The Long Road to Independence: Nationalist Movements Across Africa, 1945–1985

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Introduction

Between 1945 and 1985, Africa experienced one of the most consequential political transformations of the twentieth century. Empires that had seemed permanent unraveled in a matter of decades, giving way to a mosaic of independent states. The Long Road to Independence examines this continental shift through a comparative lens, asking why some nationalist movements negotiated swift constitutional exits while others waged prolonged guerrilla wars; why certain leaders built broad, disciplined parties while others relied on charismatic networks; and how international forces—from the United Nations and the Non-Aligned Movement to Cold War patrons—shaped the timing, tenor, and outcomes of decolonization.

This study treats independence not as a single event but as a process with multiple stages: mobilization, confrontation, settlement, and transition. It brings together cases often studied in isolation—Algeria’s FLN insurgency, Ghana’s “positive action,” Kenya’s Mau Mau, Tanzania’s nation-building, the Congo crisis, Portuguese Africa’s long wars, liberation in Zimbabwe and Namibia, and the regional struggle against apartheid—while illuminating lesser-known movements that complicate neat narratives. The Union des Populations du Cameroun (UPC), the Somali Youth League, Eritrean and Sahrawi nationalists, and student and trade-union militants across Francophone West Africa each reveal alternative repertoires of contention and distinct negotiations with colonial power.

A central contention of this book is that strategies of decolonization emerged from the interaction of three arenas: domestic political organization, colonial state structure, and the international environment. Parties and unions forged mass constituencies or faltered under repression; settler regimes and extractive economies raised the costs of compromise; and diplomatic opportunity structures—from UN committees to shifting superpower calculations—altered the calculus of both insurgents and imperial administrators. By triangulating across these arenas, we can explain not only when independence arrived, but also why post-independence institutions took the forms they did.

Leadership mattered, but rarely in isolation. Figures such as Nkrumah, Lumumba, Ben Bella, Nyerere, Cabral, Mondlane, Machel, Nkomo, Mugabe, Nujoma, and Mandela operated within organizational ecologies and transnational networks. Their choices—whether to prioritize party discipline or guerrilla decentralization, to internationalize a conflict or localize it, to accept constitutional gradualism or insist on rupture—were conditioned by pressures from rank-and-file activists, rural communities, religious authorities, and urban intellectuals. Women’s labor, leadership, and political education—too often relegated to the margins—were integral to

sustaining movements and reshaping social relations during and after the struggle.

The comparative frame adopted here also emphasizes outcomes after the flag was raised. Independence opened new possibilities while carrying forward institutional legacies of indirect rule, bifurcated citizenship, and uneven development. Some states pursued ambitious nation-building and socialist experiments; others faced immediate coups, secessionist wars, or debt crises. The book traces how wartime organizational cultures influenced civilian governance, how security imperatives shaped constitutions, and how narratives of liberation became resources for legitimacy, memory-making, and, at times, exclusion.

Organized chronologically and thematically, the chapters move from the postwar colonial inheritance to the first wave in North Africa, through West, Central, East, and Southern Africa, to island and deferred decolonizations, before assessing cross-cutting themes—international diplomacy, media and religion, gendered participation, and the politics of memory. By the end, readers will be equipped to compare trajectories across regions, understand why strategies diverged, and assess the promises and paradoxes of independence between 1945 and 1985. The long road did not end at the moment of sovereignty; it set the course for state-building and citizenship that continues to shape African politics today.

CHAPTER ONE: The Colonial Inheritance in 1945: Empires, Economies, and Social Worlds

The Second World War did not end colonialism; it subjected it to a harsh new audit. In 1945, British, French, Belgian, Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian administrators still governed most of Africa, and settler minorities ruled key territories from the Cape to the highlands of Kenya and Zimbabwe. The costs of the war—mobilized African soldiers, taxed African peasants, and censored African editors—had made the imperial bargain look less like a permanent order and more like a set of contingent arrangements that could be renegotiated. The rhetoric of Atlantic Charter democracy and anti-fascist liberation resonated beyond Europe, sharpening expectations that colonial subjects might also be entitled to self-determination. For governors, the priority was to restore order, rebuild metropolitan economies, and keep strategic resources secure in a world now divided between two new superpowers.

