



The Cold War Around the World

By Burleigh Hendrickson

The Cold War was a political rivalry between the US and the USSR. We called it a “cold” war because there were fewer guns and bombs than previous wars. But the war created violence and tensions around the globe.

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Decolonization and the Cold War

As European empires ended, new nations emerged in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The US and the Soviet Union¹ were two superpowers at the time. They competed to influence these new nations. This conflict was called the Cold War.

The US and the USSR became involved in affairs across Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Africa. The US wanted to protect its trade interests and stop communism in new nations. In a communist country, the government controls everything. The USSR was a communist nation. The USSR challenged the US for political influence in those new nations. These nations had just freed themselves from European control. Now, they had to deal with American and Soviet intruders.

The Cold War in Asia

In South Asia, Mohandas Gandhi led a peaceful independence movement against British control. However, British rule pitted religious groups against each other. Civil war broke out between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. To end the conflict, British India was divided into new nations. India was created for the Hindu-majority. East and West Pakistan were created for the Muslim-majority.

In 1965, war began in South Asia. India and Pakistan were fighting over territory in the region of Kashmir. The US stopped providing weapons to the Kashmir people. Then, India took control of Kashmir from Pakistan. The region remains in dispute to this day.



South Asia after the collapse of British India in the late 1940s. Note that East Pakistan (Bangladesh, today) and West Pakistan (Pakistan, today) were physically divided by India. Public domain.

¹ Soviet Union is an abbreviated way to say Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

In the 1970s, a civil war broke out between East and West Pakistan. Most Pakistanis were Muslim but did not speak the same language. West Pakistan controlled resources and the military. It forced its language, Urdu, on Bangla² speaking East Pakistanis.

The US supported West Pakistan. India and the USSR supported East Pakistan. East Pakistan gained its independence in 1971 and became the country of Bangladesh. The effects of this conflict still impact South Asia today.

The Cold War was just as chilly in central Asia. The British Empire gave up its control of Afghanistan in 1919. However, certain ethnic groups were already divided. These groups felt more loyalty to their tribes than any national identity. In the late 1970s, the USSR invaded Afghanistan. The US feared the spread of Soviet influence, so they helped Islamic fighters attack the Soviets. The plan left the USSR in debt. Eventually, this affected the USSR's fall. However, this plan also empowered violent Islamic groups.

The Cold War in Latin America and the Caribbean

Latin American countries were left divided after hundreds of years of Spanish colonial rule. In Guatemala, there was a wealthy European minority. This group owned most of the land, which hurt the native communities. The European minority brought foreign business to Guatemala. The American United Fruit Company took over much Guatemalan land. This hurt local banana farmers. In the 1940s, Guatemalans elected socialist leaders. Socialism is similar to communism, but people can own private property. In the 1950s, these leaders gave land back to the poor native communities. American businesspeople asked the US government to get involved.

With the help of the C.I.A.,³ Guatemalan rebels overthrew the socialist government. The new leader returned land to the United Fruit Company. Social tensions continued in Guatemala.

The US could not stop communism in Cuba. The USSR supported Fidel Castro's communist government. Meanwhile, the C.I.A. failed to remove Castro from power. Some of the tensest days of the Cold War occurred during the Cuban Missile Crisis. It was discovered that Cuba was keeping Soviet nuclear missiles. No missiles were launched in the end. However, many believe we barely avoided nuclear war.

American and Soviet involvement changed Latin American history. Some countries experienced Cold War dictatorships. These countries are still addressing the consequences of these dictatorships today. Meanwhile, countries like Honduras live in poverty and depend on the US.⁴

The Cold War in Africa

Africans turned to communist and socialist ideas after colonization ended. Anti-imperial and pan-African⁵ feeling strengthened after World War Two. Pan-Africanists felt a strong cultural pride in their African heritage. In the US, many African Americans felt similar effects. Some African Americans began wearing traditional African clothing.

The Belgian Congo is in central Africa. This is where some of the greatest Cold War competition took place. A pan-Africanist named Patrice Lumumba led a movement against Belgian rule. Lumumba identified with communism. He became independent Congo's first Prime Minister in 1960. Immediately, he faced a messy situation. The US and Belgium wanted to keep their business ties in resource-rich places like Katanga. But Katanga also wanted to leave

² Bangla (also called Bengali) is widely spoken in India, while Urdu is mostly limited to Pakistan. However, Urdu is spoken in some parts of India.

