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Europe, the War, and the Colonial World

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Abstract and Keywords

The fact that we know the end points of formal colonial rule may lead us to forget that, for those involved, the process appeared less determined and more contingent. It is deceptively easy to trip over the supposed ‘milestone’ of the Second World War, ascribing undue influence to a failing capacity or will to rule among the colonial powers themselves. Such generalizations leave no room for agency among colonized peoples themselves and dismiss both rulers and ruled as essentially homogenous, almost preprogrammed to behave stereotypically as reactionaries or revolutionaries. Recognizing these interpretive problems, political analysts of European decolonization are now more divided over the extent to which the Second World War prefigured the end of European colonial rule. Much of the evidence for a strong causal link is powerful. By 1950 the geopolitical maps of eastern, southern, and western Asia were markedly less colonial. The justificatory language for empire was also different, evidence of the turn towards a technocratic administrative style that would soon become the norm in much of the global South. If basic political rights were frequently denied within dependent territories, a stronger accent on improved living standards gave imperial powers something with which to muffle the rising chorus of transnational criticism against colonial abuses. For all that, the concept of the Second World War as a watershed in the end of empires should not be accepted uncritically. This chapter explores the reasons why.

Keywords: colonialism, decolonization, empire, violence, development

THE Second World War is still regarded by some scholars as a watershed so obvious in its effects on European colonialism that little or no examination of the precise connections between global conflict and colonial collapse is required. Texts on decolonization frequently take 1945 as their starting point, making the implicit assumption that empire was increasingly untenable for Europe's imperial powers. It is easy to see why; after all, the supportive evidence abounds. Britain and France, Europe's pre-eminent imperial nations, were each bankrupted by the war. By 1945 they faced massive tasks of domestic reconstruction that necessarily drew primordial attention and demanded vast resources. For the Dutch and Belgians, as well as the French, defeat and occupation promoted forms of wartime collaboration that mocked any ethically presumptive 'right to rule' other societies. Ruthlessly extractive 'imperial war efforts' in Africa and Asia, and heightened wartime restrictions on people's freedom to move, to consume, and to meet, alienated local populations who were compelled to work harder for a conflict they never owned. And, for all of western Europe's imperial nations, an enduring reluctance to confront the obvious political implications of a supposedly 'just war' in defence of freedom made it harder still for empire administrators to claim that they had colonial communities' best interests at heart. A struggle between competing ideological systems, one of which made racial politics its core rationale, the war ultimately rendered colonial injustice more visible. Speaking in Arlington, Virginia, on Memorial Day, 1942, hadn't Sumner Welles, Roosevelt's idealistic under-secretary of state, justified American involvement in the Second World War by calling publicly for a global, anti-colonial crusade?

> If this war is in fact a war for the liberation of peoples, it must assure the sovereign equality of peoples throughout the world … Discrimination between peoples because of their race, creed or color must be abolished. The age of imperialism is ended.[1]

(p. 577) Anti-colonial rhetoric might force Europe's imperial rulers to rethink their arguments for empire, but, in the short term, changing military fortunes proved more critical. Devastatingly rapid imperial collapses in the face of Japan's onward march through mainland Asia destroyed any residual belief in European imperial invincibility. But Japan's victories in Asia in early 1942 were not the first disasters for Europe's imperial powers. Others were made by the warring Europeans themselves. Three weeks after Marshal Philippe Pétain announced the French surrender, on 10 July 1940 British service chiefs cast around for an alternative to the imminent consolidation of a French regime that seemed likely to bend to German and Italian wishes. The one option discussed related to General Charles de Gaulle. The self-proclaimed leader of Free France, de Gaulle and his supporters had formed a nascent resistance movement, headquartered in London and eager to fight on. To assist him, the British generals discussed whether a small 'Gaullist' expeditionary force might sail to Algiers. The Royal Navy would escort it; American-supplied weapons would equip it. Algeria was deliberately chosen. France's one substantial settler territory, it was constitutionally integrated with mainland France. From a location that was administratively—and symbolically—both the heart of the French Empire and 'home soil', de Gaulle could declare the Free French intention to reconquer metropolitan France, probably via

invasion and defeat of Fascist Italy.[2] It was heady stuff. And it was hopelessly unrealistic. De Gaulle's movement was—and would remain—acutely resentful of its de facto dependency on stronger allies. More importantly, every tenet of the service chiefs' discussion was misplaced. Algeria's settlers, if not yet solidly united behind Pétain's Vichy regime, were politically and temperamentally inclined to reject Free France and its presumptuous leader. After all, the General's British partners had killed almost 2,000 French sailors during a bombardment of the port of Oran only a week earlier.[3] Nor could Algeria really be considered a part of France. It was a colony in which ethnic discrimination, typified by the political marginalization, economic neglect, and cultural denigration of the Muslim majority, would erupt into political violence at war's end.