The imperial map drawn in the late nineteenth century remained largely intact, but the logic of administration had shifted after the shocks of the 1930s. Direct rule had expanded where it was once patchy, and indirect rule had been codified into new systems of “customary” authority. British Africa was organized into a patchwork of protectorates and colonies, some with settler political clout, others anchored by a colonial bureaucracy and an emerging class of African civil servants. French West and Equatorial Africa were conceived as a unitary federation under a governor-general in Dakar, with an assimilationist ideology that promised citizenship to a narrow elite. Belgium governed the Congo through a paternalistic, technocratic regime that offered few avenues for political expression. Portugal’s “pluriracial” empire was a fiction designed to mask rigid hierarchies and coercive labor regimes.

Economies in 1945 were built on extraction and export. In the Congo, copper and cobalt from the Copperbelt underpinned global industry while the population endured forced labor and taxation. West Africa’s cocoa, palm oil, and groundnut belts were tied to metropolitan processors and shipping lines. Kenya’s white highlands and Zimbabwe’s farms rested on African peasant displacement and migrant labor, with reserve systems designed to keep wages low. North Africa’s phosphate mines and port cities linked Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria to European markets. In Southern Africa, gold and coal fed war machines and postwar reconstruction. These circuits shaped not only revenue but also the distribution of social power: chiefs, merchants, mission-educated clerks, and European-owned firms sat at the spigots of opportunity.

The war had transformed African labor and military service. Over a million African soldiers and porters served, from the Sudan to Madagascar, and their return home

after 1945 created new networks of veterans, political networks, and expectations. Paybooks, uniforms, and travel experiences widened horizons, while wartime shortages and price inflation hit urban and rural households hard. The French tried to channel veteran grievances into municipal councils; the British looked to “indirect” co-option via local authorities. But the disjuncture between sacrifice and citizenship was glaring: men who had fought for “freedom” faced poll taxes, land alienation, and limited franchise rights. In towns, factory work and wartime services expanded a working class that was increasingly restive and organized.

Colonial social policy in 1945 straddled reform and repression. The French implemented a new Labor Code in 1946, curbing the worst abuses while preserving employer prerogatives. The British passed a War Damage Act and promised development through colonial welfare plans, but the sums were modest and tightly controlled. Missions continued to dominate schooling, producing a small cadre of literate clerks, teachers, and catechists who became critical interpreters of politics. Urban councils in Dakar, Accra, Lagos, and Nairobi experimented with limited elections, while colonial security services expanded surveillance capacity. Repression remained a blunt instrument: the 1947 murder of a South African miner and the incarceration of union activists signaled that colonial order still rested on force when persuasion failed.

The political map in 1945 was a mosaic of institutions that would shape strategies for decades. In British colonies, indirect rule relied on “recognized” chiefs, creating new conflicts over legitimacy and land. French territories had municipal councils and the aspiration of citizenship through the 1946 Lamine Guèye law, which extended the vote to subjects in local elections, but full citizenship required naturalization and the 1946 loi Laval limited its reach for many. Belgium’s colonial doctrine emphasized social welfare and technical expertise but barred political parties in the Congo until late in the decade. Portugal’s rigidly authoritarian empire tolerated no opposition. Settler colonies—South Africa, Southern Rhodesia, Kenya, and Algeria—featured European-dominated legislatures and coercive land regimes that subordinated African majorities. Each institutional configuration created different pressure points for nationalists.

African elites in 1945 were diverse in background and ambition. A small group of Western-educated lawyers, journalists, and teachers—often products of mission schools and elite lycées—began to articulate claims for representation and rights. Their tools were petitions, letters to newspapers, and appeals to metropolitan parliaments. In Francophone territories, the impact of the 1946 French Constituent Assembly elections, which allowed African candidates like Léopold Sédar Senghor and Lamine Guèye to sit in Paris, offered a taste of parliamentary politics. In British colonies, lawyers and teachers increasingly linked local grievances—land, taxes, labor—to broader constitutional questions. In Portuguese and Spanish territories, space for such expression was minimal, forcing alternatives to emerge later.

