

Title—Decolonization in Britain and France: The Domestic Consequences of International Relations

Author—Miles Kahler

Year—1984

Categories: Decolonization, Comparative, Politics, Imperialism

Place: The World

Time: 1945-1970

Argument Synopsis:

Kahler seeks to explain the process by which Britain and France divested themselves of their colonial empires post-1945. He demonstrates that by the 1950s overseas colonies simply were not of major economic significance so that the choice of retaining or releasing them ultimately rested upon political criteria. He utilizes a comparative approach in order to answer why both conservative and socialist parties in Britain were able to deal with the colonial question in the rather frictionless fashion it deserved, while France required the cataclysmic overthrow of the Fourth Republic and installation of De Gaulle to get out of Algeria. Kahler lays out a complex set of common linkages and national variations that spring from both the nature of British and French domestic experiences of relations with the rest of Europe and from colonialism. The major focus of the book is on the political parties and the degree to which they succeeded in maintaining an internal consensus over the inevitable steps towards decolonization. His comparative approach highlights the role of imperialism as a class issue in Britain as opposed to a national issue in France.

This book aims to address the difficulties of nation states in adjusting, domestically and internationally, to their diminished world status. Kahler asks how the international or external environment shapes the domestic politics of nation states. To answer this, he examines four means by which the British and French empires penetrated metropolitan politics: through political parties and ideology; economic actors, especially interest groups and individual firms; the empires' European and non-European populations; and the state, including colonial administrators and military. Kahler offers an explanation of the differing effects that change in a particular set of external relations could produce within the metropolitan societies—he uses these effects as partial explanations of the contrasting course followed by Britain and France during decolonization. Although he does underscore how neither major power was fully in control of the decolonization process.

While British metropolitan elites generally assumed the obedience of its colonial administration, French authorities could rarely count on their automatic support for its decolonization policy. Kahler identifies five reasons why the British conservative party was better prepared to detach itself from empire than the French, and thus better able to politically survive its loss. These were: the Tory party's ideological movement towards centrist politics well before decolonization; divisions among intra-party opponents of decolonization; the limited opportunity available to conservative dissenters to exit the party; the conservative leadership's considerable institutional authority over the party's lower echelons; and the British electorate's insensitivity, compared to French non-elites, to issues of national autonomy and status.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- The role of imperialism as a class issue in Britain as opposed to a national issue in France
- Britain and France were not simply actors in their relations with the colonial empires, but were also acted upon by the empires
- Violence in the periphery hardened attitudes in the metropole, making gradual peaceful change more difficult