Not surprisingly, the proposed Algiers landing never occurred. Instead, in late September 1940 de Gaulle was ferried to Dakar, administrative capital of the French West African federation, in a remarkably similar—and equally misguided—operation. Perhaps understandably, the failure of the Dakar expedition mattered most to Britain's imperial administrators because of its wider implications for British Africa, and for the established colonial order more generally. Colonial Secretary Lord Lloyd put things bluntly:

> Our strategical ideas for Africa were formed on the basis of the French Alliance. Since the French collapsed we have had to do a complete mental somersault. The African situation is now novel and unexpected … The magnitude of our African interests is out of all proportion to our defences. These interests are in fact continental. The African territories under the rule of the Colonial Office cover an area of 2,000,000 square miles. There are living in them over 43,000,000 people, for whose destinies we are responsible. The addition of the Union of South Africa and the (p. 578) Sudan … brings these totals up to 4,652,000 square miles and 60,000,000 people … Our defensive positions there are lamentably weak, and we have given little thought to the strategic problems which may now immediately arise. It is imperative that we should think out now, before it is too late, the complicated issues involved.[4]

British and French imperial prospects—together or alone—were bleaker still in South East Asia. In British Malaya a series of industrial strikes in tin-mining compounds and Singapore's massive naval dockyard had been orchestrated by the colony's Communist Party with varying degrees of success since 1937.[5] The date was no coincidence. It signified the Party's closer identification with its larger Chinese cousin and with China's desperate struggle against Japanese invasion. Each of these causes was inflected with a strongly anti-imperialist rhetoric, the strength and appeal of which intensified as the transnational ties between Chinese communities throughout South East Asia spread in response to the growing Japanese threat.[6] Elsewhere, Vietnamese, Burmese, and Indonesian leftists, as well as other civil society groups determined to avoid a future restoration of European colonial rule, sought wider support at home and overseas. Put differently, the experience of a new, racially configured foreign occupation created the

sociopolitical conditions in which local, but transnationally connected, networks of future anti-colonial insurgency took root.

Malaya's exposure to Japanese attack was, of course, heightened by the increasingly tenuous French grip over the Indochinese peninsula. French Indochina's Second World War is usually discussed in relation to a wartime colonial turn towards Vichy, the rise of Vietnamese Communist resistance, wartime famine, and ultimate revolution in 1945. But it also had significant ramifications for the security of French—and British—imperialism far removed from the South China Sea. During 1941 and 1942 southern Vietnam provided the bulk of what little organic rubber the Third Reich could obtain for its war industries. And evidence of Vichy's trans-shipment of Vietnamese rubber helped the British authorities to persuade their US counterparts to break with Pétain's regime and its colonial satellites in North and West Africa. These complex webs of connection—between communities of Chinese contesting colonial domination on the one hand, and between French Indochina's loss of economic sovereignty and the Allied decision to act against Vichy in Africa on the other—point to a wider phenomenon: the globalization of imperial crisis under the strains of multi-continental war.

Allied victory in 1945 did nothing to reverse this globalizing dynamic. If anything, the emergent post-war international system made the challenge of rebuilding empire harder still. As Colin Gray suggests, by 1945 the most intractable problem in Europe was not how to make peace *with* Germany but, rather, how to make peace *about* Germany and its future.[7] So, too, the critical dilemma for those governing European colonial empires was to sustain control over the futures of dependent territories in international and transnational environments fundamentally reshaped by war. The Soviet and American giants were assuredly less anti-colonial in practice than their founding myths might suggest. The Americans recognized that European colonial spaces presented more of a barrier to Communist influence than any real obstacle to the advance of US (p. 579) free-trade capitalism.[8] The Soviet regime was also too preoccupied with its own imperial dominance in the 'Second World' of Eastern Europe to invest its political energies or military assets in anti-colonial movements in the 'Third World' of Africa and Asia. This was a bitter disappointment to anti-colonial radicals such as the Trinidadian writer George Padmore, whose wartime manuscript *How Russia Transformed Her Colonial Empire*, finally published in 1946, suggested that Soviet resilience derived from its multi-ethnic unity in service to a higher ideological cause.[9] But all was not lost for those hoping that the superpowers might yet insist that the Old World imperialists change their ways.

The US and Soviet governments were willing to intervene decisively against Western Europe's ailing colonial empires when their reputations and material interests were affected, or when potential clients in the global South were at stake. Ironically, it was the United States, not the Soviet Union, that took the lead here. From Palestine to Dutch Indonesia, the Americans, it seemed, were strategic realists, willing to sink Europe's floundering colonial ships rather than waste resource and reputation bailing them out. Perhaps such actions were not simply realism at work. They could be read differently as logical consequences of a new cultural outlook, one that was institutionally embodied in

the United Nations and rhetorically embedded in new instruments of international law that at last defined basic human rights in terms fundamentally at odds with the racial hierarchies of European colonialism. To sum up, however one cuts it, in this interpretation 1945 was a watershed for Europe and its relationship with the colonial world.

