1. **The British Empire**

**III.1. The First British Empire**

* In the15th and 16th century coinciding with the era of great discoveries, Portugal and Spain undertook to explore the world and established large empires around the globe (the Portuguese Empire and the Spanish Empire), which quickly boosted their economies in a context of global mercantilism
* The success of Spain and Portugal led England (under Henry VII), France and Netherlands to try in their turn to find colonies overseas
* England founded its first colony, Virginia, in North America in 1607 and later 12 other colonies in the same area including New Hampshire (1623), New York (1626), Massachusetts (1630), Maryland (1633), Connecticut (1636), Rhode Island (1636), Delaware (1638), North Carolina (1663), South Carolina (1663), New Jersey (1664), Pennsylvania (1681), Georgia (1732).
* The United Kingdom of Great Britain (after the union between Scotland and England in 1707) established then its first colonial power in North America with its 13 American colonies; this is referred to as the First British Empire
* Great Britain had also colonies in Asia particularly in the Caribbean islands
* Besides the kingdom of England, there were other colonial powers such as the Kingdoms of France, Spain and Portugal
* These different kingdoms disputed the various colonies in North America, which gave birth to **The Seven Years’ War** that was ended by **The Treaty of Paris** also called The Treaty of 1763
* During the war, the kingdom of France lost many of its colonies for the benefit of Great Britain ([Canada](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canada_%28New_France%29), Grenada, Dominica, [Guadeloupe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guadeloupe), [Saint Lucia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Lucia), [Saint Vincent and the Grenadines](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Vincent_and_the_Grenadines), and [Tobago](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tobago), Gorée and the Senegal river. Some of these colonies, namely Gorée, Guadeloupe, Saint Lucia but also Martinique were restored to France
* France and Spain gave back all their conquered territories to Britain and Portugal
* After that war won by the coalition led by Great Britain, the latter became the dominant colonial power in the world in gaining a good number of French colonies in America
* However, the UK of Great Britain lost much money in the war and was heavily in debt
* To pay back the debt, King George III imposed taxes to the Thirteen American colonies. They refused and started boycotting the British goods, which the king found unacceptable and sent soldiers to restore order in the colonies
* The Opposition between the king and the 13 colonies eventually led in 1775 to the outbreak of the American War of independence also called the American Revolution
* In July 1776 the thirteen colonies – that were politically and military united to better face the British government- declared independence and formed a new nation called the United States of America
* With the help of France and Spain, the USA won the war of independence and a treatise was signed in 1783 called The Treaty of Paris 1783 to end the war
* With this treaty negotiated by Benjamin Franklin, John Hay and John Adams representing the USA on the one hand, and David Hartley representing the British monarch on the other hand, the UK of Great Britain officially recognized the independence of the USA
* The loss of the Thirteen American colonies marked the end of the First British Empire, but also the beginning a new British conquest in Asia, the Pacific and later Africa

**III.2. The Second British Empire**

* In 1789 a great political and social change occurred in France Known as the French Revolution (from Monarchy to Republic)
* Most European monarchies feared the spread of the liberal and republican ideas of the French Revolution that could also called into question their political regimes
* The Republic of France attempted to defend and protect its Revolution against its enemies, engendering then the French Revolutionary wars (1792- 1802)
* These revolutionary wars developed into wars of conquest under Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte (1804-1815) commonly known as Napoleonic wars
* The Empire of France (a political regime not to be confused with the French colonial empire) obtained important victories and extended its territories overseas under Napoleon Bonaparte who will be eventually defeated in 1814 then in 1815
* With the defeat of the French Empire, its traditional and most serious enemy, Great Britain, rose again as the most powerful naval, trade and imperial power; it is the beginning of the second British Empire.
* In the early 19th century Industrial revolution took place in Great Britain that was, among other things, favoured by the expansion of the British empire
* Great Britain became the first world power and the biggest empire in the world
* Its colonial possessions comprised Canada, Australia, Pakistan, New Zealand, Malta, India, the Westindies (the Bahamas, Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, Guyana, etc.) and large parts of Africa (Egypt, Botswana, Zambia, Uganda, Kenya, Malawi, Lesotho, Mauritius, the Gambia, Nigeria, Ghana …)
* The British Empire was actually so vast that it was described as “[the empire on which the sun never sets](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_empire_on_which_the_sun_never_sets)" (because it was so extensive there always one part of the British territories that was in daylight)

