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## Fight or Flight: Britain, France, and Their Roads from Empire by Martin Thomas

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**Thomas, Martin. *Fight or Flight: Britain, France, and Their Roads from Empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. xxi + 539 pages. Hardcover, \$39.95.**

A prolific historian of twentieth-century French imperialism and widely regarded as a leading expert on the interwar period, Martin Thomas has increasingly broadened his focus in recent years to explore comparisons between the British and French colonial states by way of their use of intelligence agencies, violence, and police services. In *Fight or Flight: Britain, France, and Their Roads from Empire*, Thomas turns his attention to the incredibly daunting task of offering a comparative analysis of British and French decolonization in Asia and Africa. Despite what the publisher's blurb for *Fight or Flight* suggests, a handful of others have published single-volume comparisons of decolonization. None of these books, however, has achieved anything that could accurately be described as going beyond the mere introductory-level survey in terms of detail and sophistication. Not only does *Fight or Flight* surpass its predecessors in this way, but it also approaches its subject from a fresh perspective by studying the differing levels of violence that marked both British and French decolonization. Believing that the "hardest problem to solve is why wars and violence erupted in some colonies in the throes of decolonization but not in others" (p. xv), Thomas argues that "this issue turned on the choices made by the imperial powers and their opponents about resisting the end of empire or negotiating it, about fight or flight" (p. 3).

Thomas's comparative case studies lead to some conclusions that will be of particular interest to historians of British decolonization. It has long been accepted that the end of France's colonial empire was an especially bloody affair that witnessed the two most violent wars of decolonization in Indochina and Algeria. Due to the fact that British decolonization produced nothing on the scale of a Dien Bien Phu, it was traditionally believed that Britain had disengaged from empire in a more benevolent manner. Yet, a spate of recent studies on British counter-insurgency efforts in Palestine, Malaya, Cyprus, and Kenya has severely qualified this view. Should the distinctions be completely done away with? Thomas suggests not, explaining that differences in the British and French political traditions did, indeed, make the former more likely to opt for a flight strategy. Ultimately, he explains, "If the traffic lights of British decolonization tended to oscillate between amber and green, their French equivalents sometimes stuck on red. Where British governmental statements were often placatory, understated and, it must be said, misleading, declarations of French governmental intent were usually framed in a more confrontational language of triumph and defeat" (p. 10).

Following an introduction, the book is divided into thirteen chapters, which for the purposes of this review may be organized into three parts. The first three chapters cover the interwar, wartime, and immediate postwar years that preceded what is commonly labeled "first wave decolonization" in Asia. Thomas's main purpose here has to do with periodization, locating the origins of differing British and French fight or flight trajectories in the years prior to the Second World War. After 1945, these differences became even more pronounced, whereas "Britain would adjust, albeit painfully, to America's new global dominance, successive French governments reacted in contrary fashion, equating retention of empire with resurgent international power" (p. 67).

The next nine chapters form the heart of *Fight or Flight*, presenting wonderfully detailed case studies based on the author's research in British and French archives, as well as his prodigious engagement with the most up-to-date secondary literature (the book's 370 pages of text are supported by almost exactly 100 pages of endnotes). The selections range from the

familiar (India, Indochina, Algeria, Suez, and the various British counterinsurgencies noted above) to the less familiar (Madagascar and an interesting juxtaposition of Algeria and Southern Rhodesia). In each case, Thomas displays a remarkable appreciation for complexity and nuance. More often than not, this disposes the author towards the more conservative school of thought when it comes to various historiographical disputes. For instance, he is wary of judging Britain's handling of the Malayan Emergency a "success" (p. 163), unwilling to label the Suez Crisis a "watershed" for either the British or the French (p. 168), and chastises the "neatness" of conventional explanations of the Cyprus Emergency (p. 271). If these are unexciting positions, even less so is Thomas's conclusion in the final chapter: "Often messy, always interlocked, these histories remind us that Britain and France travelled their difficult roads from empire together" (p. 370). But to focus on these individual points of contention is to overlook the merits of what amounts to a rare collection of in-depth narratives upon which future comparisons may build.

Although Thomas acknowledges in an endnote that "I do not wish to imply that the 'fight or flight' model can explain everything" (p. 470), it seems clear nonetheless that his model has utility beyond the British and French case studies presented here. In fact, one might say that the most famous examples of each occurred elsewhere (fight: Portuguese Africa; flight: Belgian Congo). Implicitly, Thomas seems aware of these possibilities. But one might have preferred he spend a bit more time grappling with the underlying assumption that decolonization is best understood in comparative perspective. *Fight or Flight* seems to take for granted that most will agree with this point. It is difficult not to sympathize with the desire for an approach that transcends traditional barriers, but one cannot help but notice the ever-increasing pressures of academic specialization and wonder if the trend is heading in the opposite direction. If for no other reason than his steadfast refusal to accept this outcome as inevitable, Thomas deserves the admiration of his peers.

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