



DECEPTIVE ENDS OF EMPIRE?

BRITISH POLICY-MAKERS AND THE ASSESSMENT OF THE FRENCH
APPROACH TO DECOLONISATION IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA (1956-1965)

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In December 1960, as what became known as the Year of Africa came to a close and only a few days before the United Nations General Assembly voted Resolutions 1514 and 1515 (XV) on the end of colonialism and on economic sovereignty, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, James Penfield, talked about 'the African revolution': 'Like our own, like that of France, like the industrial revolution', he said, 'the African revolution has aspects which shock and a pace which often confuses. Old governmental and societal structures are replaced by unfamiliar forms. In each instance, there is a release of energy producing long-term advantages for all affected. [...] Africa today is undergoing all of these revolutions at once, selecting from each adaptable features'¹. In Whitehall, where the British Embassy in Washington sent a copy of the speech, British officials were keenly aware of the challenges which the old imperial world views and structures were facing. The British had withdrawn from Ghana, which had just become the first African Republic in the Commonwealth, and from Nigeria. Progress towards full independence was apace in Tanganyika, Sierra Leone and Uganda, but British officials also felt that they were being overtaken by far more rapid transfers of powers in French-speaking Africa. Between September 1958 and November 1960, direct formal French rule in sub-Saharan Africa ended, while Belgium left the vast Congo in June 1960 and planned withdrawal from Rwanda and Burundi. As the nature, form

¹ The National Archives (TNA), FO 371/154713, Address by James Penfield, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Annual Conference of the American Academy of Economics and Political Sciences, Brookings Institution, 10 December 1960.

and timing of independence remained a matter of acute debate in British Eastern and Central Africa, evolutions in French-speaking Africa prompted regular assessment exercises, almost soul-searching reflections in Whitehall about the late colonial politics of the British state, the transitions towards the post-colonial state and the nature of the Commonwealth experiment. Most central to British debates were the policies pursued by France: how should they be interpreted? What policy recommendations could be drawn from the French experience? What influence, if any, did they have on Britain's approach to the end of empire? Out of all the colonial powers in Africa, France had always attracted the keenest interest in British official circles in charge of African, European and global policy. France was Britain's most necessary yet most awkward Western partner on the continent, with the greatest capacity—and possibly willingness—to upset British interests. As bloody wars in sub-Saharan Africa—against the Union des Populations du Cameroun [DELTOMBE ET AL.]—were obscured in the official rhetoric, and after the end of the Algerian war in 1962, France also played up the history of a smooth transition to independence in sub-Saharan Africa, free of the Congolese civil war, the Rhodesian conundrum or the rise of armed struggle in the unrelenting South African and Portuguese empires.

Between the Suez Crisis in 1956 and the creation of the Commonwealth Secretariat in 1965, which opened a new phase in post-colonial relations, British officials analysed the spirit and letter of the French approach to decolonisation: political and constitutional developments, particularly the French Community, born in 1958 with the Fifth Republic; economic relations, including the crucial developments in trade and development assistance through the European Economic Community (EEC); the complex system of defence agreements; and the extent to which linguistic and cultural legacies continued to inform international relations after the end of empire. The bulk of correspondence amounts to far more than a formal comparative exercise, as British officials assessed if there had been any form of 'revolution' in French-speaking Africa. From Martin Thomas's study of colonial intelligence to Catherine Schenk's analysis of economic integration, scholars have demonstrated the importance of giving European connections a central place in the study of the end of empire. Here, British interpretations and policy recommendations shed essential light on the influence of both international relations and cultural identities on the end of empire in Africa. Assessing the impact of the end of the French formal empire in sub-Saharan

Africa on Whitehall goes beyond comparative work to address three sets of questions: how strong was Britain's belief in the Commonwealth experiment? To what extent did British officials choose to defer to the French when decolonisation brought them into conflict? What constraints did French decolonisation place on the construction of British post-colonial international policy? That the end of the French empire was far more elusive than the Year of Africa suggests has been well established by a generation of political scientists and historians of French-speaking Africa². What this meant for British policy-making, however, has received comparatively little attention but is central, as debates in Whitehall demonstrate, to understand the redefinition of Britain's African policies in the transitional politics of decolonisation.

From the Loi-Cadre to Algeria's independence: testing Britain's 'evolutionary policy' against the formal end of the French empire

In 1956, British officials had the distinct sentiment that out of the European colonial empires, Britain presented the most enlightened and successful policy towards growing nationalism in Africa. Sudan became independent in January; British Togoland voted to gain independence as part of the Gold Coast, which celebrated independence as Ghana in March 1957; and Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah saw no incompatibility between outspoken anti-colonialism and Commonwealth membership, becoming the first black African Head of Government to attend Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meetings. The future of most African territories remained very uncertain: for reasons of size and economic viability in West and Southern Africa; because of the presence of white settlers in East and Central Africa; and more broadly, because of the constraining influence of South African imperialism. But compared to the French empire, the second largest on the continent, Whitehall thought its policies rated favourably in the international spotlight. The Loi-Cadre of 1956, which reformed the French Union, was primarily intended to bind the colonies closer to metropolitan France [CHAFER]. Any form of immediate independence for French Togoland was rejected as

² France's relations with its ex-empire and the transition from colonial to post-colonial state have been analysed, from different perspectives, by Jean-François Bayart, Tony Chafer, Achille Mbembe, Jean-François Médard, Marc Michel, Dieudonné Oyono.

France managed to block calls for the UN to hold a plebiscite on self-determination in the French Trust Territory [ANYANGWE: 37]. And after 1954, the struggle for Algerian independence, the *guerre d'Algérie*, held international attention far more than the armed repression of the Mau Mau, who lacked the nationalist credentials of the Algerian fighters and, officially, only mounted an insurgency, not a fully-fledged war of liberation³. The comparatively easier position of Britain was not lost on the French themselves: the results of the UN plebiscite in Togoland, followed by Britain's withdrawal from Suez under American pressure, were seen to be evidence of British treachery, drawing vivid memories of Franco-British rivalry all the way back to Fashoda. As the Foreign Office discovered, both events in 1956 had left marked imprints on the man who became the first President of the French Fifth Republic in September 1958, General Charles de Gaulle [TORRENT, 2013].