Let us pause a moment to consider any problems with this line of approach. For one thing, it is perhaps too tempting to read the history backwards. The fact that we know the end points of formal colonial rule may lead us to forget that, for those involved, the process appeared less determined and more contingent. For another thing, it is equally easy to trip over the supposed ‘milestone’ of the Second World War, ascribing undue influence to a failing capacity or will to rule among the colonial powers themselves. Such generalizations leave no room for agency among colonized peoples themselves and dismiss both rulers and ruled as essentially homogeneous, almost preprogrammed to behave stereotypically as reactionaries or revolutionaries.

Recognizing these interpretive problems, political analysts of European decolonization are now more divided over the extent to which the Second World War triggered the collapse of European colonial rule. Much of the evidence for a deep causal link still looks persuasive. Within four years of the end of the Second World War, Britain had withdrawn from the Indian subcontinent. The Mandate for Palestine, arguably never a workable proposition, had disintegrated, leaving war and refugees trailing in its wake. To the north, France was evicted from Syria and Lebanon, while, far to the east, Dutch recognition of the Indonesian Republic in December 1949 brought down the curtain on South East Asia’s largest European colonial project. Admittedly, UN-backed plans for trusteeships in former colonial territories were, in some places, abandoned or corrupted (think of British predominance in former Italian Libya, for instance). But, in others, they were well advanced.

(p. 580) Equally significant, the justificatory language for empire had changed profoundly, evidence of a widespread shift towards a technocratic, results-oriented administrative style that would soon become the norm in much of the global South. If basic political rights were still frequently denied within dependent territories, a stronger accent on improved living standards, sustained infrastructural investment, and proto-industrialization gave imperial powers something with which to muffle the rising chorus of transnational criticism against colonial abuses. For all that, the concept of the Second World War as a watershed in the end of empires should not be accepted uncritically. Several reasons indicate why.

To make the Second World War the decisive catalyst for decolonization underestimates pre-war trends towards the disintegration of European colonial control. Once one adds these factors up, they are not so readily dismissed: early nationalist organization and varying forms of protest, interwar rebellions, and the economic dislocation between European states and dependent colonies triggered by the global depression of the early 1930s—all were powerfully disintegrative. To take an obvious example, British rule in

India, while not quite rendered untenable by Mahatma Gandhi's interwar civil resistance campaigns, was certainly refashioned in response to them. After the preceding years of protest and persecution, between 1935 and 1939 the Indian National Congress was induced to collaborate with imperial administration, first at provincial level, then more widely. Expecting India to fight a war to which its population had never assented undermined what Judith Brown terms this 'collaborative nexus', paving the way for wartime resumption of demonstrations, the 'Quit India' movement, and the jailing of Congress leaders.[10] Even so, when viewed from a more long-term perspective, the war years signified a reversion to earlier patterns of civil protest rather than something without precedent.

Primary emphasis on the years 1939–45 further implies that extraneous, war-induced factors precipitated empire collapse. It is hard to dispute this in relation to the fall of Hong Kong or Singapore or to growing US regional dominance in the Caribbean basin, one might say. Even so, this 'war first' viewpoint obscures the extent to which colonized individuals and groups were already taking the initiative in achieving their own sociopolitical advances, particularly through industrial actions, heightened—often transnational—political organization, and stronger claims for equality under law between whites and non-whites.[11] Equally, the 'Second World War as catalyst' argument minimizes the degree to which European colonial powers had begun adjusting forms of imperial control to changed economic, social, and political conditions in the colonies. To take two well-known examples: from the French Popular Front's short-lived but authentic willingness to elaborate a colonial welfare programme to the British imperial forays into development epitomized by Lord Hailey's 1938 monumental *African Survey*, redefining the scope of imperial obligation was already in the air.[12] In this sense, the war marked an interruption of planned modernization and reform, not their original cause.

Interpretational problems arise even if we do concede that the war was the principal agent of change. By 1945 there was an obvious geopolitical disjuncture between Asia and **(p. 581)** Africa that was reflected in a differential pace of decolonization. In South and South East Asia, European colonialism was undermined by two consecutive shock waves. One was the impact of Japanese regional supremacy and the occupations that came with it between 1942 and 1945. The other was the subsequent dominance achieved by the United States around the Pacific Rim. Ultimately, it was not the regulation of Japan's defeat in 1945 but the development of Cold War in East Asia that dictated the terms of Asian decolonization, ensuring that the United States played a more dominant role in the colonial actions of France and the Netherlands.

So, too, in the Middle East, the war transformed regional politics and social organization, hastening the emergence of fully independent Arab states and intensifying the conflict between Arabs and Zionists in Mandate Palestine. But Africa south of the Sahara was a strategic backwater for most of the war, and neither colonial authorities nor most anti-colonial nationalists envisaged national independence as an immediately achievable goal. It seems equally clear that European governments and voting populations never thought

that the war made abandonment of empire inevitable. In fact, popular imperialism in France and Portugal especially emerged stronger after 1945 than before it.

