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DECOLONIZATION AS MOMENT AND PROCESS

“DECOLONIZATION” is a technical and rather undramatic term for one of the most dramatic processes in modern history: the disappearance of empire as a political form, and the end of racial hierarchy as a widely accepted political ideology and structuring principle of world order. One can pin down this historical process by using a dual definition that, instead of keeping the process chronologically vague, anchors it unequivocally in the history of the twentieth century. Accordingly, decolonization is

(1) the simultaneous dissolution of several intercontinental empires and the creation of nation-states throughout the global South within a short time span of roughly three postwar decades (1945–75), linked with

(2) the historically unique and, in all likelihood, irreversible delegitimization of any kind of political rule that is experienced as a relationship of subjugation to a power elite considered by a broad majority of the population as alien occupants.¹

Decolonization designates a specific world-historical moment, yet it also stands for a many-faceted process that played out in each region and country shaking off colonial rule. Alternative attempts at a definition accentuate this second dimension. The historian and sinologist Prasenjit Duara, for example, puts less emphasis on the breakdown of empires and more on *local* power shifts in specific colonies when he defines decolonization as “the process whereby colonial powers transferred institutional and legal control over their territories and dependencies to indigenously based, formally

sovereign, nation-states.” He, too, adds a normative aspect: the replacement of political orders was embedded in a global shift in values. This dissolution signifies a counterproject to imperialism in the name of “moral justice and political solidarity.”²

It is equally possible to ask, quite concretely and pragmatically, when the decolonization of a specific territory was completed. A simple answer would be: when a locally formed government assumed official duties, when formalities under international law and of a symbolic nature were carried out, and when the new state was admitted (usually within a matter of months) into the United Nations. A more complex (and less easily generalizable) answer would weave these trajectories toward state independence into more comprehensive and intricate processes of ending colonial rule and extending political, economic, and cultural sovereignty.

Decolonization can thus be described at different levels, and even its exact time frame may vary according to the thematic or regional focus. Vagueness and ambiguity are part of the historical phenomenon itself, and they cannot simply be defined away. From a global perspective, decolonization has its “hot” and most decisive phase in the middle of the twentieth century during the three decades following the Second World War. The core period of decolonization, however, needs to be incorporated in a longer history with less sharply defined chronological margins. This long history of decolonization harks back to the years following the First World War, when anticolonial unrest took on a new dimension and colonial rule itself was subject to major transformations, and it extends to the many aftershocks palpable up to the present.

People all over the world have used different words to describe these dramatic transformations and the world they thought would supplant a world of empires. Compared with concepts such as “self-determination,” “liberation,” or “revolution” (and their many linguistic and cultural variations)—and also to other popular categories applied to contemporary history, like “Cold War” or “globalization”—it is a somewhat anemic word derived from administrative practice that has become the most common term for this process. “Decolonization” is not a category that historians or

social scientists thought up in retrospect. Traces of the concept may be found before 1950. The term, which can be attested lexically since 1836, found some theoretic elaboration in the writings of the German émigré economist Moritz Julius Bonn in the interwar period. Yet, we only find it used with any significant frequency beginning in the mid-1950s, that is (as we know in hindsight), at the apex of those very developments the term describes.³

Initially it was a word from the vocabulary of administrators and politicians confident of being able to keep abreast of the unfolding historical dynamics. What now appears to us as its cool and technical character actually reflects a political idea that was widespread at the time. Following the Second World War, the political elites of Great Britain and France, the last remaining colonial powers of any consequence, believed that they could engineer the transfer of power to “trustworthy” indigenous leaders in the colonial territories previously under their control, and that they could manage this transfer in accord with the colonial ruling elites’ own ideas. It was hoped that these transitions would be long and drawn out—in other words, lasting decades rather than a few years—and that they would take place peacefully. There was also the expectation that the newly independent states, not without gratitude for many years of colonial “partnership,” would cultivate harmonious relations with their former colonial powers. With this in mind, decolonization was understood as a strategy and political goal of Europeans, a goal to be reached with skill and determination.

Only in a few instances did the actual course of decolonization bear much semblance to this kind of orderly procedure. The confidence to keep the exit from empire under firm control was called into question by historical reality, the momentum of numerous self-reinforcing tendencies, speed-ups, unintended consequences, or mere historical accidents. While a number of colonial experts faced the inevitable end of colonial rule in Asia after 1945, almost all of them were united in believing that colonial rule in Africa would last—an erroneous belief, as would soon become apparent. For them, decolonization was thus a constant disappointment of the imperial illusion of permanence. It marks a

historical juncture at which the exact outcome was anything but certain from the outset. Competing options were considered, negotiated, overtaken by events, and sometimes swiftly forgotten. This presents historians today with a great challenge: how, in hindsight, to avoid trivializing this openness to the future as experienced by contemporaries into a superficial impression that everything had to happen the way it did.⁴

