

Empires and Nations

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Prologue

For over two millennia, empires were the great political structures that overshadowed human society through their mixture of leadership and oppression ([Jane Burbank & Frederick Cooper](#)). In the last few centuries of the imperial era, some nations gained recognition in Europe and the Atlantic ([Kohn](#)). Then, after World War II, a flood of decolonization replaced empires, establishing national governments everywhere ([Jan Jansen & Jürgen Osterhammel](#)). Within both empires and nations, the subcategories were equally important: absolute vs. constitutional monarchy, monarchy vs. republic, parliamentary and presidential republics, the rise of dictatorships, and legislatures influenced more by lobbyists than by voters. This essay clarifies the global patterns of change in government.

Essay

Empires arose in the first millennium BCE. They linked numerous and diverse communities under a central military and administrative power. Most empires persisted for one to three centuries; new empires destroyed the old and empires spread gradually to new lands. Imperial military and religious regimes held together diverse monarchies and ethnicities, with multiple languages, religions and cultures. Commerce linked the regions of empires to each other and also to neighboring regions, whether under separate empires or outside of empires.

In a new phenomenon, nations began to appear as early as 1500 CE, notably in Europe. Empires and nations overlapped and competed from 1500 to 1980. Of the national units, some were governed as monarchies and others as republics. The specific character of the nation was the idea of a common identity among the members of a nation—a citizenry, rather than just subordination to a monarchy. The citizens of nations were presumed to be uniform in political identity, culture, and perhaps religion, in contrast to the diversity of empires. (In practice, most nations underwent serious internal conflict in response to their diverse composition.) Then, for five centuries, nations and empires coexisted and overlapped as competing and collaborating forms of government. During these centuries, the global history of nations and empires brought recurring change to the shape of global interrelations. Most simply, the world has shifted from dominance by empires to recognition of nationhood as the near-universal form of government. The details presented here summarize the past five centuries of empires, then trace the formation of nations, mostly as they broke away from empires through decolonization.

Waves of Empires, 1500–1980

In the late sixteenth century, as the rise of worldwide maritime contact enabled new empires to emerge alongside existing empires, a few major empires controlled a significant portion of the land and population of Earth. They were China (the Qing state), the Mughal state of India, Persia, Russia, the Ottomans, Spain's empire (in Europe, the Americas, and the Pacific), and Portugal (Brazil plus small territories in Africa and Asia). In fact, these empires controlled perhaps one fifth of the surface of the Earth.

Two centuries later, in the 1780s, the composition of the world's empires had changed only slightly. Remaining in place were Qing China, Persia, Russia, the Ottomans, the Spanish, and the Portuguese—the Mughals had now

been replaced by the Maratha state. New empires were mostly quite small. Britain had small territories in North America, the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean, and Australia. The Netherlands held Asian islands and small portions of South Africa and the Caribbean; France held small lands in the Atlantic and Indian Ocean; and the newly formed United States had substantial western lands.

By 1900, the imperial picture had changed greatly. China, Persia, the Ottomans, and Russia held relatively unchanged lands. Britain, France, and Portugal had each lost whole empires, but each gained large territories in Africa, while Britain, France, and Netherlands gained large territories in Asia. Germany, the U.S., and Japan each gained significant new imperial territories, while Brazil retained its status as an empire up to 1888. This was the greatest extent of imperial lands ever to exist on the Earth.

The two world wars marked the peak and the decline of empire. The year 1914 brought the outbreak of World War I, a war among imperial states armed with the latest in military technology. World War II led to a far greater cataclysm than World War I—in it, empires and nations fought each other at all levels. The result was total defeat for the Axis Powers and their policy of racial hierarchy. As a result, empires were discredited: by 1980, all of the empires were gone. They had been replaced by nations of one sort or another. China, Persia, Russia, the United States, and Brazil existed as great nations, no longer as empires. Four more great nations—India, Pakistan, Nigeria, and Indonesia—had gained independence from Britain and Netherlands, respectively.

Nationalism and Nationhood

Ideas and practices of nationalism and nationhood gradually took form in Europe, especially from the sixteenth century. Within what came to be known as “national monarchies,” a sense of patriotism developed among many subjects of the monarch, and the monarchs came to be seen as concerned with the welfare of the nation and not just the power of the state. Historian Hans Kohn told and retold these stories as part of his systematic chronicling of nationalism.¹ National monarchies arose in France, England, Portugal, Prussia, Denmark and Sweden. Netherlands accompanied these as a national government, organized as a republic rather than as a monarchy. These states were at once national monarchies, holders of imperial territory in Europe, and empires controlling overseas lands—England conquered Ireland and annexed Scotland, while Denmark annexed Norway. Meanwhile, nationalistic sentiments grew more slowly in Russia and in the Habsburg monarchies of Spain and Austria—yet they remained strictly imperial states until the nineteenth century.

In the eighteenth century, unsuccessful national movements arose in Scotland, Ireland, and Poland. Elsewhere in the eighteenth century, national sentiment took form among the Cherokee in North America: the nation persisted until its citizens were dispersed in the 1830s. Two great South American movements—led by Tupac Amarú in Peru and the Comuneros in New Granada—briefly threatened Spanish rule; the monarchical yet nationalistic regime of Tippoo Sultan in Mysore survived for decades until his death in 1799. Only with the late-eighteenth-century revolutions of the United States, France, and Haiti did nationalism become a full-blown social movement—as well as in Poland and Ireland for brief times in the 1790s.

