

## RESEARCH NOTE

### **The Legacies of the British and the French Decolonization Process in Asia and Africa: A Comparative Study**

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The end of the Second World War led to major transformations in global geopolitics, particularly in the context of Europe's empires and their colonial possessions. This was the era of the Cold War and the period of European decolonization that reshaped continents and created independent nation-states. It is important to consider that while the independence of colonies from their European colonizers sounds positive, decolonization in all cases was disruptive for the people it attempted to free. The nature of the decolonization process varied for empires and their colonies, thereby leaving countries either wrought with economic, political, and social instability and violence, embattled in internal wars for years after independence, or with some form of political and economic stability despite ethnic and social conflicts and opposition within the nation. This paper seeks then to delve into the very nature of the decolonization process by understanding its impact on several British and French colonies in Asia and Africa. To provide a more cogent analysis, this paper will focus on these two colonial powers for number of reasons, the foremost reason being the contrasting nature of their colonial policies as well as the processes of decolonization of their respective colonies.

The essay will discuss the process of transfer of power and the comparative nature of post-colonial governance to analyze how the newly independent countries used their colonial experience to advance toward prosperity or extreme uncertainty in the post-colonial Cold War world. In doing so, this paper will argue that European decolonization was not simply a linear process of transference or removal of power in the political sense, but a complex phenomenon that is both influenced as well as influences geopolitics, ideologies, society, culture, and public memory thereby transforming the lives of both the imposer and the imposed.

The Cold War era coincided with the decolonization of Asian and African nations which brought about political and economic changes as the United States emerged as the superior global power. Utilizing the British and the French empires as the means to prevent communist expansion, the US attempted to create an example out of successful transitions of power, like in India, as the flag-bearer of democracy, an effective alternative to Mao's China. It was a period of neo-colonialism where the imperial control over territories was shifted to a more sophisticated

free-market colonialism propagated by an Anglo-American alliance, that would allow these Western powers to make newly independent countries dependent, thus allowing for a 'hands-off' control even after a formal transfer of power.

The British colonization of the Indian subcontinent ended in 1947 amidst the violence of the Partition of the country into India and Pakistan - and while it was a successful transfer of power - the disorder and disruption of life and property accompanied the decolonization process. While this sudden decision was partly because of "postwar exhaustion,"<sup>1</sup> and partly due to shifting British interests to the Middle East;<sup>2</sup> in India, Gandhi's powerful persona, the creation of the Indian National Congress as the flag-bearer of independence movements, and the impact of the Swadeshi Movement created a class of nationalist bourgeoisie who became the foundations of manufacturing industries in the prominent cities, while simultaneously uniting the middle-class and the peasantry against the colonial apparatus. Therefore, the success of India as it emerged to be a strong democratic country lay in the calculative decision of the nationalist government to threaten revolution, as the British scrambled to determine how India could be made into a federation and given Dominion status, with the hopes of maintaining Anglo-Indian relations within the Commonwealth.

Post-independent India appropriated certain colonial administrative policies, like the division of the government into three branches of power, but it differed by providing rights to its citizens and a parliamentary form of governance.<sup>3</sup> Its neighboring country Pakistan remained fractured geographically, politically, and socio-culturally from the start until the 1970s when it lost East Pakistan that formed a separate nation of Bangladesh. Western countries were skeptical about the question of a united India because of its intense caste and religious diversity. What proved the skeptics wrong was the foundational principles of the constitution which from its creation targeted appeasing the caste-based minority debates through quotas and reservations, as well as in ensuring the secularization of the judiciary and the fundamental rights of its people.