Even if it may have proceeded peacefully in some cases, the process of decolonization on the whole was a violent affair. The partition of India in 1947 (at about 15 million refugees and expellees, the largest forced migration condensed into any comparable twentieth-century time period), the Algerian war of 1954–62, and the 1946–54 war in Indochina are among the most conspicuous instances of violence in the second half of the twentieth century. Between 1945 and 1949, a bloody chaos held sway on the islands of Indonesia.⁵ In all these cases, it is practically impossible to give a precise count of the number of victims. The picture becomes even more dismal when we add the Korean war (1950–53) and the war the United States waged against Vietnamese national communism (1964–73) as follow-up wars of decolonization, and when we also include those civil wars that took place immediately or shortly after decolonization (in the Congo, Nigeria, Angola, Mozambique, etc.). The confrontation between rebels and colonial powers was often conducted with extreme brutality. State archives—many of them lost, deliberately destroyed, or still inaccessible—often provide only fragmentary evidence of this brutality.⁶ In some cases—for example, Kenya—its extent has only come to light recently, partly accompanied by spectacular court cases over the European states' responsibility.⁷ Other episodes of large-scale violence, such as the gruesome (and successful) repression of a major uprising in French Madagascar in 1947–49, have vanished almost completely from public memory outside the country concerned.⁸

As a political process, decolonization has by now passed into history. If in 1938 there were still approximately 644 million people living in countries categorized as colonies, protectorates, or

dependencies (not counting the British dominions), today the United Nations registers only seventeen populated “non-self-governing territories” having a total population of about 2 million inhabitants “remaining to be decolonized.”⁹ Not all of these remaining colonial subjects—for example, the 32,000 inhabitants of Gibraltar—feel a strong urge toward full national self-government. Even while this great transformation was still under way, the concept of decolonization broke loose from the illusions harbored by European actors at that time and acquired a broader meaning. As a shorthand label, it designates what the historian Dietmar Rothermund has called “perhaps the most important historical process of the twentieth century.”¹⁰

SOVEREIGNTY AND NORMATIVE CHANGE

From another perspective, the vanishing of colonialism represents the end of Europe’s overseas empires. Even if not synonymous with it, decolonization is at the center of what has been dubbed “the end of empire.” Decolonization thus meant more than a profound rupture in the history of formerly colonized countries; it was more than a mere footnote in the history of Europe. As the “Europeanization of Europe,” decolonization led to “Europe falling back on itself,”¹¹ altered the position of the continent in the international power structure, and interacted with the supranational integration of Europe’s nation-states, which reached its first culmination in 1957 with the establishment of the European Economic Community (EEC), the forerunner of the present European Union (EU).

Overseas empires in which white-skinned Christian Europeans dominated nonwhite non-Christians had been gradually built up since around 1500. They were hardly ever systematically planned, and they were usually expedited by an interplay of hazy vision and improvised exploitation of opportunities.¹² All these empires were patchwork, and none was consistently organized down to the last detail. The non-European territories were subordinated to their respective European metropolises as “colonies” in a wealth of different legal constructions. The political idea of nationalism with

its goal of the independent nation-state changed little about colonial realities during the nineteenth century. Only in Spanish-speaking South and Central America was a large empire replaced by a multitude of independent states.

On the eve of the First World War, the British Empire was the only true world empire, since it also included Australia and New Zealand, in that it was represented on every continent. Three additional features made it unique. First, within the geographic boundaries of Europe, it also ruled over Europeans: Malta (since 1814) and Cyprus (since 1878) were British colonies; Corfu and the Ionian Islands had been so from 1815 to 1864. Ireland had an independent special status within the United Kingdom that was viewed as colony-like by Irish nationalists. Second, within the British imperial structure, there were several countries that were self-governing, that is, they regulated their political affairs themselves in democratic institutions and procedures under loose supervision by the British Crown. Starting in 1907, the generic term “dominions” became customary for these countries.¹³ Ever since several individual possessions were bundled together into the Union of South Africa in 1910, the “dominions” became the four proto-nation-states of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa; in South Africa, however, the black majority was excluded from political participation, a tendency that was aggravated even more around the middle of the twentieth century. Third, alone among all the European colonial powers, Great Britain had the military resources (especially at sea) and economic strength (especially as the center of world finance) to exercise a preponderant international influence even beyond its colonies or outside the “protectorates” it administered somewhat less directly. It is possible to speak of such an “informal empire” on the eve of the First World War, especially in China, Iran, the Ottoman Empire, and parts of Latin America. The term “British world-system” has been suggested to designate this conglomerate of “formal” plus “informal empire.”¹⁴

The other empires were smaller, based on area and population. The French Empire was present in Southeast Asia, North and West Africa, the Caribbean, and Polynesia. Portugal laid claim to control

over territories in southern Africa (especially Angola and Mozambique); Belgium, over the heart of the African continent with its share of the Congo. The German flag waved over a collection of colonies scattered among Africa, China, and the South Seas, and the Italian flag flew over Libya since 1911, while the Netherlands possessed in the “East Indies” (today’s Indonesia) one of the most population- and resource-rich colonies in the world. Only the Spanish Empire, once powerful and extensive, had been reduced to mere remnants of its early modern self since the loss of Cuba and the Philippines that followed its defeat in the war of 1898 between Spain and the United States. With the exception of the German colonial empire, all these empires survived the First World War and even saved themselves, however battered, for a time beyond the Second World War.¹⁵ By 1975, they had disappeared. The oldest of the European overseas empires, the Portuguese, was the last to dissolve.

