How decolonisation in british and french colonies differ history essay

The term decolonisation only became widely used in the 1950's and 60's after World War II when the rate of decolonisation increased making it a central part of international relations. Broadly decolonisation as a concept can be defined as " the process by which the peoples of the Third World gained their independence from colonial rulers." Decolonisation was not only the pursuit of " national liberation,"[1]but was also brought about by the realisation that colonies were an economic burden. Colonies were intended to fund and support their colonial powers however when colonial empires became a financial burden and no longer served their intended purpose imperial empires rapidly disintegrated.

Decolonisation was known as the " era of dissolution,"[2]and occurred over a long period of time involving many countries. However in order to maintain a focused analysis this essay will discuss post 1945 African decolonisation in France and Britain. France and Britain saw decolonisation as a process that developed in stages such as " a franchise leading to eventual majority rule; guarantees that the constitution would not be abrogated; immediate increase of African political rights; an end to discriminatory legislation; and assurances that the constitution was acceptable to the majority."[3]

One of the significant factors that affected Britain and France was international pressure. After World War II the imperial paradox of fighting for freedom yet maintaining a colonial empire served to encourage the rise of nationalism in French and British colonies. These nationalist movements were key in shaping British and French decolonisation policies. Another important factor that affected decolonisation was domestic affairs and the shift in domestic attitudes also influenced British and French decolonisation

policy. This essay explains why the effects and policies of decolonisation in Britain and France were different and highlights the similarities and differences between the French and British decolonisation policies.

International pressure post 1945 was a fundamental cause of decolonisation in France and Britain. European colonial powers had to rethink their attitudes towards imperialism during World War Two because it highlighted the contradiction that having a colonial empire and fighting against fascism posed. Darwin supports this view commenting that " the ideological struggle against Hitler had made the assertion of pre-war colonial principles unfashionable."[4]In 19 48 the UN issued the Declaration of Human Rights which condemned imperial rule and increased the support for decolonisation by consolidating the idea that colonial empires were immoral.

In 1941 Britain signed the Atlantic charter with the United States which added to international pressure. It stated that independent government was a national right and as a result challenged the morality of colonial rule. The Atlantic charter directly affected British decolonisation policy because it confronted the colonial mindset and " lay greater emphasis upon the conversion of the policy."[5]Having agreed to the Atlantic charter Britain was obliged to decolonise her empire. The turning point in British decolonisation was the Suez Crisis in 1956 when Britain was unable to prevent the nationalisation of the Suez Canal which " had become Britain's powerhouse."[6]The Suez Crisis " made plain for all to see that Britain was doomed both as a colonial power and as a world power."[7]After the Suez Crisis, African decolonisation was rapid and in 1957 the African Gold Coast, now Ghana became independent and was the first British African colony to

gain independence. In Britain international pressures influenced decolonisation strategies in that it addressed the root attitude behind colonial rule and this directly shaped government policy.

France faced international pressure regarding their violent conflict with Algeria which the UN and international community condemned. Decolonisation was made more difficult because Algeria was a settler colony that had the invested interests of the French elite. France's involvement in Algeria affected the Fourth Republic and from an international perspective the French imperial reputation was negative. According to Holland " the battle of Algiers encapsulated the dilemmas and brutalities of decolonisation more powerfully than any comparable situation of modern times," and was a decisive moment in French decolonisation policy.[8]

At the end of these conflicts both France and Britain had a lower global status and consequently changed their decolonisation strategies. Darwin maintains this view and points out that decolonisation brought " a wave of further changes helped by the post-war shifts in the global distribution of power."[9]For Britain and France " decolonisation effectively demolished the old international system – economic, geographic and cultural," highlighting their diminishing global power.[10]Post World War II Britain and France were financially crippled and before the Suez Crisis and the Algerian War presented a solution to financial difficulty. However these conflicts made it clear that colonial rule was in fact a financial burden.

It is important to consider the impact that the Cold War had on decolonisation policy and how it added to the existing international pressure

that Britain and France experienced. Just as the Second World War had revealed colonialism to be hypocritical the Cold War served to reinforce this idea and endorse decolonisation. How could European nations like France and Britain criticise the USSR for creating an ' Iron curtain,' or " Russia's European Empire," when they themselves had colonies?[11]Furthermore during the Cold War as American allies France and Britain were expected to " prioritise the Cold war over colonial possessions," increasing the pressure to decolonise.[12]This was particularly true of Britain who was in debt to America and could not afford colonial conflict.

The most important differences between Britain and France from an international viewpoint was that " the French Empire had traditionally been much tighter than that of the British."[13]France fought in the Algerian War for eight years because as a settler colony Algerian independence would mean the loss of wealth and status among French elite. Their lengthy conflict emphasises the French Fourth Republican government's commitment to colonialism despite international pressure. In contrast the Suez Crisis in 1956 lasted less than a year and in the same year the British government granted the Gold Coast independence which strengthened the nationalist movement in colonies like Algeria who knew that decolonisation as a reality.

