1

Introduction

The Politics of Nationalism in the French Empire

In late 1945, elected representatives to France's First Constituent Assembly began the task of constructing a new postwar constitution for the Fourth French Republic. In the Overseas Committee, the issue at hand was the place of France's colonial possessions in the new constitution. Delegates wrestled with questions about how the empire would be governed in the postwar era, what status colonized subjects would have, and how to manage cultural differences within a wider polity.[1] To answer these questions, the delegates needed not only to reconcile their own views, but also to think about the great diversity of opinions and aspirations of colonized populations throughout the French empire. For as the debates took place in Paris, various political movements were underway in the colonies and territories. Ho Chi Minh had just declared Vietnam independent to cheering crowds in Hanoi. Political leaders from Martinique, Guadeloupe, Guiana, and Réunion were seeking to turn their territories into French departments. In Morocco, the Independence Party had formed in 1944 and was organizing demonstrations in favor of national independence. Tunisia's nationalist movement had demanded autonomy. In Madagascar, the leaders of the Malagasy National Socialist

[1] For more on the French Constituent assemblies, including the failure of the first, see Benoist (1982); Chafer (2002, 60–67); F. Cooper (2009); Marshall (1973).

Party had asked for autonomy in April 1945. In other parts of French Africa, African leaders favored reforming colonial rule in an egalitarian direction, asking that Africans be accorded the political rights of French citizens while maintaining their distinct cultural identities. The Senegalese deputy Léopold Sédar Senghor had just urged his fellow Africans to "assimilate, do not be assimilated."[2] Algeria was still reeling from the May 1945 events in Sétif, where after a nationalist demonstration had turned violent and resulted in European casualties, a period of brutal retaliation and repression had ensued.[3] Despite the viciousness of the French reaction, there was not, as yet, a consensus among Algerian leaders in favor of independence; some organizations advocated independence but others sought reform within the existing colonial system.[4] In Paris and across the empire, political leaders and colonial subjects expressed diverse wishes for the postwar order.

In hindsight, it is easy to believe that the delegates to the constitutional assemblies had been handed a Sisyphean task: no matter how sincerely they tried to address the inequalities of colonial rule or what proposals they put forth to redefine the relationship between France and her colonies, their efforts were bound to come crashing down eventually, in part because of the allure of nationalism. Nationalism is frequently described as a wave that swept the colonized world in the wake of World War

[2] Quoted in F. Cooper (2009, 98).

[3] Accounts of the initiation of violence in Sétif are contradictory and unclear. The police decided to stop a demonstration, and reports suggest that either the police fired first, or that they responded with gunfire when some of the demonstrators fired or threw stones. The small police force was overwhelmed, and over the next few days, 103 Europeans were killed and another 110 injured. The number of Algerians killed in the reprisals carried out by the French army and area settlers is unknown, although even the lowest numbers suggest that it was a vastly disproportionate response. Horne (1977, 27) gives figures that range from 1,020 to 45,000 killed, and says that most French historians accept a figure of 6,000. On the uprising in Sétif, see also Stora (2001) and Jauffret (1990).

[4] The question of Algeria's postwar status would be tabled until 1947, when seven different proposals for the *Statut d'Algerie* were considered (Ageron 1991a, 104).

II, a ubiquitous force that characterized politics and identity in places ruled by empires.[5] The nationalist movements demanding independence or autonomy that were already underway in 1945 offered clues as to what the future would bring to the rest of the empire; the mystery is why the French did not see it coming.

Indeed, after the colonial period ended, the French and other observers saw nationalism in the colonies as predictable. In his memoirs, Charles de Gaulle (1970, 38) suggested that the very act of bringing French civilization and notions of nationhood to the colonies produced the desire for self-rule.[6] Others thought nationalism was inevitable for reasons less flattering to imperial powers, arguing that the inequalities and injustices of colonial rule made nationalism the obvious response.[7] Global changes also made nationalist responses throughout the colonial world seem natural; Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, the founding of the League of Nations, and the creation of the United Nations are among the events that rendered imperial rule illegitimate and self-determination an internationally recognized right. As Lamine Guèye, once the great Senegalese spokesman for assimilation, said when francophone African states became independent in 1960, "One cannot hold back the ocean with one's hands."[8]

In the academy, understanding colonial history through the lens of nationalism has become, as Gary Wilder (2005, 127) put it, "intellectual common sense."[9] To take a few examples, Roger Owen (2000, 20) writes in his history of Middle Eastern states that the colonial state gave birth "to the familiar dialectic by

[5] For examples of this type of language, see Emerson (1969, 4); Grimal (1985, 6); Landau (1956, 141); Smith (1975, vii), among others.