British and French policy-makers involved in colonial affairs had met at regular intervals after the Second World War: in the margins of the United Nations, in the Commission for Technical Cooperation in Africa South of the Sahara (CCTA) and in a number of ad-hoc meetings in London or Paris. By 1959, British officials still talked using these discussions to 'coordinate colonial technical policies in Africa'⁴, on which they also liaised, albeit to a lesser extent, with the Belgians and the Portuguese. The collapse of the Fourth Republic in France, however, brought about seemingly fundamental changes in France's relations with its African territories. The French Community, which all French colonies, save Guinea, voted to join in September 1958, devolved local affairs to Community members, keeping key financial, military and diplomatic affairs in French hands, while de Gaulle presided over France and the Community. Community membership, therefore, fell far short of independence. Yet Article 88 of the Constitution

³ New work on the British war against the Mau Mau [ELKINS; ANDERSON] has led to a fundamental revision to the history of independence in Kenya. But the fact that the Hola Camp affair in March 1959 was received as a real shock in Britain, despite regular reporting on the 'rehabilitation' camps [CARRUTHERS : 175; HOWE : 205; OGOT : 500], shows the extent to which it was perceived as an exceptional horror, rather than a more routine part of the brutality of the end of empire.

⁴ TNA, FO 371/137960, Record of meeting between H. Macmillan and M. Debré, London, 14 April 1959.

included provisions for territories to achieve independence and maintain close, comprehensive agreements with France, a process begun by the Mali Federation⁵ and Madagascar in late 1959. Within two years of the inauguration of the Fifth Republic, all the members of the French Community south of the Sahara, as well as the trust territories of Cameroon and Togo, had become independent. As in the Belgian Congo in 1960, the speed with which France negotiated African independence was rather unexpected and suddenly placed Britain in the last group of colonial powers, alongside Portugal and South Africa. Alan James's study of independence, civil war and UN intervention in the Congo in 1960-1965 demonstrates remarkably the extent to which Belgian decolonisation disrupted regional dynamics on the border of Britain's remaining colonies, challenged the unity of the Conservative Party and asserted American domination in international forums as Cold War tensions escalated [JAMES; WILLIAMS]. Yet precisely because it was so disruptive, and so unique at the same time, the independence of the Congo could not be seen as a potential model for British policy-makers, while Belgian rule, ever since the time of King Leopold's private ownership of the Congo, had been the object of much criticism in Britain as the very embodiment of what a liberal European empire should not be. Unlike events in the Congo, however, the independence of French Africa had the potential to disrupt and redefine the British approach to decolonisation, advertising the picture of a smooth yet rapid transition to formal political independence.

British interest in the nature and consequences of the French experiment was immediate. By mid-October 1958, Colonial Secretary Alan Lennox-Boyd had finished a paper entitled 'The Lessons of the Referendum in French Africa', and consulted closely with officials in London, British governors in Africa and British diplomats in Paris, Washington and New York. Overall, Lennox-Boyd found little cause for alarm. British territories were either too advanced towards independence or too far from it to be truly affected; and most officials concluded that French acceptance of independence served Britain's wider interests in the Cold War, by securing the transfer of power to elites friendly to the West⁶. In the Colonial Office, the Foreign Office and

⁵ The Mali Federation then comprised present-day Senegal and Mali.

⁶ TNA, PREM 11/3340, 'The Lessons of the Referendum in French Africa', Alan Lennox-Boyd, 16 October 1958. See also TORRENT, 2013.

the Commonwealth Relations Office, research into the policy implications of the French Referendum seemed to reinforce, rather than unsettle, the soundness of British strategies in Africa.

The French Community, like the series of costly bilateral agreements which accompanied constitutional independence, was, in British eyes, short of *full* independence. Guinea, where France temporarily cut off aid in retaliation against the country's negative vote on the Community, seemed a case in point. While in his 1958 report, Lennox-Boyd essentially saw Guinea as the exception to a rather successful transformation, he also considered this same transformation to be the result of the traditional French approach to empire—in other terms, methods, if not substance, remained the same. In Colonial Office discourse and strategy, long-term pace mattered far more than short-term speed. One of the effects of the French Referendum was therefore to reinforce the official rhetoric of planned independence, the teleological view of the Commonwealth as the logical transformation of the empire, as past British credentials were played up in the face of present adverse circumstances. Lennox-Boyd argued that the British 'tradition, by contrast [to the French], has always been to work forward from one step to the next along lines which, in a general way, have already been mapped out in advance'⁷. A year later, the brief given to Prime Minister Macmillan for his meeting with President Sekou Touré of Guinea—the first Head of State from Francophone sub-Saharan Africa to visit London—asserted:

In our policy towards dependent territories we are guided by one objective—to help the peoples of these territories to advance towards self-government or independence and to become nations which can stand on their own feet in prosperity and freedom. Our record in this stands second to none. Our policy is neither theoretical nor haphazard: it is systematic and deliberate and is rooted in the experience of our own history and in the belief that people should govern themselves. In the last 15 years there has been a great move forward to independence, above all in Asia and Africa—perhaps one of the largest and most rapid political changes in history. We claim to have taken the lead in this great movement⁸.

⁷ 'The Lessons of the Referendum in French Africa'.

⁸ TNA, PREM 11/2584, Brief 4, Visit of the President of Guinea, African Independence and British Colonial Policy, November 1959.

