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THE DISMANTLING OF THE EMPIRES

i. A new era

On the old order in Africa the second World War had a deeply unsettling impact. Over most of Asia western domination was now broken, or fatally compromised by its easy collapse in face of the Japanese. In 1942 the little attachment of the Burmese to the retreating British could not be blinked; desertions from the 1st Burma Division were numerous. Even in the Soviet Union old bitternesses might return to the surface. Germany was able to tamper with some of the Caucasian peoples; conservative Muslim dislike of Soviet rule, or modernity, feeding on memories of the resistance to the tsars, had gone on smouldering. Four of the seven nationalities of the northern Caucasus were deported *en bloc*. Britain was prudent enough to avoid the post-1918 folly of hanging on to the whole of an empire now beyond its strength. India, Burma, Ceylon were all abandoned before the end of 1947, and resources thus freed for other areas. That the delirium of dying empires was to be so convulsive and prolonged was the responsibility, more than of anyone else, of the French.

To combat the new mass awakening of the third world, the West could again, as after 1918, pin many hopes to new strides in military technology, improvements on what Dunsterville had called 'the various ingenuities of frightfulness that accompany modern war'.¹ In 1942 experts working at Harvard University invented napalm, to supersede the petrol used by old flame-throwers. Large quantities of it were also used in the incendiary raids on Japan, and in the Korean war 165-gallon fire-bombs were 'dropped with devastating effect on enemy troops'; in Vietnam too it was 'used with telling effect'. Helicopters were only in an experimental stage before 1945, but came on the scene in the Korean war. They were soon evolving into gunboats of the air and becoming an indispensable requisite of colonial administration. On the ground there were now tanks for

every purpose. It was chiefly with colonial disturbances in view that the Saracen armoured car, still in service today, was being developed in the early 1950s, with a speed of 45 mph and sterling cross-country performance.

In addition the War had hatched corps of paratroopers and others trained to special toughness and ruthlessness, who could be trusted to make good use of any new means of killing people. They were élite formations, romanticized by themselves and their advertisers, but often in practice very much like such forerunners as the death-squads of Hitler's SS. The empires would have to fight far harder to keep their hold than they had in the past to gain it, and would go to any and every length. Too often ingenious technology was accompanied by equally sophisticated methods of terror, including the scarcely concealed use of torture. Partly to distract public attention from this side of things, partly as a last chapter of the old naïve faith in the blessings of empire, repression sometimes alternated with benevolent policies, or promises, intended to disarm hostility by kindness, to 'win hearts and minds' as the British learned to say in their 'confrontation' in Borneo.

1945 saw a prompt patching up of differences among empire proprietors, a return to the readiness to collaborate against native mischief-makers shown intermittently in the past. British generals in Asia at the end of the War – by whom Mountbatten is said to have been overborne – took the lead; soon a network of regional pacts and pledges of mutual support was being spun, a kind of new Holy Alliance. It was directed against nationalism, but ostensibly against communism, because this gave it a better look, and with a good measure of realism because the most energetic and resourceful colonial leadership was communist. Callwell was aware before 1914 that the true guerrilla fighter was 'on an altogether higher plane than the savage or the normal irregular';² now there was the further asset of modern-minded political leadership. Where communism took root it was the best guarantee of a movement acquiring the virtues of organization by which in earlier days Europe triumphed over Afro-Asia. Recognition of social problems, and of the need of social programmes to give nationalism a broader base, was bringing into action the mostly peasant masses. At the other end of the scale was the increasing prominence of intelligentsias, drawn from student movements more and more radical in outlook.