Decolonization came at the end of widely differing imperial trajectories and timelines. In the case of Spain and Portugal, it put the seal on a protracted, though unevenly phased, history of imperial contraction. France experienced a second major colonial breakdown after a first period of defeat overseas from 1763 to 1804. Britain was used to a long and complex history of imperial metamorphosis; nowhere else did decolonization come as less of a surprise. The Dutch, symbiotically tied to what they saw as a huge model colony of considerable stability, clung with particular tenacity to their own illusion of permanence. The much more short-lived Japanese Empire collapsed during the final apocalypse of the Second World War, leaving not even scope for a decision to retreat. For the United States, decolonization confirmed an already existing preference for tools of informal empire, temporary military occupation, and a worldwide string of enclaves and military bases over formal territorial rule.¹⁶

From out of a world of imperial blocs and dependency relations there emerged in the “short” twentieth century a mosaic of politically autonomous states, each of which jealously defended its “sovereignty,” even if with symbolic gestures alone. The concept

expressed negatively as *de*-colonization, as the removal of foreign rule, can also be reinterpreted positively: decolonization as an apparatus for the serial production of sovereignty, as a kind of sovereignty machine that produces political units, standardized according to templates of international law: a series of states, each with a defined national territory, its own constitution, legal order, government, police, flag, and national anthem. Seen this way, decolonization is comprehensible as a statistical trend: on the one hand as a reduction in the number of colonies from 163 in 1913 to sixty-eight in 1965 and to thirty-three in 1995,¹⁷ and on the other hand as an upward curve showing the quantitative increase in subjects of international law, in other words, of states that were recognized by the already existing community of states as having equal rights and subject to no higher authority.

The League of Nations was founded in 1919 by thirty-two such sovereign states, nine of which were from Latin America; in all of Asia, only Japan, China, and Siam (Thailand since 1939) were represented; in Africa, only South Africa and Liberia (the latter was a *de facto* US protectorate). Strictly speaking, founding members Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and South Africa, as British dominions, did not constitute fully sovereign nation-states; this is what they would first become in 1931 via the Statute of Westminster.¹⁸ And the fact that the classic colony India figured among the League of Nations's founding members should be understood, in part, as a symbolic way of honoring India's military service, and partly as a concession awarding Great Britain, the strongest power in the new international organization, a second vote in disguise.

In 1945, the United Nations was founded by fifty-one states, not many more than the number of original members in the League of Nations from 1919.¹⁹ This indicates that, in the meantime, there had not been any drastic change in the political map of the globe. Africa and large parts of Asia—especially Southeast Asia, almost completely colonized—were still without a voice of their own on the world stage. By 1957, the number of members had reached eighty-two, owing above all to the entry of Asian countries and those

European states that had not yet taken part in 1945. Then, in 1960 alone, eighteen new memberships were added. By 1975, the number of members had reached 144. Today, it has 193 members, including mini-states like the island republic of Nauru in the Pacific with 10,000 inhabitants. The Olympic world movement in the form of the International Olympic Committee (IOC)—one of the most extensive global organizations—goes so far as to recognize 206 “national” committees.

Since new states seldom emerge *ex nihilo*, in almost every case they owe their existence to separation from a larger political entity, generally an empire or a federation. Usually the metropole survives the loss of its peripheries and shrinks back to its core: the “hexagon” is what remains of the French global empire; the Turkish Republic, of the Ottoman Empire; the Russian Federation, of the Soviet Union. In rarer cases (the Habsburg monarchy in 1918, Yugoslavia after 1991), the empire disintegrates and disappears completely, leaving nothing more than nation-states behind. The formation of new nation-states by joining together smaller elements was already rather rare in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (the most important examples are the United States, Italy, and Germany, and to some extent, also Canada and Australia); in the twentieth century, this has occurred only in exceptional cases. The twentieth century was an era of geopolitical fragmentation. The vast majority of the 193 members of the United Nations are postcolonial or post-imperial states. These states and societies have a colonial or imperial past, which never remains without any impact on their self-image and identity today.

On the international scene, there were—and still are, to this day—hierarchies and dependencies of all kinds. In many cases, the sovereignty once so highly coveted remains incomplete, since many states would be unable to protect their territory with their own military resources in cases of conflict, and some of them would not be economically viable without transfer payments from abroad. And yet, in today’s world there are no longer those obvious structures of subordination between societies culturally alien to each other that have been labeled “metropole” and “colony.”²⁰ If, around 1913,

there was nothing unusual in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific about the status of a territory as a distant power's possession, by 1975 colonies had not only factually disappeared—with the exception of Hong Kong, Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, and Southwest Africa/Namibia, as well as a few small territories with tiny populations—but had also become scorned, both morally and in terms of international law and also with deep repercussions on historical narratives and judgments. With decolonization, international hierarchies and power relations had to adapt to a world of sovereign nation-states as the primary component of the international system.

Colonialism ended for a variety of reasons. One of the most important causes of its dissolution was that it gradually lost its *raison d'être* in the eyes of a growing number of people both in the colonies and in the metropolises. This transformation in the worldwide climate of opinion had already become apparent and legally binding in 1960 when the General Assembly of the United Nations declared, in its epoch-making Resolution 1514: “All peoples have the right to self-determination; by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.”²¹ At the same time, the “subjection of peoples to alien subjugation, domination and exploitation,” which included colonialism, was declared a crime against international law. It was then and still remains, however, a major question as to what is being understood by “alien.”

Decolonization, by way of summary, has a structural and a normative side. It means a radical restructuring of the international order. And by proscribing colonialism—and the racism that accompanies it—decolonization simultaneously means a reversal of those norms that shaped the relationship of peoples and states to each other through the middle of the twentieth century. In that way, decolonization sent shock waves that went far beyond the dissolution of formal colonial rule.

