TRAJECTORIES OF DECOLONIZATION:
ELITES AND THE TRANSFORMATION FROM
THE COLONIAL TO THE POSTCOLONIAL

Conference in Cologne, October 9-11, 2008. Co-sponsored by the GHI Washington, GHI London, GHI Paris, Fritz Thyssen Foundation, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Association of Friends and Supporters of the University of Cologne, and the Commission for the History of International Relations. Conveners: Jost Dülffer (University of Cologne) and Marc Frey (Jacobs University, Bremen). Participants: Michael Bollig (University of Cologne), Judith Brown (University of Oxford), Elizabeth Buettner (York University), Frederick Cooper (New York University), Andreas Eckert (Humboldt University, Berlin), Ousseynou Faye (University C.A. Diop, Dakar), Andreas Hilger (University of Hamburg), Paul Kratoska (National University of Singapore), Anja Kruke (Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Bonn), J. Thomas Lindblad (University of Leiden), Mairi S. MacDonald (University of Toronto), Stephan Malinowski (Humboldt University, Berlin), Christoph Marx (University of Duisburg-Essen), Daniel Maul (University of Giessen), Esther Möller (Jacobs University Bremen), Daniel Mollenhauer (University of Munich), Manjeet S. Pardesi (University of Indiana), Dietmar Rothermund (University of Heidelberg), Benedikt Stuchtey (GHI London), Hugues Tertrais (University of Paris 1 Pantheon-Sorbonne), Martin Thomas (University of Exeter), Corinna Unger (GHI Washington), Urban Vahsen (University of Cologne), Jakob Vogel (University of Cologne), Nicholas White (Liverpool John Moores University).

The field of decolonization studies has undergone significant changes in recent years. As new approaches have proliferated and research interests have expanded, it has become one of the most vibrant fields of historical inquiry—always in flux, yet constantly yielding new perspectives and surprising insights. The conference added its own distinctive note to the large body of scholarship. By bringing together historians working on such different issues as political imagination, modernization, identity, intelligence gathering, and education, it not only mapped the diversity of current approaches, but also offered an alternative framework for understanding a process that was marked by paramount complexity. As Jost Dülffer and Marc Frey pointed out in their introduction, decolonization involved more than a transfer of political power. Rather, it was a “multilayered process” of social, economic, and cultural transformation that took place on a wide geographic scale, unfolded with varying speeds, and peaked around 1960. Key for the transition from colonial to postcolonial times was the formation and transformation of elites, conceptualized as social groups who command certain resources (political support, economic power, symbolic resources, such as communication or knowledge). Noting that these groups had not yet found the attention they deserved, the
organizers proposed to examine their trajectories on three distinct levels—by looking at indigenous elites, metropolitan elites, and the international context which often brought third-party interventions.

The conference first addressed the question of indigenous elites in Asia and the Middle East. Taking Ronald Robinson’s “theory of collaboration” as a point of departure, Paul Kratoska identified four major allies of the colonial powers in Southeast Asia—royalty and aristocracies, trading minorities, ethnic minorities, and the civil service—and showed how World War II opened up opportunities for new nationalist elites. Esther Möller explained how French schools in Lebanon became ambivalent spaces of nationalist activity, yet remained traditional institutions of exclusive elite education. This was well illustrated by the fact that almost all Lebanese presidents were educated there. Judith Brown focused on the “international superstar” (Andreas Eckert) of decolonization, British-educated Jawaharlal Nehru. Brown outlined Nehru’s personal and institutional “dilemmas of a colonial inheritance,” which severely limited his influence and eventually led to a life-long struggle with divergent local Indian groups at great personal cost. Three important findings followed from the general discussion, two of them further highlighting Nehru’s special role by putting it in comparative perspective. In contrast to the Lebanese elite that strove to conserve social structures, Nehru appeared as a fierce advocate of social and economic change. And while neighboring Pakistan soon hit the road to military dictatorship, conference participants largely agreed that it was Nehru’s passionate belief in parliamentarianism that saved Indian democracy from a similar fate. The discussion also settled the question of whether the concept of “elites” would primarily be a horizontal or a vertical concept, with most participants agreeing that it necessarily has to include both axes.