Events had clearly shown—and continued to show—that this was largely myth-making, and that the British ‘pro-active’ approach to African nationalist mobilisation was largely the result of crises in the colonies and comprised a vast array of reactive, pragmatic reorientations⁹. Yet British confidence was also buoyed by the reactions of the African governments in the colonies, who believed that both the French Community and the bilateral arrangements that followed its collapse impinged on African sovereignty. Reports from the Colonial Office and from British diplomats in the new states of Francophone Africa at the turn of the 1960s repeatedly emphasised that British-style independence did not contain ‘an element of sham’ as French-style decolonisation did. As one Colonial Office report implied in 1959, the French Community was but a half-way measure between empire, which admittedly remained a reality in most of British Africa, and independence, which only ex-British territories and radical Guinea had achieved by then.¹⁰ In the summer of 1960, the British Ambassador to Guinea proudly reported to London that Britain’s ‘reputation in West Africa [stood] high in contrast’ to that of the French, and that he was regularly told: ‘at least when we give independence, we observe it’¹¹. From Dakar in the same month, the British Consul reported that ‘although some of our actions in Africa are condemned to varying extents’ by African governments, France and South Africa ‘were very widely linked as the two powers hostile to African interests. [...] The United Kingdom [was] not in this category’¹². In 1958, Lennox-Boyd had believed that at best, the French Community ‘might make it easier for opinion in our own non-viable territories (e.g. The Gambia) to accept as a final status something less than complete independence’¹³. The complete collapse of the French Community in 1959-1960, as one territory after another sought separate political independence

⁹ See for instance the work of S.R. Ashton and Philip Murphy on the debates in Whitehall and in the Conservative governments about the constraints which the British faced in the ‘management’ of nationalist forces in Africa.

¹⁰ TNA, CO 936/565, ‘The role of Great Britain and France in the evolution of Africa’, brief prepared for the Anglo-French Conference of 1959 in Bordeaux.

¹¹ TNA, FO 371/146492, British Embassy (Conakry) to Foreign Office, 28 July 1960.

¹² TNA, FO371/46492, British Consulate General (Dakar) to Foreign Office, 13 June 1960.

¹³ ‘The Lessons of the Referendum in French Africa’.

and sovereignty, showed that the Community could not even be a model for the smaller British territories.

The real turning point for British officials concerned with African decolonisation, therefore, was the end of the Algerian War, far more than events in French sub-Saharan Africa itself. In July 1960, the British Ambassador to Paris argued that the settler question made French Algeria far closer to the problems Britain faced in the Central African Federation, and rejected comparisons between French Algeria and apartheid South Africa as too facile. Given Britain's commitment to protect 'the position and prospects of the local European minority' and its support of multiracialism 'as a legitimate and feasible policy', Sir Gladwyn Jebb argued, 'we can hardly blame the French for not capitulating to the FLN'¹⁴. Briefed by Whitehall, and himself convinced of the importance of this, Macmillan reminded African heads of state that Britain considered it its 'objective and [its] duty [...] to bring about self-government in security and freedom for all the people'¹⁵. In effect, British officials duly avoided discussion of French territories with African politicians and diplomats. The British Consul in Dakar in July 1960 rejected—rather regretfully—the possibility of issuing the same criticism on French policy in Algeria as against apartheid South Africa in the wake of the Sharpeville massacre of March 1960. He did, however, like most of his British counterparts in the wider region¹⁶, advise London to at least 'refrain in future from any endorsement of General de Gaulle's policy' and 'adopt a more neutral position', suggesting that Britain take refuge behind the principle that Algeria is 'wholly or mainly the internal concern of a member state' of the United Nations and thereby refuse to discuss matters, as on South Africa¹⁷. The British Ambassador in Paris equally acknowledged Britain's dilemma in managing relations with France and the Afro-Asian bloc—'The real difficulty, of course, is that we seem to be defending French

¹⁴ TNA, FO 371/146492, British Embassy (Paris) to Foreign Office, 27/07/1960. See also the objectives outlined in TNA, CAB/129/98, 'Africa: The Next Ten Years', Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 2 July 1959.

¹⁵ TNA, PREM 11/2584, Record of Meeting at 10 Downing Street on 10 November 1959, 17 November 1959; Brief 4, Visit of the President of Guinea.

¹⁶ TNA, FO 371/46492, Foreign Office, E.B. Boothby (FO) to J.H.A. Watson (Dakar), 31 August 1960.

¹⁷ TNA, FO 371/46492, J.H.A. Watson (Dakar) to FO, 13 June 1960.

policies if we do not go to the other extreme and fully endorse African opposition to them'. His recommendation, again, tied in with what British diplomats in Africa advocated: act pragmatically and 'examine the advantages and disadvantages of the possible courses of action in each case'¹⁸.

Writing from London, French Ambassador Geoffroy de Courcel suggested that the Evian Agreements of 1962 had deprived British officials and politicians of the 'extraordinary good conscience'¹⁹ they had so keenly felt in matters of decolonisation. The Imperial and Foreign News section of *The Times* was replaced by Overseas News in early 1961²⁰ but this failed to reflect the list of pending questions which continued to rack British Africa and which British officials were highly aware of—pinpointing one of the temporal disjunctions between the experience of decolonisation in Britain itself and the actual end of empire in Africa²¹. In January 1963, there was undoubtedly a tinge of satisfaction in de Courcel's conclusion that retrospectively, Macmillan's 'Wind of Change' seemed 'little sensational'²² compared to de Gaulle's speeches on the French Community in Brazzaville in 1958, on independence in Saint Louis in 1959 and on Algerian self-determination in September 1959. Macmillan's African tour was undoubtedly more complex than early accounts suggested but de Courcel's interpretation failed to take into account one important element: overtaken in speed, British officials did not automatically conclude that the end of the French empire in Africa had delivered a better settlement than the on-going

¹⁸ TNA, FO 371/146492, British Embassy (Paris) to FO, 27 July 1960.

¹⁹ Ministère des Affaires Etrangères et Européennes (MAEE), Nantes, Londres (Ambassade), 378PO/1/1977, G. de Courcel to Quai d'Orsay (direction Afrique Levant), 24 janvier 1963 (my translation).

²⁰ MAEE, Nantes, Londres (Ambassade), 378PO/1/1977, G. de Courcel to Quai d'Orsay (direction d'Europe), 26 février 1962 ; G. de Courcel to Quai d'Orsay (direction Afrique Levant), 24 janvier 1963.

²¹ As scholars like Andrew Thompson or Stuart Ward have demonstrated, British society needs to be brought more centrally into the debates on the end of empire. This includes the need to investigate further what role the British people have played in the end of the empire and what influence decolonisation has had on the British nation.

²² MAEE, Nantes, Londres (Ambassade), 378PO/1/1977, G. de Courcel to Quai d'Orsay (direction Afrique Levant), 24 janvier 1963.