Old colonial movements defended the past, the new ones were creating a future. Similarities of outlook could facilitate co-operation between movements in neighbouring countries, countering the

mutual aid of the imperialists, or help from countries which regained their independence to those still struggling. During the epoch of conquest outside help had been virtually unknown, each people waging its fight and going down by itself. Together these novel sources of strength could be a combination impossible for any technology to overcome. 'The Communists have displayed almost unbelievable staying power', a journalist writing on south-east Asia in 1969 admitted; communist movements there had shown 'tremendous capacity' for undergoing huge losses without breaking.³

In Indonesia, immediately on the Japanese surrender, Soekarno proclaimed a free republic. A British force arrived, to take custody of the Japanese but also to restore Dutch rule. In November 1945 there was hard fighting at the naval base of Surabaya between it and the patriots, and air bombardments and harsh repression followed.⁴ A protest was lodged by Nehru against the use of Indian troops in this and similar operations, last and least creditable of all the countless actions fought by the Indian army under British direction. Early in 1946 an American woman war-correspondent visited the nationalist-held area of Java, and found it a scene of confusion; she saw Soekarno, with insight, as an eloquent windbag.⁵ Poor rebel organization enabled the Dutch, now reinforced, to launch in July 1947 what they called a 'police action'. Blockaded and short of ammunition, the nationalists were penned into a part of southern Java, while elsewhere the Dutch, profiting by regional discords, set up puppet governments.

At the end of 1948 they broke off a truce and resumed the offensive, seizing Jogjakarta and most of the insurgent leadership. In face of their 100,000 soldiers the nationalists were reduced to guerrilla tactics, but in these they proved quite skilful. Further than this their leaders' compound of populist demagoguery and religious appeals could not carry them. But the puppet regimes crumbled, and international opinion was hardening against the Dutch. In 1949 they were obliged to negotiate, and the next year Indonesia became fully sovereign. Only West Irian, or western New Guinea, useless except as a face-saver, remained Dutch. In 1956 American missionaries, when a mission station was raided by Kapauku tribesmen, saw Dutch soldiers land from a squadron of planes and at once proceed to lob mortar shells into thickets where the marauders were hiding, before tracking them down one by one; nearly two hundred were killed.⁶

After 1945 'there were few periods when part of the British Army was not engaged in active operations somewhere.'⁷ Old habits and hankering kept Britain meddling in the Middle East. In Egypt 1954

brought Colonel Nasser to power, and in July 1956 the Suez Canal was nationalized. It has been alleged, not too improbably, that a plan for Nasser's murder was submitted by MI6.⁸ Instead the Tory government entered into a clumsy conspiracy with France and Israel. Israel invaded Egypt, providing its partners with an excuse to intervene under pretence of safeguarding the canal. There was a chorus of denunciation of this brigandage by the UNO, USA, and USSR, and in Britain itself. Inglorious failure and the unseating of the prime minister Eden made the rash adventure a milestone in Britain's imperial decline.

In 1962 Aden with its military base was tied into the Federation of South Arabia, a bundle of reliably medieval sheikhdoms, in order to suffocate urban opposition. Unexpectedly revolt broke out against the feudal rulers, and in the spring of 1964 bombing raids were made on the tribesmen, while 'food control' measures that winter meant burning of crops and driving thousands out of their villages in the hills – a *modus operandi* derived from north-west frontier policing, and by remoter ancestry from the conquest of Ireland. Resistance was firm enough, with some protest in Britain over what was learned of the repression, to make the government decide on closing the Aden base and surrendering power in 1967 to a republic of South Yemen. Oman, the protected sultanate at the other tip of southern Arabia, was the one British success hereabouts. Occasionally a glimpse of protracted repression there, again including destruction of food supplies, got into the British press, but a conspiracy of silence was kept up by the front benches. British officers went on being lent to the sultan, as a species of official mercenaries, and found Oman a useful training-ground for experiments in counter-insurgency. Sporadic fighting went on until 1975, with Iran and Pakistan and half a dozen other despotic regimes joining in against the rebels.⁹ The colonialist united front was by now much broader than the West alone.

Another territory where Britain was prepared to fight and go on fighting, on a much bigger scale, was Malaya, with its tin and rubber. Capitalist interests had brought in large minorities of Chinese and Indians, inevitably obnoxious to the Malay population. Jungle resistance by some Chinese to the Japanese occupation forces left behind a core of perhaps five thousand devoted communists, past masters in such fighting, and with able leaders in men like Chin Peng. When trouble broke out in 1948 and a state of emergency was declared, government and left wing each accused the other of being the aggressor; the government did at least jump at an opportunity to strike hard at the trade unions. Very little active support for the rising

was forthcoming except from sections of the Chinese community; militants never numbered more than eight or ten thousand, and their exploits could not go far beyond surprise descents on police-posts or plantations.

