



[Home](#) > [Gallery](#) > Background

[Search this exhibition](#)

[Print](#)



## GALLERY 3 OVERVIEW: THE END OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

- [The decline of the empire](#)
- [How the empire ended](#)
- [Links](#)

### ⚙️ The decline of the British empire

Historians disagree about how and why Britain's empire declined and ended. However, most would agree that factors like war and a changing world economy played a key role in the decline of the British empire. Before the Great War (1914-18) Britain was one of the richest countries of the world. Its strongest industry was the banking and finance trade - everyone owed Britain money! After 4 years of fighting, Britain's wealth was virtually all gone. Most of Britain's debts were with the USA. Britain was greatly weakened by the war.

Although Britain recovered some of its strength after the Great War, it was completely bankrupted by the end of the Second World War. Its debts were even greater and it needed huge loans and grants from the USA to get back on its feet. The empire and its peoples played a crucial role in Britain's survival and victory in both world wars. However, by the end of the Second World War, most British people felt that rebuilding their own country was more important than holding on to distant lands. At the same time, Britain's economy was changing. Its trade with Europe and America became far more important than its trade with the empire.

Nevertheless, Britain did not lose all links with its former colonies. The British empire gradually became the British Commonwealth. All of the former members of the empire were invited to become members of the Commonwealth. The great majority did, although Ireland did not and South Africa left the Commonwealth for many years. The Commonwealth was a voluntary organisation mainly aimed at promoting friendship and harmony between the nations of the former empire. However, there were other benefits such as sporting and cultural links, and special agreements in terms of trade and security as well.

### ⚙️ How the empire ended

British rule ended relatively peacefully in many parts of the British Empire, although this was not always the case, of course. British ideas about "liberty" helped make peaceful decolonisation possible for some countries in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To the British, liberty meant freedom to rule yourself. However, it also meant that if you had liberty you had to use it responsibly. In other words, if parts of the empire were going to have liberty and rule themselves, they had to convince Britain that they were ready to run their own country in a way that Britain approved of.

One British view of the British empire was that they were ruling these places until they were ready to rule themselves. As you can see in the second gallery of this exhibition, the British believed that British rule meant providing stable government and good order, and developing the education and experience of local peoples until they could take over the running of their own countries and rule them in the same way as the British had done. When they reached this stage they would be welcomed as members of the British Commonwealth.

Not surprisingly, many Indians, Africans and other people in colonised countries felt this was a rather patronising view. They also pointed out that the first areas to be given self-rule were the colonies with many European settlers such as Canada, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand. Critics of British rule wondered whether this was because the British thought Europeans (and European culture) were basically superior to non-Europeans. Thus they would give self-rule to "white" Australia, Canada and the other Dominions, but were reluctant to give it to non-white India or Africa.

In some parts of the empire (from Ireland to India to Africa), the British were influenced in their decision to leave by strong nationalist movements. People joined in a range of ways to try to gain their independence - ranging from democratic measures and peaceful protests through to armed resistance. To find out more, have a look in the case studies of this gallery.

### ⚙️ Links

The Sun Never Set On The British Empire

<http://www.friesian.com/british.htm>

Difficult but detailed examination of the make-up of the empire and how the various parts of the empire became independent (edited by Kelley L. Ross)

The Empire and Globalisation

<http://www.channel4.com/history/microsites/H/history/heads/library/empire.html>

Web site following up the Channel 4 TV series on the Empire