So where does this leave us? With the Second World War reduced to the rank of merely one cause among many for the demise of Europe's maritime empires? Surely that is to swing the pendulum too far in the opposite interpretive direction? In a field as contested as imperial history, it is perhaps unsurprising that forceful counter-arguments can easily be proposed. Let's take some of these in turn. We know that the disappointment felt by colonial leaders whose demands for additional rights went unanswered after the First World War spurred the growth of anti-colonial protest and new forms of transnational anti-colonial activism. British and French imperial rule survived nonetheless.[13] The Second World War, by contrast, had made the territorial, economic, and intellectual certainties of European imperialism crumble away.[14] By early 1942 the British, Dutch, and French colonial federations in South East Asia were either overthrown or reduced to Quisling status. India was in political and communal ferment, the outlines of eventual partition and British withdrawal increasingly visible. Sub-Saharan African colonies, although rarely on the war's strategic front lines, nonetheless experienced the global conflict in visceral terms because of harsher governmental demands made on recruiters, labourers, food producers, and families. Net purchasing power tended to decline (real-terms price inflation was widespread). Material hardship increased. Political space shrank.

Admittedly, the United Nations Charter of 1946 fell short of demanding an end to colonial rule. Indeed, its key authors showed little enthusiasm for explicit reference to any presumptive right to 'self-determination'.[15] The charter did, however, commit its signatories to develop 'self-government', a term for which French colonial officials quickly acquired an acute loathing.[16] And it soon became apparent, not just that colonial nationalist leaders expected the Allies to uphold their wartime pledges of support for democratic liberties, but that countless people around the world did too. Galvanized by transnational networks of shared interest that, for instance, linked African-Americans **(p. 582)** seeking an end to discrimination at home with Africans and Indians who wanted freedom from colonialism, the perceived right for people of shared ethnicity to govern themselves became more closely bound up with demands for an end to racial discrimination.[17]

Having rehearsed the arguments for and against closer identification between the Second World War and the fate of colonial empires, the rest of this chapter tries to provide some answers. To do so, it explores certain themes connecting the Second World War's impact and the future of European colonialism after 1945. These themes include the war's effects on imperial thinking in Western Europe; connections between money and empire; the transition to Cold War; and, finally, a few reflections on the phenomenon of 'politics through violence' prevalent in European decolonization after 1945.

War and Imperial Thinking in Western Europe

A remarkable presumption behind the imperial policies emanating from London, Paris, Brussels, and The Hague in 1945 was that imperial relationships weakened by wartime occupations, uprisings, or deprivation could be revitalized in peace. (Portugal's wartime neutrality, although tenuously observed, spared it the worst of the conflict. If this set the Salazarist regime apart, the Lusophone imperial core of Angola and Mozambique was strongly affected by developments in neighbouring Belgian Congo and the settler-dominated regimes of British Southern Africa.) Portugal aside, the human and material costs of maintaining empire fell on four European countries devastated by war. Among them, only Britain escaped the divisive legacies of wartime collaboration at home and imperially.[18] For all that, Britain—like France, the Netherlands, and Belgium—was financially prostrate. Their governments looked to Washington for short-term financial relief, aware that tasks of domestic reconstruction were their first priority. Redistributionist fiscal policies, welfare reforms, and ambitious public spending were pursued through continuing peacetime austerity. And this determination to lay more equitable foundations for future domestic prosperity informed the two strands of political belief newly dominant in post-war north-western Europe: left-tinged social democracy and Catholic Christian democracy. Each emerged within a post-war cultural environment presciently described by scholars as one of 'life after death' in which relief at surviving the war was matched by reification of the family as the bedrock of society.[19]

The inward focus within the societies of Western Europe's imperial states does not, though, imply any governmental or popular turn away from empire. To the contrary: the urgency of post-war domestic reform was matched by imperial administrative changes that seemed almost hyperactive after the lassitude imposed by economic depression and war. Between 1945 and 1947 sweeping constitutional rewrites, mulled over in wartime, were rolled out—piecemeal in the British case, throughout its empire in the French case. (p. 583) Development, once conceived primarily in terms of grand but remote infrastructural projects, was reinvented as something meaningfully local. Additional schools, piped water, housing schemes: all were potentially socially transformative because they were closer to the people.[20] This accent on bottom-up improvement in living standards was matched by new thinking about imperial citizenship, local governance, even democratic inclusion. French and British post-war imperial vocabulary replaced 'colonies' with 'territories', 'Commonwealth partnerships', and 'unions'. The same might have held true in Dutch as well had not Indonesian independence been declared in August 1945 in open defiance of the anticipated return of imperial administration.