Within ten years of India's independence, the British colony of Malaya would gain its independence in 1957, amidst social and political turmoil. Like in India, the colonial reforms led Malaysians to conceive of their identity in a nationalist framework, through their education of the Malayan traditions and based on their religious anxieties under the colonial modernity. "[...] technology- in the shape of enhanced road communications, printing, even cinema- empowered Asians. Everywhere, the new enthusiasms these colonial initiatives were intended to arouse, began to advance identities of a different kind."<sup>4</sup> The British inadvertently fostered the growth of the indigenous Malayan leadership who formed political associations to challenge the colonial government. With the Malayan Emergency in 1948, the British strategized 'population control' towards Chinese supporters of insurgency that highlighted the British 'civilizing mission,' as a veil over their expansion of security forces, control of food distribution, and settlement of the population.<sup>5</sup> How-

ever, like in India, the question of Malaya's participation in the Commonwealth reflected British eagerness more than the new country, and while the Malayan politics at the dawn of independence was still multi-ethnic, the effectiveness of its legacy rested in its "high political compromise."<sup>6</sup>

Most of the development schemes undertaken by the colonial regime continued after independence, but the Alliance government focused more on the uplift of the rural economy through several land-settlement schemes and the construction of the nation by uniting the diverse ethnicities. By the end of the twentieth century, the new National Development Policy of Malaysia aimed at restructuring the Malayan society, and reducing the religious and feudal influence since "[a] new kind of corporatism and social discipline was needed for Malaysia to modernize economically, to entrench a stable Malay supremacy, within which a new Malay community could take the lead in the creation of a new Malaysian nation, which would then take its rightful place in the international community."<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, contestations within Malayan ethnicities and the meaning of a united Malaya nation are still questioned and therefore there always remains a debate as to what frameworks should be used to evaluate Malayan identity.

Comparing the British decolonization measures in Asia and Africa, it will be argued that unlike their contained and calculative façade in Asia, the British counterinsurgency in Kenya against the Mau Mau leaves a big spot on the British idealization of their efficient and effective decolonization process. The colonial power got embroiled in a bloody civil war amidst severe backlash in the 1950s as the Belgian decolonization of Congo was taking place in the middle of severe African resistance to the Belgian settlers; as a result, Britain and France were forced to move away from the Suez crisis, while the United States was taking a strong anti-colonial stance to prevent the consolidation of communism as the ideology of resistance.<sup>8</sup> Within Kenya then, "the irrepressible demands of the more radical African nationalists forced them to abandon any gradualist approach toward decolonization in Kenya."<sup>9</sup>

The complexities of the decolonization process and post-colonial state-building were reflected in the differences within the Kikuyu community, where land and labor reforms were undertaken by the state which allowed for loyalists to gain economically and socially, therefore, cementing their loyalty towards the colonial government while creating a class-based division in the community. The breakdown of patron-client relations, the landlessness of the poor, and the accumulation of land and wealth by the elite to gain access politically while the loss of land and economy meant the loss of Kikuyu dignity and honor.<sup>10</sup> With Kenya's independence in 1963, the head of all newly independent institutions was secured by the loyalists. "In Kikuyuland, former Mau Mau adherents despised their loyalist neighbors for taking their land, raping their wives, killing their children, and murdering their husbands."<sup>11</sup> Despite the attempts of the new president of independent Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, to pacify the tension within the country, many former detainees tried to

destabilize the country by forming the Land and Freedom Army. Tensions continued as Kenyatta made efforts to secure the economic future of the country, by convincing thirty thousand European investors to stay in Congo, but the experience of the Mau Mau rebellion has had continued to haunt Kenya's post-colonial society and politics by fueling armed resistance against the Moi regime in the early nineties, and even in the twenty-first century.

The French colonizers, on the other hand, were less far-sighted when it came to decolonizing its colonies and providing for an efficient transfer of power. However, their colonial expeditions in Indochina failed to create a strong united anti-colonial resistance, that was further complicated with the Japanese presence in the northern region of Tonkin. Nevertheless, the Decoux regime's attempts at social and cultural reforms paved the way for a wave of nationalist propaganda, particularly in the North, thus dividing the Indochinese aspirations rather than uniting them against multiple foreign presence. Consequently, with Ho Chi Minh's Vietnam Democratic Party in the North receiving considerable military and financial support from Communist China, and with the French-orchestrated Bao Dai government in the South receiving military aid from the United States- as a part of the NATO alliance- the decolonization of Indochina emerged as the priority international issue that engaged the superpowers in the region. Ultimately, the failure of the French and the American alliance to achieve a consensus regarding the future of Indochina and resisting the force of communism, led to the Americanization of the country.<sup>12</sup> Decolonization, then, became the important medium of increased American intervention albeit on the grounds of "support on a limited basis,"<sup>13</sup> as France's failure to effectively leave the colony in the hands of a strong non-communist government merged with America's growing tensions surrounding the creation of Communist China, the Korean War, and the Soviet's testing of the atomic bomb in the 1950s.

