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# Decolonization: The Fall of the European Empires

*Second Edition*

*M. E. Chamberlain*

Blackwell Publishing

# *Outline Chronology*

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| 1783 | Britain loses the Thirteen Colonies in North America. |
| 1820s | Spain and Portugal lose their empires in South and Central America. |
| 1830 | France becomes involved in Algeria. |
| 1857 | Indian 'Mutiny'. |
| 1858 | East India Company cedes its remaining administrative powers in India to the British Crown. |
| 1869 | Opening of the Suez Canal. |
| *c.*1884–91 | Whole continent of Africa is partitioned among the European Powers. |
| 1885 | Indian National Congress founded. |
| 1906 | Muslim League is formed. |
| 1914 | Outbreak of First World War. |
| 1917 | Montagu Declaration. The Secretary of State for India promises eventual self-government for India. |
| | Balfour Declaration. British Foreign Secretary declares in favour of a 'national home' for the Jews in Palestine so long as it does not prejudice the existing rights of non-Jews. |
| | Russian revolution. |
| 1919 | Mandate System is established by Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations. |
| | Amritsar massacre. |
| 1923 | Union of Soviet Socialist Republics formed. |
| | Southern Rhodesia becomes a 'self-governing colony'. |
| | The Devonshire White Paper declares that Kenya is 'primarily an African territory'. |
| 1926 | Balfour Report provides classic definition of relations within the British empire and especially the meaning of dominion status. |
| 1930 | Mahatma Gandhi leads symbolic march to Dandi to pick up sea salt, thus evading the excise duty. |
| 1931 | Statute of Westminster. |
| 1930–2 | Round Table Conferences to discuss Indian affairs. |



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| 1935 | Italians invade Abyssinia (Ethiopia) |
| | Government of India Act. |
| 1937 | Indian elections. Congress wins 8 of the 11 provinces and refuses to co-operate with the Muslim League. |
| | Irgun begin terrorist campaign against Arabs in Palestine. |
| 1939 | Outbreak of Second World War. |
| 1940 | Fall of France. |
| | Negro Governor of Chad, Felix Eboue, rejects Vichy and declares for General de Gaulle and the Free French. |
| 1941 | Japan enters war. |
| | British forces restore Ethiopian independence. |
| | Japanese occupy Indochina. |
| | Ho Chi Minh founds Vietminh to work for Vietnam independence. |
| 1942 | Fall of Singapore. |
| | Cripps offer to Indian nationalists. 'Quit India' resolution. |
| 1945 | Ho Chi Minh proclaims provisional government in Hanoi. France, despite British and American misgivings, insists on resuming control of Indochina. |
| 1946 | United Nations Trusteeship Council takes over functions of League of Nations Mandate Commission. South Africa refuses to recognize its jurisdiction in Namibia. |
| | 'French Union' is established as part of constitution of the Fourth Republic. |
| | Americans back large-scale Jewish immigration into Palestine. |
| | Cabinet Mission tries to bridge the gap between Congress and the Muslim League to agree on terms for Indian independence. Fails. |
| 1947 | Partition of India. India and Pakistan become independent as two separate states. |
| | Britain refers Palestine question to the United Nations. |
| 1948 | Britain surrenders Palestine Mandate and withdraws troops. First Arab–Israeli war. |
| | Gandhi is assassinated by a Hindu fanatic. |
| | Burma becomes independent and (unusually for an ex-British colony) opts not to join the Commonwealth. |
| 1949 | Eire becomes a republic and leaves the Commonwealth. |
| | The Dutch withdraw from Indonesia. Sukarno becomes President. |
| | Formula is found by which republics can stay in the Commonwealth. |
| 1950 | India and Pakistan become republics but stay in the Commonwealth. |
| 1953 | Death of Stalin. German workers rise but are easily suppressed. |
| | Central African Federation is formed between Northern and Southern Rhodesia and Nyasaland. |
| 1954 | Anglo-Egyptian Agreement that Britain would withdraw all forces |

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| | from the Canal Zone. |
| | French defeated at battle of Dien Bien Phu. Geneva Conference arranges that Vietnam shall be partitioned along 17th parallel until elections can be held. Elections not held. |
| | FLN formed to fight for Algerian independence. |
| 1956 | Suez crisis. |
| | Hungarian rising is suppressed. |
| | France introduces 'loi cadre' (outline law) which allows for diverse developments in French colonies. |
| | Morocco and Tunis become independent. |
| 1957 | The Gold Coast becomes independent as Ghana – the first British colony in 'Black' Africa to do so. |
| | Federation of British West Indies set up. |
| 1958 | De Gaulle returns to power. |
| | French 'Community' replaces 'Union'. |
| 1960s | Civil war in Angola. |
| | Conflict between Indonesia and Malaysia about disputed territories. |
| 1960 | French settlers in Algeria rise against government policy. |
| | French territories in West and Equatorial Africa become independent, although most retain economic and other links with France. |
| | Nigeria becomes independent. |
| | Belgian grants the Congo independence with very little preparation. Katanga secedes. |
| 1960–3 | Violent civil war in the Congo. |
| 1961 | India occupies Goa. |
| | Berlin Wall built to stop contact between West and East Germany. |
| | South Africa leaves Commonwealth, knowing other members' disapproval of apartheid policies. |
| 1961–2 | Evian talks lead to Algerian independence. |
| | Federation of British West Indies dissolved. |
| | Rwanda and Burundi become independent states with the ending of Belgian trusteeship. Conflict between Hutus and Tutsis culminates in genocide. |
| 1963 | Kenya becomes independent. |
| | Central African Federation dissolved. |
| 1964 | United States drawn into Vietnam conflict. |
| | Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland become independent as Zambia and Malawi respectively. |
| 1965 | (Southern) Rhodesia illegally makes Unilateral Declaration of Independence. |
| | Adjective 'British' dropped from Commonwealth. |
| 1965-75 | Vietnam War. |
| 1968 | 'Prague Spring' repressed. |
| 1974 | Revolution in Portugal. |



