

**Title—Europe After Empire: Decolonization, Society, and Culture**

**Author—Elizabeth Buettner**

**Year—2016**

Categories: Decolonization, Comparative, Migration, Europe, Culture

Place: Europe (& The World)

Time: 1930-Present

Argument Synopsis:

Buettner's book aims to provide a review of the various decolonization experiences. She is the first to incorporate five national-imperial cases into one book through her comparative approach towards the empires of the British, French, Belgian, Dutch, and Portuguese. She underscores how decolonization involved not just the relinquishing of control of colonies but also coming to terms with the loss of the colonial order that had benefitted many Europeans, as well as grappling with colonialism's far-reaching implications. Buettner explores the central aspects of the extended histories and present-day ramifications of decolonization with an emphasis on its metropolitan dimensions. The book is organized into three sections. The first part examines the larger decolonization processes. She specifically looks at the loss of British India, French Algeria, the Dutch East Indies, the Belgian Congo, and Portuguese Africa, due to their disproportionate importance for European policymakers and the public. The second part explores the history of inward and return migration from former empires that have been responsible to a considerable degree for these nations' current ethnic and cultural diversity. The third part examines how these former empires have been remembered and forgotten. She posits that the experience of empire deeply influenced everyday society and culture across Britain, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Portugal. Her sources include autobiographies, political speeches, and material artefacts, to name a few. She insists on the importance of Europe itself as an object of historical scholarship—Buettner emphasizes the ways and extent to which specific European nations experienced decolonization through a comparative study.

Her comparative approach assesses the five metropolises transitions from colonial to postcolonial, especially in the metropolitan context. She rejects both the tendency of keeping Western European nations separate from their empires but also the persisting tendency of keeping them separate from one another. Buettner argues that European imperialism was a shared phenomenon, and scholars who study these nations in isolation risk missing important context. She criticizes historians of Britain and its empire in particular as the worst offenders of examining national histories in a state of false isolation; and because British Empire history's breakdown of the metropole and colony binary has informed the scholarship of European empires at large. Buettner charts the process from the ending of empires to a postcolonial European present imbued with colonial traces and memories, conscious and unconscious, beginning with Britain before turning to the Netherlands and the other three European colonizers. Overall, she demonstrates how both decolonization and postcolonial migrations have changed the ways the increasingly multicultural nations of Western Europe imagine their colonial pasts.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Historians of Britain and its empire are the worst offenders of the tendency to examine national histories in a state of false isolation from their nearest neighbors
- Imperial mentalities remain alive as many Europeans prove unwilling or unable to decolonize their minds to adjust to a new era
- European imperialism was a shared phenomenon