Would there be a repeat of 1919, when peacemaking fostered new ways of thinking about imperial relationships and ethnic rights that were quickly snuffed out as colonial rulers retreated into old habits? The rapidity with which violence and rebellion engulfed colonial South East Asia might suggest so. To the west, the calamitous aftermath of Indian partition in 1947 and the tragic impasse in Palestine meanwhile pointed to a different,

more chaotic future, one in which the end of empire unleashed communalist impulses that left millions of refugees dispossessed or stateless.[21] In colonial Africa and the Caribbean, though, the results were mixed. Problems abounded north of the Saharan belt. A bitter May 1945 uprising amidst near-famine conditions in eastern Algeria and sustained political and industrial militancy in neighbouring Morocco and Tunisia exposed levels of nationalist opposition that ultimately rendered French North Africa ungovernable. In Egypt dispute over the scope and strategic implications of Britain's treaty rights intensified years before the Free Officers' Movement seized power in July 1952. Ironically, former Italian Libya, epicentre of the Second World War in Africa and scene of vicious reprisal killings during the changes of regime that accompanied that campaign's back-and-forth progress, perhaps occasioned the greatest optimism. Its trusteeship status, stalled at the UN, remained in dispute throughout the late 1940s. Even so, the end of Fascist colonialism and post-war international oversight registered improvements of a sort.[22] In sharp contrast, at Africa's southern tip, the victory of Dr D. F. Malan's National Party in June 1948 heralded the programmatic introduction of apartheid, an institutionalization of total racial discrimination long in gestation.[23] Albeit an extreme manifestation, South Africa's race politics foretold a deeper imperial truth. In Portuguese and French territories as well as in British, the status of Africa's white settlers would precipitate the longest and bitterest struggles of European empire's end.

Evidence of disorder, violence, and discrimination in the global colonial landscape after 1945 is easy to find, but in some places the possibility of dialogue and enhanced imperial relationships persisted. Without simply moving from one colonial region to the next, the case of francophone Africa suffices to prove the point. French black Africa in the post-war decade witnessed the two extremes of repression resumed and reformist horizons widening. Madagascar exemplified the former: a 1947 revolt brutally suppressed at a cost of perhaps 100,000 lives. But, in much of French black Africa, what historian Frederick Cooper describes as a 'claims-making culture' took root. Colonial voices in politics, the workplace, student residencies, **(p. 584)** and civil society tuned into the inclusive language of France's Fourth Republic; indeed, more than that: they shaped it.[24] The long-held French republican design of empire integration, fashioned through the dissemination of French language and culture and idealized in terms of colour-blind citizenship and rights equivalence, was far from realization. But the talk of wider citizenship, enhanced worker entitlements, strategic investment, and greater intercultural respect was more than empty rhetoric that could be wished away once its metropolitan opponents regained office. Along with the language, the terms of imperial politics had changed. The principal consequence was that people of influence throughout French West Africa discerned unprecedented possibilities for social improvement, democratization, and federal partnership within the framework of empire. Much as this points to a post-Second World War imperial 'moment' of more lasting duration than that of the Paris peace settlements, so, too, does the generational shift among the political leaderships of Western Europe's imperial powers.

For many in Clement Attlee's Labour administration, wartime experience in government confirmed their belief in state intervention as the locomotive of societal change.[25] The Fabian reformism of some Labour colonial specialists melded remarkably well with Colonial Office gradualism. Each was informed by positivist notions that benevolent administration validated British imperial authority. Meanwhile, in France, where the Socialist and Communist Left shared power with Christian Democrats and other centrist groups, wartime resistance—and, by extension, collaboration—had refashioned politics. A resistance past became a badge of republican legitimacy, which, somewhat paradoxically, French Communists and right-wing supporters of Charles de Gaulle mobilized for opposing political purposes. And the arc traced by resistance supporters from outlaws to national leaders resonated among anti-colonial groups from Algeria to Vietnam. All followed the same cue, couching their demands in terms of the right to resist unjust foreign rule. Little wonder that, all too briefly, France's new leadership felt bound to negotiate with Ho Chi Minh's Hanoi regime before resolving to crush it in late 1946.[26]

Shaped by markedly different wartime political cultures, those governing the post-war empires of Britain and France thus shared a willingness to tackle the imperial fissures opened by the war, recognizing that colonial practices could not simply continue as before. But these commendable impulses were soon dampened by their shrinking room to manoeuvre economically and strategically. Huge wartime debts and hardening East–West enmity transformed the political context in which imperial rebuilding was supposed to occur. More than excuses, the twin pressures of austerity and Cold War quickly circumscribed the thinking about self-determination, capacious imperial citizenship, even negotiated withdrawal that pervaded colonial ministries immediately after the war ended.[27] Attlee's government, for instance, expected colonial economic assets to assist the recovery of sterling. And, although the prime minister famously ventured the suggestion of a Middle East pull-out in 1947, by the time Labour left office in 1951 the idea seemed outlandish.[28]

(p. 585) Money, Empire, and Cold War

The preceding observations bring us to the identification between global status, monetary resources, and empire. A long-established phenomenon, it emerged stronger than ever after 1945. The British case was especially instructive. Sterling's uncertain future as both a reserve and a transactions currency in a global trading system dominated by US dollars redefined official thinking about the value of imperial connections. Britain's war spending was funded, in part, by borrowing from empire treasuries, meaning that the country entered peacetime with a large imperial war debt. India was Britain's largest colonial creditor, its 1.3 billion of sterling assets (at 1946 values) critical to British liquidity. Other imperial territories accounted for an additional billion plus, Egypt and Sudan alone holding 400 million. Only after tough talking with the major empire creditors, notably India and Australia, during 1946–7 were the necessary stopgap arrangements made to

avert a crisis over these sterling balances.[29] Self-interest trumped fellow feeling here. It made no sense for Commonwealth governments or soon-to-be-independent India to undermine sterling's value in international markets.[30] Nor were Britain and, by extension, France, financially toothless. Each could still use strategic investment, customs tariffs, and tax breaks to foster a climate favourable to home industries and, by extension, less favourable to other outsiders. Amidst the emergent Bretton Woods system of dollar-dominated global free trade, there remained substantial pockets of protected European imperial economic influence that would endure into the 1950s and beyond.

