The year 1885 was a prophetic one for the British Empire. The Berlin Conference which finished in this year meant an increased external threat, as the German Empire and other European powers competed in the ‘Scramble for Africa’. This, combined with the significant loss of face resulting from the defeat of General Gordon at the hands of Sudanese rebels in Khartoum, meant that the British Empire in Africa seemed to be assailed from both exterior and interior forces. In other places, too, the spectre of destabilisation appeared: at home, the General Election of 1885 saw neither the Liberals nor the Conservatives gain a majority, leaving the Irish Parliamentary Party holding the balance of power and introducing the first Irish Home Rule bill; abroad, another political movement with monumental importance to the Empire was founded – the Indian National Congress.

The Congress was, at the outset, a moderate body, constituted of European-educated elites who lobbied for increased representation for Indians in the colonial legislature. In the twentieth century, faced with British intransigence, it began to agitate for self-government, though still within the empire. The well-connected, cosmopolitan members of the Congress party sought support not only in India, but also among Indian professionals throughout the empire. They were encouraged in Britain by progressive Liberals and members of the Irish Parliamentary Party. In 1892 the first Asian member of parliament, Dadabhai Naoroji, was elected in Finsbury Park for the Liberal Party. His thoughts on the pros and cons of British Rule can be read here:

As well as the INC, other organisations added to the chorus of disaffection with the British Raj: the All-India Muslim League was founded in 1906 to give greater representation to Muslims than the majority-Hindu INC, and in which Muhammad Ali Jinnah (Pakistan's founding father) came to political prominence. A more radical and working-class form of resistance was advocated by the *swadeshi*, or self-sufficiency, movement, which could trace its genesis to the mid-nineteenth century and attracted widespread support from ordinary Indians, particularly in Bengal.

![Dadabhai Naoroji, MP](image)

**Task 1**

Think about the way in which Naoroji expresses the INC’s grievances. Were the Congress members right to moderate their message, as a first step, in order to make it more acceptable to the imperial government? Are there situations in which a more radical, uncompromising approach is most effective?

The Indian nationalists in London congregated in India House, a hub for students and professionals with an interest in global radical politics. The cause of Indian students in Cambridge was also championed at this time by the master of Christ's College, A.E. Shipley, among others.
The reformers and revolutionaries of India House were part of a global network which linked anti-imperial nationalists (as well as social campaigners, most notably the suffragists) from all across the British Empire and the United States. The calls for Indian self-determination were much more than a challenge to the policy of the British Raj; they forced British imperialists to consider the reasoning and aims underlying the imperial project. The arguments over the degree of control that colonised peoples ought to have – and were capable of having – in their own destinies persisted until decolonisation.

An illustration of the interconnections of anti-imperial campaigners in the early years of the twentieth century can be found in the so-called Hindu-German Conspiracy, a plot to instigate a nationalist mutiny among the 1.4 million Indian soldiers serving in the First World War. The Ghadar Party, a group of Indian nationalists in the United States, hatched the plan with the support of Germany, the Ottoman Empire, Irish-American nationalists and Indian anti-imperial activists. You can read an issue of their newspaper, Independent Hindustan, here:
https://archive.org/details/TheIndependentHindustanVolumeINumber1

**Task 2**

Consider the differing motivations of the various players in the Conspiracy. How does the fact that an anti-colonial movement could be supported by Europeans, even for political purposes, speak to the complexities of imperial relations? How does the cosmopolitanism of anti-colonial activism come across in the Independent Hindustan?

Independence organisations of all stripes gained an ever louder voice in India after the First World War, but it was the Indian National Congress that enjoyed the widest support with Mohandas K. Gandhi's mass nonviolent campaign of 1942 calling for Britain to 'Quit India'. Part of Gandhi's success, like that of other nationalist leaders, was the marshalling of support both in India and in Britain. Historians often talk of empires in terms of the core (or metropole) and the periphery – though, as the mass movements which won Indian independence show, the support of cosmopolitan elites accomplishes little without a movement that engages a broad cross-section of society. Indian nationalism was, nonetheless, one of the ways in which the gap between core and periphery was bridged, and people in Britain were forced to take notice of affairs in their far-flung possessions.
The self-image that Britain had of its empire in India, its most important colony, was a complicated one. The great Cambridge historian Sir John Seeley wrote in 1882 that “at best we think of [British India] as a good specimen of a bad political system. We are not disposed to be proud of the succession of the Great Mogul. We doubt whether with all the merits of our administration the subjects of it are happy. We may even doubt whether our rule is preparing them for a happier condition, whether it may not be sinking them lower in misery, and we have our misgivings that perhaps are genuine Asiatic Government, and still more a national Government springing up out of the Hindu population itself, might be in the long run more beneficial because more congenial, though perhaps less civilised, than such a foreign unsympathetic government as our own.”¹ At the moment of Indian independence, the argument was made that the British had acted as the 'trustees' of imperial government, transferring sovereignty to the hands of the people now that they were ready to run their own affairs. It was a sentiment which squared rather poorly with the messy reality of sectarian division and the mass death resulting from the Indian partition, the ancien régime's last act. Even in this era of mass movements, however, cosmopolitan anti-imperialists played a role; it was a group of Punjabi Muslim students at Cambridge who in 1933 devised the name for a separate state for their co-religionist compatriots: running together the initial letters of the constituent provinces – Punjab, Afghan, Kashmir, Sindh and Baluchistan – they arrived at the

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term 'Pakistan'.

From the perspective of mid-twentieth century Britain it could be difficult to see the extent to which changes and influences on the culture of these islands flowed inward from the overseas empire. The effect of the empire on the United Kingdom was, however, monumental. Exposure to other languages and cultures had an effect on British society and the built environment, so even those who never left their home towns were touched in some way by the empire. The actions and interactions of the imperial state caused Britain to develop a consciousness of racial difference, and they arguably still inform discourses of race and Britishness today. Additionally, the empire provided an accidental 'laboratory' for a great deal of social legislation and infrastructural development, and influenced the British attitude to the making of the state. Britain owes more to her former colonies than she knows.

Task 3

Think about some ways in which the culture of former colonies can be discerned in Britain today? Reading through the summary of decolonisation below, what are some of the priorities and problems that policymakers had to deal with, in India and elsewhere, in dismantling the empire?

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/modern/endofempire_overview_01.shtml]