In its narrowest possible construction, decolonization may be reduced to an isolated change of sovereign ruler in a particular country. There were different ways in which such a change could take place. In the most peaceful case, government power was handed over to indigenous politicians in general agreement with the colonial power. A transfer of power of this kind happened in the British Empire, for example, by way of a law passed by Parliament in London. In a ceremony that with time became a well-rehearsed routine, an envoy of the government presented a gracious letter in which the king or (since 1952) queen offered the newly independent state best wishes for the future.²² The flag of the colonial power was lowered and that of the new state raised in its place. The military took leave with a musical band playing (most of the soldiers were, however, not British). The erstwhile governor completed his last official business. In less harmonious situations, independence was proclaimed one-sidedly with triumphant gestures and a seizure of power by victorious nationalists. Colonial officials and foreign citizens fled the country. In these cases, the change of power had nothing in common with a “transfer.”

The symbolism and the ceremonies associated with this crucial constitutional moment, however, were similar. To this day, every nation that underwent this emotion-laden rite of passage celebrates its independence day—following the model of the Fourth of July in the United States. Decolonization in this sense is a moment that can be captured precisely in historical time. One need not be a devotee of a narrative history of political events in order to appreciate how fruitful it can be to take a close look at those glorious moments of independence. These snapshots offer historians a useful vantage point. One can investigate how the colonial power and the colony arrived at this turning point and, looking into the future, inquire into what became of the dramatic replacement of a coercive political order with the institutions and the spirit of independence and freedom.

An approach focusing on the history of events—which is always indispensable, even if rarely sufficient—will concentrate on reconstructing political developments and concomitant ideologies

and narratives within the chronological framework of a few years, months, or even days before independence. From documents, media reports, memoirs, and oral history interviews, a detailed picture can be obtained in many cases. But a broader history of decolonization cannot be constructed from building blocks like these alone. Decolonization does not limit itself to a series of “flag histories”—as important and hard-fought as they may have been. The colonizers did not simply turn off the light and vanish into the night.²³ Any colony’s formal-legal independence was integrated into broader processes of disentanglement and re-entanglement that were political, economic, social, and cultural in nature. On closer inspection, this was a complicated, often long-drawn-out affair: property relations had to be sorted out; the political, economic, and cultural aspects of foreign relations had to be rebalanced; citizenship regulations for the different population groups had to be developed; and archives had to be divided up. In addition, these processes were subject to very different temporalities: a quickly acquired external political sovereignty was not necessarily—in fact, was rarely—accompanied by an effective control of borders or local government, by economic self-reliance and control of natural resources, or the rupture of academic exchange relationships.²⁴ Histories interested in these changes choose longer time frames beyond formal independence and tend to delve into one subprocess (economic, cultural, etc.). While broadening the temporal scope, this approach still confines itself to the immediate relationship between the colonial power and indigenous power elites in narrowly defined situations.

With a different calibration of the historical optics, decolonization can be fitted into more comprehensive contexts. As a matter of fact, decolonization was enmeshed in various macro-processes and threads that shaped the twentieth century. It intersected with other fundamental changes in the international sphere, such as the Cold War and international bloc formation; the rise of international organizations and NGOs and the emergence of a global public; the history of human rights and human rights activism; and European unification. It evolved in a world shaped by

economic booms and busts (the Great Depression, the postwar economic boom, and subsequent economic crises), by urbanization and global population growth, and by new social movements and civil rights activism. It was more than a footnote to the histories of asymmetric warfare and proxy wars, of global economic and forced migration, and of international development and aid. It reveals multiple connections to the worldwide spread of literacy, mass consumerism, and mass media; the post-1945 rise of social welfare states, hygiene, and living standards; and the rise of the social sciences and social engineering. To be sure, all these processes did occur in contexts remote from decolonization—modernization theory and interventionist social and economic policy, to name but two examples, reached a peak of popularity at the same time in many totally uncolonized places. Yet decolonization conferred on the processes their specific shape in many parts of the world. They would be experienced in close relation with the end of colonial rule.

Zooming out even further enables us to place twentieth-century decolonization in the millennium-old history of empires. It is clichéd to say that every empire eventually comes to an end, sometimes suddenly through a military defeat or revolution, otherwise in a protracted process of weakening and decline. The paradigm for this in European history has always been the fate of the Imperium Romanum. Only in quite rare cases—China would be the best example—have empires merely experienced metamorphoses in form without completely disappearing. A historian or historical sociologist with an interest in the history of empires occasionally searches for patterns or even regularities of a cyclical kind in the “life” of empires. For example, “thresholds” are postulated that every empire crosses sometime, and phases that the empire inevitably has to go through are distinguished. Such an approach broadens our perspective in space and time, but it also allows details to disappear and makes it hard to identify features peculiar to a specific era.

From a *spatial* point of view, imperial history, which has experienced a significant upsurge in the last several decades, reminds us that the modern seaborne empires of the Portuguese, the

Spanish, the Dutch, and the British by no means represent the historical norm. Rather, as the early modern Europeans embarked on their imperial ventures from what was hardly a position of military strength and economic supremacy, they were entering into a much older history, one that was shaped by the old Eurasian empires.²⁵ Ever since the conflicts between the naval power of Venice and the expanding empire of the Ottomans, different types of empire collided with each other in the Mediterranean. China's "opening" during the Opium War (1839–42) was also this kind of collision between empires organized in different ways. In the nineteenth century, the dominant political entity in the north and east of the Eurasian continent was the Tsarist Empire, which had all the characteristics of a hierarchically ordered multiethnic empire, spread out in territorial contiguity. It was revived, after a crisis-ridden transitional period following the October Revolution of 1917, in the shape of the federal Soviet Union.