³ The C.I.A. (Central Intelligence Agency) is run by the federal government of the US. It gathers global intelligence and information in the interest of US national security.

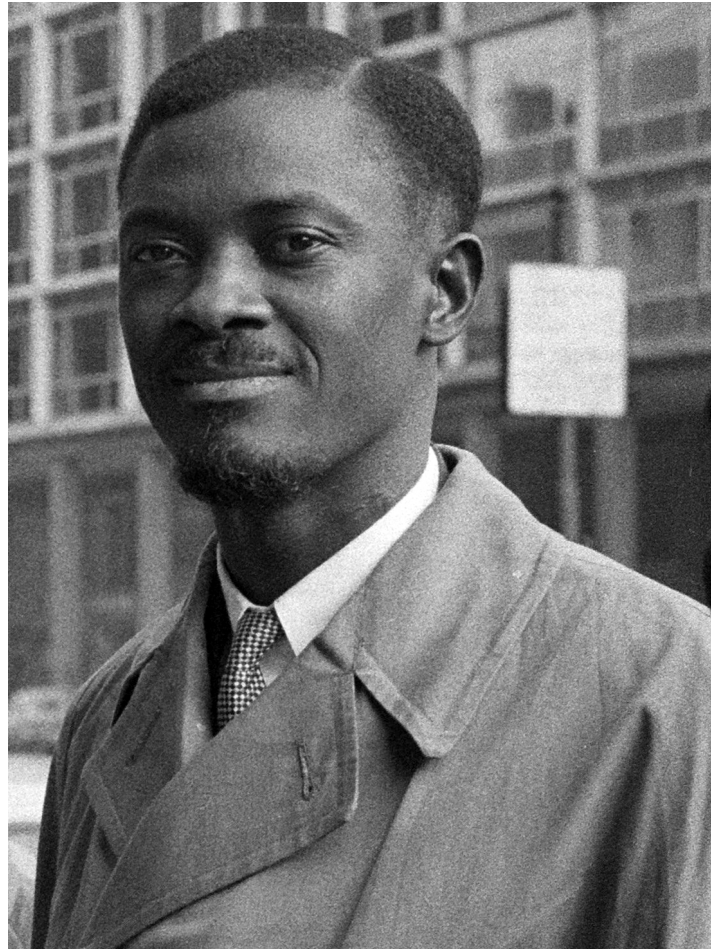
⁴ Two-thirds of Hondurans live in extreme poverty, making less than US\$1.90 per day. This is according to a report from the World Bank in 2018.

⁵ Pan-Africanism generally refers to the belief in a more socialist Africa. It is also a rejection of non-African political and economic influences.

the Congo. The result was a series of violent conflicts. Some Congolese soldiers carried out massacres against certain ethnic groups and also against Belgians.

No one would help Lumumba put down the rebellion in Katanga. He turned to the Soviet Union. With the help of the US and Belgium, anti-communist members of the Congolese government killed Lumumba in 1961. Congolese military leaders took power. Life in the Congo changed dramatically. Most European settlers fled. A strong military dictatorship emerged in 1965. The Congo was left with anti-communism beliefs, corruption, and authoritarian rule.

In summary, decolonization and the Cold War were connected. New nations emerged after European imperialism. These nations often had to side with the Americans or the Soviets when they needed help. Both superpowers influenced politics in decolonizing nations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The Cold War rivalry produced instability and authoritarian rule around the world.



[Patrice Lumumba](#) attending the Congolese Round Table Conference in Brussels, Belgium in January, 1960. By Harry Pot, CC BY-SA 3.0.

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Image credits

South Asia after the collapse of British India in the late 1940s. Note that East Pakistan (Bangladesh, today) and West Pakistan (Pakistan, today) were physically divided by India. Public domain. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Partition_of_India#/media/File:Partition_of_India.PNG

Patrice Lumumba attending the Congolese Round Table Conference in Brussels, Belgium in January, 1960. By Harry Pot, CC BY-SA 3.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Anefo_910-9740_De_Congolese2.jpg



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