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Martin Thomas, Bob Moore and L.J. Butler, *Crises of Empire: Decolonization and Europe's Imperial States, 1918-1975*. London: Hodder Education, 2008. 457 pp. Notes, maps, bibliography, and index. \$39.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978 0340 731277.

Review by Robert Aldrich, University of Sydney.

Empire has moved to the center of historical research and history-writing, with anecdotal evidence suggesting that in English-speaking countries more postgraduate students of French history are writing theses on colonial history than ever before. The opening of archives covering the whole of the colonial period has made in-depth primary research possible. New themes, such as the cultural history of colonialism and, more recently, a revivification of the study of the institutional, administrative, and legal history of overseas empires and the metropole (which the volume under review reflects), have widened the field. Debates about France's deeds and misdeeds, including the use of torture in wars against nationalists, have fired the interest of journalists, while films such as *Indigènes* (2006), featuring North African soldiers in the Second World War, have focused attention on previously ignored links between France and its outposts. Conflicts in contemporary France—the *affaire du foulard*, rioting in the *banlieues*, questions of religion and *laïcité*, migration and citizenship—have sparked discussion about imperial legacies. Comparative approaches have usefully pointed out similarities and differences in colonial experiences, often bringing old notions—such as a contrast of violence in French decolonization versus a more peaceful British path to independence—into question.

Crises of Empire is a contribution to the comparative studies of decolonization. It is divided into three major sections, each written by a different scholar: L.J. Butler on British decolonization, Martin Thomas on the French case, and Bob Moore on the Dutch example. There is a shorter chapter, also by Thomas, looking at Belgian and Portuguese decolonization, as well as a brief general introduction and conclusion. The story presented is one of missed opportunities, bungled handling, and an intractable disinclination by Europeans to accede to colonial independence.

European leaders in the early twentieth century thought that empire would endure. Indeed, they recast imperial policies for the new age, the British championing “constructive imperialism,” the Dutch designing an “ethical” policy, the French promoting republican imperialism, an “associationism” that would concede greater legitimacy to local cultures, and *mise en valeur* for economic and social development; somewhat later, the Portuguese talked of a new “lusotropicalism” that bound Portugal and its empire. The Second World War has generally been seen as a watershed marking the start of decolonization. The authors accept that international circumstances, including the difficulties of re-establishing imperial control after the Second World War, in general played a crucial role, but they nevertheless stress the determination of the powers to regain or maintain colonial control rather than relinquish it after 1945. The British staunchly proclaimed that quitting India did not mean abandoning the rest of the empire, and as late as 1954 Winston Churchill dreamed of building a grand new colonial ministry in Whitehall. Dutch leaders thought that the East Indies would gain self-government or sovereignty only after twenty-five years, if at all, and they sent in their army to try to reconquer the Indies even when independence was a *fait accompli*. The French fought wars in Indochina and Algeria, unsuccessfully, to preserve empire. Thus, in the view of Thomas, Moore, and Butler, if the genesis of

imperial decline can be spotted well before the war, the process of decolonization, from 1947 to 1975, was reluctant, long and ragged. The authors convincingly charge that the settler communities, whether in Algeria or French Equatorial Africa, Kenya or Rhodesia, or the East Indies, bore much of the responsibility for the tragedies of withdrawal. Internecine struggles within the colonized populations—the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya was a conflict primarily between Africans, with Africans as the main victims, and the FLN killed many of its opponents—both complicated withdrawal and created awful problems afterwards, as the case of the former Belgian colonies of central Africa sadly proves. The hope of setting up friendly, moderate, and stable post-independence regimes—a primary objective of the decolonizers—was often not achieved. In addition to this legacy, there were great effects on Europe; France spent 6-10 percent of its budget fighting the Indochinese War, an expense that undoubtedly slowed reconstruction at home. The end of empire also brought the “repatriation” of a million *pieds-noirs* and *harkis* to France, as well as the move to Europe (in less well known calculations) of 250,000 Dutch settlers and pro-Dutch Indonesians, and 550,000 people from the Portuguese empire.