British experience. They did, however, show concern over the impact of Franco-African and Euro-African politics on their own African and global interests at the end of empire. The French approach may not have been a model for Britain, but it did place key constraints on the sort of policy Britain could pursue in the late colonial empire and in the early stages of post-colonial relations in Africa.

From Venice to Yaoundé: the impact of France's Euraffrican politics on Britain's global interests

During the Macmillan-Debré talks of April 1959, Colonial Secretary Alan Lennox-Boyd ventured that '[t]he association of parts of Africa with the Common Market might cause serious divisions in that continent'. Although he acknowledged that French and British 'interests were identical in the social, political and military spheres' and that '[t]he only real difficulty' might have been 'economic'²³, it was undoubtedly a very sizeable one. Just over a year later, the British Consul in Dakar warned London of the dangers of using Africans 'as makeweights in European quarrels': British policy in Africa, he argued, 'must be based, and be visibly seen to be based, on African considerations'²⁴. The combined pressures of the Cold War and European construction at the time of decolonisation, however, meant that it was simply impossible for Whitehall, or British politicians, to dissociate African policy from Britain's global economic and military interests. From early colonisation to the Partition of the continent and the 'internationalisation of colonialism' [KENT] in the post-war world, British policy in Africa had always been devised within the broader framework of pan-imperial, European and international dynamics. But after the Khrushchev doctrine of 1955 and the Venice conference of 1956, when France made preferential trade and aid to the colonial territories a *sine qua non* condition of European construction, British and French policy in Africa became both more politically interdependent and more economically divided.

²³ TNA, FO 371/137960, Record of meeting between H. Macmillan and M. Debré, London, 14 April 1959.

²⁴ TNA, FO 371/46492, British Consulate General (Dakar) to FO, 13 June 1960.

Distinctions in British and French methods for trade and development in Africa were nothing new. In the post-war years, dollar shortages increased the importance of Africa for both the British and the French governments but marked policy differences appeared. France was prepared to spend far more—as comparisons between the Commonwealth Development and Welfare Act of 1945 and the *Fonds d'Investissement et de Développement Economique et Social des Territoires d'Outre-Mer* (FIDES) of 1946, seven times larger, showed [WHITE : 222; COOPER]. It was also intent on tying the colonies closer to the metropole and exporting the French model, pursuing previous policies of assimilation and integration. Divisions came to a head during the negotiations for joint European assistance to colonial territories. As Schenk demonstrates, the 1956 discussions showed major differences between British and French conceptions and practices of empire, independence and international relations. Independence was on the cards for a number of territories, including Ghana and Malaya, and the Commonwealth itself involved members who had reached very diverse stages of development. Britain was therefore keen to avoid discriminating against independent members, or making distinctions within the Commonwealth [SCHENK]. This was particularly crucial at a time when the Commonwealth experiment did not have the reassuringly expanding character it later acquired: membership for Ghana caused much concern in South Africa, while the identity and number of future members remained extremely uncertain, as the series of committees on Commonwealth membership showed [MCINTYRE]. Association with the European Economic Community (EEC) would later help loosen France's hold over its ex-territories, but in the short term, France's objectives in tying its empire to Europe was undoubtedly to buttress its overall power and influence [DIMIER : 38]—in the EEC as the largest colonial state and in its own empire. No African representative participated in the discussions over the terms of association in the French Union, while Paris demanded that French officials accompany all European officials on EEC missions to Africa [DIMIER : 35-37].

Hegemonic Gallic plans featured prominently in Whitehall interpretations of French policy, and African Commonwealth governments still felt highly wary of EEC association in the early 1960s, which they conceived primarily as a neo-colonial endeavour [MAZRUI]. Ghana was most virulently against the principle of reverse trade preferences which association entailed, and British newspapers on the Left voiced similar concerns. British membership

of the EEC, argued *The Observer*, would be detrimental to Commonwealth developing members²⁵ and plans for what became the Yaoundé Convention of 1963 showed the extent to which trade remained directed by European nations, leaving economic decolonisation far behind any constitutional and political achievement. The diplomatic breakdown in relations between Nigeria and France, following the nuclear tests which Paris had carried out in the Sahara in 1960, added political hostility to existing economic concerns²⁶.

Ultimately, the evolution of European relations between 1956 and 1963 aggravated Franco-British divisions, culminating in General de Gaulle's veto against British membership in January 1963. In Africa, European dynamics entailed two major consequences in the crucial years when the French formal empire on the continent ended. First, European divisions in 1963 were reflected in the trade barriers between the African Commonwealth and the Yaoundé Convention signatories. Divisions arising from colonial traditions and monetary issues, including the dominating presence of the CFA franc and the slow retreat of sterling, were strengthened by the breakdown of Britain's European negotiations—even though what place the developing Commonwealth might have had, or wanted to have, remained uncertain by the time of the French veto. The formation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1963 under the influence of the moderate Monrovia Group, acknowledging relations between states rather than peoples and crystallising the ideal of the nation state by postulating the inviolability of the borders inherited from colonisation, further entrenched these dividing lines. Secondly, the years of increasing British interest in the EEC leading to the first application encouraged the British to adopt a more open policy towards the French in Africa, which had a clear impact on the modalities of decolonisation. In 1962, the British Ambassador to Paris had emphasised the importance of considering Britain's status as 'aspiring

²⁵ MAEE, Nantes, Londres (Ambassade), 378PO/1/1977, G. de Courcel to Quai d'Orsay (direction économique), 28 août 1962.

²⁶ Relations were broken by Nigeria in January 1961, and only resumed, after much lobbying from the African States of the region, in 1966, shortly before the Nigerian Civil War broke out.

Europeans' in the formulation of British policy likely to affect French interests in Africa²⁷.

This does not mean that Britain's policy in Africa was entirely conditioned by its application to the EEC after 1961. Relations with Guinea is a case in point. When he met Sekou Touré in London in 1959, Macmillan politely declined to comment on the Guinean President's claim that '[t]here had been a marriage between African and British interests [but that i]n their colonies the French did not look ahead'²⁸. Britain initially delayed recognising the new regime in Guinea, waited on the French to decide on diplomatic representation in Conakry before sending their own mission there [TORRENT, 2013] and made it clear that '[t]he closer the relations between France and Guinea the better pleased we shall be'²⁹. In July 1960, the British Ambassador in Conakry, although no close friend of the French, asserted that Britain 'may be able to afford open Western divisions elsewhere in Africa, but not here in Guinea'³⁰. Support for French presence therefore clearly predated any British plans for EEC membership. But overall, Britain's application to the EEC, if it did not initiate the weight of the French factor in the formulation of policy, certainly reinforced its influence, as British decisions in the Southern Cameroons demonstrate.