This, though, was far from the whole story of war, money, and empire economics. Of much greater significance to many occupied and dependent populations was the war's impact on price stability. From Greece to Vietnam a toxic combination of state requisitioning and rampant inflation rendered essential foodstuffs either unavailable, unaffordable, or both. The result was famine. Japanese extraction of the bulk of Vietnamese rice during lean harvest years in 1943 and, more especially, 1944 created a starvation belt that stretched along Tonkin's Red River Delta. Conservative estimates suggest a death toll among the north Vietnamese of half a million. Probably higher, this dreadful human cost of new-style colonial occupation was integral to the Vietnamese revolution over the summer of 1945. The Communist-led Democratic Republic of Vietnam established in Hanoi during August–September made peasant land reform a central plank in its programme for a post-colonial state.

At much the same time, famine also engulfed north-eastern India. Slow to respond, British authorities in Bengal ultimately failed to alleviate chronic food shortages precipitated by requisitioning, rising costs, and a breakdown in Bengal's agricultural market system.[31] By the end of 1944 some 3 million Bengalis had died. A searing indictment of colonial inability to guarantee human life through the economic stresses of world war, Bengal's famine utterly discredited British rule. Meanwhile, the disintegration of social solidarity among Bengal's starving population heightened Gandhi and other (p. 586) Congress leaders' determination to foster stronger national cohesion among India's poor.[32] Whether for colonial powers or their opponents, wartime famine thus registered stronger social and political impact than any promises of impending peace and a return to the certainties of European imperial rule.

With India and Palestine the most striking examples, the European colonial withdrawals of the late 1940s also triggered huge population movements and altered long-established economic and cultural relationships within and between countries and communities.[33] The post-war surge in empire disorder changed the points of contact between First World and Third. So, too, in the 'Second World'—the Eastern European and other territories living under Soviet dominion—interest in decolonization mounted. For some Eastern Europeans, anti-colonial activism was perceived as evidence of authentic socialist revolution (as in Vietnam or, rather later, in Cuba). For others, colonial insurgencies were read as proof that seemingly immovable foreign occupations could be successfully challenged.[34] Some imperial powers also reinvigorated empire connections at the same time as anti-colonial pressures increased. Post-war emigration was one facet of this. In

the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s white Europeans still departed in their thousands—in the British and Portuguese cases, in their hundreds of thousands—for countries that retained imperial connections to the homeland.[35] Simultaneously, migrant traffic flowing in the opposite direction, from dependencies past or present to Europe, also reshaped European societies demographically, culturally, and politically.

As for the Cold War, it was the imperial powers' misfortune to set about post-war imperial reconstruction along the conflict's fault lines in South East Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.[36] Crisis after crisis tumbled into one another within the Dutch, British, and French empires over the next quarter-century. As in 1919, so after 1945, the United States was critical. It weakened the grip of colonial powers: the Dutch in Indonesia; the British in Palestine; initially at least, the French in Indochina. At the same time Washington disappointed those colonial subjects who anticipated a brave new world of democratic freedom.[37] Just as 1919 witnessed a fleeting Wilsonian moment, so the years 1944 to 1947 might be identified as a second 'moment' in which America might have played its diplomatic and strategic cards in the anti-colonialists' favour.[38]

Events turned out otherwise. Post-war US administrations did more to conserve colonial systems than to destroy them.[39] Once overwhelmingly explained in terms of Cold War zero-sum thinking—the imperatives of Western strategic interest trumping the empty rhetoric of US anti-colonialism—historians have, more recently, been drawn to other explanations for this shift in American approach. The most subtle posit that the United States worked with its British and French partners to ease their withdrawal from empire, clearing a path for US dominance while, for the most part, avoiding open confrontation.[40] President Truman's 'layered conception of sovereignty' cast self-determination not as a basic right, but as an ideal condition contingent on the abilities and willingness of the people involved to adhere to Western standards and political loyalties.[41] Back in 1945 it was in the Far East that the European imperialists were feeblest and American military might most decisive.