For readers of H-France, the section on the French empire will attract particular interest. It represents the lengthiest part of the book at almost 150 pages, and completes Thomas’ tripartite survey of the French empire in the twentieth century, complementing *The French Empire between the Wars* and *The French Empire at War, 1940-45*.^[1] Also the author of a volume on the British and French in the decolonization of North Africa, and a study of British and French intelligence in the Middle East in the early twentieth century, Thomas is today the leading scholar of the international history of French imperialism.^[2] His works skilfully analyze the evolution of French colonial policy in the global arena, link colonial policy with diplomatic and geopolitical strategy, and investigate the pressures on the French from other powers in the periods of the world war and decolonization.

In the current work, Thomas reiterates a point argued in his earlier work: that the empire essentially was coming apart even before the Second World War, but that the war, paradoxically, reinforced a desire in the political class (though not necessarily in the general population) to hold on. The Vichy regime had emphasized the benefits of empire in the ideology of the “national revolution,” which accorded remarkably well with colonial governance. The Free French, with “imperial optimism” (p. 138), promised some changes in policy, though explicitly ruling out self-government, and still saw the colonies as vital to France’s status as a world power. In a direct way, however, the Japanese occupation of Indochina made it almost impossible for the French fully to regain their position after 1945, especially when coupled with the strength of Ho Chi Minh’s nationalists and the skepticism of the Americans: Franklin D. Roosevelt memorably said that “The French had been there [in Indochina] for nearly one hundred years and had done absolutely nothing with the place to improve the lot of the people” (p. 87). The post-war boom in anti-colonialism and the critique of the ideas underlying it, which took place in the colonies themselves, in France, and in the “concert of nations,” mandated such substantial changes in the French imperial project that the empire finally came undone through its own contradictions and the inability of the French government to manage them. “Just how long,” Thomas rhetorically asks about the immediate post-war period, “could the empire subsist without some effort to redress the growing imbalance between economic modernization and arcane colonial authoritarianism?” (p. 133).

Thomas lays stress on economic issues: “It has become increasingly fashionable to emphasize cultural difference alongside the perennial culprit of French political intransigence, but perhaps it is time to return to economic structures” (p. 230). Economic determinism predominated in post-war policy, yet the vast amounts of money stoked into the empire to fuel development could not secure the acquiescence of increasingly alienated local elites to French control. More moderate critics of French rule found the economic marginalization of indigenous populations and economic inequalities in the colonies *the* basic problem; French failure to rectify that situation left the way open to nationalists with more revolutionary programs of economic change and political secession.

One of the merits of Thomas’ treatment is to give considerable attention to sub-Saharan Africa, whose

decolonization often gets short shrift because of concentration on the wars in Indochina and Algeria. He also gives a thorough account of events in the protectorates of Morocco and Tunisia, which also often get sidelined as cases of amicable decolonization. The record, Thomas says, is not so simple, especially in Morocco where the French did not hesitate to force the abdication and exile of the sultan in a bid to keep the country under its control. "Only by viewing events through the prism of the Algerian war could one consider France's departure from Morocco and Tunisia a relative political success" (p. 225), he concludes.

