly six months, American, British, French and Colonial troops attempted to break the stalemate along a series of German and Italian redoubts known as the “Winter Line” with an ancient hilltop church near Casino forming the crux of the defenses. At the height of the battle, a group of Goumier outflanked their Axis enemies by climbing a mountain

⁸ “Big Decisions” (Associated Press, Twin Falls News February 22, 1941)

⁹ James Luto, *Fighting With the 14th Army in Burma*, (Pen and Sword Military, UK 2006) pages 204-218.

which was thought to be impossible to traverse.¹⁰ They ultimately captured the peak of Monte Cassino and enabled supporting forces to finally conquer Rome, thus knocking Italy out of the war. While estimates vary greatly, at least 500,000 Africans died in battle or from famine induced by the war. Despite the high cost of victory paid by Africans, the contest was near apocalyptic to their European rulers. Out of the conflict, Africans emerged battle tested and with a new sense of confidence in themselves while the governments which “controlled” the colonies were in shambles. In the years immediately following the war, rapid sweeping changes destroyed the continents’ status quo and killed colonial traditions forever.

The impact of the war on Europe was both immediate and lasting, and also had a direct influence on the decline of global empires such as Great Britain, France and the Netherlands. Strictly in the sense of casualties, all European participants were devastated. Britain, the chief architect of African colonialism, was exhausted by the war, with just under 10% of its population of 46 million citizens fighting in some capacity, among which 388,000 perished.¹¹ France, who owned the second most land in Africa lost 810,000 people to the conflict and for the duration of the war 1.8 million soldiers were held captive by the Germans, unable to protect their country or participate in the French economy, something which proved a serious hindrance towards the nations’ recovery efforts post-1945. After such an overwhelmingly destructive event, these powers were in no condition to continue their administration of a global colonial system. The rejuvenated African independence movements that sprang up after the conflict were often too much for these dwindling empires dissipate. “European colonial powers were economically and physically exhausted after each world war... They were unwilling militarily to suppress nationalist movements that had been fueled by the devastation of the war.”¹²

¹⁰ Driss Maghraoui, “Moroccan Colonial Soldiers: Beyond Colonialism and Nationalism in North Africa.” *Arab Studies Quarterly*. (spring 1998)

¹¹ Annual Report 2014 – 2015, Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

¹² Vincent Khapoya, *The African Experience*. (New Jersey, Pearson 2013) page 151.

Militarily, these nations were spent, and they, and all of Western Europe for that matter, depended on the United States to prop up their recovering economies. The “Marshall Plan” was the name of legislation which allocated over \$13 Billion to reconstructing the war torn countries of Europe. Depending so heavily on US aid bent Europe to the whim of the Americans, who generally were in favor of the dismantling of colonial systems. The lack of manpower induced by the war, coupled with developing subordination to the US and USSR finally made colonial powers realize that the status quo was shifting. “The French were utterly defeated in 1940, and had to endure four harsh years of German occupation, with great loss of wealth and prestige. The British won the war, but they had to fight for their victory to the last man and the last penny... The USA and USSR became ‘super powers’ in the post war world... If with very different political ideas, both had an interest in weakening British and French rule.”¹³ As early as 1941, the year the Allies put to paper their plan for the post war world, the United States made it clear to all parties that colonialism was well and truly over. “The Atlantic Charter of 1941... promised that after the Allies won the war, they would ‘respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live.” With the signing of the charter and the ultimate defeat of the Axis powers, the defense of the colonial system became untenable.

While Europe was in decline in the post-war years, the colonies and nations of Africa were on the upswing in regards to their sovereignty and influence. “The new importance of the colonies for the war effort was not lost on the men and women who were put in the position of sacrificing their lives and economies to give others in Europe the freedoms that they did not enjoy. For men and women across the continent, the war... made them agents in a global struggle for democracy, and left an indelible imprint on their history.”¹⁴ The irony of fighting oppression in Europe while simultaneously being subjugated by “free” nations was obvious to the African soldiers. “People on the home front saw their

¹³ Basil Davidson, *Modern Africa: A Social and Political History*. (New York, Longman Group 1994) pages 65-66.

