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The Impact of the Second World War on the Decolonization of Africa

Erin Myrice

“An African poet, Taban Lo Liyong, once said that Africans have three white men to thank for their political freedom and independence: Nietzsche, Hitler, and Marx.”¹ Marx raised awareness of oppressed peoples around the world, while also creating the idea of economic exploitation of living human beings. Nietzsche created the idea of a superman and a master race. Hitler attempted to implement Nietzsche’s ideas into Germany with an ultimate goal of reaching the whole world. Hitler’s attempted implementation of his version of a ‘master race’ led to one of the most bloody, horrific, and destructive wars the world has ever encountered. While this statement by Liyong was bold, it held truth. The Second World War was a catalyst for African political freedom and independence. The war helped build strong African nationalism, which resulted in a common goal for all Africans to fight for their freedom. World War II led to decolonization of Africa by affecting both Europe and Africa militarily, psychologically, politically, and economically.

In 1939, Nazi Germany initiated the Second World War by attacking and invading Poland. After Poland, Nazi Germany invaded Belgium, Holland, and France. It attempted to invade Britain but this proved to be unsuccessful. Fascist Italy joined Germany in 1940, and then imperialist Japan completed the Axis powers by joining in 1941. Up until 1942, these Axis powers were successfully overpowering their enemies, winning battles left and right. After 1942 though, the Allied powers, which included Britain, The United States, and The Soviet Union, successfully fought back and won critical victories.

Nazi Germany was trapped on both fronts and eventually stopped fighting after May of 1945. Months later, Japan surrendered after America dropped atomic bombs on both Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In all this time, Africa did not go untouched by this gruesome war, fighting took

¹ Vincent Khapoya, “African Nationalism and the Struggle for Freedom,” *The African Experience*, (2013): 141.

place in two regions of Africa: The Horn, and North Africa. Countries that were not physically marred by the fighting did not go unscathed by the effects of a World War either. Millions of Africans from everywhere on the continent fought and died in bloody battles of WWII.²

In both World War I and World War II, millions of Africans were drafted to fight. They were fighting a war against German imperialism. They were fighting for the ‘freedom’ of the allied powers. They were fighting a war to ‘free’ these European countries when they themselves could barely consider themselves free. The irony was not lost on Africans everywhere.³ “Those who had claimed to be civilizing Africans once more seemed to have failed to civilize themselves.”⁴ While some would claim that WWII was not Africa’s war, they fought regardless. If they had not participated, many lessons learned would have been lost. The Second World War was instrumental in arming Africans with the military knowledge and leadership skills they would utilize when fighting for their own independence.

An important military skill that Africans learned throughout the world wars’ was that of communication and the ability to work together. One of many reasons Africa was colonized by European countries was due to the lack of unity among African countries and its’ peoples. At the beginning of European colonization, countries within Africa were often fighting themselves while at the same time fending off European imperialism. “While Europe could focus her attention militarily almost exclusively on her imperial activities overseas without any distraction at home, African states and countries had their attentions divided.”⁵ After World War II, this lack of unification was no longer an issue. This bondage formed a common goal to fight for freedom

² Basil Davidson, “The Second World War, 1939-1945,” *Modern Africa: A Social and Political History*, (1994): 61-65.

³ Vincent Khapoya, “African Nationalism and the Struggle for Freedom,” *The African Experience*, (2013): 149.

⁴ Basil Davidson, “The Second World War, 1939-1945,” *Modern Africa: A Social and Political History*, (1994): 61.

⁵ G.N. Uzoigwe, “European Partition and Conquest of Africa: An Overview,” *Unesco General History of Africa*, (1985): 39.

and independence. This unification strengthened African nationalism. The larger a group is, the more likely they are to be heard. African nationalists made sure their voices were heard around the world, and this helped tear down European colonialism in Africa.

African voices were especially raised in protest when European soldiers and personal were given awards and celebrated for their bravery in the war, while Africans received nothing but a pat on the back and a ticket home. The lack of recognition and gratitude towards Africans who served in the war alongside these European men, angered African people. This anger fueled the fire that had been burning for centuries in the hearts of Africans, and it made them even more determined to become independent from European rule. When millions of people share a common resentment towards the same people, it bands them together. The anger that African people experienced bonded them together, and became yet another reason behind the unification of African countries.

The Second World War imposed psychological changes that aided in the decolonization of Africa. War changes the way people view everyday life, themselves, and the people around them. This war changed and shaped the way Africans viewed Europeans. “The Africans noticed that, in war, the white man bled, cried, was scared, and, when shot, died just like anyone else.... It dawned on the African that beneath the skin, there was no difference between him and the European.”⁶ For centuries, the idea of white superiority had existed in the minds of Africans. People thought that Europeans were insurmountable and unable to be defeated.

For hundreds of years, Africans had been resisting European rule, coming away with very few successful results. One cannot blame Africans for developing the idea that Europeans seemed almost undefeatable. Africans had plenty of experience being defeated, degraded, and

⁶ Vincent Khapoya, “African Nationalism and the Struggle for Freedom,” *The African Experience*, (2013): 150.

minimalized to nothing by whites; it is only natural that one's mind would begin to think whites were superior, and this notion is exactly what Europeans wanted. After WWII, this white superiority mindset was threatened and Africans began to develop genuine hope that freedom was not a fantasy. There is always hope when the possibility of the want is obtainable.⁷ For the first time in centuries, Africans saw that independence from European countries was possible.

There was not only a psychological change in Africans, but in Europeans as well. "One major consequence of WWII for colonized people in Africa and elsewhere was that it destroyed France's and Britain's entrenched confidence that there would be no serious external challenge to their imperial authority."⁸ While Africans could see that Europeans were not invincible, Europeans saw that they were not impenetrable. This notion liberated Africans, while it stuck fear in the hearts of Europeans.

