

Hall, Simon: 1956. *The World in Revolt*. London: Faber & Faber 2016. ISBN: 9780571312320; xiv, 509 S.

Rezensioniert von: John Paul Newman, Maynooth University, Ireland

About mid-way through Simon Hall's '1956: The World in Revolt', the author cites an editorial in 'The Times of London', condemning the recent nationalization of the Suez Canal by the Egyptian president Gamel Abdel Nasser. The editorial is titled „A Hinge of History“, and it claimed that Nasser's 'seizure' of Suez was comparable to Hitler's march into the Rhineland (p. 261). The citation well encapsulates Hall's own intentions in this book, for the author offers 1956 as a pivotal year, a hinge of history as important as, say, 1968, or 1989. But it also captures an essential feature of the times: the proximity of the Second World War. That reference to Hitler and the Rhineland was more than a rhetorical nod towards a distant time: almost all of the actors in the dramas of 1956 had living memory of the Second World War. This book is a panorama of confrontations between popular (and sometimes less popular) forces of protest and change aligned against a world order still trying to find its feet in the wake of military conflict.

Keeping the emphasis on this dramatic and eventful year, Hall divides his narrative into four parts, named after the four seasons: „Winter: Cracks in the Old Order“, „Spring: A Yearning for Freedom“, „Summer: A Spirit of Rebellion“, and „Autumn: Revolution and Reaction“. Within each of these parts Hall cycles through the main historical events of the period. Hall emphasizes three of the most important and transformative of the year's historical turns: the civil rights movement in America, de-Stalinization in Eastern Europe (with an emphasis on Poland and Hungary), and de-colonization (the nascent Franco-Algerian conflict and, of course, the Suez crisis). The narrative strands seem, if not exactly to converge, then at least to reach a kind of climax in the final and longest part of the book, in which Hall reaches for a suitably dramatic conclusion to this remarkable year by describing the two pivotal military inter-

ventions of 1956: the Franco-British debacle in Suez and the contrastingly effective Soviet invasion in Hungary.

What binds this global turmoil? The American civil rights movement is linked to a global struggle of oppressed and marginalized peoples everywhere, the colonial world, communist Eastern Europe, and so on. Indeed, there is at least a foggy understanding on the part of the main actors of the significance and relevance of events on the other side of the world. Martin Luther King is cited comparing the plight of African Americans to non-whites battling European colonialism in other parts of the world Hall also makes a case that the „Cold War loomed large“ (p. 149). over race relations in the US, the banner of anti-communism justifying a multitude of harsh responses to the movement. It was certainly a factor, although 'looming large' might be to overstate the case. The sense of a revolutionary *Zeitgeist* is certainly present, although I wondered how concerned the anti-communist Poles or Hungarians were about, say, segregation on American buses. Likely not at all, or at least not significantly. Do King's comments actually speak to a new understanding of the pre-eminent position of the USA in the world, now arguably at the pinnacle of the American century?

From another angle, the dilemmas facing the colonial masters of France or Britain were similar, be they in Algeria, Cyprus, or elsewhere – and a comparison can be made with the American and Soviet 'empires' in Cuba and Eastern Europe. The rulers of the post-war world are of course caught in their own contradictions: the Soviets pharisaically deride the abuse of African-Americans at the hands of the capitalist system and support, rhetorically and materially, the anti-colonial forces of the emerging 'third world'. No such sympathy is shown inside their own recently-expanded sphere of influence, where violence is threatened and real. There is a savage irony, not yet apparent in 1956, in the fact that Nasser fought the British and the French using arms provided by the Soviets that were produced in communist Czechoslovakia (p. 213). History would show the Czechoslovaks that some revolts are more valid than others, and that some 'empires' are here to stay.

Indeed, the comparison between Hall's two set-piece military interventions, Suez and Budapest, is a telling one. The contrasting results of these two interventions speak to the contrasting paths of the two historical processes in question: de-colonization would continue apace in the decades to come, whereas de-Stalinization gave way to Soviet retrenchment in Eastern Europe. The Soviet Union, recovering from the losses of the Second World War, was not likely to abandon its territorial spoils so soon and so easily. Hall notes that the closeness of the Second World War meant that the Hungarian 'counter-revolution' could be depicted by the ruling communists as a resurfacing of right-wing forces of the interwar and Second World War (Horthy's dictatorship or the Arrow Cross fascists). But no such case could be made against the Prague Spring in 1968, carried out in a country with no history of right-wing authoritarianism. That made little difference to the Soviet response: different country, different epoch, same policy. Compare this to the French experience in Algeria, which ended with French withdrawal in 1962, essentially in the same forced retreat as the one at Suez. 1956 is a snapshot of the old empires in a state of decline, even as the new ones are just beginning to assert themselves.

There is no over-arching thesis here, aside from a mention in the preface about challenging the supposed 'drabness' of the 1950s with the revolutionary ferment of the 1960s. In Hall's exciting account 1956 seems hardly less revolutionary than 1968. Historians of the sixties often posit as a key factor in the revolutionary mood of the times a dramatic generational shift, the coming of age of the 'baby boomers' unmarked by direct experience of the Second World War and therefore at odds with the previous generation. No such demographic shift is present in 1956. As we have seen, almost all of the main protagonists, the individuals, the states, the social movements and forces, are deeply marked by the Second World War. Just look at the biographies of the lead players in 1956: Dwight Eisenhower, formerly Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in Europe, Nikita Khrushchev, Stalin's leading commissar in wartime Ukraine, Anthony Eden, who re-applies the lessons he learnt in the appeasement crisis of the 1930s to

Nasser's Egypt in the 1950s, with disastrous consequences, or Ben Bella – FLN leader in Algeria who had fought for the French army in the Second World War, and whose post-war career shows that not all the permutations of the Second World War are obvious, expected.

Hall's narrative makes clear that, just as murky and muddled as the events were in 1956, it is now obvious who was on the right side of history: de-colonization of the kind taking place in Algeria and elsewhere was an irreversible post-war process. Even if the anti-communist revolt of '56 was crushed, the political system it challenged would ultimately collapse under popular pressure not unlike that which flickered in Poland and Hungary in 1956. Formal racial segregation is a thing of the past, even if the problem of race-relations in the US is still far from solved. Hall's perspective brings bold color to the perceived monochrome of the 1950s, his impressive scope and narrative verve mean that this book can be read for profit and pleasure by general readers and professional historians alike.

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