There has been a long and inconclusive debate about whether decolonization also extends to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. There were aspects that made the Soviet Union both similar to and different from the West European (and Japanese) overseas empires. During the decades in which the latter dissolved, the Soviet Union remained territorially intact; it outlasted the global moment of decolonization. But when, in 1989–90, the "steel frame" that kept the empire together broke and, from the Baltics to Muslim Central Asia, the non-Russian Soviet republics (with the exception of Chechnya) became independent in a process that was remarkably low in violence, this was frequently *experienced* in the new states as liberation from the Russian "yoke." Certain parallels to the foregoing process of West European decolonization cannot be overlooked, whereas the ethnic violence that engulfed Yugoslavia from 1991 onward accompanied the breakup of a fragile federation that few of its inhabitants had ever considered to be an empire.

In the process leading to independence of the non-Russian Soviet republics, however, it is the differences that stand out. These republics were not part of a worldwide movement and did not profit from long-lasting international support; the "détente process" of the

1970s was aimed more at liberalization in the eastern Central European satellite states than at the destruction of the Soviet Union itself. The theme of racism hardly played a role at all, and in its place the factor of religion—especially in Central Asia—assumed an even greater significance. The Soviet Union was much more strongly integrated at the elite level, mainly through the Union-wide organization of the Communist Party, than the West European colonial empires had ever been. The power establishments in the republics possessed a much higher degree of indigeneity than was the case in any of the overseas empires, and this was an important precondition for their relatively smooth path to independence. On the whole, we find good grounds for not assimilating the dissolution of the Soviet Union too closely to the historical model of decolonization. The concept of the “global Cold War” offers an interpretive framework much better suited to accounting for the post-Soviet experience.²⁶

A different role was played by the Japanese Empire, which lasted exactly half a century, from 1895 to 1945.²⁷ From a geographic perspective, this was an overseas empire held together by a strong navy and maritime trade. Since the Japanese imitated many of the colonial methods of the West Europeans, certain similarities were apparent from the outset. In its later phase (starting around 1932), the Japanese Empire bore a closer resemblance to the fascist empires of Italy and Germany. Much like the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the Japanese Empire was not preceded by any lengthy process of resistance and political mobilization. Prior to the end of the war in 1945, there was not a single case of any national liberation organization being able to challenge the Japanese in their colonies and the territories later conquered and occupied by the Imperial army. The empire was brought down by the military power of the United States, ultimately by US atomic bombs. Japanese imperialism was, however, closely intertwined with the status of all the European powers in Asia; they were all elements of an imperial system of competition that self-destructed in 1945 and was never restored in Asia. For that reason, Japanese imperialism can hardly

be ignored even if the definition of decolonization is more narrowly construed.

Overall, developments in the twentieth century may be distinguished from earlier collapses of empires throughout world history by the way they discredited any kind of alien rule. Until then, it had been taken for granted by all concerned that the place of one disappearing empire would be occupied by a new one. The twentieth century's imperial collapses thus have a certain emphatic finality about them. In this, they resemble the prior secession of the thirteen North American colonies from Great Britain, with the utopian hope for the dawn of a new era that event invoked.

From a long-term perspective, twentieth-century decolonization appears as the last stage in a series of emancipations from the European colonial empires. One can distinguish two earlier proto-waves of decolonization: *first*, the revolutions that took place in the New World between the 1770s and 1820s, in each case linked with freedom struggles conducted by military forces and militias, leading to the establishment of independent republics in North and South America and in the former French colony of Saint-Domingue (which became a sovereign state in 1804 as Haiti); *then* the gradual and less violent expansion of political scope for the white inhabitants of the British Empire's settler colonies (especially Canada, Australia, and New Zealand), which led at the beginning of the twentieth century to dominion status.

This is not to say that earlier patterns were only repeating themselves in the twentieth century. With the important exception of Haiti, these proto-waves terminated colonial rule of Europeans over Europeans or Creoles of European descent. Over long periods, the newly created states in the Americas and the dominions did not end forms of dispossession, discrimination, or rule over their non-European inhabitants. In South Africa, the racial exclusion and systematic segregation of the black majority even peaked at a time when the country was no longer governed as a British colony. Twentieth-century decolonization, by contrast, was in almost all cases about dismantling colonial rule over non-Europeans and

peoples formerly regarded as essentially inferior and incapable of self-government.

This also informed the way these earlier emancipations reverberated in the twentieth century. At the beginning of the century, the colonial powers had long since convinced themselves of the unassailability of their own position of dominance. Even in the British Empire, there was no occasion to fear a repeat of the settler revolts that had brought down British rule in eighteenth-century North America. The constitutional mechanisms applied to the countries that were emerging as the dominions defused the potential for serious conflict. The only one-sided declaration of independence by white settlers in the empire took place with the secession of Southern Rhodesia in 1965, that is, at a very late date. On the side of the colonized peoples, by contrast, the separationist legacy of the United States played a larger role. Thomas Jefferson and George Washington became role models for independence fighters everywhere in the world. When the Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam on September 2, 1945, he quoted from the 1776 Declaration of Independence.²⁸ Until the Cold War became globalized sometime after 1950, at which point revolutionary movements all over the world could expect to be opposed by the United States, that former rebel state, in spite of its own imperial ambitions and adventures, retained remnants of its image as an anticolonial great power. In the British Empire, however, there emerged an alternative model, in part from the lesson learned when the American Revolution created the independent United States: the model of a step-by-step, constitutionally safeguarded convergence toward domestic self-government and external sovereignty. Dominion status became an important (interim) goal not only for white settlers in the British Empire (and beyond) but also for many Asian and African nationalists. Yet the eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century independences in the Americas mattered in a rather nonrevolutionary way as well. They provided a model for a conservative interpretation of the principle of self-determination

that would leave most borders created during the colonial era untouched during twentieth-century decolonization.²⁹

ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVES

In the literature, there are different analytical perspectives on decolonization. Each of them shifts attention to different contexts and factors shaping (and possibly also explaining) the decolonization process. They may be systematized—rather schematically—according to three different levels of decolonization: imperial, local, and international.

Nowadays, the *imperial* perspective is not meant as an apologia for empires; that kind of conservative viewpoint is hardly found any longer in the scholarly literature. Rather, this perspective proceeds from the ascription of historical subjecthood to a particular empire and then inquires into how the last stage fits into the long-term evolution of that empire. In books about British, French, or Portuguese (etc.) decolonization, special attention is paid to political developments in the relevant metropole, to strategies that concern the empire as a whole, to shifts in the relative weight of different parts of the empire, to the interaction between decision makers in the center and those in the periphery of the empire, to how these decision makers reacted to liberation movements and in general to changing circumstances overseas. This literature is also inclined to link the end of empires to the enfeeblement of the metropole (“the decline of Britain,” etc.), even if this decline tends to be viewed without nostalgia. A more in-depth assessment of the ways in which decolonization impacted the metropolises has become a booming research field. As another recent trend, the imperial perspective has proved particularly receptive to comparative (inter-imperial) approaches to the end of empires.

The *local* perspective adopts the viewpoint of a single colony or of a particular region—for example, French West Africa (Afrique Occidentale Française, or AOF)—that traverses the process of decolonization. It concentrates on on-site developments, sometimes in a comparative fashion. Originally, histories of liberation movements and wars as well as biographies of their leading

personalities were characteristic of this perspective. The successes of anticolonial resistance were depicted as the emergence of a new nation. Another type of local approach looked into the shrinking ability of the colonial state to establish and sustain stable relationships with local collaborators.

In recent years, a new kind of historical writing has arisen, one previously reserved for novels or memoirs: reconstructing in the greatest possible detail what is admittedly often hard to capture in the sources, namely the everyday experiences of ordinary people in a period of upheaval and uncertainty. For example, the 1947 partition of South Asia, into India and what was then disaggregated into the two disconnected territories of the country Pakistan, did not appear solely as the outcome of strategic moves undertaken by a few key actors, but also as a humanitarian tragedy of major proportions.³⁰ Even the easily demonized colonial “masters” acquire a human face if we think about repatriated “empire families.”³¹ Such a history of decolonization “from below,” which sometimes tracks the fates of individuals beyond the historical borderline separating independence from the colonial era, inevitably clashes to some extent with the heroic narratives of victorious anticolonialism or a regulated transmission of power. Not infrequently, it shows how the transition was disorderly and chaotic, and how political acumen and moral responsibility cannot be neatly assigned to heroes and villains.

The *international* perspective chooses a framework that surmounts the individual colony and the single empire. Its classical subject matter is made up of diplomatic-military crises that include not only the dyad of colonizers and the colonized, but also “third-party” governments and international organizations, such as the 1954 Geneva Indochina conference, the 1956 Suez crisis, the Congo crisis of 1960–63, and most recently, the crisis surrounding East Timor (1999–2002). There is a growing interest in the role of world public opinion, especially in the United Nations as a critical forum, and in the mutual perception and support of liberation movements in different colonies, often across imperial borders as well. Today, historical investigations undertaken from this perspective tend to

belong more to a “new international history” than they do to colonial history.

The three analytical perspectives are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they complement each other when it comes to describing and understanding specific cases and paths of decolonization. Only by combining a variety of factors on the local, imperial, and international levels, and their articulation, can justice be done to the complexity of historical cases and reductionism be avoided that may result from locking oneself into a single perspective. An analytical checklist like the following shows how the three perspectives can be integrated. This list may serve as a flexible tool kit, applied to specific historical cases.³²

Characteristics of the Late-Colonial Era

- Which type of colony is being examined (colony of exploitation, settler colony, military base colony, etc.)? What was the position and status occupied by the colony within the overall imperial structure?
- What was the demographic share of the colonizing population, and what was its internal composition (administrators, soldiers, merchants, missionaries, etc.)? How extensive or limited was its influence within the different sectors of the colonial state and economy?
- How and to what degree was the colonial economy dependent on the world market? How important were export enclaves, and who controlled them (including control by third-party groups, e.g., Chinese in Southeast Asia)?
- What was the class and gender structure of the indigenous population, its ethnic and religious composition, and its geographic distribution with special regard to the proportion of the urban and the rural population?
- In what way was colonial rule organized (political decision-making, administration, and police)? How directly and how intensely was colonial rule exercised on the ground?