**III.3. Decline and collapse of the British Empire**

* The U K remained the first world power until the beginning of the 20th century
* But soon Germany and the USA started rising as major powers, which undermined British hegemony
* This hegemony was more weakened after World War I; however, the decline of the British Empire started properly soon after World War II
* Though the UK was part of the allies that won the war, its economy was severely shaken (chiefly as a result of its terrible defeats between 1940 and 1942), which negatively impacted on its imperial power
* While the British prestige waned, two superpowers, the USA and the Soviet Union, rose after WWII and, to maintain their supremacy and extend their influence throughout the world, they discouraged the imperial ambitions of the already crumbling Empires, the UK and France specifically
* Backed up by the Soviet Union, the Indian Nationalist movement, under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, forced the UK to grant independence to India, the largest, most populous, and prosperous British colony that provided the UK with the main resources that it used during WWII and on which the British imperial power mainly rested
* In 1947, with The Indian Independence Act 1947, the parliament of the UK gave independence to India; the Act also partitioned India into two self-governing dominions: India (Hindus) and Pakistan (Muslims)
* With the loss of India, that great provider of resources for the UK, the latter found it almost impossible to maintain its navy, military and imperial power
* The UK gave then freedom to most of its Asian colonies
* The revolutionary and non-violence ideas of the great spiritual and political leader, Gandhi, who had already spent 21 years in the South African civil rights movement, will influence other intellectuals; the latter, among whom the South African, Nelson Mandela, the Ghanaian Kwame Krumah, the black American Martin Luter King Junior, will be actively involved in the fight for independence or more freedom for their people
* Freedom movements developed around the world and most local populations claimed independence for their countries
* The Soviet Union and India supported the freedom movements in various parts of the world to gain independence in addition to the anti-colonial policy of the USA (a former colony that encouraged decolonization and on which the UK, its former colonizer, was now financially dependent)
* The British government led by Prime Minister Clement Attle gave up the Empire and focused on its vast social programme called the Welfare State for the benefit of all British, mainly the poorest
* In the 1960s, in a context of a large decolonization movement, the UK granted independence to its African colonies
* The First country in black Africa to be granted independence by the UK is Gold Coast that became the Republic of Ghana with Kwame Nkrumah as president ( South Africa became independent in 1910, Egypt in 1922, Sudan in 1956)
* The independence of Ghana and the major Pan-African ideas of its leader, Nkrumah, played a determinant role in the independence of other British colonies in Africa such as Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Kenya, to name but a few
* In 1997 the UK handed over Hong Kong to China; this event known as Hong Kong turnover definitively marked the end of the British empire
* 14 territories preferred however to remain British territories and did not take their independence; they are today called the British overseas territories and are under the jurisdiction of the UK and have as Head of States Elizabeth II. They are small islands located in the Pacific, the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean, the Atlantic, etc. among them we have: Anguilla, Bermuda, British Indian Ocean Territory, Gibraltar, Saint Helena, etc.
* During the process of decolonization, the UK started a policy of cooperation with its former colonies, now independent States, with which it shares the same language and culture, giving then birth to the Commonwealth of Nations

**III.4. The Commonwealth of Nations**

* An intergovernmental organization that gather mainly the former British colonies and established by the London Declaration in 1949**;** its headquarters is in London (Marlborough House)
* Among the 52 member countries only Mozambique and Rwanda have never been British colonies
* The Commonwealth is composed of 5 kingdoms with Head of State other than the British Queen (Brunei, Lesotho, Malaysia, Swaziland, Tonga), 31 Republics (including South Africa, Ghana, India, Kenya, Malta, Mauritius, Nigeria, Pakistan, Uganda, Cameroon, Zambia, Dominica, etc.) and 16 monarchies whose Head of State is the reigning British monarch and collectively known as the Commonwealth Realms. They comprise among others: the Uk, Canada, Grenada, Jamaica, the Bahamas, Australia, Antigua and Barbuda, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Mauritius …)
* Rwanda is besides the last country to join the Commonwealth in 2009
* The States that make up the Commonwealth share the common language (English), history and a certain number of values such as democracy, human rights, international peace and security, tolerance, freedom of expression, good governance, etc. defined in the Commonwealth Charter
* A country that blatantly flouts (does not respect) these principles can be suspended from the Commonwealth; it is the example of Nigeria (1995-1990), Pakistan (1999-2004) then from 2007 to 2008, Zimbabwe in 2002
* Zimbabwe withdrew from the Commonwealth in 2003, Gambia in 2013, and the Maldives in 2016
* The British queen is the Head of the Commonwealth
* The Commonwealth has its own flag
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