

Decolonization and the Fourth Republic

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Q. How important was the empire to France in the immediate post-1945 period?

A. Following the defeat and occupation of France during the Second World War, France was much weakened. With the emergence of the two new superpowers, the USA and the USSR, France was also no longer the world power it had been before the war. Post-war French governments therefore attached central importance to maintaining the empire, as a means of reasserting France's world power status.

Q. What was the French Union?

A. While maintaining the empire was a key priority, there was also a recognition by the republican leaders of post-war France that colonial rule could not continue as it had before the war. De Gaulle's address in 1944 to the Brazzaville Conference on the future of the colonies acknowledged that reforms were needed and expected, both in recognition of African loyalty to France during the war and to reward the 200,000 Africans who had served in the French Army. To symbolize this new deal for the empire and assert the unity between the people of metropolitan France and the colonies, in 1946 the Ministry of Colonies was renamed the Ministry for Overseas France and the empire itself became the French Union, part of the 'one and indivisible' French Republic.

Q. What was the state of play in French West Africa (FWA)? How strong was the support for independence in 1945? Who were the key actors?

A. It is noticeable that there was very little support for independence in FWA in 1945. Only a tiny minority of intellectuals demanded liberation from France. The future leader of independent Senegal raised the spectre of independence in one little-noticed article, but this was more out of frustration at the slow pace of the promised reforms than conviction. In fact, he did not mention independence again and the demand for independence only emerged in the discourse of FWA's main political leaders in 1959–60. Although African students in France initiated the demand for independence in 1950, they were not heeded by most of the French-educated elite of FWA, who preferred to campaign for decolonization through closer integration with France, rather than secession from it. They wanted to see a reformed empire and campaigned for the creation of a modern Africa within the colonial system – the realization of a genuine and equal 'French Union' – rather than independence. Only when it finally became clear that this ambition was unattainable, in the late 1950s, did FWA's main political leaders, in many cases reluctantly, ask for independence.

Q. What was the nature of decolonization in French West Africa? How was it different from Indochina and French North Africa?

A. The key point here is that there was no war of decolonization in FWA. Instead, there was a generally smooth and peaceful political transition from colonial rule to national sovereignty for the eight new countries – from Mauritania in the north to former Dahomey (present-day Benin) in the south – that emerged from the former federation of FWA in 1960 (Guinea under its fiery leader Sekou Touré had actually taken its independence two years earlier and was promptly excluded from the French ‘family’). This transition is often presented as having been carefully managed by well-intentioned French politicians and enlightened African leaders. However, the rapid unfurling of events after the Second World War was a complex, piecemeal and unpredictable process. In particular, it is important to realize that there was, before 1959, no deliberate French policy to grant independence to Black Africa. The peaceful transition was more the result of France’s creation of a loyal, French-speaking elite in FWA, than the product of any French plan.

Q. What has been the legacy of colonization both in France and West Africa since 1960?

A. It is sometimes said that France decolonized in FWA ‘so as better to remain’. In other words, decolonization was not conceived, either by France or by the main political leaders of former FWA, as a break in relations. It was, rather, a recognition that the international tide was by this time flowing against the maintenance of a colonial empire and this was an attempt to reconfigure the relationship between France and Africa for a new world in which colonialism had lost its legitimacy. For France, decolonization maintained the essentials – its sphere of influence in Africa – but freed it of the growing cost of colonial rule; while for the new African governments of the small, poor and politically fragile countries that emerged, ill-prepared, to face independence from the federation of FWA, it provided continuing support and stability. An array of political, economic, cultural and military ties continued to bind France to its former colonial territories in FWA long after independence.

Key publication by Tony Chafer

The End of Empire in French West Africa: France’s Successful Decolonization? (Oxford: Berg, 2002).

Further reading

F. Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

J.D. Hargreaves, *Decolonization in Africa*, second edn (London: Longman, 1996).

J. Springhall, *Decolonization since 1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001).