UNIT 4 BIG IDEA

INDEPENDENCE AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE 20TH AND 21ST CENTURIES

The 20th century saw a set of devastating global wars, the dissolution of centuries-old **empires**, and a new worldwide focus on **human rights**. It included three periods of independence movements that helped re-shape the world. These movements produced both new declarations of independence and new, independent **nations**. In the second half of the century, much of the world joined together to form the **United Nations**, a global effort to promote international cooperation and prevent the outbreak of another catastrophic world war. This international effort also turned its attention to creating a formal list of **rights** that should apply to all people and countries around the world, uniting smaller efforts that had previously been in progress.

Declarations of Independence

For nearly five centuries, powerful countries crossed oceans to colonize other lands around the world and to create vast empires. The first successful attempt to throw off that power was the American Revolutionary War in the 18th century. The victory of the United States and its Declaration of Independence caused a ripple effect that became the **Age of Revolutions** in the 19th century — and it did not stop there.

Turn of the 20th Century

The Spanish Empire experienced the Age of Revolutions particularly deeply. Many of their American colonies declared independence and established their own countries in the 19th century, including Venezuela (1811), Chile (1818), and Mexico (1821), among others. One of the last declarations of independence in the 19th century came from the Philippines in 1898. Achieving independence was complicated, however. Despite receiving help from the United States in their fight against Spain, neither the United States nor Spain recognized Philippine independence. Instead, the Philippines was given by Spain to the United States at the end of the Spanish-American War. The Philippines became fully independent in 1946.

Revolutions within the Spanish Empire were the first in a wave of such movements that swept across the globe, crossing the 19th century into the 20th and beyond. Like the Philippine Revolution, not all were linear nor were they all immediately successful. Regardless, more and more people around the world continued to push for their independence.

Post WWI Declarations

One of the factors that led to the outbreak of World War I was competition among several empires to amass and control colonies across the globe. In the wake of the war, a number of those colonies declared their intention to be free and independent nations. The Czechoslovak Declaration of Independence (1918) from the Austro-Hungarian Empire directly reference the United States Declaration and was drafted in Washington, D.C. As part of a long struggle for Irish independence from the United Kingdom, the Forógra na Saoirse or Irish Declaration of Independence (1919), **ratified** the creation of an independent Irish **republic**. India had also faced a long struggle for independence from the British and wrote the Purna Swaraj, or declaration of independence, as a statement of their goals and intentions in 1930. This declaration borrowed from the United States Declaration of Independence by stating that when a government deprives people of their **unalienable rights**, "the people have a further right to alter or abolish it." India fully secured their independence in 1947.

In East Asia, countries like Japan had been growing their empires since the end of the 19th century. Korea, for example, had been under the control of the Japanese Empire since 1910. Four months after World War I ended, Korea declared itself independent. However, it would take until 1945 for them to finally secure their independence.

Post WWII Declarations

Following World War II, dozens of nations in Asia and Africa declared independence from European and Asian empires. Their declarations of independence, many supported by military efforts, resulted in the dissolution of most global empires by the end of the 20th century.

During World War II, Vietnam was occupied by Japan. Beginning in 1941, Vietnamese revolutionary Ho Chi Minh led an independence movement, continuing political work he had been engaged in for years. When the war ended 1945, Ho Chi Minh proclaimed an independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam from both Japan and from France, which had controlled Vietnam before World War II. His declaration paraphrased the United States Declaration of Independence and the French Declaration of Rights of Man and of the Citizen. Ho Chi Minh admired George Washington, and he believed the United States Declaration to be an inspiration for **anti-colonialism**. However, his attempts to reach out to the United States for support were unsuccessful, as the United States aided France in its attempts to retake the country.

In South Asia, the dissolution of Great Britain's "Indian Empire" after World War I led to the creation of other countries after World War II as well. Pakistan gained its independence alongside India in 1947, and modern countries including Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka also declared and gained their independence between the 1940s and 1970s.

