

Title—Decolonization and Its Impact: A Comparative Approach to the End of the Colonial Empires

Author—Martin Shipway

Year—2008

Categories: Decolonization, Europe, Politics, Comparative

Place: Europe (& The World)

Time: 1930-1970

Argument Synopsis:

Shipway's book is a comparative study of European empires during the period of decolonization in the mid-twentieth century. Shipway's study confirms the assumption that disengagement from empire was activated by the Second World War because it challenged the sustaining ideologies of the colonial powers towards empire and altered the dialectic with their colonial subjects. This breakdown eventually led to the end of imperial rule, long before leading European policy makers would have ever predicted. The change in European attitudes towards empire following the war heightened the expectations of ordinary colonial citizens and political leaders who increasingly made demands of the colonial state, which it was not at liberty, politically or economically, to deny. Shipway provides an informal view of the end of the European empires, using case studies to support his argument. He utilizes a comparative approach, allowing him to challenge the prevailing assumption that decolonization experiences of the major European powers were essentially dissimilar, especially in Africa. Shipway uses a chronological framework for his analysis which narrows the scope of cross-comparative case studies, unfortunately. The main focus of Shipway's analysis is on the politics of decolonization.

Despite varying temporal beginnings for all of Europe's empires, they all came to an end with remarkable speed at roughly the same time. Shipway is primarily concerned with this surprisingly quick process of decolonization. As opposed to other major literature on decolonization, Shipway is the sole author of the volume. He attempts to present a history of the end of empire that straddles the view from above and the view from below. Shipway notes the tendency to see decolonization either as an act of surrender by weakened European states or as a hard-won triumph for anticolonial independence movements—he aims to bridge this gap. Although Shipway attempts to compare all of the European empires, his reliance on secondary sources, as opposed to original research, leads to the focus being mostly on the British and French experiences.

Shipway argues that the impact of the Second World War on colonialism was essential, although largely indirect. The war changed the ordering of the international system, allowing for the breakdown of the imperial systems. Regional studies make up the bulk of the book, and Shipway attempts to explain how various paths to decolonization took shape in specific contexts. In his introduction, he considers the colonial system and seven nations that broke ties in this period: Vietnam, Indonesia, Philippines, Pakistan, Indonesia, South Africa, and Hong Kong. Shipway concludes by reviewing the conclusions of a variety of historiographers and experts on the subject.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- The Second World War was instrumental in making some form of decolonization inevitable
- The war changed the management of colonial rule and the economic prowess of colonial powers
- The outcomes of decolonization were neither intended nor envisioned