The second panel turned to metropolitan elites. In comparing the experiences, problems, and shifting identities encountered by the returning “middle-class aristocracies” of former European colonials, Elizabeth Buettner shed light on the long and complicated adjustments of European nations to the postcolonial era. Marc Frey examined the motivations and modes of behavior of Dutch political, business, and functional elites during and after the decolonization process. He concluded that the Dutch “police action” was as much a result of “consensus democracy” as of social pillarization. The question of continuity loomed large when Frey pointed out that functional elites such as colonial administrators often returned to the former colonies in new clothing—for example, as development experts. Next, Daniel Mollenhauer described how French core beliefs in “grandeur” and the civilizing mission translated into contradictory ad-hoc measures against the decolonization drive, comprising repression, economic development projects, democratization, and federalization.
The first day of fruitful discussions ended with Frederick Cooper’s spirited keynote speech on the political imagination of elites in French West Africa from 1945 to 1960. Taking aim at Benedict Anderson’s dichotomy between empire and nation-state, Cooper underscored that the territorial nation-state was far from being the only grand design for postcolonial times. Nor was nationalism necessarily formed in opposition to empire. Instead, visions of an African-French community built on federal institutions and “intercitizenship” remained important political alternatives, as African leaders strove to reconcile African particularities with social and economic security.

Hugues Tertrais and Christoph Marx examined French and South African elites. Tertrais disentangled the conflicting interests of French political, economic, and military officials in Indochina. Initially caught between colonial nostalgia and cost-calculations, French leaders nevertheless ultimately decided to withdraw from Indochina, Tertrais showed. Christoph Marx, on the other hand, illustrated how the Verwoerdian homeland policy became a rallying point for Apartheid’s Broederbund and new collaborative elites in the Transkei and Lesotho—among them Chief Kaiser Matanzima and Chief Leabua Jonathan—who entered a political partnership with the Apartheid regime built on campaign funds and organizational support provided by the Broederbund.

Military elites were covered by Manjeet S. Pardesi, who compared India and Pakistan. Pardesi concluded that the dominant role of the military in Pakistan was born of early structural deficiencies—in particular, the absence of a viable political center and loose party structures. Martin Thomas introduced elites of a special kind: colonial intelligence providers. Although formally not part of the higher colonial service class, intelligence providers nevertheless occupied a crucial place in the colonial state, as they furnished information about indigenous societies, managed the flow of knowledge, controlled political participation, and cracked down on uprisings, albeit with diminishing success in the 1950s. One of the biggest colonial wars, that of Algeria, took center stage in Stephan Malinowski’s paper on “military-civilian elite units and the search for ‘modern men.’” Characterizing the Algerian War as a “war of modernization,” Malinowski argued that Western attempts to transform and dominate Algerian society in order to control the direction of the modernization process created a “Frankenstein’s nightmare,” a paradoxical ensemble of development initiatives coupled with massive colonial violence that closely reflected intra-European developments of the 1950s. Among other things, the ensuing discussion revolved around the ideology of consumption, another potential area of research.
Michael Bollig and Ousseynou Faye highlighted two different kinds of elite activism in changing African environments. Bollig reviewed the strategies of northwestern Namibian chiefs employed in the long process of decolonization. In place since the 1920s, the chiefs masterfully managed to defend their powerful position in the 1960s by embracing the South African homeland policy, while they later preserved their authority vis-à-vis the Namibian government by referring to the international norm of decentralization. In addition, Ousseynou Faye examined how Senegalese teachers became active within and beyond the realm of education by launching symbolic steps of resistance against the signs of colonial domination, expanding literary production, and forming powerful academic unions. Generally, it was agreed in the discussion that the concept of local governance could be useful in understanding decolonization at local and grass-roots levels. Also, some participants raised the question of whether decolonization in fact consolidated a Western European male-dominated gender order. While the discussion did not settle those issues, it identified further important avenues for future research.