- What was the legal position of the colonized (segregated law codes and special jurisdiction, explicit religious or ethnic discrimination, etc.)?
- To what extent did the colonial power intervene in local society through cultural and educational policy (directed by both the state and missionaries)? What difference did colonial intervention make at the primary education (as indicated, for example, by the degree of literacy) and secondary education levels? Did it contribute to the emergence of Western-trained and Western-educated groups among the colonized population?
- Which were the main movements of anticolonial resistance: their activists, supporters, and social substratum; their motives and goals? How did the colonial state respond to anticolonial challenges?

External Conditions

- At what point in time did a process of decolonization begin to take hold? How important were the influence and legacy of preceding decolonization events in the vicinity or further away?
- How relevant was pressure from third parties (United States, Soviet Union, United Nations, nonaligned movement, world public opinion, etc.)?
- Was there a decolonization strategy among politicians and colonial experts in the metropole?
- How significant were colonial issues in the public arena of the metropole, and how did they relate to party divisions?
- Did colonial interest groups (settler lobby, trade and mining interests, missionaries, etc.) exert a significant influence on the political process in the metropole?
- What was the real and perceived significance of the colonial tie for the economy of the metropole?

The Course of the Decolonization Process

- How, to what degree, and with which results was violence used by liberation movements as well as by the colonial state, by settler militias, and so on?
- Did other (e.g., ethnic-religious) conflicts complicate the picture of a binary confrontation of liberation movements and the colonial state?
- How much room for maneuver was left to “proconsuls” commissioned by the colonial state?
- What were the goals, programs, and political idioms of liberation movements?
- In what constitutional form was independence achieved? Who prepared and decided on a constitution?
- Which regulations regarding citizenship were implemented in the new nation-state?
- What kind of elections were held after independence? Was there genuine competition?
- In what way did external borders and internal divisions characterize the political geography of the new state?
- What kind of treatment was meted out to the expatriate ex-colonizers and their property (e.g., expropriation, expulsion, toleration)?

Short- and Medium-Term Consequences

- What kind of political (including military and security policy) ties were maintained between the new state and the former colonial metropole (e.g., Commonwealth membership, military bases)?
- Similarly, what kind of economic ties were maintained (e.g., currency relations, tariff preferences, trade and investment before and after independence)?
- How durable were the political institutions created at independence?
- What role did the military play before and after independence?
- How did the colonial past impact the cultural situation after independence (retention of European languages or promotion of

national languages, promotion of nationalistic versions of history, etc.)?

- What were the consequences of decolonization in politics (e.g., triggering of a systemic crisis), in the economy, and in society (e.g., return of settlers, immigration of the new nation's citizens) in the metropole?

EXPLANATORY MODELS

Contemporaries of decolonization inquired about the causes and driving forces behind the events and broader transformations they were witnessing or actively shaping. Since the late 1940s, there have been lively debates about how to *explain* decolonization. Many historians of decolonization have also set this as their goal. But in so doing, it is not always clear exactly *what* should be explained. The question of why overseas empires came to an end *at all* would be absurd for its naïveté. It is only meaningful to pose more specific questions—and it is often best to do so in a comparative context: Why did the dynamic of decolonization set in at a specific time? Why did it slip away from the control of the colonial power, or why (to the contrary) was this a dynamic that the colonial power was able to shape? Why did one process of decolonization take a more violent course and another take a more peaceful one? Why did the process unleash specific kinds of conflicts (ethnic, religious, social, etc.)?

In the literature, we find various ways of explaining decolonization. For the sake of clarity, we distinguish five general models providing different explanations of why colonial rule came to an end.³³ These explanatory models occasionally show up in pure form. More commonly, however, they are combined with one another in different ways from case to case. Historians make use of them in their works as arguments they freely deploy and combine. Even when the question of explaining decolonization is not explicitly evoked, such models tend to structure and undergird the historians' accounts and narratives of the events.

(1) The *transfer of power* model. Decolonization is conceived as the purposeful fulfillment, rationally implemented by European

administrators in cooperation with “moderate” indigenous politicians, of a reforming tendency already inherent in colonialism, namely to send non-European peoples who came of age thanks to their colonial education on their way into “modernity” based on self-determination. This model thus puts emphasis on metropolitan decisions and plans as the motor of change. It found its classic expression in the British literature. In its extreme versions, it sets a self-congratulatory tone, stressing a liberal tradition within British colonial policy ever since the violent separation of the North American colonies. The dissolution of the British Empire is described accordingly as a gradual and freely chosen extension of self-government rights across the different colonies: from Canada, through the white settler colonies, South Asia, to Africa and the Caribbean.

(2) The model of *national liberation*. Decolonization is viewed here as the toppling of alien rule based on violence by native liberation movements aiming to unite their nation and availing themselves of a broad spectrum of means, from peaceful negotiation to boycott to armed struggle. This model is, to a certain extent, the mirror image of the transfer-of-power-idea. It stresses the need and urge of the colonized peoples to free themselves from colonial rule. Liberal or reform-oriented tendencies or a readiness on the part of the colonizers to relinquish control are generally considered as secondary or as a means to defuse anticolonial resistance.

(3) The *neocolonialism* model. Decolonization is presented as the colonial powers’ voluntary renunciation of coercive colonial structures that have become obsolete once they realize, in the age of powerful multinational corporations (who, in turn, depend on indigenous collaborators), that they can achieve their goal of economic exploitation just as well and more cheaply without direct domination of a state. In a broader (not only economic) sense, this model describes decolonization as a strategy to retain geopolitical and economic influence in a world in which nation-states have become the norm and to shield these spheres of influence from nationalist pressure and international interference or scrutiny.