In Britain and France another increasingly important factor was the role that domestic affairs played in the process of decolonisation. After the Second World War it was clear that Britain and France needed to invest in domestic interests such as creating an efficient welfare system to improve public services such as education and health. Cooper reveals that in post 1945 one of the " relatively recent developments in the management of social

processes in Europe was notably the welfare state."[14]This was more of a priority than colonial security and the arguments used to justify imperial activities such as the ' civilising mission,' to bring infrastructure to colonial inhabitants was no longer legitimate when financial resources were needed nationally. Cooper explains that the " welfare state and industrial relations – became both the model for concrete policy interventions," and increased support for decolonisation.[15]

Britain was in debt after World War Two and under Macmillan the new Prime Minister from 1959 to 1961 a colonial balance sheet was conducted making it clear that " the colonial empire was an albatross," and a fiscal burden. In light of the recent Suez Crisis Macmillan was pro-decolonisation, more so than the previous Prime Minister Attlee.[16]The British government was " vividly aware of rapid changes in the vast expanses of western French and Belgian Africa," and under Macmillan's decolonisation policy South Africa, Cameroon, British Somaliland, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone were all granted independence.[17]

In France the transition from the Fourth to the Fifth Republic influenced decolonisation policy. The Fourth republic had been tainted because of the involvement in the Algerian War. Holland comments that " The battle of Algiers encapsulated the dilemmas and brutalities of decolonisation more powerfully than any comparable situation of modern times."[18]The conflict in " Algeria was different because of the presence of one million white settlers mostly French."[19]As a settler colony the large white French population were unwilling to grant the Algerian Front Liberation Nationale (FLN) self-determination. A flawed decolonisation policy in Algeria caused a

constitutional crisis resulting in a dramatic fall popular support for colonialism. Under de Gaulle's Fifth Republic decolonisation was essential in order to restore public faith in French politics as well as remove the shame of the Fourth Republic. With de Gaulle as president decolonisation was swift because during his term in office from 1959 to 1969 all the French colonies except Comoros and French Somaliland were granted independence. The main similarity between France and Britain in relation to domestic affairs was that after the Suez Crisis and Algerian War both experienced a change of government. However Holland points out a crucial difference that " in Britain the decolonisation sequence never threatened the stability of any government administration."[20]

Both Britain and France aimed to maintain relation with former colonies such as the Ivory Coast and South African after decolonisation. Both nations after the wave of independence were able to maintain economic ties with their former colonies through the French Union and British Commonwealth. In France " all inhabitants of the Union the right to become French citizens with equal civil rights." This was a tribute to De Gaulle's relatively successful decolonisation strategy.[21]This is evident with Senegal who gained independence in 1960 and had arguably the most amicable transition from an imperial power to indigenous rule as there was no conflict or civil war. To this day Senegal is part of the French Union/ Community. Ansprenger observes " co-operation within its former possessions was for many years excellent."[22]In France and Britain under new government decolonisation was faster than it had been previously as a result of a change in government. The main significant difference between France and Britain's

decolonisation policy is that decolonisation was profoundly quicker in France under De Gaulle than in Britain under Macmillan. This was arguably because of the stigma that was attached to colonial rule under the French Fourth Republic. Clearly the rate of decolonisation is directly linked to the domestic concerns of the colonising nation.

When examining the role of nationalist movements in France and British decolonisation it is important to note that the Second World War legitimised decolonisation in that it changed the imposed perception that European society and powers were more civilised than all African societies. Ansprenger comments that " decolonisation [was]further[ed] by the shattered prestige of the white man," during World War Two allowing many African nationalists to pursue freedom just as the allies had sought freedom against fascism. [23]Nationalist movements were another aspect of the process of decolonisation that impacted British and French policy.

Nationalism was stronger in settler colonies and consequently there was profoundly more resistance to decolonisation in these societies. Britain for example possessed British East Africa, (now Kenya) a settler colony. The conflict between the Mau Mau and the settler government uprising in 1963 is a case in point. Notably the " nationalist parties and movements appeared in most British colonies," and the Kenyan example can be compared to the French involvement in Algeria which was also a settler colony.[24]The conflict in Kenya caused economic instability and demonstrated that British decolonisation was often turbulent and resulted in civil war and economic crisis.

As stated previously decolonisation took significantly longer in Britain debatably because Britain saw decolonisation as " adjustment, accommodation, [and] gradualism."[25]Britain had planned to work with nationalist leaders to achieve an effective independence that would preserve economic interests. Nationalism affected British colonial policy in Rhodesia now Zimbabwe which was also a settler colony when in 1965 the Rhodesian government issued an unauthorised Universal Declaration of Independence (UDI). This was a " serious breach in the sequence of negotiated decolonisation," and the British government refused to acknowledge it and adopted a non-interventionist policy leaving Zimbabwean nationalists to take decolonisation into their own hands.[26]This non-interventionist policy was the last stage in the evolutionary process of decolonisation. Rhodesia is a unique example and is comparable to the Kenyan decolonisation as well as French involvement in Algeria.

In France nationalism was " a prime instrument in the process," of decolonisation because the pressure it put upon colonial rulers quickened the pace of decolonisation.[27]France passed the Loi-Cadre in 1956 which was proposed by a Senegalese nationalist gave French colonies legislative power and making decolonisation easier to achieve. The most apparent similarity between France and British nationalist decolonisation is that the Second World War increased political consciousness among Africans which encouraged and shaped nationalism. Additionally decolonisation both France and Britain highlighted the fact that the ' ease' of transition from colonial rule to self-determination is partly determined by whether a colony was a settler colony or not.

In conclusion it can be said that France and Britain implemented different decolonisation strategies and as a result decolonisation in French and British colonies took place at different rates and had different impacts. Furthermore the reluctance of colonial rulers in particular Britain to apply the best strategy possible in the different countries explains the variation in results of decolonisation. Darwin comments that " there was no logic and little system in its constitutional structure," emphasising the inconsistent way that decolonisation took place.[28]

Although French and British decolonisation differed considerably both nations faced similar international pressures and domestic issues and both were exposed to similar global events, like World War II. The consequences of decolonisation are arguably still on-going because decolonisation was not merely just an isolated international event but " was the interlocking of events, international, domestic and colonial, that determined that outcome."[29]Decolonisation was therefore not a uniform process and was to a large extent unpredictable because it involved several countries.