In the nineteenth century, Muhammad Ali built a nationalistic monarchy in Egypt, though British intervention in 1836 reduced it to a semi-colonial status. Of the more successful national movements, mainland Latin American territories gained independence and nationhood after 1820. Brazil sustained a national monarchy for over sixty years; in the same era, over a dozen republics gradually took form in ex-Spanish America. Japan, long since unified, became a constitutional monarchy in 1868; Italy unified in 1860 and Germany unified in 1870, each through war

¹ Hans Kohn (1891–1971), born and educated in Prague’s German-speaking Jewish community, was an Austrian combatant and Russian prisoner of war during World War I. He began his writings on nationalism in the 1920s, settled in the United States in 1934, and continued to write numerous books and articles on nationalism and nationhood throughout the modern world until 1970.

and both with a provincial monarch becoming head of state in a constitutional monarchy. Ex-slave immigrants to Liberia declared an independent nation in 1847, which survives today. Norway, long a kingdom but under Danish rule, fell under Swedish rule in 1814; Norway declared independence as a constitutional monarchy in 1905.

By the end of the nineteenth century, a global community of some fifty nations had formed. Most national members of this community were in Europe and the Americas; a few were in Asia and Africa. Leaders of the community of nations were the great imperial powers, who controlled great amounts of territory that were considered to be colonies rather than nations. The imperial leaders were the main combatants in World War I; after the war, the community of nations formed the League of Nations to address their interrelationships. The League of Nations was flawed from the first in that several of the most powerful nations remained outside of it. In any case, the consequences of World War II led to decolonization, expansion of nationhood, the end of empires, and a wholly new community of nations.

Forms of National Government

Absolute monarchies, in which all were subservient to the monarch, have long existed and still survive today. Constitutional monarchies, in which parliamentary government enabled the merchants, landowners, and industrialists to have significant interest, created a more open political system. This was the system that evolved in Great Britain, where laborers were gradually able to participate politically. Similarly, Denmark changed within a century from an absolute monarchy to a parliamentary democracy governed by a social-democratic party with socialist policies. In the nineteenth-century era of British imperial dominance, British armies and diplomats encouraged the appointment of monarchs at the head of constitutional monarchies—as in Greece, Belgium, Thailand, and many other nations. (For monarchies that existed within the British empire, however, the British relied only on the sovereigns, so that since those lands became independent, they have been ruled by absolute monarchs—such is the case for Brunei, Emirates, Eswatini, Kuwait, and Qatar.)

In mainland America, the ex-Spanish territories, as they gained independence starting in 1820, tended to set up presidential republics modeled on the government of the United States. For most of the nineteenth century, presidential republics were the main form of government in the Americas, while parliamentary governments (with a monarch or a governor-general as head of state) in Europe plus Siam and Japan.

With time, a new and personal form of governance arose in nations with both parliamentary and presidential systems, in nations with monarchs, presidents, or prime ministers. This was dictatorship, in which a single individual had unique power over the state, even though the constitutional forms remained in place. The first major dictator was Porfirio Díaz, who held power as president from 1877 to 1911. In Italy, Benito Mussolini held power as prime minister from 1922 to 1943.

The strains of neocolonialism and other difficulties of independence led commonly to military seizures of power and dictatorships. But in twentieth-century decolonization, British and French rulers set up parliamentary republics as they left the colonies. As these nations returned to civilian rule, they tended overwhelmingly to create presidential republics, so that this form of government is now predominant throughout the world.

Decolonization and End of Empire

Nationalist movements gained strength in many parts of the world in the interwar years, 1919–1940. After World War II, nationalist movements gained great popular support in the colonies, and the imperial powers found that they had little choice but to accede to demands for national self-determination. “Decolonization,” a term adopted in the 1960s to refer to the waves of national independence for European colonies in Asia and Africa, carried on in practice until the end of the twentieth century.

In the 1940s, the nations of Asia gained their independence, including India, Pakistan, Indonesia, and the Philippines (further, the revolutionary movement in China proclaimed the People's Republic of China in 1949). In the 1960s, some 35 African nations, the majority of all African nations, gained their independence. In the 1970s, the island nations of the world gained independence—in the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean, and the Pacific. Portugal held on to its colonies the longest, but the results seemed inevitable. With the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, most of its federated republics declared their independence.

But if one reviews the full history of the rise and fall of empires, it becomes clear that decolonization began well before 1945. Britain lost most of North America to the independent United States, France lost its most valuable colony with the independence of Haiti in 1803, and Spain lost its mainland American colonies to national movements as of about 1820. The Ottoman empire began to lose its colonies with Greece in the 1820s, and with Serbia, Algeria, Egypt, Bulgaria, and Romania thereafter. With the collapse of the German, Russian, and Austro-Hungarian empires in World War I, several more European countries gained national independence—Finland, the Baltic states, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and (in a different story) Ireland. Britain and France, victors in the war, seized the remaining Arab lands of the Ottoman empire during the war, but granted them partial independence before the end of World War II.

Thus, in addition to the gradual rise of national sentiment and national movements after 1500, an early dimension of decolonization began with the United States and continued during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yet there is a reason to distinguish these two periods of nationalism and decolonization—those before and after 1945. Decolonization before 1945 took place in a world dominated by racism and imperial expansion; decolonization after 1945 took place in a world of terminal imperial decline, in which anti-racism had become a powerful movement that brought major social change.