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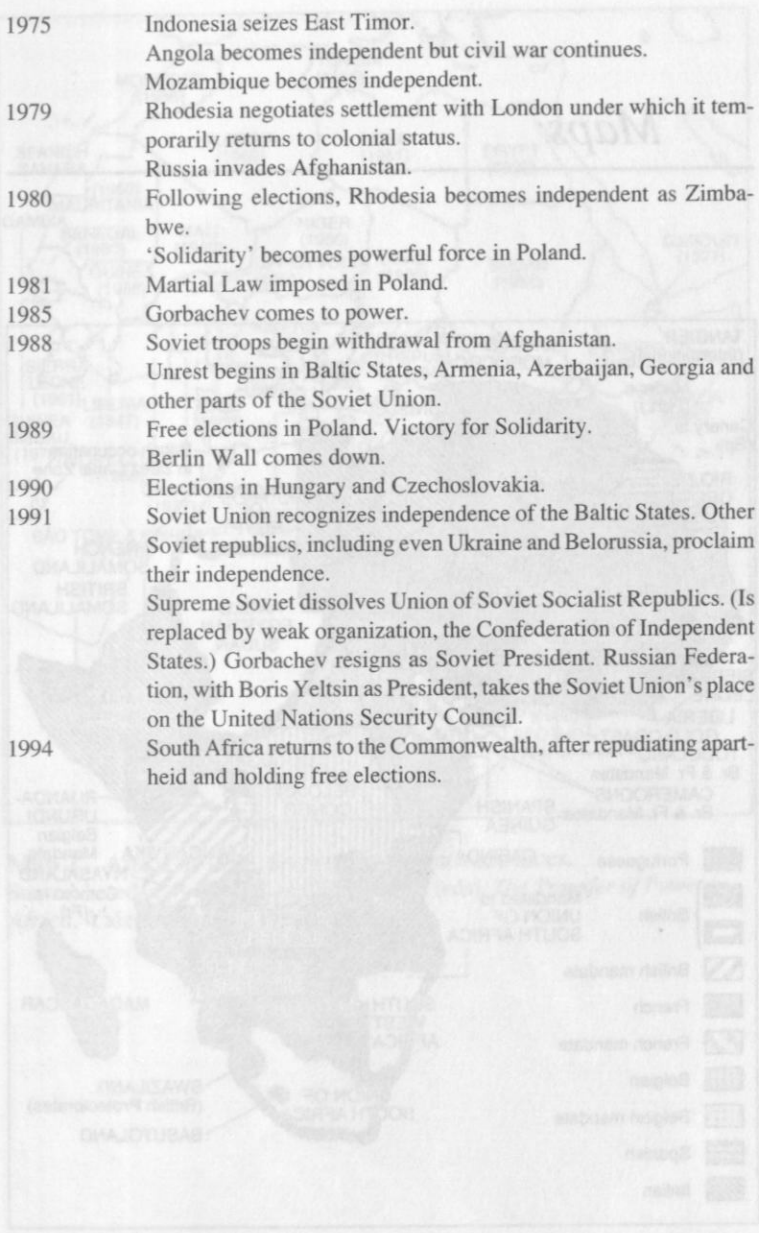
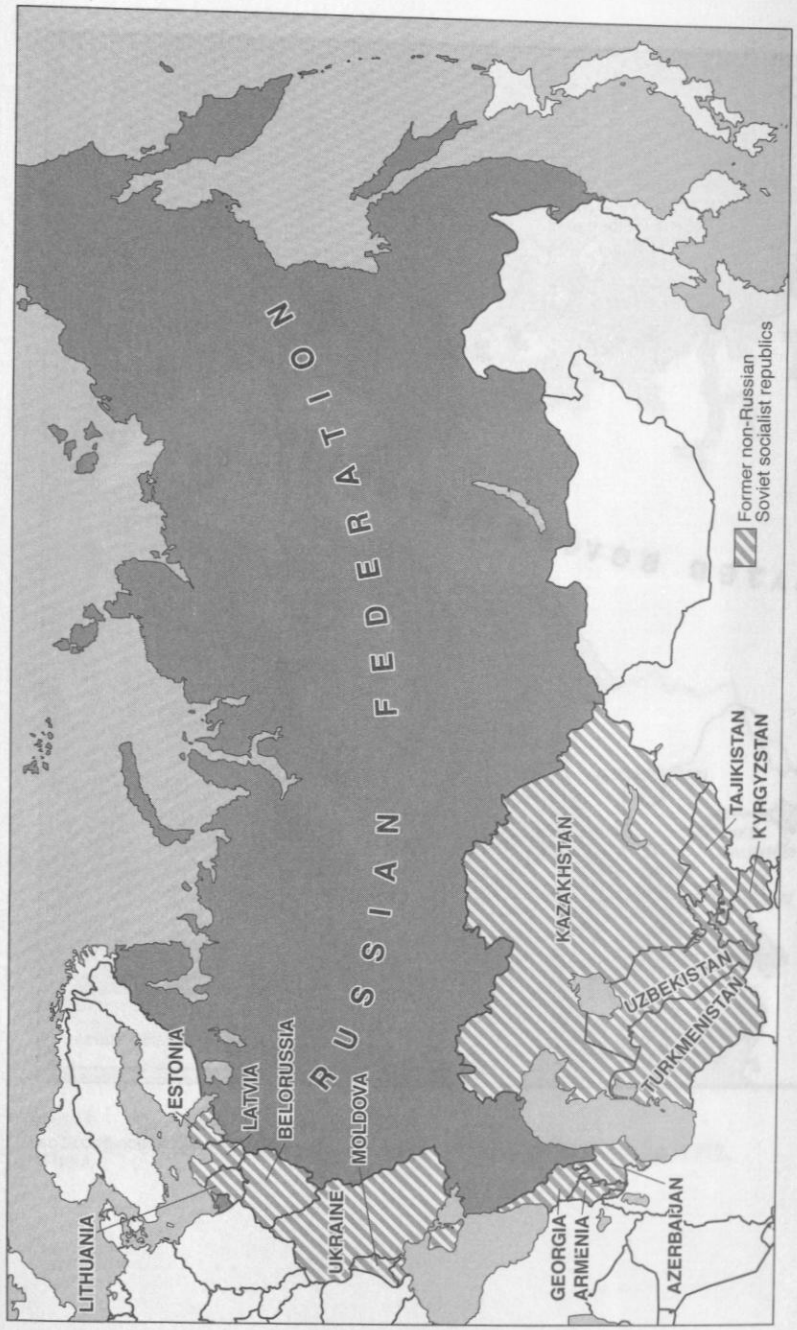
| 1975 | Indonesia seizes East Timor. |
| | Angola becomes independent but civil war continues. |
| | Mozambique becomes independent. |
| 1979 | Rhodesia negotiates settlement with London under which it temporarily returns to colonial status. |
| | Russia invades Afghanistan. |
| 1980 | Following elections, Rhodesia becomes independent as Zimbabwe. |
| | 'Solidarity' becomes powerful force in Poland. |
| 1981 | Martial Law imposed in Poland. |
| 1985 | Gorbachev comes to power. |
| 1988 | Soviet troops begin withdrawal from Afghanistan. |
| | Unrest begins in Baltic States, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and other parts of the Soviet Union. |
| 1989 | Free elections in Poland. Victory for Solidarity. |
| | Berlin Wall comes down. |
| 1990 | Elections in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. |
| 1991 | Soviet Union recognizes independence of the Baltic States. Other Soviet republics, including even Ukraine and Belorussia, proclaim their independence. |
| | Supreme Soviet dissolves Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. (Is replaced by weak organization, the Confederation of Independent States.) Gorbachev resigns as Soviet President. Russian Federation, with Boris Yeltsin as President, takes the Soviet Union's place on the United Nations Security Council. |
| 1994 | South Africa returns to the Commonwealth, after repudiating apartheid and holding free elections. |






**Map 6** The successor states of the Soviet Union.
Source: *The Times Concise Atlas of World History*, 1994, p. 151.

# *Introduction*

When V. I. Lenin wrote the preface to a new edition of his *Imperialism; The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, dated from Petrograd in April 1917, he complained that, previously, Tsarist censorship had compelled him to use coded language and to pretend to be speaking of Japan and Korea. Now 'the careful reader will easily substitute Russia for Japan, and Finland, Poland, Courland, the Ukraine, Khiva, Bokhara, Estonia or other regions peopled by non-Great Russians, for Korea' (pp. 6–7). Lenin had no doubt that Russia's landward expansion over the territories of non-Russians did not differ from the overseas conquests of the maritime Powers of western Europe. On this, his interpretation seems to be vindicated by the fact that since 1988 the Soviet empire has collapsed in much the same way as the western empires. It is therefore logical to include the dissolution of the Russian empire in a book on European decolonization.

The United States provides a more difficult case. In the middle of the nineteenth century the American people generally did not doubt that it was their 'manifest destiny' to conquer the whole of the North American continent, including Canada and part of what was then Mexico. At the end of the century in what some historians regard as a 'great aberration' (S. F. Bemis, 1955, p. 463) and others as a logical development (R. W. Van Alstyne, 1960; 1974; A. E. Campbell, 1960), the United States also acquired overseas territories, Hawaii, the Philippines, Cuba and Puerto Rico. Some of these, the Philippines and Cuba, have been decolonized more or less on the European model. Others, Hawaii and Puerto Rico,

have been drawn into a closer relationship with the United States. The United States is itself a 'successor state' of three European empires, the British, Spanish and French. Although it does not fit into the pattern of twentieth-century decolonization so neatly as Russia does, some consideration of American policy is also likely to be instructive.

'Decolonization' is a recent word. It only came into general use in the 1950s and 1960s, although it seems to have been coined in 1932 by a German scholar, Moritz Julius Bonn, for his section on 'Imperialism' in the *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (Seligman, 1932). Nowadays it is commonly understood to mean the process by which the peoples of the Third World gained their independence from their colonial rulers. But it has not altogether found favour with Asians and Africans because it can be taken to imply that the initiatives for decolonization, as for colonization, were taken by the metropolitan powers. Consequently, Asians and Africans have sometimes preferred to speak of their 'liberation struggles' or even their 'resumption of independence' (Hargreaves, 1979, pp. 3–8; Gifford and Louis, 1982, pp. 515, 569).

There is force in this objection, but it remains true that vital decisions were taken in London or Paris, Brussels or The Hague. Historians must try to hold the balance by examining both the policies of the colonial powers and the ideas and initiatives which came from the colonized. Both were frequently influenced by earlier historical experience. It is, therefore, also important that the historian should view the problem in a longer perspective. Decolonization took place almost entirely after the Second World War, mainly between 1947 and 1965, but it had much deeper roots than that. Some have held that the European empires had the seeds of decay within them from the beginning (Kennedy, 1984, pp. 201–3). Even if this seems too deterministic a view, it is true that both the speed and the fashion in which the various European empires were dismantled owed a great deal to earlier historical experiences and to the lessons which had been drawn, correctly or incorrectly, from them.

This is particularly so when the connection had been a long one and of great importance to both parties, as in the case of Britain and India. India must be a key case history in any study of decolonization. The story begins long before 1947. It was the largest single country decolonized, as well as the first important example of decolonization after 1945. How far India provided the model for Africa is now the subject of some scholarly debate (see pp. 10–11), but it seems beyond dispute that India was the great exemplar to which colonial nationalists in other countries looked and that the relinquishment of India in 1947 set the British empire (by far the largest of the European colonial empires) inexorably upon the path to dissolution. Where Britain led the others followed. It took a generation for all the implications to be realized, but in the end most former colonial peoples found that they were pushing at an open door. The Europeans had abandoned their attempt to dominate the rest of the world politically, although perhaps not economically. The era which had begun soon after the Renaissance had finally come to an end.



## The Background

Modern Europe's first great loss of empire occurred not in the twentieth century, but in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and involved not alien peoples, temporarily under European rule, but peoples of predominantly European stock, who broke away from the colonial power to found their own nation states. Although the twentieth-century movement was sometimes concerned with the recovery of already well-defined national identities, it more often involved the creation of new nation states from hitherto diverse groups of peoples. The historic precedents of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries cannot be ignored. They were sometimes known to, and used by, colonial peoples in the twentieth century; for example, educated Indians were aware of the American embargo on the import of British goods, which preceded the American war of independence, and created their own form of it in the *swadeshi* movement of the early twentieth century, when Indians were encouraged to boycott European goods in favour of Indian.