Sir Henry Gurney and his assistant General Briggs resorted, like so many other colonial governments, to a wholesale uprooting of people, in this case the Chinese squatter population, which was rounded up and removed to 'new villages'. Here, surrounded by barbed wire fences, they were under watch and ward of searchlights and machine-guns. Thereby the officially designated 'Communist Terrorists', or 'CTs', were cut off from a source of recruits and supplies; an extra gain was a pool of cheap labour available for employers. Gurney was ambushed and killed in October 1951, the insurgents' most successful year. General Templer then became High Commissioner, civil and military authority were more completely fused, and before he retired in 1954 the back of the rebellion had been broken.

Quite large forces had to be deployed. British troops included 'national service' men: imperial exigencies kept conscription going for several years after the World War. Besides a large force of Malay armed police, there were Gurkhas, Africans, and at one stage a band of Dyak head-hunters from Borneo, esteemed as trackers. Thousands of arrests were made, many were deported, some executed. Most of the CTs killed, a regimental history tells us, 'were caught in skilfully laid ambushes, which usually were based on Special Branch information.'¹⁰ In 1950, when helicopters were brought into play, it was announced that new bombing techniques were being worked out: bombers would be used as artillery, seeking their own targets instead of being only appendages to ground operations.

In 1953 a total of 4500 air strikes in the past five years was reported,¹¹ and in 1956 an Australian squadron of 'Hell-bombers' could boast of 40 sorties in four days and 480,000 pounds of explosives dropped.¹² Little by little resistance was worn down, but it was not without political consequences. In 1957 Malaya was granted independence, under conservative Malay rule, and in 1958 the 'Emergency' was declared at an end. Ten thousand rebels had been killed, nine thousand, most civilians, on the other side. Lessons learned by the army were codified at a Jungle Warfare School in Malaya, and British methods were widely admired and came to be regarded as 'a model of counter-insurgency': Americans and others bound for Vietnam received training at the school.

ii. Wars of liberation against France

1945 found France's Afro-Asian subjects rising up against it very much as its subject peoples in Europe did in 1813-14. Among the varied motives and passions which impelled the French to react so pugnaciously, those of the army stand out. Most of its officers belonged to a force which had suffered humiliating defeat in 1940 and inglorious inaction thereafter, at home or in Africa, and they were now in an ugly and cantankerous mood. Their ranks underwent very little of a purge at the end of the War; they far outnumbered the Free French contingent which gained a place in the officer corps. Both sorts agreed on keeping out men from the Resistance, which was largely communist. All this meant that the colonial wing of the army was more powerful than ever. In one sense the officer corps was growing more democratic, with fewer entrants coming from St Cyr and the École Polytechnique, more being promoted NCOs or rankers. But this was far from making it any more progressive; it may in some ways have had an opposite result.

To pull it together at the end of the World War, action was imperative, a washing of the spears as a Zulu might have called it. In May 1945 a stormy demonstration at Sétif was fired on, from the air as well as by ground troops, and some 15,000 Algerians may have been killed. During 1947-8 an unknown but very large number of rebels or suspects were killed in an abortive rising in Madagascar. Bleeding was still the imperial cure for all political distempers, just as it was once the universal nostrum of the medical faculty. An attempt to regain control of Syria by force in 1945 had fizzled out, partly because Britain disliked it as a further unsettlement of the Middle East. It was apparently decided in London that the French must clear out, and in return would be helped to reassert themselves in Indochina, where they could do no harm except to the Indochinese.¹³

With the World War the Vietnam nationalist movement crushed so remorselessly in 1930 raised its head, and there was again harsh repression after a revolt in the south in December 1940, with thousands killed and many other thousands arrested. In May 1941 a gathering of exiles in south China, initiated by Ho Chi Minh but including a variety of parties, set up the united front which came to be known as the Vietminh. The French rulers were soon losing face by their tame submission to the Japanese. In September 1945, with the Japanese collapse, a republic headed by Ho Chi Minh was proclaimed. British forces arriving to take charge of the surrendering

Japanese were under the command of General Gracey, an officer of aboriginal type whom the thought of treating with upstart natives, who might actually be communists, filled with horror. He re-armed the French, and went on to give them energetic backing. Many of his troops were Indian; the British lion was using its false teeth to the end. Soon the nationalists were driven out of Saigon, where their strength and unity were less than in the north.