Lack of consensus in Paris about the future of French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa, as well as Madagascar and other outposts, mirrored differences of opinion among nationalists: should the colonies remain attached to France in some revamped relationship or not, should they become independent as separate nation-states or linked in federations, would the new regimes and economies be created in the French image or attempt some more radical (often socialist) departure? Still other options of decolonization presented themselves elsewhere. The *vieilles colonies* of Martinique, Guadeloupe, Guyane and La Réunion were made into *départements d'outre-mer*, in principle full integration into France. In Indochina, in the confusing situation of the 1940s and early 1950s, France negotiated with the nationalists, recognizing Ho Chi Minh's regime, then turning against it, trying to keep together the Indochinese federation (including Laos and Cambodia), then breaking it apart, finally agreeing in the Geneva Accords to the division of Vietnam. Indeed, Thomas makes the pertinent comment that the division of Vietnam, despite Ho's triumph in Hanoi, shows that "the conference's real losers were the Vietminh" (p. 203). The possibility of "associated states" appeared in the 1946 constitution, though only briefly and unsuccessfully was it tried in Southeast Asia. Prospects for further fission of colonies (even to France keeping part of the Sahara when Algeria became independent) also emerged. The case of New Caledonia, as Thomas notes, has provided a latter-day context for administrative machinations, and for hopes of a "half-way house" between classical colonial overlordship and outright independence.

The other sections of this book amply repay attention from historians of France. Butler emphasizes the absence of a grand plan for British decolonization, the end of empire as jumbled as its beginnings; often the British simply "lost control of events" (p. 53). Provocatively, but perhaps correctly, he suggests that anti-colonial agitation against the British is "inaccurately described" as nationalism (p. 80) because of the rivalries on the ground between various ethnic groups, lack of agreement about the shape of independent states, and efforts to work out alternatives to full independence. Like Thomas, Butler moves away from the most obvious case, in this instance India, with fine studies of British policy in the Arabian peninsula and in Malaya, which looms as a key site of imperial withdrawal and Britain's diminishing international power.

Moore's section on Indonesia provides, to my knowledge, the best available overview of the Netherlands' withdrawal from the East Indies, the debates it caused in the metropole, and the rather pathetic decision of the Dutch to hold on to West Papua for fifteen years after their belated recognition of independence in Indonesia, a country that really escaped the Netherlands' dominion during the Second World War. The greatest Dutch failure, he argues, was in dismissing the growth of indigenous nationalism. Here Moore's view of nationalism distances him to a degree from Butler, though he does discuss the massive centripetal forces in the East Indies. Finally, the chapter on Belgium and Portugal, though limited in scope, provides interesting comparisons of the involuntary disengagement of Europe's other two imperial powers after 1945.

All three authors favor a top-down approach viewing the emergence of imperial policy in European parliaments and ministries, and in colonial government houses, with less attention devoted to grass-roots militancy among nationalists (if such is the word) in the colonies. Readers must look elsewhere for portraits of independence leaders and for vivid accounts of signal moments in the decolonization saga. The sober prose and rather *événementiel* and institutional approach, while leaving out some of the human

drama of the period, reminds readers of the complexity of the policy issues, the variety of choices and challenges facing policy-makers in London, Paris and The Hague, differences of opinions despite a widespread hope for retaining empire, and the efforts to salvage some benefits for national interest, settler communities and future relations in the midst of imperial dissolution.

There are only a few minor glitches in this volume - in the French section, Octave Mannoni's surname is consistently given as Monnoni (p. 147), and Mouloud "Marreri" (p. 239) is presumably Mouloud Mameri; French Guyana may be a "tiny enclave" (p. 262) in relation to South America, but it is nevertheless larger than Ireland. The maps and a list of abbreviations of the baffling number of organizations involved in decolonization are helpful, as are the relatively brief bibliographies. This book provides an admirable study of decolonization, well suited for the advanced student audience for which it is primarily intended. But it is more, as it represents a new interpretation of decolonization underlining the role of metropolitan debates not just nationalist militancy, stressing the roles of elites and the policies they formulated, and reintroducing the significance of economic issues into the history of colonialism in its final stages.

NOTES

[1] Martin Thomas, *The French Empire at War 1940-45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), and *The French Empire Between the Wars: Imperialism, Politics and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

[2] Martin Thomas, *The French North African Crisis: Colonial Breakdown and Anglo-French Relations, 1945-62* (London: Macmillan, 2000), and *Empires of Intelligence: Security Services and Colonial Control* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

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