In contrast to the relative success of the British in establishing stable indigenous governments in post-independent India and Malaya, the French left Indochina wrought with death and destruction, dividing the country into two parts, and allowing for another foreign power to fill the vacuum who attempted to rectify the failure of the French colonizers to unite the country under a non-communist government. By the beginning of the 1960s, the United States replaced the French civilizing mission with their modernizing program by controlling the education system, replacing the French language with English, and introducing American culture through the newspaper, radio, movies, and mobile exhibits. Although the United States promoted the idea of creating a free democratic nation, the process of decolonization was disastrous, as it witnessed an imperialistic transfer of power from one western power to another, keeping the country divided along the seventeenth parallel and driving it into a bloody war between its people until 1975.

Notwithstanding the strategic importance of Indochina to the superpowers, for the French colonial government, Algeria was more important than Indochina, because unlike in Indochina the French had great strategic, territorial, and

operational advantages in this settler colony in Africa. Moreover, the decolonization of Algeria was exceptional in the sense that the French had considered Algeria to be a part of France and not a colony, thereby allowing its people to enjoy the benefits and status of being French citizens until the 1960s. However, by 1962 the French intellectuals and authorities began to consider Algeria as an “[...] unfortunate colonial detour, from which the French Republic had now escaped.”<sup>14</sup> The period from the 1830s to the late 1960s was “one of the longest and bloodiest wars of decolonization.”<sup>15</sup> This was coupled with systematic discrimination against the Muslims who were considered as a “nationality” rather than a “religion” and hence were declared “necessarily foreign.”<sup>16</sup> This was the seed of the growing nationalism in post-World War-II Algeria, where the French-educated Muslim middle-class applied French ideals of liberty, and equality to question their status in Algeria and demanded French citizenship rights. Therefore, while earlier under Mollet “Algeria was seen to be France’s future: the lynchpin of a geo-strategic strategy which would uphold France’s role as a global actor,”<sup>17</sup> under de Gaulle France began to look at their removal from Algeria best serving their social, economic, and geopolitical interests. The period leading up to Algerian independence was marked by violence and war within Algeria mostly between the FLN and OAS, and while with the Evian Agreements, the Provisional Government felt a sense of victory and independence, it was the period of an ‘undeclared war’ becoming more violent between the OAS, FLN, and the French Army.

After independence, Algeria chose to support the rebels and revolutionary leaders not only within Africa but also in Asia and Latin America. In the political arena, Ben Bella’s administration sought to manipulate the superpowers for their economic and geopolitical interests, while declaring a non-aligned stance from the two blocs. The apparent dissatisfaction with the Bella administration due to the 1963 Moroccan military offensive for Sahara led to a coup in 1965, and Bella was replaced by his minister of defense Houari Boumedienne who justified his actions with national security concerns, and foreign presence coupled with the “contradiction between the FLN’s transnational habits and the prerogatives of statehood.”<sup>18</sup> The implementation of centralized colonial policies created a sense of anti-colonial sentiment in almost every colony, but the emergence of a united anti-colonial front varied. For instance, while under the British, the colonial developmental projects appeared as a blessing in disguise in creating strong leaders with a sense of brotherhood; on the contrary, the frequent policy alterations by the French colonizers resulted in the failure to create a sense of homogenized nationalism in their colonies.

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their colonies.

In conclusion, it can be said that the British were far-sighted in their deliberations on the future of their imperial conquests with the changing time, especially conscious of the social and political transformations of the post-World War II period. They, therefore, were more interested in expanding their status and preserving their economy through investments and ventures, with the US and through the Commonwealth. However, for France, the reinstatement of their imperial vigor and their establishment prominently among the western powers, became much more important, especially with the growing suspicions regarding Anglo-American aspirations in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless militarily, financially, and diplomatically, the French had to depend on the British and American help, and hence their only resort to elevate their international position was through their imperialist hold over the colonies.