¹⁴ Judith Byfield, *Africa and World War II*, (Cambridge, April 2015) page xix.

sacrifices during the war as a down payment for their own self-determination.”¹⁵ Africans had fought and died alongside their European masters for six years, and when peace finally came they believed that the right to govern themselves had been earned. Participation in international conflict and global politics also led to the development of a realization of the role the colonies could and should play in the world. “The war experience helped to develop a better political understanding of the colonial systems. It raised political consciousness. One cause of this was the anti-nazi, and therefore anti-racist nature of the war on the allied side.”¹⁶ The war had proved that Europeans were not as “invincible” as they had seemed during the wars of colonization and the idea of racial superiority which had persisted for decades began to disappear. Africans watched as “inferior” Japanese forces handed Great Britain its’ worst military defeat in history at the battle Singapore, in which 80,000 British troops were captured. Also, on their own Africans had become a formidable fighting force, defeating the armies of Italy, Germany and Vichy France in multiple battles. The war was one of the first times colonial soldiers were properly trained and educated in the subtle arts of fighting. As noted, soldiers stationed in Burma learned the art of guerrilla warfare from their “Chindit” allies and 6 years of conflict provided ample opportunity to gain practical knowledge of combat.

Not only did the war offer chances for militaristic improvement for Africans, but it fostered the growing sense of unity and the collective desire for self-governance. “Service in the colonial army made it possible for Africans from different regions of the same colony to meet... an important breakdown of ethnic barriers and the development of shared identification.”¹⁷ For the first time, non-elitist Africans could engage in dialogue about their situation in the colonies with individuals outside their immediate vicinity. The African soldiers returned home with a new sense of purpose and direction, and the years

¹⁵ Judith Byfield, *Africa and World War II*. (Cambridge, April 2015) page xxi.

¹⁶ Basil Davidson, *Modern Africa: A Social and Political History*. Page 64.

¹⁷ Vincent Khapoya, *The African Experience*. Page 150.

following the war saw the growth of the Pan-African movement and the eventual liberation of the colonies. The Pan-African Congress was reconvened in Manchester in 1945 to determine the future of the movement, which many believed was full autonomy for African nations. The first colony to gain its independence was Ghana (formerly the Gold Coast) in 1957. The movement began in the late 1940's when social activist Kwame Nkruma, well-educated and uniquely aware of the opportunity provided by the Second World War, led farmers and workers in general strikes for a new colonial constitution. Within 10 years the movement had expanded and Britain gave Ghana its full independence on March 6, 1957. This set off the official beginning of decolonization, with some countries acquiring independence peacefully, and others through force. The bloodiest wars for independence were fought in Algeria and Kenya, in which Africans fully utilized their military training and experience in guerrilla fighting to bleed French and British forces dry. Algeria won its independence in 1962 and Kenya did as well in 1964. When former colonies finally did gain their autonomy, they had the difficult task of creating their own functioning governments and economies. Thankfully, they were helped along in part by developments made during the Second World War. The mining industry was uniquely developed during the war to supply the Allies with vital materials for aircraft and tank manufacturing. Copper Mining in the Congo, bauxite mining in Ghana and tin mining in Nigeria were instrumental to the survival of Britain and provided some form of international trade when these nations acquired independence.¹⁸ To a lesser degree, the absence of imported goods during the war years forced Africans to industrialize in some capacity, although this ability was mostly limited to South Africa and Nigeria. These timid economic developments ensured new African nations had something to offer the world market when they gained their autonomy in the 1950's and 1960's.

¹⁸ Raymond Dumett, "Africa's Strategic Minerals during the Second World War" *Journal of African Studies* 26, no. 4. (1985) page 381.

World War Two is generally perceived to be one of the most important events in history, not just for its near incomprehensible destruction but for changing social and political normality's in nearly every country around the globe, and the nations of Africa are no exception. Even when they themselves had no experience with freedom, Africans stepped up to protect the sovereignty of the very countries who had subjugated them, defending liberty from the even greater evil of Nazi tyranny. Through their participation in the conflict Africans gained the political awareness and military knowledge necessary to develop successful nationalism movements amongst themselves. Africans knew that their sacrifice put European colonial powers in their debt, and when they were not afforded the self-determination promised to them by the Atlantic Charter, these re-invigorated Pan-Africans and nationalists were not afraid to fight for the freedom that they were owed. The success of the independence movements in the wake of the Second World War is testament to the self-confidence and knowledge Africans gained through their participation in the largest conflict in human history.

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