Decolonization in French West Africa

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Summary and Keywords

Studies of French decolonization in West Africa have traditionally treated it as a planned and reasonably smooth process. It has therefore been portrayed as a successful decolonization that stands in stark contrast to the much more conflictual decolonization processes in Indochina (1947–1954) and Algeria (1954–1962), which were marked by prolonged wars. This approach has tended to give pride of place to the role of individuals—members of France’s governing elites and African political leaders—who are portrayed as having successfully managed the transition to independence. While the importance of such individuals cannot be denied, it is important to recognize that French decolonization in West Africa was a contingent process. Shaped by the particular nature of French colonial rule in the region, the new international context after 1945, events on the ground, and—on the French side—the perceived need to maintain empire at all costs in order to restore French grandeur after the humiliation of defeat and occupation in the Second World War, it was a process that involved a multiplicity of French and African actors who were not in control of the policy agenda but who were, on the contrary, operating in a highly constrained context and constantly being forced to react to rapidly unfolding events. De Gaulle finally decided to grant independence in 1959, and within a year all the territories of former French West Africa had gained their political independence. However, political independence did not mean French withdrawal and the end of French dominance. There were many continuities between the colonial and postcolonial periods, which have been analyzed in a burgeoning literature on French neocolonialism in sub-Saharan Africa. Decolonization should therefore be seen as a process that started well before French rule formally ended in 1960 and that is—arguably—still ongoing.

Keywords: decolonization, French West Africa, France, French policy, colonialism, postcolonial, neocolonialism, Françafrique

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