Along with this, several factors favored the British over the French in making the decolonization process less problematic, where Britain's experience as a colonizer proved essential through its practices of establishing transitional government structures like the Dominion system in place before the actual transfer of power. In contrast, French attempts after the Second World War to formulate policies for better colonial governance, for instance in the conference in Brazzaville in 1944, failed to include even the thought of granting political privileges to colonized elites for the eventual independence of its colonies. Moreover, it is important to state that while Britain understood the rising tide of nationalism in its colonies, the French were ambivalent and over-confident about the inability of the natives to primarily assert their independence, especially with their misjudgment of the Viet Minh's military power. For instance, while the British accepted Tunku Abdul Rahman's power that allowed for the suppression of communists in Malaya, in Indochina, the pro-Vichy French government's acceptance of the Japanese occupation allowed the communists' underground operations for independence to become more powerful, while several non-communist factions who had resisted French rule in the 1930s, and who may have later proved as important allies for the French, were eliminated by the colonial power.<sup>19</sup> The relative success or failure of the process of transfer of power by the British and the French does not account for the fact that decolonization was a chaotic process. While India and Malaya were able to emerge as strong nations, nevertheless, the Partition and destruction of life and property in India, and the search and destroy missions during the Malayan Emergency, all point toward the violent nature of the decolonization process. With this said, it found its worst expression in Indochina, Kenya, and Algeria, pushing them to years of economic and social instability, dictatorship, and violent warfare even after independence.



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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (London: Yale University Press, 2017), Preface to the New Edition, Apple Books.

<sup>2</sup> Olaf Caroe, the Foreign Secretary of the Government of India during World War II, wrote in his book the *Wells of Power*, “as the need for fuel expands, the world contracts, and the shadow lengthens from the north. Its stability can be assured only by the closest accord between the states which surround this Muslim lake, an accord which is under-written by the great powers whose interests are engaged.” D. N. Panigrahi, *India’s Partition: The Story of Imperialism in Retreat* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 338.

<sup>3</sup> “The leading ideas of the nationalist elite at Independence can be summarized under these headings: sovereignty, unity, order, a strong state, secularism, democracy and parliamentarism, economic self-sufficiency, and the need for social and economic reform.” Paul R. Brass, *The Politics of India Since Independence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 10.

<sup>4</sup> T.N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Hack, “Iron Claws on Malaya”: The Historiography of the Malayan Emergency,” in *European Decolonization*, ed. Martin Thomas (England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 342-45.

<sup>6</sup> The elevation of Chinese economic and social positions allowed for an alliance that heightened the dominance of the Malayan state. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya*, 361.

<sup>7</sup> Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya*, 371.

<sup>8</sup> Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain’s Gulag in Kenya* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2005), Epilogue, Apple Books.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, Epilogue.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Branch, *Defeating Mau Mau, Creating Kenya: Counterinsurgency, Civil War, and Decolonization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 149.

<sup>11</sup> Jeanne M. Haskin, *The tragic state of the Congo: from decolonization to dictatorship* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2005), 806.

<sup>12</sup> The Eisenhower administration viewed the French political approach as too soft whereas French politicians considered the Americans as naïve and “uneducated in world affairs, and overzealous in its anticommunist crusade [...]” Van Der Kroef, *Communism in South-East Asia*, 29.

<sup>13</sup> Kathryn Statler, *Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam* (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), Chapter 1, Apple Books.

<sup>14</sup> Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 11.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Evans, *Algeria: France’s Undeclared War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

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2012), xi.

<sup>16</sup> Evan, *Algeria*, 243.

<sup>17</sup> Evan, *Algeria*, xvi.

<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey James Byrne, *Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization and the Third World Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 12.

<sup>19</sup> Tony Smith, "A Comparative Study of French and British Decolonization," in *European Decolonization*, ed. Martin Thomas (England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 93-94.