

**Clayton, Anthony. The Wars of French Decolonization. London and New York: Longman, 1994.**

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Clayton, Anthony. *The Wars of French Decolonization*. London and New York: Longman, 1994.

*The Wars of French Decolonization* focuses on the period from the end of World War II to the recognition of Algerian independence in 1962. It is the second title in a new series of studies projected by Longman. "Modern Wars in Perspective," that will examine specific wars and phases of warfare from the Middle Ages to the present. According to the series editors, their purpose is to move beyond traditional campaign narrative to assess the causes and consequences of major conflicts within the context of key social, political, diplomatic and ideological developments.

If other volumes in the series accomplish these objectives as successfully as Anthony Clayton has done in this little book, then military history in general will be well-served. Clayton has published extensively on both the French and British military presence in Africa in the twentieth century. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the French experience of decolonization is frequently compared (unfavorably) to that of Great Britain. The survey focuses considerable attention on the two major French wars of decolonization in Indochina and Algeria during the 1950s, but also interweaves analyses of smaller but still significant French military operations in Syria and Lebanon, Madagascar, Tunisia and Morocco. The violent story of France's disengagement from empire is told against the political backdrop of the collapse of the Fourth Republic at home and the birth of the Fifth.

In nearly every case the French were handcuffed by their own prevailing colonial philosophy of assimilation — a set of assumptions that rejected colonial movement toward independence and autonomy. This led them to ignore local political values such as nationalism. Instead of recognizing certain manifestations of anti-French resistance as not unreasonable reactions to prevailing conditions, these were generally brushed aside as the result of British or American meddling and repressed. Repression led to bloody reprisal, expansion of resistance to French control and, eventually, to the evaporation of national consensus at home on the maintenance empire. Whether more sensitive military leadership would have avoided the loss of France's empire in the long run is doubtful. But Clayton concludes that the experience from 1945 to 1962 shows that, "Theatre Commanders and Service Chiefs must be well educated politically so that they are sensitive to the politics of any military situation, but not themselves become involved politically . . ." (p. 184) Alistair Home reached similar conclusions in 1984 in *The French Army and Politics, 1870-1970*.

Inescapably, the central figure in the story of French decolonization is Charles de Gaulle. Clayton's portrait of him is carefully nuanced. He does not accept at face value, for example, the general's own explanation of his apparent dithering between *Algerie francaise* and *Algerie algerienne* as a skillfully calculated policy (as Alistair Home did in *A Savage War of Peace*. 1978). In this book de Gaulle appears much less prescient about his ultimate decision on Algerian independence. Clayton acknowledges, however, his political acumen in securing a majority vote in the Assembly in May 1958, in support of his emergency appointment to the prime ministership. This move secured his political legitimacy without leaving him beholden to the army.

Unlike many other French military officers of the post-World War I era, de Gaulle never served in either North or sub-Saharan Africa. After the war, he opted to accompany the French military mission to Poland to fight the Bolsheviks rather than to participate in the pacification campaigns in Morocco. As a result, de Gaulle developed no emotional ties either to Africa or to the concept of empire.

Above all, de Gaulle is portrayed as a realist principally concerned with the international standing of France. If the maintenance of empire would serve to assert great power status, then Empire should be preserved. But if imperial wars served to weaken France, then de Gaulle was equally prepared to cut his colonial losses in order to assure stability at home and preserve a leading role for France among the major powers of the world. Thus, when the national consensus on Algeria threatened to evaporate into civil war in 1959-61, he moved to recognize Algerian independence. This analysis is fully consistent with Ian S. Lustick's recent reexamination of the Algerian War in *Unsettled States, Disputed Lands* (1993). Sensitive to the army's repeated setbacks in the colonial arena in the 1950s and 1960s, the French president insisted upon maintaining an independent nuclear *force de frappe* throughout the remainder of his administration.

Appendixes contain an array of useful supplementary materials: chronology of key events, list of

abbreviations, biographical notes on key individuals, regional maps, and a short bibliographical essay. *The Wars of French Decolonization* is appropriate for undergraduate and graduate reading lists in modern European history.

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