With the provisional government at Hanoi in the north Paris negotiated, or prevaricated, until late in 1946, when the army felt strong enough for another move. On 23 November it issued a declaration of intent by bombarding the northern port of Haiphong from the sea; at least six thousand people seem to have been killed. All the bigger towns fell to the invaders; Hanoi in February 1947 after an obstinate defence chiefly by its workers. Throughout that year the French were striving to complete their reoccupation of the north, making use of armoured river vessels and dropping parachutists in surprise attacks. But the Vietminh remained unbroken. Under desperate stress the whole coalition was pushed further to the left, just as happened in the Spanish civil war. Communist party discipline, and useful foreign links, helped to ensure it the guiding role.

In the armed struggle another communist, Vo-Nguyen Giap, was taking the lead as decisively as Ho on the political front. Born in 1909, in a peasant family in the north, he studied at the university of Hanoi, where he was impressed by the history of the French Revolution and its lessons in mass mobilization. France may not have planted any tree of liberty in its colonies, but it did plant a tree of knowledge, which bore unpredictable fruit. At first guerrilla activity was the limit of what was possible, but it was always carefully directed. Small arms such as bazookas and grenades could be made in jungle workshops; presently heavier equipment too was produced in rear bases, while growing quantities were captured from the French, often of American origin. It was an immense advantage when, with Chiang Kai-shek finally dislodged, China became a friend and supplier to the Vietminh. Meanwhile the nucleus of a regular army was being put together, each unit retaining the ability to manoeuvre on its own; this was essential particularly in the south.

Complain as the French army might of the politicians at home, conscripts could not be sent to Indochina. As an élite striking force a sort of imperial gendarmerie was being formed, with Vietnam as its starting-point, the *Parachutistes Coloniaux* or *Berets rouges*, with a central reserve at their base at Bayonne. Now with a parachute battalion of its own, the Foreign Legion was flocking back to

Indochina from early in 1946, about half of it Germans indoctrinated by Nazism. Troops from Africa included Moroccans, Algerians, and Senegalese. In the name of a puppet emperor, Bao Dai, recalled from his haunts on the Riviera, some 200,000 men were recruited to a 'National army', by compulsion or by the bait of food and pay held out to the classes suffering most acutely from poverty and wartime dislocation. As soldiers they were of dubious value, and desertions were many. This inordinate number of non-French troops put a heavy strain on the cadres of the regular army, the officers and NCOs who had to command them; a high proportion of the 20,000 Frenchmen killed belonged to these ranks. Financially too the war was a heavy drain, but this was relieved by subsidies from America, outraged by the loss of China and in 1950 plunging into the Korean war in order to bolster its position in the Far East.

Like most imperial wars of the final phase this one reproduced appallingly the worst features of nineteenth-century conquest. Besides outbursts of savagery among men unhinged by the strain of danger close at hand, there was now the more cold-blooded diabolism of the new military technology, to which enemies of alien race were no more than animal pests, or germs to be 'flushed out'. As in Malaya, multitudes were being herded into settlements which were also prisons. Crops were destroyed in the fields. It is not hard to believe the allegation that to keep up the sagging morale of the puppet troops they were given *carte blanche* 'to destroy, rape and pillage'.¹⁴ 'Pacification' was coming to mean air-bombing, massacre, systematic use of torture. A French participant describes a captured saboteur being taken up in a plane and thrown out.¹⁵ In a speech to the 12th Congress of the French Communist Party in April 1950 André Marty declared that it would not do to ascribe all the atrocities to SS men in the Legion: most of them were committed by Frenchmen whom the war was turning into criminals. When a sensational trial took place of those indicted for the shooting and burning of civilians in the village of Oradour during the occupation of France, a West German newspaper could retort: 'In Indochina there is an Oradour every week.'

