

Fourth International Seminar on Decolonization in the 20th Century

July 5 to August 1, 2009

Washington, D.C., USA

Seminar Background and Structure

Decolonization Seminar to be held by the National History Center in conjunction with the Library of Congress and with the support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation

The National History Center, an initiative of the American Historical Association, received a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, to enable the Center to conduct, in active collaboration with the Library of Congress, international research seminars that will focus on the history of decolonization in the 20th century.

Following the successful conclusion of the third seminar, the National History Center is now organizing the fourth in the series, to be held Sunday, July 5 through Saturday, August 1, 2009.

The seminar will be directed, as were the previous two, by Wm. Roger Louis, noted historian of the British Empire, who holds the Kerr Chair of English History and Culture and is Distinguished Teaching Professor at the University of Texas at Austin. Louis is the editor in chief of the recently published five-volume *Oxford History of the British Empire* and the author of the just-published anthology of essays, *Ends of British Imperialism: The Scramble for Empire, Suez and Decolonization*. He is also the chair of the Board of Trustees of the National History Center.

The key participants in the seminar will be 15 historians at the beginning of their careers (including advanced PhD candidates) and who are studying various aspects of the process of decolonization. They will be selected each year after a worldwide call for applications. Each participant will receive the cost of an economy roundtrip airfare to Washington, D.C. housing for the duration of the seminar, and a stipend to cover per diem expenses.

The participants in the seminars will be guided in all their efforts by the seminar leaders —Dane Kennedy (George Washington University), Philippa Levine (Univ. of Southern California), Jason Parker (Texas A&M), and Pillarisetti Sudhir (American Historical Association)— who will bring their expertise in the field to share with those taking part in the seminar's activities.

Aims

The seminar aims to:

- Provide an opportunity for 15 historians at the beginning of their careers-and selected for their scholarly potential-to interact with several senior historians working in the field of decolonization. The participants can be expected to bring to the seminar multiple viewpoints and to take away at the end new ideas about

- the topic, knowledge about new research methods, and new skills in communicating their ideas to fellow historians and to the public.
- Enable the participants to pursue research at the Library of Congress, National Archives, and other repositories of historical research materials in Washington, D.C., on projects within the overarching theme of decolonization.
 - Serve as an historian's workshop in which all participants including the seminar leaders will exchange ideas and discuss various aspects of the subject of decolonization.
 - Enable participants to produce a draft article or chapter of a book with the guidance of the more experienced historians leading the seminar, who, together with the participants themselves, will offer comments and critiques on the research, content, style, and argument of the evolving draft papers.

Thus, a particularly noteworthy feature of the seminar is that, apart from its traditional functions of facilitating scholarly critiques and the exchange of ideas, it will also provide a unique opportunity for the participants to focus on developing their writing skills. At the end of the four-week seminar, participants can, therefore, expect to depart not only with a sense of having contributed to the further exploration and definition of an important and emerging subject, but also with the more tangible gains reflected in improved drafts of potential research articles, and a better understanding of the special requirements of scholarly writing.

Purpose

Decolonization is a multifaceted, complex historical phenomenon that has increasingly engaged the attention of historians in recent decades. The dissolution of the western colonial empires has continued to be a critical historical problem because of the far-reaching cultural as well as economic and political effects of decolonization on the new states created in the latter part of the 20th century—and on the governments and societies of the European countries themselves. That is to say, to understand much of the modern world as we know it today, we must seek to understand—dispassionately, but nevertheless with a sensitivity to the passions of those postwar decades—the ideologies and practices of the colonial states and the worldviews of the colonized peoples who went on to constitute themselves into postcolonial nations. Moreover, the very process of decolonization has changed the perceptions of the past on the part of both the colonizers and the formerly colonized. This means, therefore, that we need to trace the genealogies, not just of the process of decolonization, but also of the evolving narratives describing and analyzing that process. The seminar cannot, in its brief compass, entirely accomplish all these complex tasks; but it can help to suggest ways of mapping the terrain, to introduce participants to the questions that have to be asked and the problems that need to be solved, and to point to new directions in the historiography of decolonization.

New Directions

At the time of the creation of area studies programs in the 1950s and 1960s—at the crest of the wave of new countries emerging from colonial status—a common assumption was that a cleavage existed between historians of Asia and Africa and those who continued to pursue traditional European fields. The split, which sometimes resembled open academic warfare, reflected the ideological passions of the 1960s and the tensions of the cold war.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the apartheid regime in South Africa in the late 1980s and early 1990s, historians of empire and historians of Asia and Africa (and other parts of the former colonial world) began to discuss the history of empire and decolonization in a collective spirit of scholarly inquiry that marked a departure from the abrasive attitudes of the opposing camps in earlier decades. The five volumes of the *Oxford History of the British Empire* are an example of a work that consciously set out to establish a balance in interpretation of both the European and the non-European world. The proposed international seminar on decolonization would adopt the same principle, bringing historians from area studies together with historians of the French, Dutch, Belgian, Portuguese, and British empires of the 19th and 20th centuries. After all, though the subject is international, there are distinctive national lines of scholarly pursuit in understanding the decline of empire and the emergence of the successor states. Whether in the former colonies themselves, or in Portugal, the Netherlands, or indeed in any of the western European maritime states, the historical processes through which new nation-states emerged from empires remain controversial. Besides, one of the characteristics of the field of colonial and postcolonial studies is the diverse nature of the research, theoretical as well as empirical, on such subjects as migrations and economic development in the twilight of the colonial era. The forging of a common purpose—even while preserving this plurality of perspectives—among historians of European colonial history and those of Asia, Africa, and other regions is one of the underlying rationales of the seminar.