In the year between the independence of French Cameroun (1 January 1960) and the plebiscites in the British territories (February 1961), the Foreign Office was already focused on achieving an acceptable balance in relations with newly independent African countries and with France³¹. In the Southern Cameroons, Britain favoured unification with Nigeria but realised that the Republic of Cameroun was a strong French ally and that British policy in Cameroon would clearly have repercussions on Franco-British relations. One of the major issues for Britain was to determine whether reunification would consequently terminate imperial preference in the Southern Cameroons. In 1958, the territory was producing 85,000 tons of

²⁷ TNA, FO 371/161371, British Embassy (Paris) to FO, 23 May 1962.

²⁸ TNA, PREM 11/2584, Record of Meeting at 10 Downing Street on 10 November 1959, 17 November 1959.

²⁹ TNA, FO 371/137959, Brief on Anglo-French talks, 1959.

³⁰ TNA, FO 371/146492, British Embassy (Conakry) to FO, 28 July 1960.

³¹ TNA, FO 371/46492, E.B. Boothy (FO) to J.H.A. Watson (Dakar), 31 August 1960.

bananas—two thirds of their total exports—most of which were sent to the British market free of the £7.10.0 tax that affected foreign countries. The Colonial Office and Foreign Office were aware that for Nigeria, reunification should mean exclusion from imperial preference—Southern Cameroonians ‘should pay the full price of their choice’³². They also realised the deleterious political effects that prolonging imperial preference would have on British colonies and Commonwealth members—and the potential for tensions was particularly high in the West Indies Federation³³. If Cameroon was seen to be getting the best of both worlds, the relevance of the Commonwealth would be seriously damaged. On the other hand, the franc zone already faced a surplus production, EEC markets were saturated and French officials had expressed the wish that assistance to the Southern Cameroons should continue even if reunification was chosen³⁴. In the short term, British departments considered that there was little choice but to envisage continuing imperial preference—even before Britain’s application to the EEC in 1961 gave the French further bargaining power to secure British cooperation in Cameroon. Ending preference would have at least three main consequences for British policy and reputation in the territory, as well as for its interests in the wider region. First, it would place further strains on the fragile economy of the Southern Cameroons, and possibly lead to political discontent and popular unrest. Secondly, it would lay British officials open to accusations that they practised a form of blackmail against Southern Cameroonians to secure victory for the Nigerian option in the plebiscite. Finally, ending imperial preference abruptly would also, the Board of Trade emphasised, play against British business interests in the territory—essentially Cadbury and Fry, John Holt and Company (Liverpool) Limited, Pamol **Erreur ! Signet non défini.** Limited, The United Africa Company of Nigeria Limited and its subsidiary, Elders and Fyffes, and the Cameroons Development Corporation itself, first set up as part of the Colonial Development Corporation. [TORRENT, 2012 : 63]. Only in 1963, after de Gaulle’s veto and repeated advance notices to the Cameroonian government, was imperial preference ended, even though the Southern

³² TNA, CO 852/2034, E.C Burr to Mr. Vernon, 21 December 1960.

³³ TNA, CO 852/2034, W.A Morris to M. Trafford Smith, 3 October 1960.

³⁴ MAEE, Nantes, Londres (Ambassade), 378PO/1/1453, AL. 30.1, Cameroun, Situation d’ensemble, Télégramme du Quai d’Orsay, 15 décembre 1960.

Cameroon had been part of the Republic of Cameroon since October 1961, following a positive vote in the UN plebiscite.

As the cases of Guinea and Cameroon suggest, Britain's temporary status as a European aspirant reinforced French influence but only because it coincided with Britain's wider, and older, strategic and economic interests at a time of increasing Cold War tensions. As the British Ambassador in Dakar admitted:

in the fields where [France] has been most active no other Western power can be expected to take her place. It is a general Western interest, and also a specific United Kingdom interest, because we are in a broadly similar position, that as much French influence should survive in Africa as can rest on mutual consent—the only basis for any stable influence in politically independent countries³⁵.

British objectives, therefore, were not to replace the French in Africa, let alone drive them out of the continent, but to reconcile Franco-British relations in Africa with the wider imperatives of the Cold War containment of Communism in Africa, which, by the early 1960s, meant that European powers must build political goodwill among African leaders *and* ensure economic assistance to the African people in order to counter Soviet offers. Building good Franco-British relations on Africa was therefore one piece, albeit a very sizeable one, of Britain's overall Cold War international policies, in coordination with the United States³⁶. Britain had neither the political will nor the economic capacity to fight a French presence on the continent, and in effect welcomed it, provided it had the power to block, rather than the potential to fuel, Communist and anti-colonial activity.

African decolonisation, French independence and cultural diplomacy: the long life of empires

For British officials, African divisions at the end of empire ran much deeper than the financial and trade barriers which Britain's exclusion from the EEC, self-imposed at first and then forced, entailed. The business of decolonisation involved a large overhaul of administrative structures in the

³⁵ TNA, FO 371/46492, British Consulate General (Dakar) to FO, 13 June 1960.

