

Title—Crises of Empire: Decolonization and Europe’s Imperial States
Authors—Martin Thomas, Bob Moore, & L.J. Butler
Year—2008

Categories: Empire, Comparative Imperial, Decolonization

Place: British, French, & Dutch Empires

Time: 1945-1970

Argument Synopsis:

Crises of Empire: Decolonization and Europe’s Imperial states attempts to address the imbalance in the English historiography on decolonization, which they claim is predominated by studies of the British Empire. To do this, they focus on the British, French, and Dutch Empires with each author writing one of the respective sections. The fourth section briefly provides a comparative look at the decolonization of the African territories of the Belgian and Portuguese Empires. Each section is organized chronologically. The authors claim that this book is a pedagogical tool to help students understand the major conceptual arguments about the origins, nature, and supposed finality of decolonization in Europe. They posit that in studies of decolonization it is easy to attribute the demise of Europe’s empires as the result of nationalism and Cold War pressures. However, this ignores **the decisive initiatives taken by the Africans and Asians themselves** in the quest for independence. In their introduction, the authors highlight the tension felt amongst the local opponents of empire between wanting the same freedoms and economic opportunities as the colonial power and an outright rejection of any form of social organization identifiable with the colonial power.

Butler claims that for most of its history, the British Empire lacked any clear sense of purpose. Butler highlights that the British hoped to manage the burgeoning nationalism in their territories, but the entire process of imperial retreat happened much faster than expected. The interwar period proved to be a transformative period for the emergence of **anti-colonial nationalism**. Many people from the colonial territories came to metropolitan Britain during the interwar period, allowing a process of transcultural exchange.

In the period between 1957 and 1964, the majority of Britain’s remaining colonies became independent; Britain still saw itself as a world power. Butler posits that decolonization had not become a major issue within Britain, although it is notoriously difficult to evaluate popular opinion on empire. The conception of the British Commonwealth reinforced their belief that Britain remained in a unique world role as a point of intersection.

The authors stress the importance of not viewing decolonization as a finite process, highlighting the economic influence the former colonial powers exerted in many of their old territories for decades. They emphasize that the collapse of empires cannot be reduced to simple metropolitan or peripheral explanations. *Crises of Empire* underscores the various influential actors during the process of decolonization of the European empires.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- English-language literature on decolonization is dominated by studies of the British Empire
- Decolonization did not necessarily mean a full break with the old colonial powers—trade dependency was a common feature in postcolonial states