In France there was deepening dislike of the 'dirty war'. Too flagrantly this 'defence of the West' against communism was only defending the profiteers who were making fortunes out of it. Every long war breeds its own vested interests; there was for instance a ramifying racket in currency exchange. To the army it seemed that it was being neglected, forgotten, its sacrifices ignored, and this showed in its hatred of press reporters. Late in 1950 France's

best-known soldier, De Lattre de Tassigny, was sent out with full powers both military and civil. He converted much of the army into flexible *groupes mobiles*, intensified air operations, dropped more napalm; but he was soon compelled by illness to retire. His successors lost ground to the tenacious Giap, who warily avoided pitched battles but struck relentlessly at exposed points. By 1953 he was getting a firm foothold inside the Red River delta, where the French in the north were being cooped up, opposing to their chains of blockhouses a network of fortified villages with tunnelled bolt-holes, very much as the communist-led Chinese peasantry had defended themselves against the Japanese. It was only in the daytime that the countryside still belonged to the French.

In May 1953 the world saw a new commander-in-chief, Navarre, paying his respects at Washington before taking up his duties. There was a buzz of talk about a 'Navarre Plan', which would roll the enemy up in a sequence of phases plotted with true French logic, starting with a drive to demolish the Vietminh in the south once for all. Giap's book on the war shows that he did not underrate his antagonist, but he soon found comfort in a conviction that Navarre was dissipating his strength – given as 230,000 men from Europe and Africa, 160,000 local levies – too widely. They were drawn into a further diversion by a Vietminh offensive in an area still French of the mountainous north-west. To block this, on 20 November a French force was dropped from the air to occupy Dien Bien Phu, a valley a dozen miles long close to the frontier with Laos. Giap's reply was to begin an encirclement. Prestige rather than utility forbade the French to withdraw; it was resolved to hold on, come what might.

The garrison was brought up to about 16,000, mostly Europeans and Africans; a large proportion were Legionaries. A fortified camp was formed partially sheltered by trenches, barbed wire, minefield. Though materials were lacking to complete these works, the position was a hard enough nut to crack, considering that heavy guns and supplies had to be hauled long distances, from the Vietminh rear bases, over forested hills, by the soldiers and thousands of labourers. On 13 March 1954, when the formal attack opened, Giap could claim a threefold superiority in numbers, and heavier fire-power. It was an artillery duel, with the assailants pushing their trenches closer and closer, and overrunning outlying posts one by one. Planes brought supplies from Hanoi; in all these colonial wars it was a vital factor that the westerners had total command of the air. But anti-aircraft guns took toll of the transport planes, and the two airfields were coming under fire. Both sides suffered heavy losses, and severe strain.

Giap hints at a crisis of nerve among his men, who had never before had work like this to do, in spite of the political teaching steadily carried on.¹⁶ But morale in the polyglot French camp was sinking much lower. When the final assault came on 7 May there were still ten thousand defenders, but surrender was not long delayed.

It was the first victory over the West, except by Japan, in a battle fought by the two sides with equal weapons and on the same highly professional lines. Its repercussions were far greater than its significance simply in terms of French losses. France was tired of the contest. At Geneva a conference had met in April to wind up the Korean war, and it provided a convenient forum for ending the Vietnam war too. France dropped out; unhappily the USA took its place, and stopped fighting in Korea only to start fighting in Vietnam.

Meanwhile the French were jumping still more hastily out of the Vietnam frying-pan into the Algerian fire. Technically Indochina had been for the army 'an incomparable experience', imparting valuable lessons and suggesting novel experiments; but it did not teach French generals to open their eyes to the new reality of Afro-Asian nationalism. And the army was 'sentimentally and passionately attached to French North Africa',¹⁷ as the scene of its most brilliant colonial successes, much as the British army had been attached to India. This meant principally Algeria, and there the intransigence of army and settler population reinforced each other. There could be no thought of belated concessions when sporadic outbreaks began in 1954, at first chiefly in the eastern uplands. Discontent must have been fanned by news from Vietnam; empires no longer consisted of scattered territories ignorant of one another's existence, and some of the cannon-fodder in Vietnam was Algerian; men who had served there came indeed to form 'the hard core of the rebel army'.¹⁸