The collapse of these earlier empires was powerful in determining the attitudes of the colonial powers. Britain lost the bulk of her North American empire in 1776–83 when the United States was formed. The loss may not have been so shattering to Britain, either

materially or psychologically, as was once supposed. Professor Harlow argued forcefully that the loss only confirmed the 'Swing to the East', which was already discernible in British policies; that is to say, a preference for trade in Asia to the expense and commitment involved in governing colonies of settlement in the western hemisphere (Harlow, 1952, pp. 1–11). Nevertheless, the American war of independence left a permanent mark on British thinking about empire. The British fairly soon reconciled themselves to the loss by arguing that it was 'natural'. Colonies were like children who would eventually grow to manhood and would then inevitably seek their independence from the mother country. Britain put no serious obstacles in the way of such growth on the part of her other colonies of settlement, Canada, Australia, New Zealand or (since in the early twentieth century it was regarded simply as another colony of white settlement like the others) South Africa. Whether the same arguments held good for non-European dependencies, like India or Britain's many tropical colonies in Africa and elsewhere, was thought to be debatable.

Britain's loss of her American colonies had not been occasioned by any collapse on the part of the metropolitan power. On the contrary, Britain was still confident in the memory of her success in the Seven Years War of 1756–63, which had given her French Canada and left her as the dominant European power in India. At home the vast economic changes, which were to make Britain for a time the leading industrial power in the world, were already under way. The loss must be traced to political mistakes in Britain, the determination of the Americans, and the international support given to the Americans by France and Spain.

The story of the collapse of the Spanish and Portuguese empires in South and Central America in the early nineteenth century is different. Both Spain and Portugal were so weakened by the Napoleonic wars that they could no longer control their American empires. Although there was fighting in some places, generally the successor states established themselves to fill a vacuum. They were often unstable and prone to lurch from one extreme form of government to another. Some historians have even speculated that a serious struggle to obtain independence is a necessary stage in the creation of a stable and disciplined state.



In the nineteenth century Spain and Portugal sank to the rank of third-rate powers. It was easy for colonial propagandists to adopt 'cause-and-effect' arguments, either in the form that the loss of colonies would inevitably lead to the loss of great power status, or that the loss of great power status would inevitably lead to the loss of colonies. Either way the possession of an empire came to be regarded as a kind of badge of great power status, important for prestige, irrespective of whether it was also worth while economically.

The great Scottish economist, Adam Smith, saw this paradox as early as 1776. He argued forcefully that, although colonies could not be other than a liability to the colonial power, no country would voluntarily relinquish them, partly because of the pressure of particular vested interests within the metropolitan country but also because of general considerations of prestige. Adam Smith's arguments help to explain why, although fashionable doctrine held during the early and mid-nineteenth centry that colonies were an economic drain and an international liability, no colonial power seriously tried to get rid of them. Britain indeed considerably expanded her empire (Robinson and Gallagher, 1953, pp. 1–15).

The late nineteenth century saw renewed competition for empire. Scholarly opinion is turning against monocausal explanations for that phenomenon. A complex mixture of economic, diplomatic, political and strategic motives led the old colonial powers like Britain, France, Holland, Portugal and Spain, joined by new colonial powers, like Germany and Italy, to reassert themselves both in the race for new colonies and in the defence of old ones.

At that time nothing was further from the mind of most governments than 'decolonization'. The future seemed to lie with the big states, such as the United States of America, or the now united German Reich. If countries like Britain and France were to remain in contention, they must do so as the centres of great empires. This, however, left room for considerable diversity in the actual organization of those empires. The French always tended towards centralization. Their ideal was 'assimilation'. Their colonial peoples would become French in culture and civilization, and send deputies to Paris to help govern the whole empire. 'Assimilation' seemed unattainable during the period of rapid expansion at the end of the

nineteenth century and was accordingly modified, but it remained the ideal. The British preferred the policy of devolution. Different parts of the empire, especially the old colonies of settlement, were allowed varying degrees of autonomy. It was vaguely hoped that one day the whole empire might be coordinated in some form of federation. (Optimists, like Cecil Rhodes, even dreamt that the United States might be induced to rejoin such a federation.) In the newly acquired non-European territories, Britain experimented with various forms of 'indirect rule', which allowed the colonial peoples to govern themselves according to their customary laws and practices, with only a general oversight from British officials. The diversity of governmental practice adopted by the colonizing powers naturally influenced the form which decolonization was to take in different territories.

In one part of the British empire, India, there had always been a great deal of indirect rule, although it was not usually referred to by that title. Barely half of the Indian sub-continent was ever under direct British rule. The rest continued to be governed by the 'native princes', as they were collectively known, with British advisers. The American war of independence had convinced the British of the essentially transitory nature of empires. This was reinforced by their astonishment, as a small nation of northwestern Europe, at finding themselves the rulers of the Indian sub-continent. As late as 1838 Charles Trevelyan wrote: 'The existing connection between two such distant countries as England and India cannot, in the nature of things, be permanent: no effort of policy can prevent the natives from ultimately regaining their independence' (quoted in Stokes, 1959, p. 46). But he drew the same conclusion as Mountstuart Elphinstone, the Governor of Bombay, had drawn a decade earlier: 'It is for our interest to have an early separation from a civilized people, rather than a violent rupture with a barbarous nation, in which it is probable that all our settlers and even our commerce would perish, along with all the institutions we had introduced into the country' (Colebrooke, 1884, vol. 2, p. 72).

Such thinking lay behind the introduction of western education into India, which Mountstuart Elphinstone had admitted was Britain's 'high road back to Europe'. Trevelyan's brother-in-law, Thomas Babbington Macaulay, took up the same theme in his speech on the renewal of the East India Company's charter in 1833. In a famous peroration he told the Commons:



> It may be that the public mind of India may expand under our system till it has outgrown that system . . . that, having become instructed in European knowledge, they may, in some future age, demand European institutions. . . . Whenever it comes, it will be the proudest day in English history. . . . The sceptre may pass away from us. . . . Victory may be inconstant to our arms. But there are triumphs which are followed by no reverse. There is an empire exempt from all natural causes of decay. Those triumphs are the pacific triumphs of reason over barbarism; that empire is the imperishable empire of our arts and our morals, our literature and our laws. (Quoted in Chamberlain, 1974, p. 71)

Even though during the imperialist period of the late nineteenth century the possibility of India becoming independent seemed indefinitely postponed, the same idea lay behind the slow introduction of some elements of representative government into India, beginning with the admission of a few nominated Indians to the Viceroy's Legislative Council under the Indian Council Act of 1861. Some further progress was made by the Government of India Act of 1909, usually known as the Morley–Minto reforms (after the Secretary of State for India, the veteran radical, John Morley, and the then Viceroy, Lord Minto), which provided for non-official (but not necessarily elected) majorities on the Legislative Councils of the Indian Provinces, although not yet on the Viceroy's own Legislative Council. Such advances seemed substantial at the time although they were modest enough even compared with the position already achieved by Britain's old colonies of settlement. Canada, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand had already obtained near autonomy in their domestic legislation and some, although still undefined, right to be consulted on foreign policy decisions which affected them. In other words, they had reached 'dominion status', which was defined for the first time in the 1907 Imperial Conference.

In 1914 the Dominions and India, as well as the British colonies, were automatically at war when Britain declared war on

Germany because, in international law, the British empire was still a single state. But the British government had already accepted in practice that the contribution to the war effort to be made by the Dominions and India would have to be determined in their respective capitals, rather than in London. The Dominions (South Africa less enthusiastically than the others) rallied to Britain's support. India too identified with the British cause and sent troops.

Britain, gratified by what seemed to be genuine loyalty on the Indian side, responded with the Montagu Declaration of 1917. Lord Montagu, the Secretary of State for India, announced on 20 August:

> The policy of His Majesty's Government . . . is that of the increasing association of Indians in every branch of the administration and the gradual development of self-governing institutions with a view to the progressive realization of responsible government in India as an integral part of the British empire.

It was a cautious statement with the emphasis on the word 'gradual', and this was further spelled out later in the text when Montagu emphasized that, since ultimate responsibility still lay with the British government, they must judge 'the time and measure of each advance' and this in turn would be determined by the degree of Indian 'co-operation'. But, hedged around though it was with provisos, the Montagu Declaration was still momentous. 'Self-governing institutions' and 'responsible government' were not vague phrases. In the development of relations between Britain and her colonies of settlement they had acquired precise legal meanings. What was being offered to India was 'dominion status', comparable to that already enjoyed by Canada, not immediately but in the foreseeable future. It was the first time that Britain had formally stated that this was the goal for any part of her 'non-white' empire. In the aftermath of the First World War it was, however, Germany, not Britain, which was the first European great power to be compelled to relinquish its pre-war empire. The American president, Woodrow Wilson, had hoped that at the end of the war there would be 'no annexations'. He did not wish to see any open wound left in Europe, such as that caused by



the German annexation of Alsace-Lorraine after the Franco-Prussian war, but the Allies were equally determined not to return the German colonies, which had been captured in the course of the war. For the successor states of the Austro-Hungarian empire, which had collapsed at the end of the war, the Allies had committed themselves to the principle of 'self-determination'. The people themselves should choose to which state they would belong. New states, like Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, were created. Very tentatively, the Allies applied the same principle to the Ottoman (Turkish) empire which had also collapsed. During the war they had deliberately appealed for the support of the Arabs within the empire, many of whom were anxious to throw off Turkish rule. The Allies did not, however, yet judge these newly created Arab states to be capable of ruling themselves. It did not occur to any of the allied powers to apply the same principles of self-determination to Germany's, or their own, colonial empires. Colonial settlements were provided for in the fifth of President Wilson's famous Fourteen Points. The relevant clause demanded:

> A free, open-minded and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims based upon a strict observance of the principle that in determining all such questions of sovereignty the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined.

