



Decolonization: A Short History by Jan C. Jansen and Jürgen Osterhammel.

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On 15 August 1947, India gained its independence from Britain, ending its decades of struggle against colonial rule and beginning the erosion of Britain's colonial empire. Seven years later, the French fought the Viet Minh for control of their remaining Southeast Asian colony. The French lost that battle, but the partition of Vietnam by the 1954 Geneva Accords ensured a continuing conflict between the governments of North and South Vietnam to unite the Vietnamese people under their rule. These two different examples of the end of colonial rule typify the extremes of the transfer of power from an imperial government to its subject people. Historians Jan Jansen (German Historical Inst., Washington) and Jürgen Osterhammel (Univ. Konstanz) have now provided a framework for better understanding the discrete processes of decolonization.

*Decolonization*¹ approaches its subject as both a global and a local event. Its authors adopt three perspectives—imperial, local, and international—to achieve a more comprehensive investigation of how imperial powers have relinquished (or been compelled to relinquish) political and economic control of their colonies. In addition, they identify five paradigms of decolonization: transfer of power, national liberation, neocolonialism, “unburdening,” and world politics.

In the aftermath of World War I, tensions over imperialism mounted within the international community, even as subject peoples progressively resisted colonialism. This despite the postwar reform efforts of many imperial powers. The British government, for example, promised more autonomy to Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and, less explicitly, India. But such promises only heightened the desire for independence and dissatisfaction with the status quo among people living under imperial rule. After the Second World War, Great Britain and France sought to maintain or reclaim their colonies against a rising tide of independence movements that went back to the interwar period.

Decolonization varied by colonial regime. Britain resorted to violence less than did France and the Netherlands. British policy-makers quickly realized that harsh measures only further enflamed powerful nationalist agencies like the Indian National Congress. By contrast, the French and Dutch deployed military forces to maintain their colonial authority. To no avail. The authors marshal compelling evidence that anticolonial sentiment, the internationalization of colonialism, and promises of imperial reform galvanized nationalist groups to pursue independence even in the face of violent opposition from their metropolises.

Independence movements were not always peaceful, even if an imperial power forwent military suppression. In India, the cessation of British rule combined with the partition of Pakistan from India unleashed incredible destruction and dislocation. The problems of independence only increased if a waning empire clung to power, like France in Algeria.

The book's broad focus on decolonization and its ramifications extends to economic aspects of independence. Newly independent states often wished to continue on paths to economic mod-

1. German original: *Dekolonization* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2013).

ernization they had lately entered even as colonies. In some cases, they retained economic ties to their former metropolises, as in the case of Britain's Commonwealth nations, thanks to the willingness of the British government to plan for a new, post-colonial state of affairs. In the case of France, retention of economic ties with its former colonies did not receive the same attention.

The thriving American and Japanese postwar economies gave former colonies access to new markets whether or not their imperial masters had expressly planned ahead for economic integration after independence. Jansen and Osterhammel have wisely stressed the economic as well as the cultural and social parameters of decolonization.

The Cold War, too, affected the decolonization process, chiefly by creating an East-West divide between the United States and its allies and the Soviet Union and its allies. Both hegemonies had reason to arm otherwise unimportant states to increase their influence and erode support for their enemy's coalition. The Cold War also ushered in a new era of atomic superpowers. This entailed a North-South divide that left newly independent states concerned about unfair global economic practices and regulations that might hamper their ability to compete in global markets and thus to integrate into the international community.

The authors wisely avoid a simplistic interpretation of colonialism and decolonization or imperial domination. It is too easy to exaggerate the oppressive nature of imperialism. Although many European powers had, of course, used violence to gain and maintain empires, the new regimes in their now independent former colonies sometimes harshly repressed their own people. A great strength of the book is its discerning treatment of the complexities and paradoxes of decolonization:

Just as decolonization was gaining momentum, late-colonial policies intensified exchanges between the metropolises and their colonies. In some cases (especially France, but also Portugal), colonies had never been so strongly integrated into the political structures of their metropolises as they were after 1945. This integration frequently included a relatively broad freedom of mobility for citizens inside a shared imperial space. But in other cases, too, where late-colonial policy did not put a premium on integration (as in Great Britain and the Netherlands), the period after the Second World War brought about a lowering of imperial barriers to geographic mobility. The British Nationality Act of 1948, for example, gave all inhabitants of the empire the right to settle in the British Isles and enjoy citizenship rights after a one-year stay. The end of the colonial empires did not disrupt these spaces of intra-imperial mobility abruptly, but they did set off their step-by-step curtailment. (173)

Subject peoples' movements toward independence did not always follow nationalist lines. Pan-Arabism, for instance, was an attractive competing organizational construct for some states. And, too, decolonization evinced some of the lasting effects of imperial history: newly created states often retained their former colonial boundaries, a sign of the strength of the constitutional system of organization that was a model for many imperial possessions.

Their salutary stress on decolonization *as a process* rather than on specific countries or empires allows Jansen and Osterhammel to formulate an effective framework for further investigation. And while the welcome concision of *Decolonization* has forced them to give little space to many interesting topics, their succinct presentation of a few pertinent case studies lends depth and nuance to their argument.