

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

H. S. Wilson. *African Decolonization*. London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1994. ix + 224 pp. \$18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-340-55929-1.

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Before the Second World War, imperialism formed the core of global order and was integral to the westernization of the modern world. Despite the end of the colonial empires after 1945, the forces underlying westernization not only remained the basis of the international system, but still served to perpetuate and accelerate global interdependence. The process of decolonization in the postwar period was part of this evolving relationship between colonized peoples and the larger westernizing world. Competing pressures within the interactive imperial structure combined to fracture the overseas political sovereignty of the West and to replace it with a global state system based on the Western model.

H. S. Wilson, an Honorary Fellow in History of the University of York, explains how this transformation occurred in Africa between the 1920s and early 1960s. He draws on a wide variety of recent studies to offer an integrated explanation of the termination of European rule in Africa, the creation of post-colonial governments, and the simultaneous changes in African civil society. Wilson examines the role of individuals and institutions, both African and European, within the broader context of local conditions, developments in the metropole, and the international situation to explain the complex, often far-reaching, and sometimes mutually unintended consequences of African decolonization.

The title of Wilson's book reflects his recognition that the meaning of African decolonization is controversial and often partisan among some scholars as well as current observers of Africa. In his introduction, Wilson argues that "African decolonization" can be read two ways. From the standpoint of the metropole, the term "decolonization," with "its strong prefix denoting decisive action, implied a planned ending to Europe's African empires."

From the local standpoint, the term "African" denoted "collective action, African agency, even African ownership as well as geographical location" (p. 1). In this way, even the common symbols and language surrounding the formal transfer of power during Independence Day ceremonies had meaning for Europeans and Africans, even if independence represented something different to all those who participated.

The colonial officials in the metropolises and in the highest levels of colonial administration within Africa were the link in the imperial chain that connected political leaders in Europe and the wider world with Africans. Each of these links had an impact on the other and all were changed by the process of decolonization. Given this view of imperialism, Wilson gives sustained attention not only to the energies behind African political initiatives, nationalism, Pan-Arabism, and Pan-Africanism, but also to European attempts to sustain, reform, and internationalize colonial rule while taking African decolonization seriously in the 1940s and 1950s. He places all of these competing and often contradictory pressures within the context of the Great Depression, the Second World War, the Cold War, and the Suez crisis of 1956.

While "African decolonization" may be read two ways, the phrase also reflects two central purposes of this book. The first is to join the recent shift away from the often sterile preoccupation with government toward greater attention for the creation of civil society in modern Africa. Wilson contends that the more than thirty years of independence in Africa, along with the collapse of the Soviet empire and the difficulties resulting from state formation in former Soviet republics in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, provide an opportunity for a fresh consideration of African decolonization. He ar-

gues that an understanding of the role of African elites as well as European liberals in developing civil society in Africa best explains the uneven nature of African decolonization, the character of African nationalism, the often ambiguous conflicts between contesting groups, and some of the political and economic disappointments of the post-colonial period.

As a result, his examination mixes detailed descriptions of the aims and accomplishments of such people as Kwame Nkrumah, Margery Perham, Ahmed Sekoum Toure, Donald Cameron, Jomo Kenyatta, Arthur Creech Jones, Gamal Abdel Nasser, and Andrew Cohen. According to Wilson, these individuals built “networks of goodwill and cooperation by which the political and administrative process of decolonization and independence advanced” (p. 201). The result was the creation of new institutions including universities, cooperatives, trade unions, religious missions, self-help associations, youth clubs, and political parties which combined to establish the parameters of modern civil society in Africa.

A second purpose of the book is to find connections not only between competing African and European agendas during decolonization, but also to try to do the same between competing scholarly fields that examine different aspects of this broad subject. He attempts to avoid the apologia that sometimes invade the studies of some imperial historians or the shrill polemics that still shape a segment of the Africanist scholarship. He also draws upon the studies of a number of historians of international relations who too often either exhibit a poor understanding of Africa or disregard it altogether.

Wilson has produced an effective synthesis of the work of historians and social scientists who have much to offer one another, but because of methodological or disciplinary fragmentation, rarely link developments in Africa and Europe with each other or connect these developments with specific changes in international conditions. Some scholars may be surprised, if not entirely pleased, to discover that within the same modest volume leading Africanists such as John Iliffe, Bruce Berman, Leroy Vail, Harold Marcus, and Jean-Francois Bayert appear alongside historians of international relations like Paul Kennedy, Robert Dallek, and Thomas Paterson.

Yet, in part because Wilson tries to bridge the studies of imperialism, international relations, and Africa, specialists in all three fields will undoubtedly quibble over certain details and complain about what is missing. While primarily a study designed for undergraduate students, scholars of French or Belgian colonialism in

Africa are likely to complain about the few recent foreign language sources cited in the notes or bibliography. The confidence of experts in international history will suffer after seeing the name of Walter LaFeber, one of the giants in the study of the Cold War, spelled as “Walter le Feber” (pp. 167 and 216) and may finish the book wishing to have read more about Africa’s position in America’s postwar strategic planning as well as about the nature of the Soviet Union’s interest in the continent.

Africanists, particularly those who study forced labor, violence, or military recruitment under imperialism, are likely to cringe at Wilson’s contention that colonial rule created “relative peace and greater individual security than had existed before” (p. 16), while others will resist the suggestion that African nationalists were somehow more “reasonable” and “patient” than fellow Arab, Indian, or Irish nationalists (p. 105). Lastly, Wilson describes a number of “vigorous,” “imaginative,” or “promising” colonial policies including Cameron’s system of “Native Administrations” in the Tanganyika Territory, the Colonial Development and Welfare Act of 1940, the plans for international cooperation in creating strong interdependent regions within existing colonial empires after World War II, and the extensive agricultural development schemes in postwar Africa (pp. 21, 39, 77-78, and 149-150, respectively). He argues that the first two initiatives were unsuccessful and even counterproductive once successors blocked genuine progress or when circumstances beyond Great Britain’s control intervened. The other two policies fell victim to “bureaucratic bungling” or were simply “botched.” Scholars convinced that Europeans never had any good intentions during the colonial period are likely to dismiss these explanations with a certain degree of derision.

These weaknesses, such as they are, do little to impair the overall usefulness of this book. At a time when many colleges and universities are accused of not doing more to integrate large historical themes and issues into undergraduate courses, Wilson’s work provides teachers with a powerful response to this criticism. Instead of adding to the long list of books that examine increasingly narrower subjects and engage a shrinking audience, *African Decolonization* has much to say to students hoping to grasp contemporary history and understand the making of our modern world. Book publishers outside of the United Kingdom would benefit from encouraging more studies like this one.

The chapters are short and crisp, many with useful summaries that do more than merely repeat the central

points. While adopting a chronological approach, Wilson traces events and themes across the entire continent, paying serious attention to North Africa, and finishes by noting some of the most recent political developments in southern Africa. Most important, the work is free of cumbersome jargon and convoluted paradigms. A brief glossary of specialized terms at the front of the book as well as a select bibliography at the back give students the direction they need to use specialized terms while examining African decolonization and pursue further study.

Wilson's version of the complex problems surrounding the changing definitions of citizenship in Algeria and

South Africa are highly effective. His ability to explain the importance of the Suez crisis for African, imperial, and international history is excellent. This lively and well-organized book would make a superb addition to any broad undergraduate course exploring the history of modern Africa, European imperialism, or twentieth-century international relations.

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