The Allies were somewhat embarrassed by the contrast between their proclaimed principles and the old-fashioned haggling over the fate of the former German colonies. The result was the establishment of the Mandate System, under the supervision of the new League of Nations organization. There were three classes of mandates. Class A mandates applied only to the successor states of the Ottoman empire. Syria and the Lebanon (until 1920 Lebanon was part of Syria) became French mandated territories. Iraq (Mesopotamia) and Palestine (which then included both the modern Israel and the modern Jordan) became British mandates. Class A mandates obligated the mandatory power not only to govern well, but to bring the mandated territory to full independence as soon as it reasonably could. Iraq became independent in 1932 but the others

were still under the control of the mandatory powers when the Second World War broke out in 1939.

Class B and Class C mandates applied to the former German colonies in Africa and Asia. Class B mandates were granted to various European powers. Britain became responsible for Tanganyika (formerly German East Africa) and those parts of Togoland and the Cameroons that bordered her existing colonies of the Gold Coast and Nigeria. France took other parts of Togoland and the Cameroons which bordered her colonies of Dahomey and Gabon respectively. Class C mandates differed only slightly from Class B mandates but were granted to various African and Pacific powers. The Union of South Africa administered the former German South West (Namibia); Australia, part of New Guinea and various other Pacific islands; and New Zealand, Western Samoa. There was no formal obligation to advance these territories towards independence. The mandatory power was required only to provide good and humane government, to refrain from exploitation, and to suppress evils such as the remnants of the slave trade. The mandatory power was to send regular reports to the League of Nations Mandates Commission. The Commission took its work seriously. The mandatory powers were generally scrupulous in furnishing the reports and, so long as the League of Nations remained in existence, the Mandate System had at least the merit of setting standards, albeit paternalistic standards, by which the colonial powers might be expected to behave.

## First Colonial Responses

Allied wartime propaganda, in particular the proclamation of the doctrine of self-determination, did not go unnoticed in the colonial world, particularly in those parts of it, such as British India, where there was already an educated and politically sophisticated class. The role of India is of peculiar importance in this story. There is now some debate among historians whether Africa should be regarded as simply following in the footsteps of Asia in her liberation struggles (Gifford and Louis, 1982, pp. vii–viii) . No doubt there is much in the African experience which is particular to Africa but the key role of the Indian nationalists can hardly be denied. Chief Awolowo of Nigeria wrote in 1945, 'India is the hero of the subject countries. Her struggles for self-government are keenly and sympathetically watched by colonial peoples'; although he was also aware of the terrible dangers of division between Hindu and Muslim, which could so easily be paralleled in Nigeria itself (Awolowo, 1947, pp. 25, 50–1). Many of the early nationalist movements in Africa deliberately adopted the name of Congress in imitation of the Indian National Congress. In 1912 in South Africa Pixley Seme, a young Zulu lawyer, who had been educated at Columbia and Oxford, called his new organization the South African Native National Congress. (It changed its name to the African National Congress, by which title it is known today, in 1925.) In 1918 a Gold Coast lawyer, J. E. Casely Hayford, founded the National Congress of British West Africa. Above all, India provided modern nationalist movements with a charismatic hero in Mahatma Gandhi, who seemed to combine an ability to use skilfully all the tactics of western politics with an authentic reaffirmation of non-European values. African leaders spoke of him with admiration (Nkrumah, 1957, pp. vii–viii). In 1969 Cyprus (independent since 1960) issued a stamp commemorating the centenary of his birth.

The first response of non-Europeans to the pressures of European conquest was naturally one of armed resistance. In the sixteenth century the Incas and the Aztec peoples of South and Central America had fought against the Spanish conquistadores. The Indians of North America went on fighting against the encroaching Europeans until the late nineteenth century. The battle of Wounded Knee between the Sioux Indians and the US cavalry was fought just before Christmas 1890 (Brown, 1972, p. 352).

In India the British and the French first gained political power as the auxiliaries of Indian rulers who were fighting over the inheritance of the crumbling Mogul empire but, as the British became contenders in their own right, they encountered fierce resistance from some indigenous claimants. Siraj-ud-daula, the nawab Bengal, failed to defeat the forces of the English East India Company at Plassey in 1757, but it was not until 1799 that Tipu Sultan, the ruler of Mysore in southern India, was defeated in the battle of Seringapatam by Arthur Wellesley, later Duke of Wellington and

were still under the control of the mandatory powers when the Second World War broke out in 1939.

Class B and Class C mandates applied to the former German colonies in Africa and Asia. Class B mandates were granted to various European powers. Britain became responsible for Tanganyika (formerly German East Africa) and those parts of Togoland and the Cameroons that bordered her existing colonies of the Gold Coast and Nigeria. France took other parts of Togoland and the Cameroons which bordered her colonies of Dahomey and Gabon respectively. Class C mandates differed only slightly from Class B mandates but were granted to various African and Pacific powers. The Union of South Africa administered the former German South West (Namibia); Australia, part of New Guinea and various other Pacific islands; and New Zealand, Western Samoa. There was no formal obligation to advance these territories towards independence. The mandatory power was required only to provide good and humane government, to refrain from exploitation, and to suppress evils such as the remnants of the slave trade. The mandatory power was to send regular reports to the League of Nations Mandates Commission. The Commission took its work seriously. The mandatory powers were generally scrupulous in furnishing the reports and, so long as the League of Nations remained in existence, the Mandate System had at least the merit of setting standards, albeit paternalistic standards, by which the colonial powers might be expected to behave.

## First Colonial Responses

Allied wartime propaganda, in particular the proclamation of the doctrine of self-determination, did not go unnoticed in the colonial world, particularly in those parts of it, such as British India, where there was already an educated and politically sophisticated class. The role of India is of peculiar importance in this story. There is now some debate among historians whether Africa should be regarded as simply following in the footsteps of Asia in her liberation struggles (Gifford and Louis, 1982, pp. vii–viii) . No doubt there is much in the African experience which is particular to Africa but the key role of the Indian nationalists can hardly be denied. Chief Awolowo of Nigeria wrote in 1945, 'India is the hero of the subject countries. Her struggles for self-government are keenly and sympathetically watched by colonial peoples'; although he was also aware of the terrible dangers of division between Hindu and Muslim, which could so easily be paralleled in Nigeria itself (Awolowo, 1947, pp. 25, 50–1). Many of the early nationalist movements in Africa deliberately adopted the name of Congress in imitation of the Indian National Congress. In 1912 in South Africa Pixley Seme, a young Zulu lawyer, who had been educated at Columbia and Oxford, called his new organization the South African Native National Congress. (It changed its name to the African National Congress, by which title it is known today, in 1925.) In 1918 a Gold Coast lawyer, J. E. Casely Hayford, founded the National Congress of British West Africa. Above all, India provided modern nationalist movements with a charismatic hero in Mahatma Gandhi, who seemed to combine an ability to use skilfully all the tactics of western politics with an authentic reaffirmation of non-European values. African leaders spoke of him with admiration (Nkrumah, 1957, pp. vii–viii). In 1969 Cyprus (independent since 1960) issued a stamp commemorating the centenary of his birth.

The first response of non-Europeans to the pressures of European conquest was naturally one of armed resistance. In the sixteenth century the Incas and the Aztec peoples of South and Central America had fought against the Spanish conquistadores. The Indians of North America went on fighting against the encroaching Europeans until the late nineteenth century. The battle of Wounded Knee between the Sioux Indians and the US cavalry was fought just before Christmas 1890 (Brown, 1972, p. 352).

In India the British and the French first gained political power as the auxiliaries of Indian rulers who were fighting over the inheritance of the crumbling Mogul empire but, as the British became contenders in their own right, they encountered fierce resistance from some indigenous claimants. Siraj-ud-daula, the nawab Bengal, failed to defeat the forces of the English East India Company at Plassey in 1757, but it was not until 1799 that Tipu Sultan, the ruler of Mysore in southern India, was defeated in the battle of Seringapatam by Arthur Wellesley, later Duke of Wellington and

not until 1803 that Wellesley defeated the Maratha Confederation at the battle of Assaye. Some have contended that, but for the British intervention, the Marathas would have been the successors of the Moguls. The claim is not universally accepted (Spear, 1965, pp. 74–7, 116–17), but the Victorians did tend to date their own supremacy in India from the final defeat and dissolution of the Maratha Confederation in 1818.

Military resistance in India can be paralleled in Africa, particularly where the Europeans encountered a strong, and sometimes militaristic, state or empire. On the Gold Coast the British fought a series of wars in 1821–31, 1873–4, 1895–6 and 1900–1 against the powerful Ashanti Confederation. In South Africa they fought the Zulus in 1879, suffering at the outset the disastrous defeat of Isandhlwana. The Boer trekkers of course fought the Zulus over a much longer period of time. Zululand was incorporated into the British colony of Natal in 1897 but a major Zulu rebellion broke out in 1906. An offshoot of the Zulus, the Matabele (Ndebele), fought the British in 1893 to prevent them from establishing control of what was to become Southern Rhodesia (the modern Zimbabwe). More surprisingly, the Shona people, who had already been cowed by the Matabele and were expected to welcome the British as liberators, also rose against them in 1896. The British conquered Egypt in 1882 without much difficulty but were expelled from the Egyptian Sudan in 1885 by an Islamic fundamentalist, the Mahdi. They only regained control of the Egyptian Sudan as the result of a full-scale campaign under General Kitchener in 1896–8. The Italians failed to make good their bid for Abyssinia, suffering a humiliating defeat at the battle of Adowa in 1896. The French, expanding from their old colony of Senegal, fought their way through the Western Sudan, until they were finally checked by the British at Fashoda in 1898, against very fierce resistance from the well-organized Muslim emirates of the savannah belt. In the north it took the French nearly twenty years to subdue Algeria after their first landing there in 1830.

