

## **Themes in Comparative History**

*General Editor:* CLIVE EMSLEY

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# Themes in Comparative History

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This series of books provides concise studies on some of the major themes currently arousing academic controversy in the fields of economic and social history. Each author explores a given theme in a comparative context, drawing on material from western societies as well as those in the wider world. The books are introductory and explanatory and are designed for all those following thematic courses in history, cultural European or social studies.

EUROPEAN  
DECOLONIZATION  
1918–1981: AN  
INTRODUCTORY  
SURVEY

R. F. Holland





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# Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>List of maps</i>	x
<i>General Editor's Preface</i>	xi
<i>Preface</i>	xiii

## PART I: 1918–39

1 THE EUROPEAN EMPIRES IN A TRANSFORMING WORLD	1
Population growth and agrarian crisis in Indo-China	2
The formation of a colonial bourgeoisie	5
Religious revival and national renaissance	8
The colonial world and the Great Depression	11
British strategy and imperial reform: Egypt, India and the white Dominions	15
Race politics and the colonial order in Africa	26

## PART II: 1939–45

2 MOBILIZATION, REJUVENATION AND LIQUIDATION: COLONIALISM AND GLOBAL WAR	37
The Japanese revolution in East Asia	38
The consequences of imperial mobilization	47
Colonialism and the Anglo-American alliance	52
The bending of the <i>Raj</i>	56
Social change and settler power in Africa	63

## PART III: 1945-54

- 3 EUROPE'S ASIAN STAKE: ADAPTATION, RESTORATION AND DESTRUCTION 73
- The drive to partitioned independence in India 74
- The emergence of the Indonesian Republic 86
- The war of colonial restoration in Indo-China 93
- Making Malaya safe for decolonization 103
- 4 BRITAIN, PALESTINE AND THE MIDDLE EAST 113
- 5 EXPERIMENTATION, CONSOLIDATION AND DEADLOCK IN BRITISH AFRICA 129
- Political change in the Gold Coast: a model defined 130
- Racial consolidation in southern Africa 135
- Kenya: the deadlocked state 144

## PART IV: 1954-65

- 6 ORDER AND CHAOS: PATTERNS OF DECOLONIZATION IN FRENCH AND BELGIAN AFRICA 153
- French West Africa: the management of decolonization 154
- Algeria: the road to Evian 163
- The Belgian Congo: the breakdown of a decolonization 175
- 7 BRITAIN: THE END OF IMPERIAL STATEHOOD 191
- Suez 1956: the turning point 191
- The changing metropole 200
- 8 THE CLIMAX OF BRITISH DECOLONIZATION IN AFRICA 211
- Ghana: exemplary decolonization and political myth 212
- British Central Africa: the unravelling of Federation 220
- Kenya: the struggle for stabilization 236
- 9 BRITISH DECOLONIZATION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN 249
- Cyprus: the fatal nexus – strategy, clericalism and communalism 250
- Malta: from George Cross Island to Third Worldism 260

## PART V: 1965–81

10	THE ASSERTION OF A POST-COLONIAL AGE	269
	East of Suez: the British departure from Aden and the Gulf	274
	Southern Rhodesia: the life and death of UDI	279
	Portugal's African empire: revolution from the metro- pole	292
	POSTSCRIPT	299
	<i>Notes</i>	303
	<i>Select Bibliography</i>	314
	<i>Index</i>	317

To Hillia

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# List of Maps

1	The British empire, 1918	16
2	The pattern of alien rule in Africa, 1925	28
3	Japanese expansion, 1941-2	39
4	Indian partition, 1947	80
5	The war in Indo-China, 1946-54	101
6	The partition of Palestine	121
7	The Middle East in 1956	194
8	The pattern of alien rule in Africa, 1965	281

# General Editor's Preface

SINCE the Second World War there has been a massive expansion in the study of economic and social history generating, and fuelled by, new journals, new academic series and societies. The expansion of research has given rise to new debates and ferocious controversies. This series proposes to take up some of the current issues in historical debate and explore them in a comparative framework.

