

8. Why did the UK lose its status as a world power after the Second World War?

Pax Britannica is a term used to describe Britain's 'imperial century' as *the* global hegemonic power in the 19th century (Carson, 1968). Its early industrial revolution gave it an economic head start over other regional powers, paving the way for worldwide economic and military dominance instrumental to its maintenance of power (Stevenson, 2011).

This power had started to wane slightly since World War 1 (Watts, 2007) but Britain's decline as a world power became increasingly apparent after the Second World War as observed by its decreased role in the global commercial realm (Carson, 1968) and the erosion of the British Empire (Hyam, 1993). This was due to the unique post-war circumstances she found herself in which resulted in the increased influence of other powers vis-a-vis the the UK, decreased economic clout, and the changing mindsets of a modern world.

No other superpower in the world has experienced such a great decline in status as the UK, and part of this, or rather, most of it, can be attributed to the circumstances created by a victory by the Allies in World War 2. For the US and Soviets, this victory resulted in increased capital and technology for immense economic development (US Department of State, 2005) which rapidly increased their status and influence as new world powers (Nijman, 1992). The UK, on the other hand, due to its unique position as one of the initial belligerents in the war and caught geographically in the centre of the conflict, experienced a devastated economy and infrastructure much like many of its European neighbours (Dornbusch, 1993). The UK bore the brunt of the damage as seen in how military campaigns such as the Blitz (1940) occurred on British soil. This created a situation where the UK was unable to develop economically as much as emerging powers, so it experienced a relative drop in status and influence while other powers overtook it to claim its original status as a world power (Stevenson, 2011).

This naturally resulted in decreased economic clout for the UK. The UK's immense economic clout before World War 2 was instrumental to its power. The large scale industrialisation of Britain led to its commercial superiority which made it imitable and influential as "In the nineteenth century she stood pre-eminent as the leading commercial nation on the face of the globe, as the possessor of the largest mercantile marine, and as the universal banker, insurance and commission agent.... Her surplus wealth fertilized the barren places of the earth and promoted material progress in backward lands." (Lipson, 1959). However, by World War 2 many of the trade routes and market systems that the UK had relied on to maintain its economic clout had been dismantled or changed, leaving with it a weaker economy and thus lower influence as its soft power had been significantly reduced. This thus resulted in the UK losing declining in status as a world power.

One of the key symbols of the UK's then status as a world power was the British Empire and the famed Navy that protected it. This could be seen in the many colonies in South East Asia, Africa, and India that the UK owned. They were naturally extensions or bases of British power and influence (Black, 2016) that further maintained the UK's status as a world power. The acquisition of so many colonies was instrumental to Pax Britannica wide reaching influence. However, by the early 20th century, the modern world started to grow less accepting towards British governance of foreign lands and the 'right so self-determination' was achieved by many of the indigenous populations in Malaya, India, and South Africa. The diminishing influence of the UK worldwide then led to its decline in status as a world power.

One possibility I would like to add is that a new definition of superpower was emerging in post-WW2 international relations — one that of nuclear power (Debs, 2016). The US was able to achieve this definition with the Manhattan Project (Nijman, 1992) and the USSR followed after. US and Russian nuclear power clearly outmatched the the nuclear power of the UK alone. In this aspect, the UK took another blow to its status as the global hegemonic power.

In conclusion, a wide variety of factors which can be broadly categorised into military and economic culminated in the UK losing its status as a world power after the Second World War. This

serves as a reminder to all that how even a hundred years of history and development can be undone in a few decades — the ever changing and fluid nature of history is all-encompassing.

References:

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