Trade unions became critical vectors of political organization between 1945 and the early 1950s. Dockworkers, railwaymen, miners, and clerks led strikes that linked wages to the price of bread and the politics of citizenship. In Dakar, the 1945 strike by railway workers and the 1947–48 general strike in French West Africa demonstrated the capacity to paralyze infrastructure and force negotiations. In Nigeria, the 1945 general strike and the growth of the Nigerian Union of Railwaymen foreshadowed mass mobilization. In Kenya, the 1947 Mombasa dock strike and the role of the East African Trade Union Congress underscored the urban working class’s potential leverage. Unions built networks that transcended ethnic lines, connected cities to ports, and taught activists how to organize, bargain, and escalate.

Peasant movements and rural grievances also shaped the postwar political landscape. The 1947 Mau Mau uprising in Kenya was the most explosive, rooted in land alienation, forced labor, and chiefly authority’s complicity. Its repression was brutal, but it exposed the structural injustices of settler colonialism and forced reforms. In French West Africa, the 1946 RDA (Rassemblement Démocratique Africain) founded in Bamako linked local associations and unions to a continental vision, though it faced repression and internal debates over cooperation with the colonial state. The 1949–50 cocoa holdup in the Gold Coast, orchestrated by farmers protesting price controls, signaled rural producers’ capacity to withhold commodities and pressure the colonial economy. These movements showed that the countryside was not a passive backdrop to urban politics.

Intellectual currents in 1945 stretched from Paris and London to Accra and Dakar. African soldiers returning from Europe brought stories and newspapers; students in Paris read Senghor and Césaire; mission-educated clerks absorbed ideas of social welfare and constitutionalism. The French Communist Party, with its anti-colonial rhetoric, attracted African activists in the RDA and unions, though the relationship was fraught. In British colonies, Fabian socialism and trade unionism provided organizational templates. Across the continent, debates raged over whether to pursue assimilation, federalism, or outright independence, and whether to work within colonial institutions or build mass parties outside them.

Regional economies in 1945 were tightly interwoven with metropolitan planning. In French West Africa, the CFA franc and the banking system tied monetary policy to Paris, limiting fiscal autonomy. In British territories, colonial development funds were modest and often earmarked for infrastructure that served export agriculture—ports, railways, and storage—rather than diversified industry. In the Congo, Belgian mining companies like Union Minière controlled strategic resources and social services, creating a technocratic paternalism that delayed political organization. In Southern Africa, the migrant labor system linked rural reserves to urban mines, reinforcing racial hierarchies and pass laws. These economic structures would shape the repertoire of nationalist strategies, from wage strikes to commodity boycotts.

The Atlantic Charter and the United Nations Charter created new international expectations. Although colonial powers resisted the UN's direct involvement in "domestic" matters, the 1945 Charter affirmed the principle of self-determination and established a framework for trusteeship and supervision. The war-time rhetoric of freedom and equality could not be unspoken, and African activists learned to frame local grievances in the language of international law. The UN's trusteeship system, though limited, offered a modest arena for petitions and scrutiny, particularly in former Italian and German colonies. International legitimacy mattered, even when enforcement was weak, and colonial administrators became sensitive to the optics of repression.

Security and intelligence services expanded dramatically after the war, adapting to new threats. In British Africa, Special Branches built networks of informants and infiltrated unions and parties, while the French kept detailed dossiers on activists through the DST and colonial police. In South Africa, the apartheid state's security apparatus, honed in the late 1940s, targeted both communists and African nationalists. These institutions would later challenge liberation movements, but in 1945 they were still consolidating. Police methods included surveillance, preventive detention, and the co-option of local intermediaries. The presence of these networks meant that nationalist organizing had to be resilient, adaptable, and often clandestine.

