

Shipway, Martin: *Decolonization and its Impact. A Comparative Approach to the End of the Colonial Empires*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell 2008. ISBN: 978-0-631-19968-7; 269 S.

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The practice of comparative history is much lauded but frequently poorly executed. Only too often it demonstrates a failure on the part of its practitioners to agree on what developments are to be compared. What questions, furthermore, are likely to generate illuminating comparisons? At other times 'comparison' encourages little more than the banal listing of characteristics identified as common to broadly 'similar' situations. Linguistic imprecision and loose labellings are cable of provoking unhelpful or mistaken parallels. Revolutions, economies and empires, political and social structures, have all with varying success long stimulated such treatment. In recent years, starting with R. F. Holland's *European Decolonization 1918-1981: An Introductory Survey* (1985), 'decolonization' has come to seem ripe for comparative analysis.

Surely, it might be argued, the case for such a methodological and historiographical departure can hardly be gainsaid. The twentieth century witnessed the break-up of several European empires, including the British, French, Belgian and Dutch, within a relatively short period of time. Metropolitan official and popular discontents, local colonial nationalist resistance, and international pressures, each contributed their share to this process. Following the lead of Ronald Robinson and J. A. Gallagher, modern British historians have defined the explanatory and comparative problems surrounding decolonization as how, and to what degree, did these different dynamics bring about the global transformation involved in this ending of empires.

In his fresh and stimulating book Shipway begs to disagree with much of this by-now broadly conventional wisdom. He accepts the general chronology, the principal players in the narrative drama, and the crucial, damaging impact of the second World War. Thereafter his scepticism takes hold. First Shipway asks if historians of decolonization are in

genuine agreement as to their overall purpose. Here Shipway's immersion in French historiographical traditions results in a new perspective. Are they examining 'decolonization' as marking a dynamic conjuncture of global developments, or is their subject of concern no more than a series of coincidental events? Does the narrative history of any one colony ever contribute as much or more to the general history of decolonization than it does to the accumulation of case studies? Without agreement on this fundamental issue of goal and focus, one might argue, further comparisons are scarcely possible.

If one can reach agreement on that objective it is then necessary to ask what has so far been achieved by decolonization historians. Shipway suggests that that achievement is far from complete and far less than is generally thought. He notes the brevity of the combined post-war colonial crisis (1945-65) and its gathering speed as developments that are still barely understood. Further supports for his arguments he suggests are to be found in the persistence and stability of colonial borders, and in what he regards as the absence of significant concessions to notables and interest groups at the periphery. When taken together he believes that these characteristics provide compelling reasons to reduce the significance attached to both colonial nationalists and metropolitan policymakers in shaping the process of decolonization.

Not content with simply identifying weaknesses and tensions in the existing historiography, Shipway develops a further positive argument. To this there are three distinct strands. First, he develops an overall explanatory narrative of decolonization, and in that account attempts a process of reconciliation. He shows how existing 'imperial' analyses of decolonization (by which he means explanations defined within an imperial rather than a post-colonial system) must be integrated with, and would benefit from, an understanding of the political/social processes of colonization and colonial rule. In the course of this two additional arguments come into play. The first involves charting the emergence and operation of what in recent years has been recognised as 'the colonial state'. The second requires an acceptance of what Shipway has

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christened 'the late colonial shift', a fundamental change in the perceptions of both colonisers and colonised as to the purposes and value of empire and how these were to be secured for the future. On the part of imperial officials it involved changes in their concern to plan and manage colonial resources; for the colonised it meant for most the handing over of the colonial state and its controls to allies or rivals, differing in their degrees of acceptability and willingness to conduct 'politics as usual'. Redefining goals and the institutions appropriate to their attainment gave an uncontrollable impetus to the process of decolonization. For all parties involved decolonization meant far more than simply the 'end of empire' (what ties remained?), the 'transfer of (whose? what?) power', or 'independence' (whose? to whom?). What kind of 'colonial state' survived decolonization? Consideration of these questions provides far more than most the firm foundations for a genuinely comparative history.

After devoting two chapters to the concepts of the colonial state and the late colonial shift, the book is given over to a large number of case studies from different empires. From the British, French, Dutch and Belgian imperial systems the selection includes India, Ceylon, Burma, Indochina and Indonesia, where imperial powers failed to secure their own return; the Gold Coast and Nigeria, where the impact of the second World War was particularly pronounced and decolonization correspondingly pushed on rapidly to local control and political self-government; Kenya, Cyprus, Algeria and Madagascar, where colonial visions and the emergent colonial state were shaped above all by local wars and states of emergency. Space is found not only for the French West African territories but also for those long-lived exceptions such as southern Africa, Hong Kong and (less convincingly) the Portuguese empire. Much of Shipway's argument and illustration defy easy summary in a short review but in that no more than mirror the complexity of his subject. His book represents a notable accomplishment, a feat of stylish synthesis and compression which will inject still greater energy into an already vigorous debate.

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