Nevertheless, all these attempts at military resistance ultimately failed. Even Abyssinia fell to the Italians in 1935. The simplest explanation for this, and one which obviously contains a great deal of truth, is the great disparity of power which by then existed between the Europeans and their opponents. By the late nineteenth century Europe had undergone an industrial revolution and the rest of the world had not. It was not only a question of military superiority, although Hilaire Belloc was right when he pointed out that the Europeans had the Maxim gun (a type of machine-gun) and their opponents did not. The Europeans also had far superior means of transport, including steamships, railways and, by the twentieth century, aircraft. They could overwhelm village output by factory production. They had all the efficient bureaucracy of the modern state at their command. The effects were psychological as well as material. Early African nationalists later wryly recalled their awe when they first encountered examples of European technology, such as a railway engine.



The peoples of India and China, with centuries of sophisticated civilization behind them, were less overwhelmed by the Europeans' self-proclaimed superiority. Tipu Sultan, for example, had a nice line in anti-British propaganda. Sometimes it would take a cruel turn as in his famous working model (now in the Victoria and Albert Museum) of a man-eating tiger devouring an English officer – the point being that the tiger was Tipu Sultan's personal emblem. When the British troops penetrated into his capital, Seringapatam, in 1799 they found caricatures on the walls, depicting red-faced Europeans sprawling drunkenly at or under tables, amid the dogs and the swine.

The Chinese, although defeated by the British in the so-called opium war of 1839–42 (in fact the war had as much to do with trade in general and with the British determination to make the Chinese conform to European norms of diplomacy as with opium), regarded their victorious enemies without awe. Commissioner Lin drafted a magisterial rebuke to the foreign invaders in 1839. He wrote:

> The Way of Heaven is fairness to all; it does not suffer us to harm others in order to benefit ourselves. . . . Your country lies twenty thousand leagues away; but for all that the Way of Heaven holds good for you as for us, and your instincts are not different from ours; for nowhere are there men so blind as not to distinguish between what brings life and what brings death, between what brings profit and what does harm. (Quoted in Waley, 1958, pp. 28–9)

For all that, the Chinese had to open the five 'treaty ports' to the invaders and, later in the century, grant an increasing number of concessions to various foreign powers. By about 1900 it seemed impossible that China would escape partition by Russia, Germany, Britain, France, Italy and the United States. It was not military power which saved her, although the Chinese did resist strenuously in 1839–42 and again in 1856–6O. In 1900, avenging the attack on their embassies during the Boxer Rebellion, the armies of Britain, France, Germany, America and Japan reached and occupied the Chinese capital of Peking. China was saved partly by the watchful jealousy of the Great Powers, whose rivalry also kept the Ottoman empire intact until the First World War. But equally important was the surviving political unity of the country. China was not fragmented into many political units as was Africa. The dynasty was weak but not yet crumbling as was the Mogul empire when the British obtained control of India. The Chinese confidence in the virtues of their own civilization and their suspicion of, and contempt for, foreigners meant that there were very few 'collaborators' among the Chinese.

Collaborators were an essential element in the imposition of colonial rule. But, paradoxically, they also helped to generate those very forces which were ultimately to overthrow colonial governments.

This idea is interestingly worked out in Ronald Robinson's paper, 'Non-European foundations of European imperialism: sketch for a theory of collaboration' (Owen and Sutcliffe, 1972, pp. 117–40). The creation of a new 'westernized' class was particularly important in India and can he traced back before the 'Mutiny' of 1857.

# 1

# *The British Empire: Asia*

## India

The Indian Mutiny of 1857 belongs essentially to the first phase of colonial resistance. It was armed resistance, spearheaded by units of the Bengal army. The army had grievances of its own. Indian soldiers had willingly co-operated with the English East India Company in the squabbles over the spoils of the Mogul empire in the eighteenth century but, as the British grip on India tightened, they found that they were no longer allowed free rein to loot (the traditional way in which a soldier supplemented his pay) and that they were no longer promoted to the higher ranks. Elphinstone had prophesied as early as 1819, 'I think the seed of [our Indian empire's] ruin will be found in the native army – a delicate and dangerous machine which a little mismanagement may easily turn against us.' The supposed attack upon the soldiers' caste and religion, symbolized by the issue of the cartridges allegedly 'greased' with the fat of cows and pigs, was only the last straw. On the face of it, the 1857 rising should have succeeded. The British were numbered in thousands, the Indians in millions. Even the 'native' army outnumbered the British soldiers some five to one. The Mutiny failed, not only because it did not spread to the armies of Bombay and Madras but also because it failed to attract the support of many in Bengal. A hundred years later leading Indian historians came to regard it as a backward looking movement, trying to restore the old feudal India and so putting itself at odds with the forces of the future (Sen, 1957, p.

142). Westernized Indians held aloof from it and sometimes became its victims.

The British had fostered western-style education in India from the 1820s when, for example, the Elphinstone Institute, a great nursery for future nationalists, was founded in Bombay. A more definite decision in favour of western education was taken in 1835, supported by Macaulay's notorious 'education minute', deriding the traditional learning of India which, only a generation earlier, had been held in some respect in the West. Many Indians took enthusiastically to western education. When, in 1903, the then Viceroy, Lord Curzon, tried to check the proliferation of small colleges and to concentrate government subsidies on a few big institutions, like the University of Calcutta, it was regarded as a mortal insult by the Indian middle classes. There was, however, a marked difference in the 'take-up rate' of different communities. The Hindus were generally enthusiastic. The Muslims, who disliked seeing western secular education displace their own religious-based system, were not. As a result Muslims, who had been the governing class under the emperors, saw themselves pushed aside in favour of young Hindu clerks.

The British were quite aware that the Indians might apply to their own situation lessons learned from British history, which is not without its heroes in struggles against unlawful usurpation of authority. In fact the Indians noted not only the implications of the struggles between King and Parliament in seventeenth-century England but also those of the revolutions in Europe in 1848 and the intensification of Ireland's struggle against England. When the East India Company's charter came up for renewal in 1853 they, or at least a small number among them, were ready to organize themselves to lobby the British government. A remarkable meeting took place in Bombay in August 1852 which crossed all the usual religious boundaries, for it included Parsis, Muslims, Hindus and even Jews. They petitioned the British government for a number of studiously moderate reforms, including a larger share of administrative and judicial appointments for Indians. One of the leading spirits was Dadabhai Naoroji, a graduate of the Elphinstone Institute, who was later to sit in the British Parliament as MP for Finsbury. The Bombay Association, founded some five years before the Mutiny, was the voice of the new westernized India. These Indians were beginning to realize that using their conqueror's own political and philosophical weapons could be more effective than resorting to force of arms. The Bombay Association foreshadowed the Indian National Congress.



The Congress was established in 1885. The moving spirit was an Englishman, Alan Octavian Hume, the son of the British radical, Joseph Hume, and, at least at first, the Viceroy, Lord Dufferin, regarded it as an important means of ascertaining Indian opinion, and gave it his cautious encouragement. Some later Indian nationalists disliked the idea that what became the symbol and main instrument of Indian nationalism originated with an Englishman but in fact the Indian response was highly sophisticated. They saw it as a useful means of communicating their views to the British government through a body which, if not quite quasi-official, at least had official blessing and approval. For this reason they allowed it to supersede organizations like the Indian Association of Calcutta and the Indian National Conference, set up by Surendranath Banerjea a little earlier. Banerjea, at this time a lecturer at the University of Calcutta after a short and disastrous career in the Indian Civil Service, founded the Indian Association to be 'the centre of an All-India movement', based on 'the conception of a united India, derived from the inspiration of Mazzini'. He undertook a remarkable tour of Upper India, speaking at Agra, Delhi, Lahore, Alallabad, Benares and many other places in the Punjab and the United Provinces (as they were then called).

The significance of this was not lost on the more perceptive British officials (Majumdar, 1961, pp. 889–90). Something which could be called 'Indian nationalism' was emerging. This in itself was revolutionary. Whatever India was before the British period she was not a nation. Twice in her history, once under Asoka in the third century BC, and then under the Moguls, the greater part of the Indian sub-continent had been united under a single dynasty. But these always remained 'empires' rather than nation states. It is probably true to say that in the eighteenth century the sub-continent of India had less unity, ethnically, linguistically and culturally, than did the continent of Europe. Yet India (admittedly without Pakistan, which some Indians regarded as a border region, scarcely

Indian in character) emerged from the British period as a single nation and remains so more than a generation after independence.