³⁶ TNA, FO 371/137959, FO to British Embassy (Washington), 13 February 1959.

former colonial powers³⁷. As London and Paris proceeded to transform the ministerial channels that dealt with African affairs, and the former colonial territories more generally, their distinct choices took them further apart, making consultation institutionally difficult—quite apart from the question of the substance of such cooperation. Following the establishment of the French Community and the abolition of the *Ministère de la France d’Outre-Mer*, British officials noted that consultations with the French over Africa would increasingly involve the Foreign Office rather than the Colonial Office. The Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs since 1957, Sir Frederick Hoyer Millar, was warned that Colonial Office fears of deferring to the French would need to be borne in mind—one of the ‘Colonial Office sacred cows which must be revered’³⁸. These, however, remained internal British concerns. Hoyer Millar was prompt to reassure his colleagues around Whitehall that consultations with the French would ‘of course in our case [involve] the assistance of officials from the Colonial Office and perhaps the Commonwealth Relations Office’ and the Foreign Office would keep the meetings as informal as possible, with no automatic involvement of the Foreign Secretaries themselves, to avoid ‘arous[ing] the suspicions not only of some of the other Western Governments concerned with Africa but also of the African Governments themselves, Commonwealth as well as Colonial’³⁹. Far more difficult to negotiate were developments on the French side and, in particular, the creation of two bodies concerned with African affairs which had no equivalent in Whitehall. The creation of the French Community saw the parallel development of the Secretariat for African and Malagasy Affairs, headed by one of de Gaulle’s right-hand men, Jacques Foccart—‘the unspeakable’⁴⁰ Jacques Foccart, one British official would later say. France’s relations with its ex-territories in Africa were therefore primarily carried out at a personal, direct level, through Foccart’s Secretariat, which was also able to influence a large

³⁷ On the British side, these issues have been given much prominence by Anthony Kirk-Greene, and more recently, Sarah Stockwell. Current work into the history of the French Coopération also highlights similar issues [GOERG & RAISON-JOURDE].

³⁸ TNA, FO 371/137959, Note on Anglo-French Talks on Africa, A. D. M Ross to Sir F. Hoyer Millar, 24 February 1959.

³⁹ TNA, FO 371/137959, Sir F. Hoyer Millar, 25 February 1959.

⁴⁰ TNA, FCO 51/233, British Ambassador (Yaoundé) to E. E. Orchard, Research Department, FCO, May 1972.

number of diplomatic appointments in the continent. Secondly, the Ministry of Cooperation, created in June 1961⁴¹, undertook responsibility for the management of assistance to Africa, whilst the Quai d'Orsay remained in charge of political and other affairs but was itself bypassed on repeated occasions in the negotiations with the African countries, by Foccart's Secretariat. The dynamics behind Foccart's web of private, business and state relations and the emergence of 'Françafrique' remain the focus of vivid debate, with a number of files yet to be released [DOZON; KEESE; MICHEL; TURPIN]. But in terms of Franco-British relations, it did mean that direct Foreign Office-Quai d'Orsay consultation was partly out of sync with nodal points of decision-making on Africa. On the British side, the separation between the Foreign Office, the Colonial Office (until 1966) and the Commonwealth Relations Office (Commonwealth Office after 1966) until 1968 replicated the old colonial divisions: the Commonwealth Relations Office dealt with independent Commonwealth Africa and the Central African Federation and, after the end of the Federation, Southern Rhodesia; the rest of British Africa was the realm of the Colonial Office; the Foreign Office was primarily involved in relations with the new independent African states outside former British territories⁴². In practical, technical terms, finding the right interlocutor across the Channel to discuss African affairs remained a complex task, which did not facilitate cooperation between Britain and France or between the ex-colonial blocs.

The management of administrative decolonisation highlights a fundamental difference between the British and the French: Africa's importance for each of the two European nations, and the subsequent rank of the continent in each of their world views and foreign policies. One of the most striking characteristics of the French empire for Whitehall officials had been the

⁴¹ Only in 1966 was Cooperation transformed into a separate secretariat inside the Quai d'Orsay.

⁴² The Ministry of Overseas Development, created by Harold Wilson's Labour government in 1964, was a short-lived affair, with Barbara Castle being removed from the ministerial post in 1965 and the Secretary of State losing a reserved Cabinet place shortly afterwards [YOUNG]. And whilst it did give British development aid firmer structures, it remained very different from French initiatives on similar issues [CUMMING].

drive for assimilation⁴³. The Creole communities of the Caribbean, the ‘black Parisians’⁴⁴ who sat in the Parliament of the French Union and the integration of overseas departments and territories⁴⁵ (the DOM and TOM) into the State⁴⁶ even led British officials to underestimate the levels of racism in France. But more important, perhaps, for Whitehall, was the clear realisation that Africa meant for France far more than it did for Britain, particularly after the return to power of Charles de Gaulle in 1958. As de Gaulle himself would later tell one of his ministers: ‘Si la France n’a pas été une annexe du Foreign Office, c’est à l’Afrique qu’elle le doit. Je ne l’oublierai jamais.’ (VAÏSSE, 480) From the day Governor Felix Eboué had rallied Chad and French Equatorial Africa to de Gaulle’s government in June 1940, Africa had held a special place in the French world. African decolonisation and post-colonial Franco-African relations were therefore *also* played out against the history of French liberation and the policy requirements for the independence of France, and its international *grandeur*, fully constitutive of its national character. Africa was therefore one of the privileged scenes on which French influence was demonstrated and where opposition to ‘Anglo-Saxon’ expansion should be strengthened—two facets of the same policy of *French* independence. The British Ambassadors in Conakry and Dakar reported French suspicions against American influence and British expansion, including through the Commonwealth⁴⁷. The hopes of the British Ambassador in Paris in May 1962 that ‘now that the two

⁴³ TNA, CO 936/565, ‘The role of Great Britain and France in the evolution of Africa’, Conference on Co-operation between UK and France on colonies in West Africa, Bordeaux, 1959.

⁴⁴ TNA, FCO 65/978, British Embassy (Dakar) to FO, 20 June 1963.

⁴⁵ Something which the British rejected in 1962, see TNA, CO 1024/325, Colonial Office circular letter from Sir H. Poynton to governors, enclosed document: ‘An examination of the possibility of integration or close association with the UK as a constitutional objective’, 12 September 1962.

⁴⁶ TNA, FCO 65/978, Official note on ‘Differences between French and British attitudes’, October 1971.

⁴⁷ TNA, FO 371/146492, British Embassy (Conakry) to FO, 28 July 1960; FO 371/46492, British Consulate General (Dakar) to FO, 13 June 1960; see also FO 371/154739, Notes by Her Majesty’s Representatives in West and Equatorial Africa in Preparation for their Meeting in London on May 16-18, 1961, ‘The ex-French States of West and Central Africa’.

imperial powers have largely liquidated their empires in Africa there should be much less reason for a clash of interests in Africa⁴⁸ came to very little.