Historians, of course, are principally concerned with unique events, and they can be inclined to wrap themselves in the isolating greatcoats of their 'country' and their 'period'. It is at least arguable, however, that a comparison of events, or a comparison of the way in which different societies coped with a similar problem – war, industrialization, population growth and so forth – can reveal new perspectives and new questions. The authors of the volumes in this series have each taken an issue to explore in such a comparative framework. The books are not designed to be path-breaking monographs, though most will contain a degree of new research. The intention is, by exploring problems across national boundaries, to encourage students in tertiary education, in sixth-forms, and hopefully also the more general reader, to think critically about aspects of past developments. No author can maintain strict objectivity; nor can he or she provide definitive answers to all the questions which they explore. If the authors generate discussion and increase perception, then their task is well done.

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I do not speak with the same confidence about Venice, Portugal and Spain; I rather think they *are* decadent. But what I wished to guard against was the idea that their decadence could be measured by the decline of their competitive national power. This is a misleading test, and one which people are very apt to apply: e.g. if the British Empire were reduced to these two islands, and the United States quadrupled in population, we might become insignificant as a world power, and yet perhaps not be decadent.

A. J. Balfour to Sir Edmund Gosse,  
19 February 1908

# Preface

THE undermining and final subsidence of the European colonial empires has been one of the most distinctive themes of the twentieth-century world. Only in recent years, however, over three decades after the climax of Asian decolonization and two decades since the bulk of its African counterparts, has it become possible to develop analytical perspectives on these events of a sufficient subtlety to qualify as 'history'. This is partly because, while most constituents of the old empires had been shunted into the post-colonial age, there were always enough awkward survivals (the Portuguese African dependencies until the mid-1970s and the erstwhile Southern Rhodesia until 1981) to keep alive befuddling myths and rhetoric. Such imperial relics as Hong Kong, Gibraltar and the Falklands apart, however, the slate is now clean enough for dispassionate appraisal to be feasible. Moreover, it is vital that the hitherto simplistic debate on these events be put on a more complex footing. In the 1970s policy-makers in London and Paris could bask in the complacent belief that decolonization (with its assorted bumps and occasional traumas) had been a task well accomplished, and that western Europe could now concentrate its efforts on refurbishing its internal economy. Even leftist commentators, while critical of this position, seemed to share its assumption that the Third World had been effectively marginalized. But by the early 1980s, not least as a consequence of deep recession, this approach had been undermined. The EEC's adequacy as a framework for ordering western Europe's, and particularly Britain's, future had been revealed as, at best, of limited utility; even its survival was in doubt. The old truth that the sustained growth of the advanced world depended on a dynamic relationship with the non-advanced world was proved to be as valid as ever. Reconstructing such a relationship on bases consonant with post-colonial realities, however, cannot be achieved without an accurate and broadly diffused comprehension of the nature of decolonization during the

present century. This book is designed to provide an introduction to the latter subject for students and general readers alike.

The end of modern European empire, nonetheless, is a vast subject and this is a relatively slim volume. The methods used to convey the outlines of the story are necessarily oblique, and the selective nature of the account may sometimes be glaring. The Caribbean islands, both French and British, always hovered at the tail-end of the decolonization queue, largely because of the peculiar vulnerability of their often monocrop economies; certainly they are not dealt with here. Politics predominates over economics. The technique employed is that of an assortment of case-studies, pinpointing the instances of decolonization most expressive of particular facets of the process. The focus is chiefly on the demise of British colonialism, on the grounds that this was the largest of the modern empires; treatment of the French, Dutch, Belgian and Portuguese dependency-systems is commensurately more selective. The aim, in short, is relatively modest: to equip the reader with a broad-brush impression of imperial dissolution and to suggest avenues for further reading and reflection.