Indian nationalism was forged during the British period. This was partly the result of material advances. The new railways, as well as the new postal system, made it possible for people in different parts of India to communicate with each other as never before. The possession of an official language, English, known to all the new educated men, was perhaps even more important. India has more than two hundred indigenous languages and English has become so vital as a lingua franca that even today it is one of the official languages of independent India. But, most crucial of all, the concept of nationalism was imported into India along with the rest of western learning. Nationalism, in the sense of a citizen owing a primary duty to a nation state, seems to be an entirely western concept. Loyalty to a group is, of course, a universal human characteristic but that can take many forms; loyalty to a family group or tribe, to a small political unit like a city, or to a very wide group like a religious faith. The primacy of loyalty to the state is a western concept and a fairly modern one at that. It can be found in medieval Europe, particularly in countries such as England, which achieved national unity early, but it did not evolve to its present form until the nineteenth century. But it was to prove easily the most successful ideological weapon that the colonized had against the colonizers.

From its beginning the Indian National Congress claimed to speak for the whole of India to the British authorities. Unfortunately, that claim was flawed. Congress was never an elected assembly or parliament, although it came to speak as if it was. It was more like a political party, which anyone could join on paying the membership fee. It was originally recruited by invitation from the graduates of the University of Calcutta. As a result it was at first drawn from a very narrow class of professional men. Those present at the early meetings of Congress were mostly lawyers and teachers, with a sprinkling of doctors and journalists. A more serious defect was that the Muslim community was grossly under-represented. There were only two Muslims present at the first session of Congress in 1885. The class bias to some extent righted itself as Congress became more broadly based after the First World War; but the religous



bias was never really corrected and, in 1906, the Muslims set up their own organization, the Muslim League. Congress did not entirely satisfy even the Hindu community. The Untouchables complained that Congress only really represented the caste Hindus and paid scant attention to the Untouchables' grievances.

In its early days, until the First World War, Congress was in the main studiously moderate in its politics, calculating that the important thing was to retain the ear of the government. This was not, however, incompatible with some hard-hitting attacks on aspects of British policy. In particular, the British were blamed for aggravating the great problem of Indian poverty by 'draining' Indian money to London and by ruining Indian industries because of unrestrained competition from British factory production, especially in textiles. Congress asked for the further development of representative institutions in India but gave priority to the greater employment of Indians in the higher levels of the administration (Philips, 1962, pp. 151–6).

Indian nationalism in this period took two distinct forms, conveniently symbolized in two men, G. K. Gokhale and B. G. Tilak. Both as it happened were brahmins from the Bombay region but there the resemblance ended. Gokhale, sometimes called 'the Indian Gladstone', was very critical of British economic policy but he was prepared to work for liberal reforms gradually and through the official channels. He was respected by English politicians and particularly important for his influence on John Morley. Tilak saw his life's work as leading a great Hindu revival. He looked back to a rather mythical golden age, not only before the British raj but before the Muslim invasions. He rejected western education and western political concepts (although at times he used both). He saw the battle against poverty, which was important to the moderate party in Congress, as a distraction from the real task of purifying India and freeing her from the taint of foreign rule. Western politicians did not get on with Tilak, especially when he campaigned against the abolition of child marriages or vaccination against smallpox as attacks on Hindu tradition, and preached political assassination as a legitimate form of protest.

The First World War ended an epoch in Anglo-Indian relations. The British were gratified by Indian support. The Indians

expected their reward. They were bitterly disappointed by the slowness of the British response. The Government of India Act of 1919 introduced the famous principle of 'dyarchy' by which some spheres, such as education and health, were 'transferred' to Indian control at the provincial level, while others such as public order were 'reserved' and remained under British control. The central government, removed in 1911 from Calcutta to New Delhi, remained firmly in British hands, even though the Legislative Assembly now had an elected majority. All this seemed quite inadequate to the Indians and they were further offended by the Rowlatt Acts, which retained some emergency wartime legislation, including the right in certain cases to detain individuals without trial.

In many parts of India protest campaigns began, including *hartals*, a kind of general strike. This unrest led to the Amritsar massacre of 13 April 1919. The Punjab had been a particular centre of disturbances and a number of Europeans had been attacked. The authorities were extremely nervous and full of memories of 1857. When General Dyer arrived at Amritsar on 11 April with a small force of troops, he immediately banned public meetings. Despite this a large crowd, including women and children, gathered on some waste ground known as the Jallianwala Bagh. Some undoubtedly assembled in deliberate defiance of the ban but many others had come in from the countryside for the annual horsefair, quite unaware of it. Dyer marched his troops of British and Indian soldiers to the Jallianwala Bagh and opened fire on the crowd without the usual warnings, deeming that his prohibition of meetings had been sufficient warning. Three hundred and seventy-nine people were killed and many more wounded. Dyer seems to have been unaware that the crowd could not disperse because his own troops were blocking the main exit. Amritsar sharply divided British and Indian opinion. An official inquiry under a Scottish judge, Lord Hunter, found against Dyer, but he received a great deal of support in the British press. Congress set up its own committee of inquiry which condemned Dyer much more sharply than Hunter had done, calling the deed 'a calculated piece of inhumanity'. Many young Indian nationalists, including Nehru, later said that it was Amritsar which finally turned them against the British. It may have done, but it was probably only the catalyst which finally crystallized their doubts.



A new generation of nationalist leaders was now emerging, Mohendas Karamchand Gandhi and Jawarharlal Nehru among them. Gandhi was undoubtedly the greatest of these new men in both Indian and international terms. He had been born in 1869 in the princely state of Porbandar in western India. His father and grandfather had both been prime ministers of that state. His family were devout Hindus, indeed his mother was a woman of exceptional piety. They may have been influenced by the Jain tradition which was strong in the neighbourhood and was notable for its strict pacifism. As a young man Gandhi came to London to study law at the Inner Temple. He left a touching account of his dilemmas at that time in his unfinished autobiography, *My Experiments with Truth*. On the one hand, like most educated young Indians, he very much wanted to identify with the British, even down to choosing the right tailor and taking dancing lessons; on the other, he wanted to keep his promises to his mother and remain faithful to his religion in matters such as not eating meat. Curiously, the latter promise led him to vegetarian restaurants and brought him into contact with the idealistic socialists of the day. In this period Gandhi was deeply impressed by some western writers such as Tolstoy, and by the ethical (although not the doctrinal) content of Christianity. He also discovered for the first time some of the great Sanskrit texts, reading them originally in English translations.

In 1893 Gandhi went to South Africa to practise as a lawyer, finding many of his clients among the sizeable Indian commumity. He came to hate the discrimination against Asians, as well as against the black Africans, which he found there. He established his first newspaper, *Indian Opinion*, in 1904 and began to work out his characteristic political doctrines, above all that of *satyagraha*. This, he admitted, would look to the outsider like mere civil disobedience or passive resistance; but he contended that such a view ignored the very positive spiritual content which he wished to see incorporated into it. Some laws were so unjust that to obey them was to become tainted with guilt yourself. The follower of *satyagraha* must normally be law-abiding but, on those rare occasions when his conscience compelled him to break the law, he must

do so without violence. 'He then openly and civilly breaks them and quietly suffers the penalty for their breach.' The essence of the doctrine was that the suffering must be borne by the protesters, not inflicted upon others (Philips, 1962, pp. 215–16).

Angry though he was about the situation in South Africa, Gandhi was not at this time hostile to the British empire. Indeed he still identified with it and seems to have regarded South African practices as a perversion of the real spirit of the empire. During the Boer War of 1899–1901 and the Zulu rising of 1906 he formed an ambulance corps to help the British cause. He came to London during the First World War and tried to raise a similar corps from Indian students in London. He returned to India in 1915 with no particular intention of challenging the British. Only in February 1919 during the passage of the Rowlatt Acts did he launch a civil disobedience campaign. He called for a *hartal* throughout India on 6 April. In retrospect the British were inclined to hold him largely to blame for the events in the Punjab, including Amritsar.

The man who was to be Gandhi's lieutenant in India, Jawarharlal Nehru, was in many ways a contrast to his leader. A Kashmiri brahmin, Nehru was an aristocrat to his fingertips. His father, Motilal Nehru, was a wealthy and successful laywer and an Anglophile. The young Nehru was sent to Harrow and Cambridge where, unusually for a man of his background, he read science, although he too later turned to the law. Until he joined Gandhi in his political campaigns in the 1920s, he knew little first hand of Indian poverty. He had been influenced before the war by the Russo-Japanese conflict of 1904–5. Until then Nehru had accepted, as most westernized Indians did, that a period of tutelage from a European power was necessary before the backward countries of Asia would be ready to manage their own affairs and take their place in the modern world. But here was a different model. Japan alone among the powers of Asia seemed to have found an effective counter to western encroachment. She had kept the foreigners out, except as advisers. She had remodelled her whole political, economic and military systems along western lines and had humiliatingly defeated a great western power. It is not surprising that the young Nehru went out and bought all the books he could find on Japan. Twenty years later he became interested in another society which seemed





to be pulling itself up by its own bootlaces, post-revolutionary Russia. He visited the Soviet Union for the first time in 1927. He was impressed by some of the things he saw but he also had many reservations. In working out his own ideas of state socialism later, he was prepared to borrow ideas from Russia as from elsewhere but he felt no commitment to the Soviet creed. Nevertheless, particularly in his economic policy, Nehru remained essentially a westerner. He was shocked by Indian poverty and wanted to cure it by economic development and progress, whichever model he chose to adopt.