The end of the Algerian War actually diminished French interest in consultation, and regular talks were in effect broken off in the course of debates over the Congo civil war in 1962 [TORRENT, 2012 : 12]. Following de Gaulle's veto in 1963, Sir Pierson Dixon sent a rather pessimistic despatch to London on the future of Anglo-French talks. First, the Western alliance that had encouraged the coordination of anti-Communist policies in Africa in the mid- to late 1950s no longer held.⁴⁹ France signed a commercial agreement with the USSR in 1964, followed by an agreement on the use of French SECAM television in the USSR (instead of the PAL system) and, above all, an agreement on atomic energy in May 1965. Franco-Soviet trade remained low (totalling no more than 2% on each side) but the symbol was clearly there [REY]. By March 1966, France had pulled out of NATO's integrated military command. Secondly, French fears of the economic domination of the big Commonwealth African states in West Africa prevented relations from taking off across the former empires. In 1962 already, Sir Pierson Dixon had warned the Foreign Office that the Nigerian giant was the cause of much French concern, and that the 'French dream of 'Eurafrique' [had] no place for the English speaking Africans'⁵⁰. His verdict in 1963 was unforgiving:

France is exclusive and inward looking not only in Europe but in Africa too. She is not interested in 'British' Africa, and does not want anyone else to be interested in 'French' Africa. Conscious of the cracks in her 'system' and of the fact that her culture is in retreat in the face of 'Anglo-Saxon' encroachments, the present French Government shows no disposition to cooperate with us either in cultural or economic matters⁵¹.

Thirdly, Africa's place in France's foreign and cooperation policies was reassessed, most notably in the Jeanneney Report of 1964, and brought on a

⁴⁸ TNA, FO 371/161371, British Embassy (Paris) to FO, 23 May 1962.

⁴⁹ TNA, FCO 65/978, 'French policy in Black Africa', Sir Pierson Dixon (Paris) to FO, 6 May 1963.

⁵⁰ TNA, FO 371/161371, Sir Pierson Dixon (Paris) to FO, 23 May 1962.

⁵¹ TNA, FCO 65/978, 'French policy in Black Africa', *op. cit.*

more equal level with the rest of the developing world in French priorities— a point which Sir Pierson Dixon duly noted.⁵² But this did not mean that Africa became marginalised. Nor did it mean that French endeavours to project its influence in the world were scaled down. On the contrary, France enlarged the scope of its cultural diplomacy, with the number of experts sent as part of cultural action programmes increasing by 256% in Latin America and 514% in non-French-speaking Africa in 1964-1968 [VAISSE : 317]. This, argued Sir Pierson Dixon in his 1964 report on Franco-African Relations, showed that, despite all policy re-adjustments, French ‘superiority to other lesser cultures is an item of belief held by all classes of Frenchmen. Gaullist nationalism profits greatly from this feeling, and would not lightly forgo being the defender of the faith’ [*Ibid.*] As he had noted in 1962, ‘the extreme sensitivity of the French on cultural subjects’ stemmed from the fact that ‘[m]ore conscious of their language and their heritage than perhaps any other nation, the French see both, so recently dominant on the international scene, in retreat, the one before the English language and the other before strident nationalism’⁵³. France’s ‘sort of cultural iron curtain’ in ex-French States was therefore a factor to be reckoned with in Britain’s early relations with the new Francophone Africa [*Ibid.*] In 1968, Foreign and Commonwealth Office officials still commented on ‘the truly prodigious efforts deployed by the French to protect and extend their own language and culture’⁵⁴.

As Sir Pierson Dixon noted, part of the reason why France had repositioned French-speaking Africa into a wider international perspective was that ‘the ex-French Africans are neither willing nor competent to play the music which General de Gaulle once reserved for them in his vision of things’⁵⁵. As French policy towards the newly independent states in Francophone Africa showed [KEESE : 599], there was no single policy formula to be applied, no given faith in the friendship of the established African party leaders and, therefore, no automatic support to be given to them. Regime changes in Congo-Brazzaville or Dahomey in 1963-1964 showed the limits of French

⁵² TNA, FO 371/176517, ‘Franco-African Relations’, Sir Pierson Dixon (Paris) to FO, 12 August 1964.

⁵³ TNA, FO 371/161371, Sir Pierson Dixon to FO, 23 May 1962.

⁵⁴ TNA, FCO 65/978, Report from D. P. Reilly (Paris), 4 April 1968.

⁵⁵ TNA, FO 371/176517, ‘Franco-African Relations’.

control over Africa's internal politics after independence, and encouraged interest in the rest of the continent. Yet this did not necessarily entail that the divide between the ex-colonial empires would be easily bridged. As for the hope that 'the old concept of the *chasse gardée* must slowly pass away' [*Ibid.*], the long term was very much the order of the day, as anti-British feelings among French representatives in Africa itself died hard [TORRENT, 2012 : 40-44; 170-174]. Throughout the period, Britain took great care to demonstrate to France that the Commonwealth was not British imperialism by other means and that it was certainly not animated by an expansionist drive. British assurances that they did not seek 'to bring a Somalia/British Somaliland union into the Commonwealth'⁵⁶, after the French Government protested against Lennox-Boyd's statement on Somali talks in Hargeisa in 1959 for fear of French Somaliland (Djibouti) being drawn into a Greater Somalia, were no deceitful claim. British policy in the Southern Cameroons and the Gambia equally showed that there was no fundamental Commonwealth expansionist drive—albeit in territories which were of minor economic and strategic importance for the British. Yet British diplomats on the ground still felt that any sort of 'prestige victory'⁵⁷ against Britain and the English language in Africa was a key objective of France's decolonisation and post-colonial policies.

In mid-1963, several British diplomats reported back to London that Franco-African relations may not be as indefectible, or inward-looking, as previously thought. Sir Pierson Dixon, still under the shock of the French veto, argued that in culture and trade, 'openings in ex-French Africa will be provided by the Francophone Africans themselves as their desire to diversify their contacts grows' and suggested there was 'no reason why we should not take them up as our means allow'⁵⁸. From Dakar, the Ambassador underlined that while most Francophone Africans were 'mystified and frightened', 'frightened by the superior wealth, potential, industry and ability of countries like Nigeria and Ghana', they were 'at the same time curious and envious', 'genuinely curious about the English-speaking way of life and institutions, and they envy them their greater

⁵⁶ TNA, FO 371/137959, Note on Anglo-French Talks, 1959.