Participants

It is but natural, therefore, that the seminar should include as participants not only historians from the United States, but also scholars from countries such as Indonesia and Algeria, on the one hand, and Portugal and Belgium on the other. Those are only examples, but they signify the deliberate effort to ensure that the perspectives of the colonized are brought to bear in the discussions as well as the outlooks of the colonizers. Moreover, the participation of scholars from different countries in the seminar will help them to broaden their awareness through building lasting scholarly relationships that transcend cultural and intellectual differences—and, in the process, reinforce the goals of the seminar.

Seminar Leaders

Another distinctive feature of the seminar will be the seminar leaders. The participants will exchange ideas with them and will gain inspiration not only for their research but also for their writing and for the all-important problem of conveying their ideas to a wider readership. The inclusion of a significant number of senior members in the seminar is based on the principle that historians who are embarking on their careers can best benefit from sustained attention not by one but by several established scholars. The leaders of the seminar can be of significant assistance to the participating historians not only in discussing methods or techniques of research and new historical sources and approaches, but also in dealing with issues that remain contentious.

Research Resources

Scholarship on decolonization in recent decades has broken away from the Eurocentric approach to the subject that characterized, with a few notable exceptions, historical works before the 1960s. From that critical decade onwards, the history of decolonization has

been shaped by such significant influences as the civil rights movement in the United States, feminist scholarship, and the idea of writing history from below (as exemplified by the subaltern studies school that emerged in India). More recently, colonial discourse theory has broadened the range of subjects brought under the scrutiny of decolonization scholarship, not only by emphasizing gender, class, generation, and race, but also by including non-traditional evidence such as paintings, music and novels, street plans, prisons, architecture, culinary traditions, public health, even sewage plants. These are all rich subjects that can be explored in the collections at the Library of Congress, the National Archives, and other archives and museums in Washington, D.C., including the Smithsonian Institution museums, especially the African Art Museum and the Freer and Sackler Galleries for Asian Art, and, of course, the U.S. National Archives. At the Library of Congress, the collections include not only manuscripts but also maps, photographs, music, and films. For example, historical and literary sources of the 1950s and 1960s in Asian, African, and Caribbean archives, including foreign language collections, reflect the momentum towards independence. The map collections are especially important to the purpose of the seminar not only because modern maps are among the more durable or ineradicable legacies of colonial rule but also because of a growing understanding of how cartography reinforced the colonial enterprise in the past, and continues in the present to bedevil new nations that inherited imperfect boundaries and contested territories. A summary of some of the resources that seminar participants can use while they are in Washington, DC, is available online at the National History Center Web site, www.nationalhistorycenter.org.

Writing and Research

The seminar differs from most other comparable ventures in intensively concentrating not just on the methods of research and historical thinking, but also on writing—through daily discussion of style as well as argument, and guidance on points of historical evidence as well as the difficult challenge of making technical historical writing comprehensible to a broader or general audience. The problem, which is acute in today’s world of arcane and often incoherent articles and books, is to produce clear and jargon-free scholarly writing that meets the rigorous standards of research and interpretation demanded by fellow historians yet is comprehensible to those with no specialized knowledge of the subject. The writing component of the seminar will have two stages. During the early part of the seminar, the participants will discuss the project synopses (ideally, an updated version) submitted with the applications, essentially a brief note that summarizes the research project, setting out its scope and central argument and discussing its relationship to the overarching theme of the seminar. That is to say, the participants (including the seminar leaders) will not only annotate and offer written comments upon the synopses, but will also collectively discuss them in group meetings. This aims of this process are: (1) to allow the participants to learn more about the projects; (2) to facilitate discussion of the major issues to be raised and the historiographic challenges that need to be met; and (3) to set the intellectual framework, as it were, for the seminar. During the second part of the seminar, the synopses are expected to be turned into draft chapters or articles (of about 3,000–6,000 words) that will also be circulated, annotated, and discussed.

The Schedule of the Seminar

The four weeks of the seminar will primarily be devoted to intensive research, writing, and discussion. The seminar schedule will be designed to provide time for research in the local libraries and archives as well as for the discussion sessions and writing.

During the first week of the seminar, participants will not only have an opportunity to discuss the project synopses, but will also explore, along with the seminar leaders, the chronology and themes of decolonization, and discuss definitions of key terms and concepts. Participants will also have opportunities to orient themselves to the Library of Congress, the National Archives, and other research resources and to receive expert guidance, if required, from specialist curators and archivists. The second, third, and fourth weeks of the seminar will be devoted to the elaboration of the research proposals, to conducting research, and to discussion of the intellectual content as well as the writing style of the evolving drafts.

Some late afternoons during the seminar may be set aside for films or other activities related to the theme. The film sessions will help to promote camaraderie while providing an invaluable opportunity to engage in informal exploration of the cinematic take on historical events. *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Battle of Algiers*, *Camp de Thiaroye*, or the more recent *Lumumba*, and documentaries such as the Granada Television series *End of Empire*, are a few examples of the many that can be screened.

Selection of Seminar Participants

The fifteen participants will be selected by a committee composed of the seminar leaders. The selection process will include an invitation to submit an application consisting of a brief statement of the applicant's reasons for wanting to participate in the seminar and indicating the anticipated outcome of the research; a statement of no more than 1,000 words summarizing the research project; a curriculum vitae; and three supporting letters. Applicants must be able to certify that they are fluent in both written and spoken English.

The meetings of the seminar will generally take place in the Library of Congress.

Participants selected for a seminar will have to commit themselves to actively participating in that seminar for its entire duration. They must make their own arrangements to obtain the necessary U.S. visas; the National History Center will provide any documentation that may be required.