In Africa, Ghana was the first former European colony to gain independence. Ghana declared its independence from the United Kingdom in 1957. Celebrations of the new nation occurred at the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, where Ghana's new flag was introduced in recognition of the city's history of independence efforts. Several years later, on July 5, 1962, Algeria gained independence from France after 3 years of war. This was exactly 132 years after the start of French **occupation** of their land. The Algerian independence movement also supported others throughout Africa, including revolutionary leaders Nelson Mandela of South Africa and Mário Pinto de Andrade of Angola. Today, the majority of African countries are independent.

While most African independence movements returned power to Black African populations, there were attempts to keep white colonial power. For example, Southern Rhodesia declared independence from Britian in 1965, as a government that excluded Black Rhodesians. Their efforts ultimately failed. Instead, after both political conflict involving the British government and armed and political conflict with Black Rhodesians, the country gained its independence as the nation of Zimbabwe in 1980.

Post Cold War

At the end of World War II, the Soviet Union controlled many Eastern European and Central Asian countries. But, as in other places, independence movements began to grow. In 1989, countries including Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, gained independence from Soviet control, and East and West Germany reunified as a single country after 41 years of separation. Two years later, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to the creation or reemergence of 15 countries, including Ukraine, Georgia, and Lithuania. Around the same time, Yugoslavia split into several nations following a series of independence movements, some of which included their own declarations of independence. Slovenia was the first of these and renamed themselves the Republic of Slovenia in June 1991.

Today

Independence movements continue to this day. And as with previous efforts, gaining international recognition as an independent nation remains a critical step. In 2008, Kosovo declared independence from Serbia, which refused to recognize the declaration. Though their declaration was recognized as legal by the **International Court of Justice**,

only 97 countries currently recognize an independent Kosovo. Independence for other countries, like Taiwan and Palestine, continues to be contentious topics of debate and shows in real time how complicated, layered, and challenging the acts of declaring and recognizing independence often are.

Declaration of Human Rights

Declarations of independence were not the only type of declaration created after World War II. In 1947, the new United Nations Human Rights Committee authorized the creation of an international bill of rights in their very first session. Building on conversations around natural law and the rights of mankind that had taken place since at least the era of the **Enlightenment**, this document would list the rights that individuals and nations should expect to have regardless of their identity or location. This bill of rights became a reality in 1948 as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

John Humphrey and René Cassin are credited as the two primary authors of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but the declaration was constructed through the efforts and negotiations of hundreds of people. It borrows language from the United States Declaration of Independence and was influenced by other documents as well, including the French Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen. And every **delegate** on the Human Rights Commission, and many other contributors, had something to say. Article 1, which mimics the language of the United States Declaration's most famous line, was debated from the start. Originally saying "all men," objections from the Soviet Union delegate Vladimir Kortesky, the Commission on the Status of Women, and particularly Hansa Mehta, the delegate from India, changed the final phrasing to "all human beings."

WOMEN'S VOICES IN HUMAN RIGHTS

Many women helped to shape the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Hansa Mehta (India) insisted on the phrase "all human beings" in Article 1. Bodil Begtrup (Denmark) and Minerva Bernardino (Dominican Republic) also advocated for inclusive language, while Begum Shaista Ikramullah (Pakistan) and Evdokia Uralova (Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic) fought for equal rights in marriage and equal pay for equal work. Eleanor Roosevelt (United States) helped throughout the drafting process to be sure the document passed unanimously.

"Article 1. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights

The final version of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights contains 30 articles that cover a variety of political, civic, economic, social, and cultural rights. These include the right to equal protection under the law and the right to an adequate standard of living for their health and well-being. Although there was originally no way to enforce these rights, several regional institutions and non-governmental organizations have emerged around the globe to help protect human rights. Amnesty International and Doctors Without Borders are two of the most well-recognized of these.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights became a foundation of movements fighting for human rights into the 21st century. Its importance can be seen through the sheer volume of its translations. With versions in over 500 languages, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the most translated document in the world.

Since the 1940s, the fight for human rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has gone through ups and downs. Recently, the United Nations Global Citizenship Commission wrote a report on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a **living document** in the 21st century. The Commission described the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as laying the "foundation for our modern culture of human rights." How we will view human rights in the future is unknown, but it is clear that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights will continue to ripple outward much like the declarations that came before it.

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