

What have historians been arguing about... decolonisation and the British Empire?

Edward Webb

Decolonisation is a contested term. When first used in 1952, it referred to a political event: a colony gaining independence; it has since come to describe a process. When, where and why this process began, however, and whether it has ended, are all fiercely debated. Is it about new flags and constitutions, or something that happens in the minds of the colonised and the colonisers?¹ Is the process political or cultural? Pressure both to teach decolonisation and to decolonise the curriculum can even seem to be in tension.

There is a major methodological fault-line between historians who draw mainly on archival records and those who draw on a wider range of sources and disciplines. This partly explains contrasting interpretations of the causes of decolonisation. Emerging in the 1980s, the 'Cambridge school' focused on political, military and economic factors. Hyam regards government documents as the most valuable evidence because ministers and civil servants in the 'metropole' made the decisions.² The school of 'new imperial history' that emerged in the 1990s, however, criticised historians of the 'official mind', 'captured' by Eurocentric archives, for relegating African and Asian peoples to the status of passive observers of their own liberation in the 'peripheries', and for largely ignoring culture, the environment, gender, race, class, sexuality, and religion.³ To redress these issues (and the fact that many groups in colonised societies did not produce written records), new imperial history draws on a broad evidence base including literature, 'little stories', and techniques from other disciplines such as psychoanalysis and anthropology. The discipline of history itself has even been called into question.⁴

The argument advanced by former prime ministers Attlee and Macmillan that Britain 'voluntarily surrendered its hegemony over subject peoples' as part of a four-generation project was politically informed.⁵ Darwin dismisses this as political spin glossing over ignominious decline.⁶ So was it then nationalism that caused decolonisation? Wallerstein writes about African nationalists winning over local people after the Second World War, and colonial authorities seeking to transfer power to avoid trouble.⁷ Gallagher acknowledges the death toll among



Students demonstrating at Oxford University in 2016, calling for the decolonisation of the university curriculum.

nationalists but downplays the consequences of their actions, while Hyam rebuts Wallerstein as ideologically driven.⁸ The real question, Hyam suggests, was why the British opened the door when the nationalists knocked, thus relegating nationalism to a symptom not a cause of decolonisation.⁹ Cain and Hopkins acknowledge the role of nationalists, but argue it was not worthwhile for the British to resist them because the empire had served its economic purpose. The 'era of gentlemanly capitalism' was finished: the City of London turned away from nation states and commodity producers towards more profitable global opportunities.¹⁰ Holland describes a process of 'disimperialism' whereby the empire ended by mutual consent. Power was transferred from metropolises (now more concerned with the Cold War and the welfare state) to local elites keen to lock in the economic benefits from which they had seen Europeans profit.¹¹

Was decolonisation an outcome of the Second World War? Gallagher writes of the gradual wearing-away of imperial control through decades of concessions to local elites, so that when war came the empire found its power had crumbled away, its traditional strengths rendered obsolete by technological change. Darwin, his former pupil, argues that the fall of France and the surrender of Singapore represented a 'strategic catastrophe' which rendered Britain incapable of defending its empire and too weak post-war to move its colonies from

formal Empire to informal empire.¹² Hyam, however, prioritises the role of international pressure.¹³ Although the Cold War occasionally meant reluctant US support for the empire as a bulwark against the spread of communism, for the most part the US set out to systematically destroy British power through a relentless assault on its finances. Soviet anti-imperial propaganda encouraged Attlee to see the empire as a liability, and newly-independent countries used the UN to mobilise world opinion. 'Britain did not want to be found in the last colonial ditch' with the Portuguese, Hyam writes: its interests were better served by quitting the empire.¹⁴

New imperial historians are more likely to give precedence to narratives of anti-colonialism and struggle. Some, like Burton, also reject the hydraulic rise, climax and fall paradigm, arguing that such 'vehicles of mourning and loss' inhibit objectivity and downplay the role of resistance.¹⁵ Traditional histories focusing on 'sporadic events' such as that at Jalianwallah

Bagh (Amritsar, 1919) give the impression that resistance was exceptional, when in fact it was endemic and took varied forms, from strikes by telegraph workers to women choosing prostitution over conscripted labour. Dissent and disruption by 'ordinary actors' take centre stage in Burton's narrative because they provoked the responses which came to define imperialism. Buettner argues that decolonisation has not yet happened in western Europe: former imperial powers have yet to tell their post-1945 histories through the lens of the transition from colonialism to postcolonialism, or to combine the experiences of the periphery and the metropole. Buettner interprets Euroscepticism as a domestic response to the end of empire.¹⁶

Edward Webb has taught history in schools in London and Egypt, and is currently teaching at Ripon Grammar School. He has researched and written about decolonisation.

Designing enquiries to help students think about interpretations of decolonisation

The sharply contrasting methodologies and widely ranging evidence base on which historians of decolonisation draw make this an ideal focus. Information on sources and methodology can be found in introductions and bibliographies. We could ask *Why have historians begun to look beyond the archives to write the history of decolonisation?* in order to explore the challenges historians face in researching this topic. Archival evidence and the interpretations based thereon can be contrasted with the work of historians who have sought to hear the voices and discern the agency of the 'ordinary actors' engaged in endemic resistance. Asking students to compare the contents pages of books by Hyam or Darwin with those of Burton or Gopal, alongside examples of the evidence base on which they have drawn, would allow them to explore the question *Why do Hyam and Burton write the history of decolonisation in such different ways?*

The Editors

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