Settler politics in 1945 were particularly influential. In Kenya, white settlers dominated the Legislative Council, and their control over land and labor made negotiation with African representatives fraught. Southern Rhodesia's settler legislature pressed for greater autonomy from London, laying the groundwork for later minority rule. In Algeria, the European settler population—classified as citizens—enjoyed political dominance, while Muslim Algerians were governed as subjects. South Africa's 1948 National Party victory institutionalized apartheid, turning racial hierarchy into a comprehensive legal regime. These settler systems reduced the scope for compromise and raised the cost of dissent, pushing many African nationalists toward more confrontational strategies.

Rural-urban dynamics created new social worlds. Townships, compounds, and shantytowns grew around mines, ports, and administrative centers, bringing together migrants from different regions and ethnic groups. These spaces were sites of solidarity and tension: mutual aid societies, churches, and sports clubs functioned as de facto political networks. Municipal elections in places like Dakar and Nairobi offered a narrow opening for representation, while censorship and repression kept party formation tightly controlled. The experience of urban life—wages, rent, policing—taught activists how to mobilize across ethnic lines and use strikes, petitions, and demonstrations to press demands.

The Catholic and Protestant missionary networks continued to shape social life and

literacy. Missions ran schools, clinics, and presses, and were often the first point of contact with ideas of citizenship and rights. However, their close ties to colonial administrations made them ambivalent partners for nationalists. In some regions, African churches and independent religious movements—like the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition or Zionist and Aladura churches—asserted spiritual autonomy and sometimes political space. The language of moral authority—whether in chapels, mosques, or community gatherings—became a resource for organizing and legitimacy. Religious networks crossed borders and could carry messages that colonial censors struggled to contain.

Regional variations in 1945 set the stage for divergent paths. French West Africa’s centralized administration and large peasant population would produce broad parties like the RDA, while British West Africa’s older settler-free colonies, such as the Gold Coast and Nigeria, allowed earlier experiments with constitutional politics. Central Africa’s extractive economies and settler presence created high barriers to mass organization. East Africa’s mixed economies and settler farms led to violent confrontations. Southern Africa’s mining complex and racial laws made legal politics nearly impossible for African majorities. North Africa, tied closely to Mediterranean geopolitics, combined urban nationalist elites with rural religious and tribal networks.

Urban associations and youth leagues provided early organizational infrastructure. The Young Italia and French radical clubs inspired African student groups, while the Somali Youth League (founded in 1943) and the Jeunesse Senegalaise offered templates for mobilization. These groups often started as cultural and mutual-aid associations, then pivoted to politics as issues broadened. Their leaders were teachers, clerks, and returning soldiers, skilled in public speaking and letter-writing. The boundary between social welfare and political organizing was porous: helping members with jobs, legal issues, or school fees created bonds that could be mobilized during strikes or elections.

Women’s participation in 1945 was extensive but unevenly recognized. Market women sustained urban economies and often coordinated boycotts; farm wives carried the labor burden as men migrated to mines and cities; women’s church groups and mutual-aid societies provided networks for information and support. In French West Africa, women traders played crucial roles in the cocoa holdup and price protests, while in British colonies, women’s associations lobbied for education and welfare. Their political visibility was constrained by colonial and patriarchal norms, yet their everyday labor underwrote the social infrastructure on which nationalist movements depended.

The press and print culture expanded after the war, despite censorship. Newspapers like West Africa and the Gold Coast’s Accra Evening News, the Dakar-based Afrique Nouvelle, and Nigeria’s Daily Times spread political arguments and reports. In Francophone territories, the newspaper Présence Africaine linked diaspora

intellectuals with African debates. Print created a shared political vocabulary—rights, development, citizenship—and helped link towns and regions. Censorship laws and libel cases were common, but the circulation of pamphlets, letters, and party bulletins created a web of communication that colonial authorities found difficult to fully contain.