Gandhi was a different and more complex man. There is truth in the claim that he managed to combine in his one person the appeal of both Tilak and Gokhale. He understood western politics well enough and could play the British at their own game, but he also wished to reassert distinctive Indian values. He was not prepared to accept the traditions of his own people uncritically. His most important break with tradition was in his attempt to secure a more tolerable life for the Untouchables. But in the eyes of the Indian peasants, he was a recognized type of Indian holy man. His renunciation of wealth and comfort, his simple dress and diet, his *ashram* at Ahmadabad, his daily toil at the spinning-wheel, commanded their respect. He was able to mobilize the Indian masses in his support in a way which would have been impossible for a more conventional politician like Nehru. Nehru did not always agree with his leader, but he never doubted that Gandhi was a greater man than he was, and seems to have been quite content to remain his lieutenant until Gandhi's death in 1948.

The British had little idea how to deal with Gandhi. His first civil disobedience campaign broke down in violence and in 1922 Gandhi himself was arrested and sentenced to six years in gaol. His judge, Mr Justice Broomfield, made a remarkable statement to the prisoner in the dock, acknowledging that he was unlike any man he had ever tried before or was ever likely to try again, and that in the eyes of his own people he was not only a patriot but a saint. The judge dropped a broad hint to the authorities that Gandhi should be released as soon as the troubles died down (Philips, 1962, pp. 222–4). In fact Gandhi was released in 1924. In 1930 he led another great campaign of civil disobedience against the

government salt monopoly, leading a march from his *ashram* to the sea at Dandi two hundred miles away, to pick up sea salt illegally from the shore.

Meanwhile the British were slowly plodding on with their plans to introduce representative and responsible government to India by instalments. The Simon Commission, a British parliamentary commission under the eminent lawyer, Sir John Simon, sat from 1927 to 1930. The fact that no Indian sat on it caused an outcry in India and was regarded as slightly absurd even in Britain, although technically it was a parliamentary body on which only members could sit. In an attempt to remedy this the British government invited representatives of various interests in India to meet representatives of the British Parliament in London at the so-called Round Table Conference, which met in three sessions in 1930, 1931 and 1932. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, many of the leading Indian figures were absent from the first and third sessions. The second was more generally representative but it only served to highlight the deep fissures which were now apparent in Indian society. Gandhi, as the representative of Congress, claimed to speak for the whole of India. His claim was sharply denied by M. A. Jinnah for the Muslim League and by Dr Ambedkar for the Untouchables.

One of the MPs on the Simon Commission was Clement Attlee, later to be prime minister of Britain's first majority Labour government in 1945–51. Attlee was deeply interested in Indian problems, and the Labour movement in general was a good deal more sympathetic to Indian aspirations than were the Conservatives. Keir Hardie had visited India in 1907 and been appalled at the poverty of the Indian peasants. Ramsay Macdonald, who was prime minister in the minority Labour governments of 1924 and 1929 (and the man who called the Round Table Conference), had visited India in 1909 and subsequently written a book, *The Awakening of India*, which anticipated some of the reforms offered to the Indians in the Government of India Act of 1935.

The Act of 1935 looked to a federal solution of India's difficulties, bringing in the princely states as well as the provinces of British India. There was to be some measure of responsible government at the centre, although foreign affairs and defence were still not transferred to Indian control. (Responsible government here meant



that individual ministers would be answerable to the Legislative Assembly.) The eleven provinces were to have autonomous governments with ministries wholly responsible to elected legislatures, although the provincial governors still had considerable emergency powers. The Act was anathema to the more extreme Conservatives like Winston Churchill and Lord Salisbury, who fought it every step of the way. Indeed their opposition may well have delayed the passage of the measure from 1933 to 1935. This was to prove of crucial importance because it had been provided that the clauses relating to the central government should not become operative until at least 50 per cent of the rulers of the princely states had adhered. They had not done so by 1939 and so, as far as her central government was concerned, India entered the Second World War under the now totally obsolete constitution of 1919.

The 1935 Act had been brought into operation in the provinces and elections held in 1937. Congress had a spectacular success in the elections, winning six of the eleven provinces outright and emerging as the largest party in two more. It had originally intended to fight the elections only to prove its strength and then to decline to take office but the chance of real power, to put into operation some of the reforms it had so long been advocating, persuaded it to form ministries in the seven provinces where it had majorities. The Muslim League was chastened by its comparative lack of success – it had achieved respectable results only in Bengal, the Punjab and Sind – and made overtures to Congress. Congress, however, flushed with victory was in no mood to compromise. In October 1937 Jinnah abandoned any hope of co-operating with Congress. For the first time the creation of a separate Muslim state – first suggested in 1933 but not then taken very seriously – became a real political possibility.

The Indian response to the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 was very different from that of 1914. Indians resented the fact that the British government had declared war on their behalf, although in strict international law that was unavoidable. Far from rallying to the British side Congress saw, as the Irish had so long done, Britain's difficulties as its opportunity. The Congress ministries in the provinces resigned and on 10 October the All-India Congress Committee resolved that 'India must be declared an

independent nation' and demanded that India's future constitution must be determined by an Indian constituent assembly. The British could only reply that all major constitutional changes must wait until after the war. In 1940 France fell and Britain awaited probable invasion. By a supreme irony Winston Churchill, the Indian nationalists' old enemy, became British Prime Minister, while their former champion, Clement Attlee, became the Deputy Prime Minister.

But essentially the British and Indian attitudes remained unchanged throughout the war. The British insisted that nothing could be decided until the war was over; the Indians demanded immediate independence. The British negotiating position became weaker with the entry of Japan into the war in December 1941. Within months the Japanese had overrun Malaya and Burma. On 15 February 1942 the great naval base of Singapore surrendered and thousands of British troops were made captive, in some ways the most shattering British defeat of the war. The way to India seemed wide open. In these inauspicious circumstances Sir Stafford Cripps, an austere man of the left, was despatched to India in March 1942. It was hoped that he could win Gandhi's confidence but he had little new to offer – some extra Indian participation in government immediately, major changes at the end of the war. In the British view these changes contained all that the Indians could reasonably ask – a constituent assembly with the British pledged in advance to accept its conclusions even if they included secession from the Commonwealth. But they felt compelled to insist that there must be certain guarantees for racial and religious minorities and, in particular, that each province should be free to join the Indian union or not as it wished. Negotiations went on for seventeen days but in the end they broke down. The communal problem was still the great stumbling block. Congress feared that the Muslims might carry the Punjab, or even Bengal, out of the Indian state, even though both provinces had large Hindu minorities. For the rest of the war, the British continued to offer the Cripps proposals, Congress to reject them.

Gandhi was not sure that it was worth negotiating with the British any longer. He said that he was not interested in a 'post-dated cheque on a failing bank'. On 8 August 1942 the All-India Congress Committee passed the famous 'Quit India' resolution which, although promising an alliance to continue the war against the Japanese, demanded an immediate end to British rule and threatened that, if this demand was rejected, there would be `a mass struggle'. The British were not impressed. On 9 August the most prominent Congress leaders were arrested. There were sporadic disturbances and acts of sabotage, but the promised mass struggle did not materialize.



The Indians were in fact divided in their feelings about the war, now that it was on their doorstep. Some Indians, it is true, joined the Japanese 'Indian National Army' and prepared to march with the Japanese to 'liberate' India, but the Indian leaders were on the whole more cautious. They had no interest in merely exchanging masters and seeing the Japanese in the place of the British.

The war in Europe came to an end in May 1945, that in Asia three months later with the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. A general election in Britain gave a landslide victory to the Labour party led by Clement Attlee. On the face of it the British negotiating position was stronger than it had been in 1940–2, when they had their backs to the wall in Europe. In fact, appearances were deceptive. The British economy was nearly ruined by the war. Britain was now heavily dependent on American aid, and the United States was not in the least sympathetic to the continuation of the British empire in India.

Ideologically, the new government was committed to speedy independence for India but the practical obstacles were still formidable. In the spring of 1946 the Cabinet Mission of Lord Pethick Lawrence, Sir Stafford Cripps and A. V. Alexander went out to seek a basis for a settlement with the Indian leaders and to convince them that, since the British really were going to withdraw, they must reach agreement among themselves. They came near to success with a proposal for a federal form of government; but first Congress, then Jinnah, rejected it.

Jinnah decided that the Muslim League must show its strength and declared 16 August 1946 'Direct Action Day'. He subsequently claimed that he had expected only demonstrations, but the line between demonstrations and violence is often a thin one; and on 16 August something like four thousand people died, mainly in

Calcutta. The Viceroy, Lord Wavell, told Attlee that Britain must either resign herself to staying in India for at least another ten years and commit the resources to do so, or fix a date for withdrawal and stick to it, even if this meant handing over power to the only viable authorities, the provincial governments. Attlee rejected this as a counsel of despair and quite impracticable. He recalled Wavell and replaced him by Lord Mountbatten, who enjoyed all the prestige of the successful commander-in-chief of the last stages of the war in South-East Asia. But, at the end of the day, Mountbatten could only agree with Wavell's stark alternatives. The first was deemed impossible. There remained only the alternative of setting a date. On 20 February 1947 Attlee announced that, come what might, the British would leave India in June 1948.

