

An “excellent starting point for students of European decolonisation”

Martin Thomas (editor), *European Decolonisation*

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European Decolonisation is part of *The International Library of Essays on Political History* series. Edited by Martin Thomas, this volume brings together 21 important essays on decolonisation previously published over the last 30 years in leading journals. Given this broad remit, it is not a book that focuses upon any single aspect of European decolonisation in great depth, but is nonetheless a very useful introduction to many of the issues and themes that have been raised over the years within this historiography.

The European decolonisation referred to in the title is that of the second half of the twentieth century, and consequently the volume does not include mention of Portuguese and Spanish withdrawals from Latin America, the fate of Germany's colonies after the First World War or the Ottoman Empire. Instead, British and French colonialism receive the attention of most of the essays, although Dutch military policy in the East Indies, Belgium and the Congo, as well as the Portuguese colonies of Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau and Angola are all covered. These colonialisms and their trajectories over the period 1940 to 1970 are also considered by Thomas in his introduction.

Divided into six thematically-grouped parts, each section is designed to be read as a whole. Part I, “Long-term perspectives”, places Tony Smith's comparison of the domestic and political imperatives of the British and French in conjunction with John Darwin's overview of British colonial policy as “puzzle or pattern”. Jean-Philippe Peemans' essay here focuses upon the economics of Belgium's withdrawal from the Congo. Also in this section, Robert Blackey assesses the revolutionary ideology of Frantz Fanon and Amílcar Cabral.

Taking the impact of the Second World War as its framing device, Part II considers “post war problems and confrontations”. All of the essays in this section deal with the late 1940s, notably the reaction of the colonial powers to protest within their colonies, and the changing imperatives of policy in the post-war context. Petra Groen discusses Dutch reaction to Indonesia's declaration of independence in 1945; Frederick Cooper focuses on trade union unrest in French West Africa; John Flint takes a general look at British policy in Africa; and Anita Singh focuses on Britain's changing relationship with India leading up to and after 1947. Whilst the majority of the essays are concerned with the policies of the European colonial powers, the volume also includes a number of essays that address such issues from within colonies themselves. In this spirit Frederick Cooper's essay upon the 1947-1948 railway strike in French West Africa finds a place in this section. For Thomas, it is “a classic example of African agency”.

Part III, “Decolonisation and party politics”, through contributions from Ronald Hyam, Martin Thomas, David Goldsworthy and Ritchie Ovendale, considers the intimate high politics of the British and French retreats from empire.

Part IV, “Decolonisation, counter-insurgency and wars of liberation”, is perhaps the most wide-ranging in terms of subject matter, exploring four disparate sites of interaction between colonialists and the colonised. The chapters comprise Karl Hack’s review of British policy during the Malayan Emergency; Richard Crook’s examination of British policy towards chiefs in the Gold Coast; Patrick Boyle’s essay on educational provision in the Belgian Congo; and Patrick Chabal on the wars of liberation in Portugal’s colonies.

The three essays in Part V, “Internationalisation of decolonisation”, by Chen Jian, Steven Metz and Matthew Connelly, respectively consider the roles of China, the United States of America, and the Cold War. This provides valuable perspectives on decolonisation, going well beyond European views.

Part VI, “Forgotten constituencies? Women and returnees” is arguably the least successful section of the book. Its two essays, one on Kikuyu women in the Mau Mau rebellion, and the other on colonial officials after empire, are placed together, presumably in an effort to highlight the marginalisation of such perspectives from considerations of “decolonisation”. Unfortunately, this editorial decision actually serves to reproduce the isolation of these issues from those which they might illuminate. Cora Ann-Presley’s examination of women in Mau Mau would be more appropriately read with the chapters in the section on “Decolonisation, counter-insurgency and wars of liberation”. Likewise, Anthony Kirk-Greene’s consideration of colonial officials’ ambiguous return to the metropolis, might be better located in Part II, as it throws an interesting light on policy emanating from the colonies themselves, as opposed to actions planned from above. This kind of reconfiguration would point out the need to include such approaches in a wider historiography of decolonisation.

While *European Decolonisation* as a whole succeeds in covering a broad range of approaches and issues, without the volume becoming unmanageable, there is one issue raised in the introduction that is not followed through in the essay selection. This is the relationship between so-called “communal violence” and wider processes of decolonisation. Thomas mentions South Asia, Palestine, Nigeria, Cyprus and Rwanda, commenting generally that in these new nations, the departure of colonial powers “released pent-up inter-communal tensions, many of them directly attributable to previous colonial policies, which had been poorly addressed in the last days of imperial rule”. *European Decolonisation* might have benefited from an attempt to deal with such violence, so often viewed as part of the decolonisation process, but so little understood. Indeed, an additional section on the situations mentioned in the introduction, would invite consideration of the limitations of “decolonisation”, when explanations are sought for the range of post-colonial experiences in former colonies. These qualifications aside, this is an excellent starting point for students of European decolonisation. Because it addresses most of the important arguments within the subject’s historiography, this volume would be a useful addition to any university library.

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