The following panel centered on Sekou Touré and Julius Nyerere. Mairi MacDonald described Touré’s harsh uses of power against competing Guinean elites, which ranged from the elimination of traditional chiefdoms in 1957 and the attacks on intellectuals in 1961 to the “fifth column” purges against alleged Portuguese invaders in 1971. Likewise, Andreas Eckert demonstrated the value of biographical approaches by tracing the political career of Julius Nyerere. Eckert found striking continuities: A “product of the colonial state,” Nyerere engaged in a continuous effort to combine elements of European modernity with African traditions, most famously on display when Nyerere’s project of African socialism turned into a paternalistic and coercive civilizing mission with grave social consequences.

Other important players were economic elites. In this section, Thomas Lindblad’s paper dealt with emerging business elites in newly independent Indonesia. While older scholarship painted a grim picture of the Indonesian economy, Lindblad stressed the new élan of the business world after independence, which elevated indigenous and Chinese businesses to leadership status. For Liverpool shipping companies, though, the decolonization of markets had largely negative effects. In this context, Nicholas J. White illustrated how the rise of new competitors, flag discriminations, and cargo reservations coming along with new nation-states confronted Liverpool companies with rapidly changing business conditions and ultimately led to their decline. Last, Daniel Maul discussed the International Labour Organization (ILO) and its impact on new elites. Those influences were manifold, Maul pointed out: At the same time actor and forum, the ILO functioned as much as a place of representation
for new elites as it was a starting point for domestic careers or a transmitter of Western expert knowledge.

The concepts of “knowledge” and “education” also got prominent play in the following section, which explored the juncture of decolonization and the Cold War. First, Urban Vahsen gave a survey of the broadening contact zones between the European Economic Community (EEC) and its African associates. Greeted with much skepticism at the beginning, Vahsen argued, the EEC eventually succeeded in turning initial African resentment against partnership into acceptance by sending experts or pamphlets and organizing information tours or symposia. At the same time, the Carnegie, Ford, and Rockefeller Foundations entered the Cold War educational competition with powerful force. As Corinna Unger showed, these well-funded elite institutions with close ties to the U.S. government soon became forerunners of Western development aid and African elite formation. In an effort to create pro-Western societies, all three foundations invested heavily in African education by funding entire schools, universities, and teacher education projects before they abandoned the top-down approach of elite-focused knowledge transfers and turned to bottom-up concepts on a wider social scale in the 1970s. Andreas Hilger’s paper described the Soviet educational offensive toward India—a prime example of systemic Soviet limitations. Marked by high ambitions and ringing rhetoric, the offensive in fact never got off the ground: By 1956, Soviet officials counted “three to four” Indian students enrolled in Soviet universities.

The conference concluded with a roundtable discussion led by Jost Dülffer and Dietmar Rothermund. Dülffer noted that the “symbolic imagery” of decolonization had been neglected as the Cold War and modernization theory had been. Yet he also found that the concept of elites as social groups had proven useful, since it captured the dynamics of social ascent and descent well. With regard to the trajectories of decolonization, Dülffer argued that there may be no clear answer, since elites followed different patterns of behavior as they occupied different strategic positions after independence. Indeed, one might add, it was precisely the comparative perspective taken by contributors that made the differing trajectories of elite formation and transformation visible—an important accomplishment in itself. Besides, the conference marked out several possible routes future researchers may take. Clearly, decolonization’s symbolic dimension and its intersections with the Cold War may be areas worthy of further study. The same holds true for life stories, consumption, changing concepts of home, governance, gender issues, modernity, knowledge transfers, and education, to name a few. The “multilayered process” of decolonization leaves historians plenty of challenges to grapple with.

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