A speedy withdrawal meant that partition had to be accepted. It could not be a satisfactory solution. The Muslim population was concentrated in the north-west and the north-east but Muslim communities were scattered all over India, making up between a fifth and a quarter of the whole population. In most cases the boundaries of existing provinces could be used for the new national boundaries of India and Pakistan, but Bengal and the Punjab had to be partitioned between them. The irrigation system of the Punjab had to be severed to the detriment of both parts. East Bengal became East Pakistan. It was separated by over a thousand miles from the larger West Pakistan. It was essentially an agricultural hinterland, producing cotton, tea and jute, and, cut off from its processing plants and export ports, now in West Bengal, it was scarcely viable.

In June Mountbatten announced on behalf of the British government that independence would in fact be brought forward from June 1948 to August 1947. The formal transfer of power took place on 14 August 1947. Many details had still not been worked out. It is possible that the British government thought that they could safely be left because the two new states would in practice be compelled to act as a quasi-federation along the lines of the Mission's proposals. If that was so, the British gravely miscalculated. Any hope of co-operation between India and Pakistan perished in the communal violence of the autumn of 1947. Although most of it was confined to the two partitioned states of Bengal and the Punjab, it there reached appalling proportions. Perhaps half a million died. About



five million Muslims fled to Pakistan and about the same number of Hindus to India. More than twelve million were made homeless. Gandhi himself went to the Punjab in a desperate attempt to quell the violence, only to be assassinated himself in January 1948 by a Hindu fanatic.

Britain granting independence to India was the first major example of a country which had not been militarily defeated relinquishing an important overseas possession after the Second World War. On the face of it, it was a disaster, ending in partition and bloodshed. But this is not the whole story. It is true that Pakistan, like many other ex-colonies, has found it difficult to sustain a democratic form of government. It first came under military rule in 1958 and again, after a brief return to elected government, in 1977. Martial law lasted until 1985 and there was further military intervention in government in 1993. Separatist and bitter religious conflicts remain. East Pakistan seceded from West Pakistan and assumed the name Bangladesh in 1971.

India, on the other hand, proved to have much more stability than was apparent in 1947. More than a generation later it remains a democracy, the largest in the world. For forty years the Congress Party, which grew out of the Indian National Congress, dominated Indian politics but when it was defeated in an election in 1977, it left office and did not return until it won the election of 1980. Its power weakened in the 1990s. The election of February 1998 was inconclusive and allowed the formation of a coalition government, in which the strongest part was the BJP, a Hindu traditionalist party, feared by Muslims, Christians and other minority groups for its programme of departing from the strictly neutral secular state established in 1947.

Independent India's first prime minister, Nehru, emerged as a major world statesman. There were those who alleged that he did not practise the high-minded doctrines that he preached. In 1947 the princely states had been left to decide whether they would join India or Pakistan; but Hyderabad, which had a Muslim ruler but a Hindu majority, was incorporated into India virtually by force in 1949. Nehru was extremely reluctant to see Kashmir (where the reverse was true, a Hindu ruler and a Muslim majority) join Pakistan, and India and Pakistan fought three wars about its fate. An

interim partition was accepted by both sides in the Simla Agreement of 1972 but was rejected by Kashmiri separatists, who have since waged an increasingly violent war against the Indian authorities. In 1961 the Portuguese enclave of Goa on the west coast of India was forcibly taken over. Nevertheless, Nehru developed a distinctive foreign policy of non-alignment during the Cold War and so gave a lead to the growing number of Asian and African countries which did not want to be drawn into the power struggles of East and West.

The connection between Britain and India was a long one, much longer than that between Britain and most of her colonies. India was also by far the most important of Britain's overseas possessions. Once it had gone, the *raison d'etre* for retaining an empire at all seemed much weaker. The most immediate impact of Britain's relinquishment of her Indian empire was naturally felt in the rest of Asia.

## Ceylon, Burma and Malaya

Ceylon (Sri Lanka) has always been seen as a pendant to the Indian empire. The British had acquired it from the Dutch as a result of the Napoleonic wars. As in India the British had to face the problem of dealing with a majority and a minority community, the Sinhalese and the Tamils. On the whole they were rather proud of their record in Ceylon. It was a smaller, more manageable problem than in India, and was economically prosperous with its exports of tea and rubber. Unlike India, which was always a special case and was dealt with by first the Board of Control and later the India Office, not the Colonial Office, Ceylon was a conventional Crown Colony, ruled by a governor, assisted by an executive and a legislative council. Since 1923 Ceylon had enjoyed an unusually wide franchise and an elected majority in the Legislative Council. It became independent so smoothly on 4 February 1948, that the event received little international attention. But ethnic tensions increased in the 1980s, culminating in the guerrilla and terrorist activities of the Tamil Tigers.

Burma, even more than Ceylon, had in British eyes never been more than an outlying province of the Indian empire, conquered in three wars in 1824–6, 1852–3 and 1885–6. The Burmese had not accepted British rule willingly. Guerrilla warfare, dismissed by the British as dacoity, or brigandage, continued for many years. No doubt this helps to explain why some Burmese were willing to co-operate with the Japanese when they overran the country early in 1942. The Japanese set up a nominally independent state in Burma under a Burmese lawyer, Aung San. Aung San, however, saw himself as a national leader, not a mere quisling, and in 1944 he changed sides and offered his co-operation to the British. The Fourteenth Army painfully recovered Burma from the Japanese in 1944–5, but the British government had no real interest in restoring colonial rule. General elections after the war gave Aung Sun an overwhelming mandate for independence. Aung Sun himself was assassinated, with many of his ministerial colleagues, in July 1947 by political opponents; but he was succeeded by his former Foreign Secretary, Thakin Nu, and Burma became independent on 4 January 1948. Unlike India, Pakistan and Ceylon, Burma did not choose to remain within the British Commonwealth of Nations after independence. It has been under military rule since 1962. In 1989 it changed its name to Myanmar on the grounds that 'Burma' referred only to part of the country (although the name Burma is still often used, much as the Netherlands is often incorrectly referred to as Holland).

Malaya meant more to the British than did Burma. They had acquired it gradually. In 1819 Sir Stamford Raffles had obtained the island of Singapore from the Sultan of Johore. It had developed into a great entrepôt port and the most important British naval base in Asia. Singapore, the island of Penang and the mainland territory of Malacca came to form the Straits Settlements, originally under the control of the East India Company but transferred to the Colonial Office in 1867. The rest of the Malayan Peninsula consisted of princely states. None was formally a British colony. The Federated Malay States – Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan and Pahang – gradually fell under British control and administration between 1874 and 1896. The other five states, Kedah, Kelantan, Trengganu, Johore and Perlis, were under the suzerainty of Thailand until 1909 when they too passed under a British protectorate.

Malaya was a very important supplier of both rubber and tin. In the difficult days after the Second World War, Malaya's exports were vitally important in keeping the Sterling Area solvent. (The Sterling Area was formed in 1939 to maintain the pound sterling as an international currency. It included the whole of the British empire and Commonwealth – except Canada – and a few other countries.)

The Malayans, anxious to resume their independence, had first to face an unexpected challenge from communist guerrillas, mainly Chinese, who were anxious to acquire control of such essential raw materials. The Chinese were a minority community in Malaya and not popular. The Malayans had no desire to fall under the control of their great near neighbour, communist China. They were quite willing to accept the assistance of British forces under Field Marshal Templer. Templer fought a text-book campaign and expelled the guerrillas. In some ways Templer's success misled the British, and later the Americans. They came to believe that guerrillas could be defeated fairly easily by well-planned military action. Malaya, however, was unlike Cyprus or Vietnam. In Malaya the guerrillas were the enemies, not the allies, of the people.

After the defeat of the communists, Malaya proceeded quietly to independence. The Malayans united behind the Tunku, Abdul Rahman. Abdul Rahman was the kind of courteous conservative with whom the British had always felt able to do business. The Federation of Malaya became an independent state within the Commonwealth on 31 August 1957. On 16 September 1963 it was enlarged by the addition of Singapore (which had remained separate in 1959), Sabah (the former British North Borneo) and Sarawak, and adopted the name of Malaysia. Singapore, however, opted to resume its independence from the Federation on 9 August 1965. Brunei, the last British possession in the area, became independent in February 1984.

# 2

# *The British Empire: Africa*

The African nationalists may have looked to the Asian precedents but the British government originally envisaged a very different time-scale for their African possessions. Discounting the Union (from 1961 the Republic) of South Africa, there were two main types of British colony in Africa. First, there were those with no appreciable white settler element. These included all Britain's West African colonies – the Gambia, Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast and Nigeria – and most of those in the eastern half of the continent – Uganda, Tanganyika, Zanzibar and Nyasaland. Northern Rhodesia was usually regarded as falling in the same class, although there was a larger European population there (73,000 in 1959). The two where the settler population was too important to be ignored were Kenya and Southern Rhodesia. Apart from these colonies, properly so-called, Britain controlled Egypt and the Egyptian Sudan.

African culture and civilization tended to be denigrated by Europeans until very recently. As late as 1963 the distinguished historian Hugh Trevor Roper (later Lord Dacre) could say in a television broadcast, 'Perhaps in the future there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none: there is only the history of Europeans in Africa' (*Listener*, 1963, p. 871). He did at least concede that the ignorance might be on the European side and that African history might be 'discovered'. Many of his predecessors would simply have assumed, as did Sir Alan Burns, a notable and in many ways enlightened colonial administrator, that Africa had no history as Europe understood the term; he wrote, 'For countless centuries, while all the pageant of history swept by,