

Defining Decolonization

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Historians are like builders. Our aim is to establish a narrative, rather than to build a house, and our work materials are sources rather than bricks, but what we have in common is that we, like them, need tools to put it all together. In our case these tools are the terms we employ to categorize the information that we have uncovered, delineate our framework of analysis and position our argument in the existing historiography. However, to be of any analytical value, every historical term needs a rigorous definition, and that is often when the trouble begins, because there frequently is as much disunity and debate among historians about the precise meaning of a term, as there is about the phenomenon it describes.

A very good example of a term which has provoked much controversy is 'decolonization'. There can be no doubt that this word describes one of the most fundamental historical developments of the twentieth century. At the beginning of the last century, a few European empires ruled over a great part of the earth's surface and, thereby, a very large percentage of the world population. When the twentieth century came to an end, the world had transformed beyond recognition, with almost 200 independent states being part of the United Nations. This transformative process called decolonization is now an important field of historical study, but there is as yet no consensus about what it really entailed. Arguably, there are as many definitions of decolonization as there are books about that theme. To make matters worse, the debate about imperialism and decolonization is often conducted in a highly politicized manner. While every historian ultimately has to decide for himself how he defines decolonization, it is worth keeping in mind that he is navigating a methodological minefield between two extreme views, both of which have practical advantages, but are also ridden with significant flaws.

On the one hand, there is the traditionalist definition of decolonization as a process by which legally dependent territories obtained their constitutional independence and entered the world stage of international relations as sovereign states. This kind of transition was symbolized for these countries by the raising of their own flags, the composition of new national anthems and their joining the United Nations as full and equal members. While this definition of decolonization at first appears to be lucid and useful in its pragmatism, it is also quite narrow. By concentrating exclusively on constitutional change and the political reasons for it, it excludes the economic, social, and cultural implications of this transformative process, both in the former colonies and in the metropolis of empire. What is more, if one argues that decolonization only concerned the countries that were painted red on the map of the European empires, because it was merely a process to end constitutional dependence, this means that any other form of dependence was not relevant to it. Especially in the case of the British Empire, 'a constitutional hotch-potch of independent, semi-independent and dependent countries, held together not by formal allegiance to a mother-country but by economic, strategic, political and cultural links that varied greatly in strength and character', this is a

very significant omission.^[1] One consequence of this logic would be to exclude large parts of the Middle East entirely from the study of decolonization.

On the other hand, there is the possibility of seeing decolonization as the reversal of the process of European imperial expansion with all its political, economic, social, cultural and linguistic consequences. This definition is methodologically advantageous because it allows for the analysis of both territories and developments that the strictly constitutional view neglects. It enables us to include the informal parts of the British Empire in the analysis and to study the social, cultural and economic aspects of its end. However, the problem with this approach is that, in the final analysis, it implies that a territory has only been decolonized when it has been purged of every remnant of its colonial past. Some people might find that convincing. After all, European expansionism has transformed the world over a period of almost 500 years and left a distinct imprint on large parts of Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Oceania and the Americas that continues to live on to this day. Possibly the most lasting legacy of European imperialism is the spread of French, Spanish, and especially English throughout the world. But to argue that decolonization will only be complete once this imprint has been removed in its entirety and everywhere is to stretch the definition of the term to such an extent that it loses its analytical use. There can never be such a thing as a clean slate when it comes to decolonization. History cannot be reversed, it can only evolve.

Given the numerous methodological traps of studying decolonization, finding the right balance between a too narrow and a too wide definition of the term is not an easy task. One possible way out of this dilemma is to analyze the subject within a larger context, instead of concentrating exclusively on the relationship between the motherland and its dependent territory. To isolate this relationship from twentieth century international relations and global history is somewhat artificial. This holds especially true for the key period of decolonization during the three decades after the Second World War, when the majority of colonies worldwide gained their independence (at least constitutionally), while the Cold War was in full swing.^[2] To understand decolonization, we have to remember above anything else that it was a global phenomenon.

^[1] John Darwin, *The End of the British Empire: The Historical Debate* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2006), p. 4.

^[2] In May 2013, there is to be an academic conference at the University of Cambridge entitled 'Negotiating Independence: new directions in the histories of decolonisation and the Cold War'. See the Call for Papers at <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=HAsia&month=1212&week=c&msg=lg3V2mDNg56qaNzofON16w>

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