⁵⁷ TNA, FCO 65/978, British Embassy (Dakar) to FO, 20 June 1963.

⁵⁸ TNA, FCO 65/978, 'French policy in Black Africa'.

freedom⁵⁹. Yet the multilateral organisations that arose alongside or in the wake of the failing European empires in Africa in the early 1960s still largely reproduced colonial divisions. The Organisation for African and Malagasy Cooperation (OCAM), which replaced the initial African and Malagasy Union (UAM) in 1965, comprised essentially ex-French and ex-Belgian territories. The Commonwealth of Nations spanned all continents but remained exclusively composed of ex-British territories, with Britain remaining in practice, albeit not on paper, the one member to have bilateral relations with all others and to be the central focus of the organisation. It was also, as the Commonwealth Relations Office acknowledged in 1960, a web of 'personal relations, professional connexions, cooperative efforts and shared achievements', but one which operated primarily 'between the educated, moneyed and ruling classes and d[id] not necessarily extend to the masses'⁶⁰. In fact, British hopes that Francophone Africans were coming to a better understanding of Commonwealth identity and relations seemed to have been rather overly optimistic. As the end of empire made the task of nation-building a fundamental priority in the new states, and as the language of the ex-colonial powers became one of the key means through which national unity could be achieved, the long-term appropriation and transformation of the cultural and linguistic legacy of the European empires became a fundamental benchmark on which decolonisation, rather than independence, would be measured.

Conclusion

In their assessment of the French approach to decolonisation, British policymakers remained extremely cautious, weighing its impact on British interests in colonial, Commonwealth and foreign policy. In August 1960, the UK Representative to the United Nations suggested that British policy should be neither 'dictated purely by consideration for Anglo-French relations [nor] dictated exclusively by concern for our position in Africa'⁶¹. And the British Consul in Dakar agreed that all British relations should be

⁵⁹ TNA, FCO 65/978, British Embassy (Dakar) to FO, 20 June 1963.

⁶⁰ TNA, DO 193/36, 'The British Legacy: the "Intangible" Links of the Commonwealth Association', Commonwealth Relations Office Steering Committee Paper, 9 August 1960.

⁶¹ TNA, FO 371/146492, UK Mission to United Nations to FO, 12 August 1960.

based primarily on an ‘estimate of where our main interest lies’⁶². This, in reality, made French decolonisation a constant cause for concern among British policy-makers, and, on repeated occasions between 1956 and 1965, a liability for British interests in the region. Between 1956 and 1958 in sub-Saharan Africa, and until 1962 in Algeria, French policy was seen to fall short of the sort of evolutionary appearance the empire-into-Commonwealth rhetoric gave the British approach—despite crises like the Mau Mau and Nyasaland insurrections of 1959 or the failure to find a negotiated solution in Rhodesia. After 1960 in sub-Saharan Africa, and 1962 in Algeria, French policy remained a liability by overtaking Britain in the formal colonial withdrawal from Africa. The fact that formal independence came to French sub-Saharan Africa in a matter of months, compared to the long years that stretched between the Sudan in 1956 and Zimbabwe in 1980, is a striking difference in the history of the French and British empires.

Independence in Francophone Africa, however, as British policy-makers realised and emphasised at the time, fell distinctly short of decolonisation. Overall, for most British officials, the French approach to the end of empire was no ‘revolution’: they traced continuities at least as much as change in the substance and structure of post-independence Franco-African relations, and failed to see in the French approach a possible, or desirable, alternative to their own plans. However, Britain’s global interests made any overt criticism of the French approach a politically dangerous and diplomatically impossible route. This was particularly the case in 1958/1959, when French policy seemed to adopt a more progressive approach towards African nationalism, and in 1961/1962 when Britain’s application to the EEC imposed further accommodation with French policy in Africa. Over this key period, British concerns rested on two main objectives: the need to block Soviet attempts to penetrate Africa; and the need to prevent France’s European and African policies from damaging British national and colonial as well as Commonwealth economic interests—and British international reputation as a consequence. In many ways, it seemed extremely difficult to conciliate the two. France provided Africa with considerable financial assistance and any reduction in aid would give the Soviet bloc a golden

⁶² TNA, FO 371/46492, E.B. Boothby (FO) to J.H.A. Watson (Dakar), 31 August 1960.

opportunity to replace the West on the continent⁶³. A French presence in Africa was therefore a vital interest for Britain.

For British policy-makers, the formal end of the French empire in Africa was read as an exercise in French, as much as African, independence: 'the pursuit of [French] "independence"', argued the British Ambassador in Paris in early 1967, was 'the cardinal principle of [de Gaulle's] foreign policy'.⁶⁴ The study of British decision-making in relation to the end of the French empire in Africa demonstrates the importance of giving European relations and European construction a more central place in the analysis of African decolonisation. As Franco-British relations show, the complex dynamics of European solidarity and competition had at least three consequences for the end of empires. It affected the resolution of independence in contiguous territories, as in Cameroon. It transformed empires into distinct spheres of influence on the continent, at a time when the nation state crystallised and alternative projects were defeated. And it reinforced the economic life of empires after the end of formal political rule. This is not to say that African agency could only be exercised within the parameters of European relations, or was entirely dependent on old colonial hierarchies. But as African governments and peoples embarked on the construction of post-colonial continental relations, the French factor influenced both Britain's conception of its interest in Africa and the shape of multilateral relations. British policy-making in relation to the end of France's formal empire in Africa demonstrates that this awkward Franco-British partnership made the decolonisation of international relations after political independence an even more complex task than decades of contrasting colonial practices already did.

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⁶³ TNA, CAB/129/98, 'Africa: The Next Ten Years'.

⁶⁴ TNA, FO 371/176517, British Embassy (Paris) to FO, 'France: Annual Review for 1966', 13 January 1967.

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