REVISITING DECOLONIZATION IN GUINEA

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Elizabeth Schmidt. *Cold War and Decolonization in Guinea, 1946–1958.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007. Western African Studies series. xiv + 310 pp. Photographs. Maps. Notes. Bibliography. Index. $55.00. Cloth. $26.95. Paper.

Elizabeth Schmidt. *Mobilizing the Masses: Gender, Ethnicity, and Class in the Nationalist Movement in Guinea, 1939–1958.* Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2005. Social History of Africa series. xvii + 293 pp. Photographs. Maps. Notes. Bibliography. Index. $137.50. Cloth. $27.95. Paper.

Elizabeth Schmidt has written two excellent books that detail the political efflorescence, watershed moments, and ultimate success of the independence movement in Guinea, then a French colony, in 1958. The two books are major contributions to the history of decolonization in Africa. Based on a synthesis of archival and oral sources, they examine the ways that various sectors of the colonized Guinean society came together, mobilized resources, and articulated powerful anticolonial ideologies to attain independence.

Both books share intersecting themes that address the forces of polarization of the independence movement at home and in France: how local perceptions of colonialism and French politics during the period of global decolonization in the post–Second World War period charted the Guinean trajectory of independence. Indeed, the two books are complementary: taken together, they not only enunciate the history of the struggle for independence in Guinea, but also document the larger history of decolonization in French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa. The subject matter of both books also provides a comparative lens on decolonization in Africa as a whole. *Cold War and Decolonization in Guinea* chronicles the ways that the Guinean Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (RDA) seized differing and even antipodal populist forces of the cold war and turned itself into an agency of independence on the left. *Mobilizing the Masses* focuses on how institutions of gender, ethnicity, and class shaped the pathways of the Guinean independence movement. Unlike a considerable number of works on decolonization in Africa, especially those published in the immediate aftermath of these epochal events, Schmidt moves away from the staple historiography privileging the role of the educated elite and restores the voices of the masses—including those of women—to the history of decolonization. Both books are refreshing in the sense that Schmidt provides historiographical insights, not so much about what non-Guinean historians have written about Guinean independence, but more significantly about

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what Guineans, whose ideas were shaped by their lived experiences at the time of decolonization, have brought to the historiographical table.

Chapter 1 of *Mobilizing the Masses* deals with the consolidation of Guinean nationalism whose roots, embedded in the precolonial epoch, spread and advanced throughout the colonial period, thereby contributing to the political union of the RDA in 1946. The RDA set the stage for the decolonization of the Federations of French West Africa and Equatorial Guinea, as well as the Trust Territories of Togo and the Cameroon—then under the auspices of the United Nations. Added to this mainspring of Guinean anticolonialism were the abrasive economic and political effects of the Second War World War, which crystallized into the activism of ex-servicemen, whose political horizons had been broadened not only by the war itself, but also by the mounting economic problems exacerbated by the exigencies of wartime. Indeed, contradicting the Guinean responses to the Second World War, the French in the immediate postwar period sought to hold on to empire as both a symbolic superstructure and a foundation upon which the battered French image could be rebuilt. In many ways, chapter 1 of *Mobilizing the Masses* serves as a kind of introduction to the earlier book, *Cold War and Decolonization,* which examines the post-1945 period.

In chapter 1 of *Cold War and Decolonization in Guinea* Schmidt takes up the history of the French government's strategic responses, both at the metropolitan and colonial levels, to the simmering nationalism in Guinea and, by extension, other French enclaves in Africa and Asia. Spanning the decades of the mid-1940s and 1950s, African nationalism had crested from reformism to revolution, championed in Guinea by (among others) the African veterans of World War II. Schmidt shows how the French government's gamble to draw the empire back from the precipice of demise was worsened by the looming shadow of the cold war and the conflict between America and the Soviet Union. In sum, the French government's effort to rescue its image collided with the forces of French Communism and the Soviet Union, whose ideologically powerful anticolonialism vigorously undermined the foundations of the French empires in Africa and Southeast Asia.

The eventual parting of ways between the RDA and the Parti Communiste Français (PCF), examined in chapter 2 of *Cold War and Decolonization in Guinea,* led to the grassroots empowerment of the RDA; paradoxically this is exactly what the French government had hoped to avoid. Chapter 3 continues the examination of the failure of the RDA to entrench its interest in the French National Assembly, resulting in the alienation of its followers and promoting popular resistance to both imperial politics and the colonial electoral systems, which in the view of many had disempowered the emerging left. In chapters 5 and 6 Schmidt shows how populist forces—including organized labor, disaffected youth, student activists, and empowered rural peoples—alienated by the political ploy of *loi-cadre* of 1956 (establishing

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the constitutional parameters of French rule) put pressure on the RDA to prevent it from gravitating to the right in cooperation with the French postwar imperialist agenda. *Mobilizing the Masses* focuses especially on the ways that the labor movement and the peasantry shaped this trajectory of the RDA, including the significance of peasant resistance to forced labor and the role of women in both peasant and trade union activities. Chapter 5 in particular is devoted to women's role in the independence struggle. According to Schmidt, most of the women lacked formal education and labored in menial positions as marketwomen, peasants, cloth-dyers, and so on. Schmidt shows that for women, struggling to circumvent the normative constraints that marginalized them in Guinean society in general also meant wrestling with the forces of colonialism; as a result, the women's movement was eventually embraced by the RDA. Chapter 6 of *Mobilizing the Masses* further illustrates the paradoxical challenges that the RDA faced as it both benefited from the support of the myriad and competing constituencies of peasantry, labor, youth, and women and also had to grapple with the differing expectations and sometimes lofty goals envisioned by these grassroots constituencies

Overall, chapter 6 of *Cold War and Decolonization* and chapter 7 of *Mobilizing the Masses* deal with the actualization of independence. Schmidt shows that during the constitutional referendum of 1958 the political pendulum of the RDA remained anchored in the left-wing margins of the political spectrum. The RDA leadership was thus forced to reject French imperial programs that had been crafted, paradoxically, for the postcolonial era, and to embrace immediate independence.

Because of the enormous scope of both books, Schmidt inevitably overlooks some of the specificities of her topics. For example, she does not thoroughly contextualize the Guinean anticolonial movement in the independence struggles in the West African region as a whole. Although Schmidt examines other French enclaves, she says very little about events in neighboring British colonies. In particular, the Gold Coast (Ghana), where Nkrumah had packaged powerful left-wing anticolonial ideologies in order to attain independence, has much to recommend it for a comparative perspective on how the currents of the cold war shaped the Guinean independence movement. In addition (though this may be a quibble), the roots of the Guinean embrace of the left and the Communist ethos are not clearly delineated. For instance, how did ordinary peasants, tucked away in backwater regions, assimilate the revolutionary ideology of Communism? Also, the sources of the responses of peasants and women in terms of what they brought from precolonial activism to the anticolonial movement could have been demarcated more clearly.

The above observations are in no way meant to question the scholarly quality of both books, however. *Mobilizing the Masses* and *Cold War and Decolonization* are well-written, very readable, and undoubtedly a welcome addition to the growing history of decolonization. Both are the products of scru-

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pulous research and affirm Elizabeth Schmidt's conceptual integrity and compassionate dedication to standards of professional excellence. They demonstrate the rich layers of her extensive knowledge, and represent a fruitful synthesis of empirical research and theoretical analysis that elucidates the complex history of Guinean independence and decolonization in the aftermath of the Second World War.

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