[6] See Young (1994, 208), who suggests that colonial powers preferred to describe the outcome as inevitable because they sought to portray the outcome as a part of their plans, not a failure. Shepard (2006, 4) argues that "French bureaucrats, politicians, and journalists rewrote the history of imperialism and anti-imperialism so that decolonization was the predetermined end point."

[7] Examples include Abun-Nasr (1975, 313); Emerson (1960); Owen (2000, 20); Pratt (2007, 29); Rivlin (1955).

[8] Quoted in Morgenthau (1964, 165).

[9] Wilder is not endorsing the reliance on nationalist norms to understand colonial history, but calling attention to its dominance in U.S. scholarship on the colonial period.

which imperial rule cannot help but generate the nationalist forces that will eventually drive it out." In a similar vein, Edmund Burke III (2000, 21) states that "the violence and cultural hubris of European colonialism called forth its violent negation in the national liberation movements of the 1950s." Likewise, Clement Henry Moore (1970, 34) and Nicola Pratt (2007, 29) suggest that European rule planted "the seeds of its own destruction." To put it another way, empire was an "unstable equilibrium." (Abernethy 2000). Other depictions of the colonial era do not directly state that nationalist responses were bound to occur, but still tend to assume that they are natural and do not require scrutiny. Colonialism and nationalism appear to go hand in hand, the former eventually prompting the latter. In a world organized into nation-states, the eruption of movements using the discourse of nationalism in places where empires still ruled seems unremarkable. Although scholars typically avoid explicitly claiming that any political development is inevitable, it is tempting to look back at the close of the colonial period and see nationalism as, if not foreordained, at least hardly very surprising.

Yet such a view is mistaken for three reasons. First, by taking the resonance of nationalism in the colonial world for granted, scholars and observers overlook the other ways that people responded to empire. Nationalist claims were not the only claims colonized populations articulated; indeed, in many places and time periods, they were not the dominant way to oppose colonialism. Activists living under French rule had multiple reactions that are not easy to classify in the binary terms of collaboration or resistance. Submitting to imperialism or demanding independence were not the only choices. Activists aspired to a better life, they asked to be treated as equals, they defended religion, and they proposed a variety of solutions to the injustices of colonial rule, including federal arrangements and incorporation. Their proposals were creative, audacious, and diverse; they cannot be reduced to assertions about the primacy of nations and nation-states. Yet in the postcolonial era, these alternatives have too often been subsumed into the dominant nationalist history

or considered weak precursors to nationalism. Some scholars, however, have called attention to these neglected forms of opposition.[10] And with good reason, as not only are other types of opposition important for their own sakes, but they can also help us understand why nationalist movements took place. This book argues that we cannot understand how nationalism came to be so widespread in much of the colonial world without first considering what happened to the political movements that preceded demands for national autonomy and independence. Put otherwise, we cannot grasp why nationalist movements took place without examining the full range of variation in political organizing.

Second, nationalist opposition to colonial rule is puzzling because it required collective action against a powerful authoritarian state. Theorists have long stressed the difficulties involved in mobilizing people to obtain public goods.[11] In the colonial world, the obstacles to collective organizing were immense.[12] In their empire, the French repressed nascent movements, jailed activists, and confronted mass protests with displays of force and sometimes violence. They fought two major wars in Algeria and Indochina to defeat nationalists, resulting in one of the century's bloodiest decolonization processes.[13] Under these circumstances, the eruption of nationalist demonstrations requires explanation, unless one assumes that the ideology of nationalism is so appealing that collective action is somehow no longer a challenge. Yet there are good reasons to suppose that it was indeed difficult; nationalist

[10] For examples, see McDougall (2006); Thompson (2000b). F. Cooper (2002; 2005) has led the way in pointing out the diversity of claims in French Africa. Their work can be considered part of the larger scholarly effort to demonstrate the ways in which studies of the colonial period are beholden to nationalist interpretations of history. Although considerable work has gone into demythologizing the nationalist period in sociology, anthropology, and history, in political science and policy circles the appeal of nationalism is often considered self-evident.

[11] This argument originates with Hume (1978 bk. 3, part 2, sect. 8, p. 538), and was formalized by Mancur Olson (1971).

[12] See Wallerstein (1961, 58).

[13] See Spruyt (2005); see also Lawrence (2010a; 2010b) on nationalists' turn to violent resistance in the French empire.

mobilization in the colonial world was not omnipresent, and long periods passed with little activity. Studies that depict nationalist opposition as the clear consequence of colonial rule overpredict its occurrence and cannot account for temporal and spatial variation in nationalist mobilization. This book points to specific circumstances that provided openings for opponents of colonial rule and facilitated nationalist activity.

