

The Writing on the Wall (October 12, 1955)

Abstract

The United Nations played a key role in the process of decolonization (despite Dag Hammarskjöld's complaint that the "colonial question" might destroy the UN as a forum for peaceful debate among the nations). The UN was viewed by newly independent states as an international stage on which the situation of the colonized could be discussed; they believed that casting attention onto the situation of the colonized would accelerate the process of decolonization. 1960 was a milestone year for decolonization and the United Nations—in December of 1960, the "Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and peoples" was adopted; it branded foreign rule a human rights violation, asserted the right to self-determination, and called for an end to colonial rule. A year later, the Special Committee on Decolonization was established to examine the implementation of decolonization.

Source

On April 24, the 340 delegates from 29 Asian and African countries with a total population of some 1.4 billion—approximately 55 percent of the world's population—issued a communiqué in the Indonesian city of Bandung, stating that

- "colonialism in all its manifestations is an evil which should speedily be brought to an end." Some five months later,
- France, the world's second-largest colonial power, and also one of the four great powers, was obliged to vacate the UN stage in the face of the Bandung powers' anti-colonialist fervor;
- Holland had to accept that the UN General Assembly would soon hold a debate over the controversial question of whether or not Dutch New Guinea belonged to the Republic of Indonesia;
- Italy tacitly accepted that the UN will soon investigate Italy's mandate policy in Somaliland (East Africa);
- the Soviet Union threatens to gain a political and military foothold in Egypt as an arms supplier;
- the solidarity among the NATO powers crumbled in the face of the anti-colonialist Bandung powers.

In the UN debate on the question of whether Algeria should be placed on the agenda of the current plenary session, the NATO power Greece voted in favor, along with the Bandung and Eastern bloc powers. The NATO member Iceland abstained. Since there were 28 votes in favor and 27 against, the stance of the two NATO states decided the vote, prompting French Foreign Minister Antoine Pinay to walk out of the General Assembly hall at UN headquarters on the East River in New York.

Greece's stance was a result of the Cyprus dispute. The attempt by Greece to instigate a debate at the UN General Assembly on its claim to the British island of Cyprus had already been nipped in the bud by the UN Steering Committee. A Western UN diplomat noted bitterly, "The right of Europeans to freedom and self-determination—whether it be the Greeks on the island of Cyprus or the Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians—cannot be enforced in the UN, unlike the claims of the Kikuyus and the savages of Guinea."

Inter-American solidarity was also affected by the debate on Algeria. Six American states voted "yes" and 14 "no" (including the USA), and two abstained.

UN Secretary-General Hammarskjöld complained that the colonial question threatened to destroy the UN as a forum for peaceful debate among the nations.

The Madras daily newspaper *Indian Express* asked the Western powers the following question: “Can’t you read the writing on the wall?”

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