
*Decolonisation and its Impact: A Comparative Approach to the End of the Colonial Empires* marks an exciting step in Martin Shipway’s career. Already a well-published scholar in the field of decolonisation in the French context, Shipway’s latest book considers the subject from within a comparative framework. Such an approach challenges students of decolonisation to seek similarities and parallels between its disparate phases and movements, leading to a greater understanding of the phenomenon as a whole. Given the immensity of the topic it seeks to cover, *Decolonisation and its Impact* tackles an impressively vast amount of material.

Nonetheless, Shipway’s introduction emphasises the limitations and shortfalls of his work. The author deems the book’s scope limited for three reasons. Firstly, Shipway is concerned with depth and not breadth of analysis, with the result that he focuses on relatively few - and more importantly, paradigmatic - cases. These cases are drawn, secondly, mainly from the Asian or African colonies of Britain, France, the Netherlands and Belgium. Temporality forms the third limitation: the work focuses on the classic decolonisation phase, the ‘crisis period’ of the two decades leading on from World War Two in which most of the formal structures and institutions of colonial empires crumbled.

In this respect, Shipway’s book adheres to the general theories that the profound changes experienced by colonisers and colonised during the conflict precipitated decolonisation. However, ‘precipitated’ is here the operative word: Shipway argues that contradictions inherent within colonial policy and local disaffection with colonial rule existed prior to the outbreak of war. Throughout the book, Shipway illustrates that while World War Two provided the circumstances which initiated decolonisation, its forces were already at work within many of the colonies, in some cases for decades.

‘Decolonisation,’ Shipway tells us, can be understood from two opposing viewpoints. The ‘bottom-up’ or ‘grassroots’ approach considers decolonisation as an amalgam of perhaps one hundred different national narratives whose increasing agitation precipitated the end of colonial rule. Alternatively, the ‘top-down’ perspective looks at decolonisation as a breakdown of imperial systems. As Shipway’s introduction recognises, neither approach provides a holistic account of the end of colonial rule. His book aims, therefore, to reconcile the ‘imperial’ and ‘national’ readings of decolonisation through analysis of the political and social processes put into play via colonisation and decolonisation.

This endeavour is achieved through considering numerous secondary sources published by other scholars in decolonisation studies. As well, Shipway interprets a variety of primary material published by both individuals spearheading the decolonisation drive and colonial policy-makers determined to maintain their rule. These pro-colony functionaries could either be emissaries of colonising governments installed as local leaders, or parliamentarians operating purely within the domestic sphere for whom colonial territory was primarily a matter of prestige. By looking at the commentary published by key players on the (de)colonisation scene, Shipway introduces us to several absorbing scenarios and divergences of opinion.

One such scenario, which this reviewer at least had never considered, was the role of communism in decolonisation policy. This internationalist ideology provides an alternative reading to the predominantly nationalistic aspirations of many pro-decolonisation factions.
Shipway points out that, interestingly, leaders such as Ho Chi Minh embraced communism via the national cause (pp. 40-42). Another fascinating idea put forward by Shipway is the debate surrounding the extent to which locals accepted colonial politics. Analysing ‘collaboration’ and ‘resistance’ to external rule is especially difficult for Europeans in the post-World War Two context, as these notions have absorbed powerful connotations of their own (pp. 43-46). For this reviewer, such theoretical discussions enhance the intellectual impact of Decolonisation and its Impact. The rest of the book is more descriptive, outlining policies and key players in the realm of (de)colonisation. Spanning continents and decades, Shipway’s in-depth and well-researched account of decolonisation is a comprehensive and enlightening study of the phenomenon, bound to appeal to anyone interested in the development of the world post-World War Two.

Sally Carlton
University of Western Australia