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978-1-107-10229-3 - Memories of Post-imperial Nations: The Aftermath of Decolonization, 1945–2013

Edited by Dietmar Rothermund

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Memories of Post-imperial Nations

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Preface

The process of decolonization after the Second World War was perhaps the most important event of the twentieth century. Empires that had been built over many centuries were liquidated in a few decades. The fatal sequence war–depression–war had contributed to this historical dénouement. In 2006, I had published *The Routledge Companion to Decolonization* in which I had outlined this process. In 2008, I was asked to present a keynote address at a conference on empires organized by the German Historical Institute, London. I chose as my theme, ‘The Self-consciousness of Post-imperial Nations’. In this address I tried singlehandedly to deal with the reactions of six nations (Great Britain, The Netherlands, Belgium, France, Portugal and Japan) to the loss of their colonies. I had omitted Italy and realized later on that this was a mistake. I then felt the need of involving representatives of the respective nations in a dialogue on this subject. In July 2012, I met Antonio Costa Pinto in Lisbon and discussed this project with him and I was glad that he agreed to participate in it. In the course of the subsequent months I was able to contact colleagues in the other relevant countries. This time I did not miss out Italy and found an enthusiastic supporter of this venture in Nicola Labanca. My search for other contributors took some time, as many colleagues whom I approached were busy with their own projects. But finally I was able to get a good team together which included John Darwin representing Great Britain, Gert Oostindie, The Netherlands, Pedro Monaville, Belgium, Eric Savarese, France, Takashi Fujitani, Japan (in addition to those mentioned earlier). With all contributors I corresponded frequently.

In the course of this correspondence I got the idea that I should invite all these colleagues to a conference at Heidelberg in order to discuss the first drafts of their contributions and to coordinate our approach to the subject. This conference was then convened in May 2013 at the Internationales Wissenschafts forum, Heidelberg with the financial support of the Robert Bosch Foundation, Stuttgart. My successor in the Chair of South Asian History, Heidelberg University, Gita Dharampal-Frick, kindly helped with organizing the conference. Professor Hans Harder, Executive Director of the South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University and Martin Gieselmann, Executive Secretary, also supported this conference. The Heidelberg Cluster of Excellence ‘Asia and

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Europe' (Directors Professor Axel Michaels and Professor Barbara Mittler) helped with financing the conference.

Our meeting at Heidelberg was very fruitful. Papers were circulated in advance. For each paper a discussant was appointed. The comments of the discussants could not be printed in this volume. Here I only wish to thank them by mentioning their names: Professor Astrid Erll, University of Frankfurt, Professor Gita Dharampal-Frick, Heidelberg, Jan Jansen, University of Konstanz, Radu Carciumaru, M. A., Heidelberg, Caroline Lüderssen, Heidelberg, Professor Wolfgang Seifert, Heidelberg. I myself commented on Gert Oostindie's paper. Two general commentators were asked to sum up the proceedings of the conference at the end: Professor Aleida Assmann, University of Konstanz and Professor Partha S. Ghosh, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. In the present volume only two comments by Professors Assmann and Ghosh have been included. There will be a parallel publication in German (*Erinnerungskulturen postimperialen Nationen*, Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2015) which will also include the contributions by the other commentators mentioned above.

As the subtitle of this book indicates, it deals with the aftermath of decolonization after the Second World War. This excludes a consideration of the Spanish empire which was once of an enormous dimension but then dwindled into insignificance in the nineteenth century. It also excludes the German colonial empire which was lost at the end of the First World War. There was a great deal of colonial nostalgia in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s. But the Second World War wiped out all those memories. It is only in recent years that young German historians have worked on German colonial history. But these academic exercises have no connection with collective memory. Therefore it seemed to be justified to limit this comparative study to the seven nations represented in this volume.

This publication may not only interest readers belonging to the post-imperial nations but also find a critical response among the nations that had been subjected to colonial rule. It may be a good idea to have another round of discussion in which representatives of post-colonial nations could participate.

Dietmar Rothermund