(p. 587) The restoration of British imperial authority in post-war Malaya was assigned to a military administration poorly equipped to handle the deepening social crisis it confronted. Its most visible indicators were epidemics and malnutrition. Alongside malaria, the perennial killer of rural populations in weakened physical condition, localized outbreaks of smallpox, cholera, and typhoid added to an escalating mortality rate. Municipal authorities in Singapore and other coastal cities were overwhelmed by an influx of refugees and the wartime displaced. Increasing numbers of industrial workers were drawn to the radicalism of Malaya's Communist Party, the one political organization that could boast a solid war record of resistance to the Japanese. These disturbed conditions, strikes and health scares, rising criminality, workplace disorders, and the radicalization of Malaya's trade unions formed the backdrop to the restoration of civil administration in 1945–6.[42] By the time colonial governance was restored over the winter of 1945–6, Malaya's population was in no mood to respond to the reforms pain-stakingly devised by British officials in anticipation of their post-war return to South East Asia. The Malayan Union, an April 1946 constitutional plan, tied the restoration of British civil

government to more equitable citizenship rights for Malaya's three principal ethnic groups—Malays, overseas Chinese, and south Indians. Well intentioned but arrogantly imposed, the Malayan Union triggered fierce opposition from Malay community leaders fearful of a loss of privilege within a society in which Malaya's two major immigrant groups would at last acquire basic civil rights. British colonial authority was soon outflanked, on the one hand by Malay conservatives anxious to preserve Malaya's long-standing communal hierarchy, on the other by Communists determined to exploit the war's social dislocations. British schemes for new citizenship arrangements, more inclusive governance, and ultimate self-government would all have to be rethought as Malaya descended into political violence over the summer of 1948.[43]

Malaya's post-war crisis, unique in its communal dynamics, was also part of a wider post-war regional trend. As we know, in Vietnam, too, Japanese occupation, Communist revolution, and the northern famine that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives made the restoration of French authority, let alone French imperial legitimacy, an impossible task. French policy after 1948 therefore hinged on building up an alternative, conservative locus of Vietnamese nationalism. French officials vested their hopes in the former emperor of Annam, Bảo Đại, as a non-Communist Vietnamese national figurehead. And the French military increasingly sought to 'Vietnamize' its war against the Communist-led regime in the north by developing a Vietnamese national army to take more of the strain.

Decolonization from the Dutch East Indies meanwhile unfolded during four years of violent struggle that followed Sukarno and Mohammed Hatta's announcement of the unilateral independence of Indonesia on 17 August 1945. In Indochina, French forces fought an eight-year war against Ho Chi Minh's Communist-led Vietminh coalition that ended in crushing defeat and final French withdrawal after the battle of Dien Bien Phu in May 1954. In both cases, the Dutch and French colonial authorities had to fight their way back into power, meeting determined nationalist resistance after the phased withdrawal of British occupation forces in late 1945–6. But in neither Indonesia nor (p. 588) Indochina were the Dutch and French imperial authorities simply fighting to restore colonial power. The Netherlands colonial authorities sought to build up a federation of pro-Dutch Indonesian states that would counterbalance the power of Sukarno's republican regime in Java. The strength of ethnic, religious, and regional differences among the populations of the Indonesian archipelago, and the residual power of pro-Dutch elites in the outer provinces, including Indonesia's second most populous island, Sumatra, seemed to favour Dutch efforts to cement a network of autonomous island governments, the so-called Malino states, that would acquiesce in an Indonesian federation under Dutch supervision.

It was against this backcloth that the two Dutch 'police actions' in Indonesia, the first in July 1947, the second in December 1948, unfolded. Blighted by flagrant military abuses against Indonesian civilians, each was intended to strengthen the Dutch hand in independence talks with Sukarno's government in the Javanese capital Djokjakarta. In the first police action of July 1947 Dutch colonial forces mounted a limited offensive in Java. This proved sufficient to wrest further concessions from the republican government in the

January 1948 Renville Agreement over the precise timing and preconditions for any transfer of power. But the second police action was politically disastrous. In flagrant violation of the Renville stipulations, on 19 December 1948 Dutch paratroopers took control of Djokjakarta, only to pull back twenty-four hours later under a barrage of international criticism. Whereas France and Britain, both Security Council members, were well placed to block General Assembly consideration of their colonial improprieties, the Netherlands government was not. Far from strengthening their bargaining position, Dutch colonial officials ensured that the transfer of power in Indonesia would take place on American, not Dutch, terms.[44]

Cold War and Empire Politics through Violence

The examples of worsening violence in late colonial Malaya, Vietnam, and Indonesia illustrate a wider post-war phenomenon of the global South. Certain elements of the European imperial breakdowns in Africa and Asia after 1945 proved to be less nationally specific than colonially generic. Federations attempted, then abandoned; improvised, often chaotic, partitions; hardening settler opposition to black majority rule; and insurgencies that proved difficult to contain: these were phenomena of European decolonization whose consequences tended to spread beyond their original locale. Cumulatively, this disintegration of European–colonial connections was *globalizing* in its effects. Indeed, decolonization is perhaps better understood as a global process rather than within an analytical framework confined to a particular empire. Europe–colonial world conflicts were typically ‘bottom up’ in nature, characterized by substantial mobilization of the colonized and comparatively less commitment by the imperial power.[45] Usually at (p. 589) a technological disadvantage, colonial insurgents turned instead to propaganda and the printed word, consolidating regional networks of support among sympathetic neighbours and publicizing their cause at the UN, in foreign press outlets, and in televisual media. As Chris Goscha has indicated for French Vietnam and Matthew Connelly for French Algeria, only rarely did the ‘weak’ achieve victory through decolonization by military means. More often, they won the moral argument, leaving Western Europe’s imperial nations struggling to make their more progressive arguments for empire seem anything other than self-serving.[46]