Economic shocks between 1945 and 1947 affected political timing. Inflation and supply shortages hit urban workers and rural producers alike. Currency reforms in French territories and price controls in British colonies provoked strikes and boycotts. The 1947 French West Africa general strike coincided with growing awareness that wartime sacrifices had not translated into new rights. In the Gold Coast, the 1947 cocoa holdup disrupted export earnings and signaled peasant capacity to organize. These events forced colonial administrators to negotiate, reform, or repress—choices that set precedents for later crises.

Constitutional experiments began cautiously in British Africa. Legislative Councils were expanded to include a handful of African “representatives,” often chosen by colonial officials rather than elected by mass constituencies. The 1946 Burns Constitution in Jamaica inspired debates about gradual reform, and similar discussions played out in Accra and Lagos. The Gold Coast’s 1946 constitution widened the franchise slightly, but reserved seats for chiefs and merchants, illustrating the colonial strategy of balancing interests rather than ceding power. In Nigeria, the Richards Constitution of 1946 introduced regional representation, foreshadowing federalism’s later prominence. These incremental changes taught African politicians how to work within—and around—colonial rules.

The French tried to balance assimilation and control through the 1946 Constitution and new municipal arrangements. The Lamine Guèye law extended local voting rights to colonial subjects, but full citizenship required individual naturalization under the Loi Laval, which most Africans could not easily obtain. African deputies in Paris used parliamentary platforms to raise colonial issues, but the limits of metropolitan reforms were clear. The RDA’s founding in 1946 reflected a turn toward organized mass politics, even as French authorities monitored and repressed it. The dual structure—metropolitan citizenship for a few, subject status for the many—would fuel debates over assimilation versus autonomy.

In Portuguese territories, political organization was minimal in 1945. The authoritarian Estado Novo regime allowed no parties, and censorship was severe. Yet the postwar moment brought subtle shifts: urban professionals, students, and church figures began to circulate ideas quietly. The lack of legal channels made clandestine networks and later guerrilla organizing more likely. In Spanish Sahara and other minor territories, political life was tightly controlled and sparsely populated, leaving little room for early mobilization. This institutional vacuum would later shape the character of resistance in Portuguese and Spanish colonies.

Belgium’s approach to the Congo in 1945 combined paternalism and development with strict political prohibition. The colonial state invested in health, education, and infrastructure, especially in mining regions, while denying political parties until 1957. This produced a paradox: a relatively stable administration with limited indigenous political experience. The absence of organized parties meant that when political opening came late in the 1950s, it arrived rapidly and with high stakes. The Congo’s economy, dominated by Union Minière and other companies, was highly integrated into global markets, yet its political society was underdeveloped—a recipe for future crisis.

The Horn and North Africa in 1945 were more deeply embedded in Mediterranean and Middle Eastern politics. Ethiopia was independent but occupied by British forces after the war; Somaliland was under British trusteeship and Italian Somaliland under UN oversight; the Somali Youth League began mobilizing across these territories. In French North Africa, urban nationalists in Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria were organized into parties and associations that drew on Islamic reformism, urban notables, and rural alliances. These regions had stronger traditions of print culture and organized political life, setting them on earlier, more confrontational paths with colonial rulers.

The social world of 1945 was thus marked by deep structural continuities and new forms of dislocation. Colonial economies demanded labor and raw materials; colonial administrations demanded order and revenue; African societies navigated these demands while rebuilding from wartime disruptions. The institutions of rule—chiefdoms, missions, municipal councils, unions, parties—formed an arena in which strategies would be tested. The inherited map and economy constrained choices, but they also revealed opportunities: ports and railways that could be shut down, commodity markets that could be withheld, elections that could be contested, and international forums that could be petitioned.

The stage was set for divergent trajectories. Where colonial authorities offered limited constitutional openings, parties learned to compete and negotiate. Where economic leverage existed, unions and peasant associations could force concessions. Where settler power or authoritarian regimes blocked legal avenues, movements turned to clandestine organizing and, eventually, armed struggle. The postwar moment did not guarantee independence, but it redefined the terms of contestation. The colonial inheritance was not just a map on a wall or a budget line in a metropolitan ledger; it was a set of social relations, economic dependencies, and political institutions that nationalists would have to understand, confront, and, where possible, transform.

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