(4) The *unburdening* model. Decolonization in this view is a deliberately planned effort at modernization by abandoning overseas positions whose military and strategic value has become increasingly doubtful, fiscally costly, politically risky, and damaging to the colonizer's international reputation, and that are also less and less supported by the public at home—in other words, an attempt at unburdening usually linked to a shift in global priorities (e.g., from empire to Europe). This model thus prioritizes metropolitan reactions to changing situations in the colonies (e.g., the rise of anticolonial activism, costly modernization, or repressions), in the international arena (i.e., the increasing delegitimization of colonialism), and at home (e.g., economic decline, diminishing domestic support). Following such cost-benefit calculations, clinging to the burdensome and loss-making enterprise of maintaining colonial rule seemed increasingly irrational.

(5) The *world politics* model. Decolonization is seen as the inevitable consequence of the newly emerged bipolarity between the post-1945 nuclear superpowers, which no longer leaves any room for the old European strategies of securing power by colonial control over the widest possible expanse of territories and devalues the possession of conventional colonial empires as a guarantee of top billing on the world political stage. This model addresses the changing patterns of the international power structure and the inevitable decline of the European colonial powers and their traditional imperial instruments. In a strong version, decolonization amounts to no more than a footnote to the Cold War; weaker versions consider the new international order as the ineluctable framework to which liberation movements and colonial governments had to adjust their activities.

Even if all these models combine and prioritize elements from the three analytical perspectives (local, imperial, international), each model tends toward one of them. The models reveal their differences above all when the question of agency is addressed: in the transfer of power and unburdening models, it is the political elites—parliamentary politicians and the administrative top cadres

embodying an “official mind”—of the colonial powers, while in the model of national liberation it is the national movements of the colonized that have agency. In the Marxist neocolonial model, big business interests are presumed to be the puppet masters behind the policy of the metropole. Finally, the world politics model stresses unavoidable adjustment to preexisting objective constraints and limitations on action, thus shifting agency to the outside and leaving to the authorities in the imperial capitals only some tactical leeway to react. In a weaker form, the other models, too, use the idea of diminishing decision-making options for the colonial powers.³⁴

The five models of explanation emerged parallel to the actual course of decolonization, and we already find them in the literature before 1980 or thereabouts. They are in some respects mirror images of the “theories of imperialism” that were the subject of a lively discussion at the time.³⁵ Those theories, mostly developed in the early 1900s by liberal or Marxist social scientists, tried to explain the driving forces behind imperial and colonial expansion. The models or theories of decolonization, in turn, account for the reversal and end of that historical process. Whoever, for example, believes that colonies had been acquired for economic reasons is inclined to suspect that the end of empires is also explicable in economic terms. Since the 1980s, a wealth of empirical studies have refined and aptly combined the established models of explanation. Yet, there have hardly been completely new models for explaining decolonization as such and its varying paths. The new cultural history has pursued different goals. Historiographic interest has shifted from causes to effects. This reflects an extended time horizon. The history of decolonization a few years after the event³⁶ was written differently from how it is being envisaged from the distance of half a century. Only across a temporal distance of several decades was it possible for postcolonial studies to emerge. They arose from the disturbing observation that “colonial” habits of thinking have not automatically gone away with the loss of colonialism’s importance as a political institution.

Today, three points are more clearly apparent than they were three or four decades ago.

First: With the end of empires and colonies and the formal proclamation of a “right of self-determination” for nations, a condition of hierarchy-free coexistence among peaceful nation-states has by no means been achieved. Although much more difficult to legitimize than in the past, imperialistic patterns of behavior by the strong toward the weak still exist and have even reappeared in new shapes, adjusted to a world of formerly sovereign nation-states; imperialism after empire is being revived in attenuated forms, and in the language of world politics, “spheres of influence,” “interventions,” and “protectorates” have gained unexpected currency.

Second: The European continental powers and Japan have not been thrown into ruin by the loss of their empires. They have withstood their own decolonization well, both economically and politically, sometimes *with* (as in the case of France and Portugal) and sometimes *without* major domestic political upheavals (Great Britain, the Netherlands). Today’s problems of integrating immigrants and refugees are not necessarily a direct legacy of the colonial past: Afghans or Syrians in Germany or Moroccans in Belgium do not come from the former colonial empires of these countries.

Third: There is no direct correlation linking the colonial situation, the decolonization process, and the current situation of states. Former colonies can be very poor, but they can also be prosperous (e.g., South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Brunei); regions in Asia and Africa that were never colonized in the nineteenth and twentieth century are among the poorest (e.g., Liberia, Nepal, Haiti) and the richest (e.g., Saudi Arabia) countries in the world. Neither an especially repressive colonial rule (like that of the Japanese in Korea) nor a notably violent decolonization process leads inevitably to extraordinary burdens in the era of independence. Kenya, where the withdrawal of the British was associated with enormous violence, is economically no worse off than neighboring Tanzania, where decolonization—or more precisely, the release from a League of Nations mandate/UN trusteeship—took place quite smoothly.³⁷ To be sure, an undramatic transition to independence has never

been a disadvantage. Conversely, the one country that suffered the longest from a sequence of imperial interventions during the age of decolonization, Vietnam, was cruelly damaged in the fulfillment of its potential. Elsewhere in Asia, the two halves of Korea are like a laboratory experiment in how one and the same colonial point of departure—in this case, the collapse of Japanese rule in 1945—can lead to extremely different paths being taken.