When disorder spread into Morocco, with another Riff rising, Paris acted fairly promptly, conferring independence on Morocco and Tunisia in 1956 in the teeth of strong army disapproval. But Algerian revolt was spreading and taking on a more organized character. It benefited from the first by the sympathy of fellow-Muslims. It was at Cairo, late in 1958, that the FLN or National Liberation Front set up its provisional government, recognized by all Arab states. Arms came from Egypt; Morocco, and still more Tunisia, provided a sanctuary for rebel forces. Elaborate barriers with electrified wire had to be constructed by the French to seal the frontiers, and adjacent zones cleared of inhabitants.

Resistance did not develop the same heroic proportions as in Vietnam. Population was smaller, and there was less here than in the Far East either of national tradition or of genius for collective organization. Politically the FLN stood on a lower level than Ho Chi Minh's party, and produced no equivalent leadership; there were frustrating jealousies among the heads of the *wilaya* or military districts into which the country was divided. The main force was normally in reserve, much of it outside the country. It incurred heavy losses when it ventured on a series of regular engagements near the Tunisian border early in 1958. Mostly the struggle was waged by guerrilla action, and by terrorist methods, often of the kind that Fanon deplored, though he could comprehend them, in one of the most illuminating books inspired by any war of liberation.¹⁹ It could seem at times that bombs were being thrown in order to coerce ordinary people into supporting the rebels; as with similar IRA doings, the psychology moulded by an intolerant religion demanded political unanimity. But French repression did far more to drive the Muslim population into approval of the rebellion.

To deal with something like 40,000 active opponents alive at any one time, given their high death-rate, the army of occupation was built up to about ten times that number. As was first shown by the Boer War, to wear down a determined enemy defending his homeland with modern weapons an immense numerical superiority is required. A proportion of the troops brought in were from black Africa. Algeria being in legal fiction part of metropolitan France, there could be no bar to employment of French conscripts. There was some draft-dodging, and some officers felt it incumbent on them to give their men simple lectures justifying the war. In many cases these officers must have been a good deal less intelligent or well-informed than some of their audience. There were conscripts who within the twenty-eight months to which the term of service had to be extended could be conditioned by the army into 'glorying in military exploits, brutality and medals.'²⁰ On the other hand there were impressive cases of Europeans in Algeria risking death and worse to help the rebels.²¹

Most of the ordinary troops were tied up in routine occupation duties and patrolling, systematized in the *quadrillage* or grid pattern of garrisons and outposts covering the entire country. This left only a limited reserve, and for a striking-force there was more and more reliance on the 45,000 or 50,000 paratroopers and Legionaries, with helicopters to add to mobility. Paratroopers prided themselves on being the élite of the army, and gazed self-consciously into the mirror of history, or historical fantasy; in the age of novelette, 'comic',

cinema, radio-play, this kind of false consciousness, or deliberate acting of an artificial role, has entered increasingly into mass mentality. It was to General Massu's 10th Paratroop Division that police control of the city of Algiers was handed over, and it was by its ruthless efficiency that terrorism there was curbed.

'Counter-terrorism' was the order of the day, and torture in regular use. Once again the now familiar device of population removal was employed, and by 1959 two million villagers, a fifth of the population, had been transferred to new locations under military watch. There was enough tincture of French intellectuality in the army to set it spinning theories about a 'revolutionary war' against revolution, a blending of persuasion with coercion; a bureau was set up to direct 'psychological warfare'. Since blandishments were not and could not be accompanied by any tangible concessions, to appease land-hunger especially, not much came of it.