At the beginning of the war, Britain was losing to the Axis powers. Britain discovered that they were not invincible. They saw what a cause or a common goal could do to a nation, and they took African nationalism more seriously. "They knew that nationalism could erupt suddenly, forcefully, and disconcertingly, so they each gave their minds in the postwar years to how they could fend off such eruptions in Africa."⁹

Unfortunately for Britain and other European countries who had colonized Africa, they could not economically afford to resist African nationalist movements. "The British won the war, but had to fight for their victory to the last man and the last penny. They came out of the war

⁷ R.S. Downie, "Hope," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, (1963): 248.

⁸ Cheikh Babou, "Decolonization or National Liberation: Debating the End of British Colonial Rule in Africa," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, (2010): 42.

⁹ Gifford & Louis, Low, "Decolonization and African Independence: The Transfers of Power, 1960-1980," (1988): 34.

much poorer than before.”¹⁰ The war had torn through Europe, and left ruin in its wake. It severely damaged Africa’s economy as well. Village people were forced into a massive effort to increase production of raw materials for export, and imports were unattainable. In retrospect, Europe’s economic power in Africa increased during the war, but this power had other effects unforeseen at the time. Rural families struggled and many succumbed to poverty. This created social problems which colonial governments were not equipped to deal with, and Europe was too distracted with the war to lend much of a hand. Ultimately, this led to weakened colonial systems.¹¹

The Second World War raised political awareness to African people. This was caused by the anti-racist nature of the war. Hitler wanted the world to exist with a ‘master race’ of people. The most famous group of people Hitler targeted were the Jews. Millions of Jews were sent to concentration and death camps, simply for being who they were. Hitler was a mad man and his ideas were ludicrous, but something about the nature of WWII caught Africa’s eye. They saw how persistently Allied countries fought to defeat Germany and its racist regime’s. Europe fought a dictator, and freed thousands of Jews from camps, yet their colonial rule in Africa still existed. Millions of African people weren’t free themselves, and continually trapped under the rule of colonial powers.

Another cause of political awareness after The Second World War was the promise by The United States’ President Roosevelt and Britain’s Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s Atlantic Charter. This charter stated that after the Allied powers won the war they would “respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live.”¹² After this

¹⁰ Basil Davidson, “The Second World War, 1939-1945,” *Modern Africa: A Social and Political History*, (1994): 65.

¹¹ Basil Davidson, “The Second World War, 1939-1945,” *Modern Africa: A Social and Political History*, (1994): 63-64

¹² Basil Davidson, “The Second World War, 1939-1945,” *Modern Africa: A Social and Political History*, (1994): 64-66.

charter was promised, many critical questions were being asked around the world. Questions like: If it was wrong for Germans to rule the French, then why was it okay for European countries to rule African and Asian countries?

This heightened political consciousness raised awareness towards other nationalist movements around the world. Asian nationalism was expanding and gaining success, and their stories were inspiring to African nationalists. The successes that Asia experienced in gaining independence helped Africans gain confidence in their fight for their own freedom. Many of these nationalist movements around the globe might not have succeeded had it not been for the lasting impression that WWII had on the world.

Many political organizations were developed after WWII was finished, and the United Nations is an important one to note. After the failure of the League of Nations 'mandate system' following World War One, the United Nations was formed and they relabeled this concept 'trusteeship territories'. Colonial powers were required to make annual reports on their territories, and this was one implemented rule that proved to be successful. This new rule also allowed Africans to state any grievances against them. "Oral hearings and petitions are equally important in affording a mission and the Trusteeship Council the means of ascertaining the aspirations, requests, and grievances of the people of the territories."¹³ Many of the United Nations plans proved to be unsuccessful, but their attempted implementation is a sign to countries everywhere that worldwide political views were shifting from colonial to anti-colonial in nature. The UN was not successful right at the beginning of its creation, but with time it grew to become a strong advocate for anti-colonialism.

¹³ W.F. Cottrell, "The United Nation and Africa," *Annals of the American Academy of Political History*, (1994): 56.

The political arena had changed around the globe when the war was over. It is well known that Europe's landscape was left in ruins in the aftermath of WWII. It is also known that The United States and The Soviet Union emerged from the ashes, on top, which later resulted in The Cold War Era. It is important to note that these two countries became superpowers, and did relatively well after the war. Both the United States and The Soviet Union held no interest in helping to strengthen Britain and France's colonial rule in Africa. The USA and USSR had very different political agendas, but both were more or less anti-colonial. It is clear that views of colonialism were changing at the internationally political level, and these newfound views were not in favor of European countries.

The fight for African freedom and independence was a long and tiresome struggle, but Africa and its people prevailed. Basil Davidson stated that WWII "Began as a conflict between Europeans. But it developed into more than that: it became, at least to some extent, an anti-colonial and anti-racist war as well. Some good came out of the evil."¹⁴ The Second World War affected not only Africa, but the world. Everyone was affected militarily, psychologically, economically, and politically.

In retrospect, WWII, as bloody and destructive as it was, was instrumental in helping Africans gain their political freedom and independence. If WWII had not occurred, the age of European imperialism could have continued for years. "Internationally the Second World War, coupled with the post-War advent of the United Nations, had disrupted what Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper have called the 'world of empires' with promises of a new international

¹⁴ Basil Davidson, "The Second World War, 1939-1945," *Modern Africa: A Social and Political History*, (1994): 66.

order.”¹⁵ The ‘War for Freedom’ took on many different forms depending on who was asked. It was a catalyst event that led toward African freedom and independence.

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¹⁵ Jeffrey Ahlman, “Road to Ghana: Nkrumah, Southern Africa and the Eclipse of a Decolonizing Africa,” *Kronos*, (2011): 25.

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