A final reason to question the obviousness of nationalist responses to colonial rule is that they were not, as it turns out, foreseeable at the time. Writing just over a year before the Independence Party in Morocco was formed and mass demonstrations erupted, French administrators wrote: "The attachment Moroccans have to France is deeper and more sincere than ever."[14] The delegates drafting France's postwar constitution likewise failed to anticipate that African colonies, too, would experience nationalism or that Algerians would unify under a nationalist platform.[15] During the immediate postwar period, it was not clear just how popular, important, or irreversible nationalist trends would be.

The insight that nationalist movements were to be expected in the mid-twentieth-century colonial world is a retrospective one that depends on knowledge of the outcome. Only in hindsight do nationalist movements and the transformation of colonies into independent nation-states appear to be part of a "tide of history."[16] This point has been made more starkly in the context of the collapse of the Soviet Union, where the suddenness of nationalist revolutions stunned both observers in the West

[14] *Bulletin de Renseignements Politiques*, November 1942. Biweekly report of the Political Affairs Bureau, French Residency in Morocco, SHAT 1414.

[15] Young (1994, 182–183) writes that no one foresaw the collapse of empire immediately after the war. Maalem (1946), like other Algerian activists, did not anticipate widespread mobilization for independence in Algeria during the postwar period. Writing in 1953, Keris (1953, 13) still did not predict significant nationalist mobilization in the Empire, seeing nationalism in Madagascar, Vietnam, Morocco, and Tunisia as the result of causes specific to those places and not part of a wider trend.

[16] See Shepard (2006, 3–10), whose discussion of decolonization as an invented tradition that has been depicted as part of a "Tide of History" could likewise be applied to nationalism.

and dissidents in the East. Although initially surprising, those nationalist uprisings later came to be seen as the inevitable consequence of multiple factors.[17] As in the Soviet Union, nationalist movements in the French empire became predictable only after the fact.

Starting from an outcome and looking back into history to identify patterns that produced it is not necessarily misguided; sometimes patterns are only discernible after time has passed. But, as Frederick Cooper (2005, 18) points out,

> [O]ne risks anachronism: confusing the analytic categories of the present with the native categories of the past, as if people acted in search of identity or to build a nation when such ways of thinking might not have been available to them. Even more important is what one does not see: the paths not taken, the dead ends of historical processes, the alternatives that appeared to people in their own time.[18]

Hindsight can thus produce biased explanations. Knowledge of the outcome can lead one to erroneously believe that preferences for the outcome caused it to happen, even when the existence of such preferences has to be assumed.[19] Analyzing past events

[17] Beissinger (2002) examines just how the "seemingly impossible" disintegration of the Soviet Union became the "seemingly inevitable" by 1991. Derluguian's (2005, 166) analysis describes "the contentious processes behind what was perceived in the contemporary political imagination as the inevitable consequence of the existence of nationalities." Kuran (1991, 12) argues that hidden preferences make such contentious processes difficult to predict. Hale (2008) provides an explanation for the timing of movements seeking independence. For more on nationalism and the collapse of the former Soviet Union, see also the seminal works by Brubaker (1996); Bunce (1999) and Suny (1993).

[18] See also the discussion in Rivet's (2002) introduction.

[19] Kuran's (1991) explanation for nationalist mobilization in the East European revolutions of 1989 rests on the private preferences of ordinary citizens, who reach a "revolutionary threshold" when hiding their dislike for the regime becomes more costly then acting against it. This theory helps explain why revolution is so surprising, but because it depends upon preferences that are by definition unobservable, it is essentially unverifiable. One has to take the outcome as evidence for the explanation of that outcome. Anticipating this objection, Kuran (1991, 48) states that the theory predicts unpredictability and thus can be falsified if predictable revolutions are observed, but unpredictability is also consistent with other explanations for nationalist uprisings, including accounts that focus on contingency and political opportunities.

with the end result in mind can make an outcome that was not predicted paradoxically appear easily predictable. Looking back after the fact, it is easy to focus on the "winners" who succeeded at collective action or gather only the evidence that appears most relevant to producing nationalism. But by ignoring (or simply failing to see) the alternatives to nationalism, we miss the opportunity to investigate why one mobilization platform succeeds while others fail.

Moreover, we risk being overly influenced by the winners' perspectives. Part of the reason that nationalism seems so inevitable comes from nationalist ideology itself, which, like Marxist metanarratives or ideologies of inexorable Western expansion, explicitly puts forth a teleological view of history. Nationalists vigorously maintained that the imperial status quo was untenable and nationalism was bound to triumph. Some scholars and observers looking back at the period have accepted those claims as fact. There are normative reasons for doing so; emphasizing the contingent nature of nationalist responses might be interpreted as diminishing the accomplishments of national liberation movements, or even implying that colonial rule was viable or inoffensive. Yet, as this book seeks to demonstrate, an investigation into how colonized populations came to articulate nationalist objectives can help illuminate just what made colonial rule in the mid-twentieth century so objectionable.