Those interested in deeper, impersonal forces might be frustrated at how rarely decolonization is examined as a global phenomenon, one in which Europe’s Second World War experiences transformed its relations with the colonial world. To be sure, histories frequently ‘join the dots’, suggesting that colonial collapses unfolded inexorably, even predictably, one after another. And the Second World War is often identified at the trigger. The point is that these presumptive links and individual empire approaches may conceal as much as they reveal. Linking colonial withdrawals in a domino theory-type sequence does not tell us very much, not least because some pull-outs were violent and total while others were relatively peaceful and far from complete. It is perhaps more useful to

recognize that these post-war shifts were inherently transnational, the changes in sovereignty involved sometimes of less imminent consequence than the movement of people, ideas, and political actions across colonial—and empire—boundaries that resulted. To be sure, decolonization, by its nature, lent itself to emulation. Its catalysts, transnational or otherwise, and the shared dilemmas of imperial powers were not somehow illegible to those caught up in the process. Far from it: after 1945 opposition to imperial rule transformed a geopolitical system otherwise placed in stasis by Cold War. Necessarily global, the interaction between war, Europe, and the wider world, oft-times described by the shorthand term ‘decolonization’, would alter the terms on which international politics were conducted, on which capital and trade flows proceeded, and on which cultural and political attachments were understood.

Notes:

(*) This chapter draws on my book, *Fight or Flight: Britain, France and their Roads from Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

(1.) Cited in Julian Go, *Patterns of Empire: The British and American Empires, 1688 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 145–6; and in Wm. Roger Louis, *Imperialism at Bay: The United States and the Decolonization of the British Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 154–5.

(2.) The National Archives (TNA), WO 208/52, Vice CIGS note on Lord Dillon’s ‘Suggested plan for de Gaulle’, 10 July 1940.

(3.) Hostility to Britain and Free France was widespread in the French Empire even before the Mers el-Kébir bombardment, see TNA, WO 208/52, Colonial Office circular to Overseas Governors, 20 June 1940; War Office military intelligence, ‘Summary of reports on morale of French Colonies up to 24 June 1940’.

(4.) TNA, PREM 3/99/1, Lloyd memo. for Churchill, ‘African defence situation’, 28 September 1940.

(5.) TNA, CO 273/662/10, ‘Labour troubles in Malaya’, *Manchester Guardian*, 14 February 1940; Shenton Thomas, Governor, Singapore, to Colonial Secretary Malcolm MacDonald, 9 April 1940.

(6.) TNA, CO 273/662/11, Malaya Combined Intelligence Summary no. 7, ‘Policy of the Malayan Communist Party’, n.d. [October 1940].

(7.) Colin Gray, ‘Mission Improbable, Fear, Culture, and Interest: Peace-Making, 1943–1949’, in Williamson Murray and Jim Lacey (eds.), *The Making of Peace: Rulers, States, and the Aftermath of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 272.

(8.) Go, *Patterns of Empire*, 145.

(9.) Carol Polsgrove, *Ending British Rule in Africa: Writers in a Common Cause* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 62.

(10.) Judith M. Brown, 'Gandhi and Civil Resistance in India, 1917–1947: Key Issues', in Adam Roberts and Timothy Garton Ash (eds.), *Civil Resistance and Power Politics: The Experience of Non-Violent Action from Gandhi to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 45–6.

(11.) Polsgrove, *Ending British Rule*, 168–9.

(12.) Tony Chafer and Amanda Sackur (eds.), *French Colonial Empire and the Popular Front: Hope and Disillusion* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999); John W. Cell, 'Lord Hailey and the Making of the African Survey', *African Affairs*, 88/353 (1989), 481–505; Henrik Aspengren, 'Empire: A Question of Hearts? The Social Turn in Colonial Government, Bombay c.1905–1925', in Mark Duffield and Vernon Hewitt (eds.), *Empire, Development and Colonialism: The Past in the Present* (Oxford: James Currey, 2009), 45–58.

(13.) Indispensable is Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

(14.) Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 78, 86.

(15.) Roger Normand and Sarah Zaidi, *Human Rights at the UN: The Political History of Universal Justice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 212–20; cited in Brad Simpson, 'The United States and the Curious History of Self-Determination', *Diplomatic History*, 36/4 (2012), 679.

(16.) Martin Shipway, *The Road to War: France and Vietnam, 1944–1947* (Oxford: Berghahn, 1996), 51–6, 66–74.

(17.) Simpson, 'The United States and the Curious History', 678–81; Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), ch. 4.

(18.) Stephen Broadberry and Peter Howlett, 'The United Kingdom: "Victory at all costs"', in Mark Harrison (ed.), *The Economics of World War II: Six Great Powers in International Comparison* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 43–80; Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940–1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

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