Nationalist responses to empire do require interrogation. The tendency to see nationalism as the obvious organizing idiom for people living under colonial rule in the mid-twentieth century has obscured important puzzles about the causes of nationalist mobilization. Most importantly, taking nationalism for granted serves to conceal the contingent nature of the eruption of movements seeking autonomy or independence from colonial empires. Yet this outcome did not have to unfold as it did. Specific circumstances gave rise to movements in particular times and places. This book looks at some of the ways that mobilization varied in the French empire, addressing several questions. Why did mobilization in favor of independent statehood supplant movements to reform and reshape colonial rule, where it did so?

What prompted those living under imperial rule to begin making nationalist demands? Why did nationalist demonstrations erupt in particular places and times?

Concepts: Nationalism, Nationalist Mobilization, and Decolonization

Nationalist mobilization in the French empire is the subject of interest here, not decolonization or nationalism, two related but distinct phenomena. My investigation benefits from a significant body of scholarly work on the colonial period, but nationalist mobilization is typically not the central outcome these studies seek to explain. To begin with, nationalist mobilization in the colonial world is usually analyzed for its effects rather than its causes. Thus, there is an ongoing debate about how much credit nationalist movements can take for achieving independence: did they win liberation or did independence result from a European-initiated process of decolonization?[20] These questions focus on decolonization or the achievement of independence, depending on the stance of the author. Nationalism is one factor, among others, that potentially produces independence.[21] The major puzzle of interest is the European loss of territory. Studies of the postcolonial period have likewise looked at the effects of mobilization, examining what nationalist movements achieved and failed to achieve in the years following independence.[22] Fewer studies have focused directly on nationalist movements

[20] For a recent discussion of this debate, as well as a discussion of the existing consensus on the factors that led to decolonization, see Shipway (2008).

[21] For studies that take decolonization or the end of empire as the outcome of interest, see Ageron (1986a; 1991b); Betts (1991); Chafer (2002); Chamberlain (1999); Clayton (1994); Duara (2004); Easton (1964); Gifford and Louis (1982); Grimal (1985); Le Sueur (2003); Low (1991); Lustick (1993); Pervillé (1991); Smith (1975); Spruyt (2005); von Albertini (1975); Yacono (1971). See also Roeder (2007) on the formation of nation-states.

[22] For instance, on North Africa, see the seminal works that focus on postindependence politics by Entelis (1980); Moore (1970); Waterbury (1970); and Zartman (1964). L. Anderson (1986) theorizes the impact of colonial rule on post-independent Tunisia and Libya. On postcolonial politics in Southeast Asia, see Slater (2010); for Africa, see MacLean (2010).

themselves, placing their fate and not the fate of the colonies at the center of the analysis.[23] An investigation of the causes of nationalist mobilization has implications for understanding the transition to independence, but explaining empire's end is not the objective here. This analysis examines why people came to mobilize for national liberation, not why colonialism collapsed, a question others have carefully and convincingly considered.

Whereas studies of the colonial period typically emphasize independence as the outcome of interest, there is a considerable body of work with wide geographic and temporal scope that is directly concerned with the development of nationalism. This study draws on insights from the nationalism literature, but it is important to highlight the distinction between taking nationalist *mobilization*, rather than nationalism, as the outcome of interest. It is more common for scholarly work to focus on nationalism, understood primarily as ideology or identity, than nationalist mobilization, which is explicitly concerned with human action. My objective is to investigate when and why people come to take action in the name of the nation, not when they start identifying with a nation or how nationalist ideologies are constructed.

This is not unfamiliar terrain; Beissinger (2002) likewise focuses on mobilization in his study of the breakup of the Soviet Union.[24] He points out that most studies see nationalist behavior "as merely an externalization of nationalist ways of thinking brought into being well before the onset of nationalist action" (Beissinger 2002, 9). These studies imply that the origins of national identity deserve the bulk of scholarly attention because identity explains action or, if it does not fully explain it, at least predisposes people to take certain actions.[25] It is noteworthy that this view does not imply that studying action is unimportant. Rather, because

[23] A number of important works do focus on nationalism in the colonial context, particularly those that examine the case of India. See Chatterjee (1993a; 1993b); Goswami (2004). See also Duara (1997), on China.

[24] See also Hechter (2000), who defines nationalism as collective action. See Beissinger (2002, 21–27) on the importance of systematically studying events. For a discussion of events as a theoretical category, see Sewell (1996).

[25] For this view, see the classic work by Hroch (1985); as well as the discussion of Hroch in Beissinger (2002). For more recent examples that privilege an