Psychological warfare may have had most effect by introducing officers to politics: 'a large number of them found it to be a fascinating game'.²² If the FLN could not defeat the French army, it could bring down not merely a French government but the short-lived Fourth Republic. In 1958 suspicion of weakening determination at home started a ferment, chiefly among junior officers and paratroopers, and led to a seizure of power in Algeria and, on the demand of Massu and the commander-in-chief Salan, the return to office on 13 May of General De Gaulle. Diehards were soon disillusioned by his ambiguous tactics. At the end of March 1961, unable to sit on his uncomfortable fence any longer, he agreed to talks with the FLN, and there was a cease-fire. Next month revolt exploded among the French in Algeria, with a group of commanders seizing control: parachutists of the Legion were their heaviest battering-ram. Between 22 and 26 April there was a furore in France, with the prospect again as in May 1958 of parachutists descending on Paris and being welcomed by the right wing. But the revolt quickly lost momentum. Probably the army as a whole shrank from a Spanish-type civil war. Muslim demonstrations in Algeria finally deflated the myth cherished all through the fighting by French conservatives, of the mass of the people being at heart pro-French. It seems that conscripts may have had a share in paralysing the army coup, by showing their unwillingness to follow its leaders.

There was a tailpiece to the war in July at the French naval base of Bizerta, which was being enlarged while Tunisia was pressing as often before for its evacuation. A parachute force was sent, and took revenge for the failure in Algeria by bombing and machine-gunning

the Arab town indiscriminately. A reporter's photograph showed a dead Tunisian with a circle and cross carved on his chest with a knife, the emblem of a French neo-fascist movement *Jeune Nation*.²³ The civilizing mission in north Africa was having an appropriate finish. Algerian independence, confirmed at last in March 1962, found the country wrecked and ruinous, with enormous numbers of dead and war-cripples, but also shaken free by the hurricane from much lumber of ideas and customs, the dead weight of a dead past. Women had been brought into the struggle by an early decision of the FLN, and responded courageously; prejudices against modern medicine as foreign were jettisoned.²⁴

iii. *Black Africa*

In 1960 De Gaulle took a long step towards an Algerian settlement by conferring independence on France's possessions in black Africa. Freedom so granted might be little more than an extension of long-practised methods of indirect rule through dependable local managers. French governments have shown themselves very ready since then to intervene forcibly in these territories; colonial war has been transposed as it were into a fourth dimension. All the same, the second World War had given black Africa a more vigorous shaking up than the first. In the British sphere it was in Kenya that the consequences were earliest felt. In October 1952 attacks on white farms led to a state of emergency lasting nearly eight years. Kenya had never been a nation, and was indeed very much a jumble of squabbling tribal groups. Among these the Kikuyu people was the most important, but though most of the outlaws came from it and tribal brotherhood provided a loose framework, the embitterment that goaded them was primarily agrarian. In Kenya with its 'White Highlands' the evil of land-robbery by settlers – a repetition of the embezzling of village commons by landlords in nineteenth-century western Europe, especially England – was exceptionally gross. In the two World Wars, an old man said to an enquirer, Britain asked Africans for their young men to go and fight Germans and Italians, and now there were German and Italian planters occupying land from which they were shut out.²⁵ Resentment among poor Kikuyu peasants, and some town-dwellers, was turned against more prosperous fellow-Africans and Kikuyus as well as against whites, and the better-off Kikuyus were loyal to a government under which they were faring well enough.

Because the fighters came mostly from the poorest, most illiterate strata, with scarcely any leadership of more modern outlook, the rising took on the aspect, like many earlier ones in Afro-Asia, of a religious or magical cult. 'Mau-Mau' had some grotesque features which made it easy to denigrate the whole movement as a relapse into an abysmal past. Rebel weapons were at first not much more up to date, a few home-made guns the best of them. Nothing like a regular force emerged from the guerrilla bands; the army was making wide sweeps across the country to round them up and prevent them from combining. 'National service' men were again involved; like conscripts of other nations they were much less useful at this kind of work than professionals. As a rule the army seems to have behaved with restraint, the more easily preserved because it suffered scarcely any casualties; the police were much worse.²⁶ The special prisons where those considered incorrigible were incarcerated, or made away with, were probably as bad as any similar Nazi or Japanese establishments. As often in colonial wars, some of the worst crimes might be committed by native auxiliaries. The number killed in the fighting, or executed, was at least ten thousand, perhaps far more.

In earlier times this would have been the end of the matter. But the world was a different one now, and British statesmen could not be oblivious of the winds of change. To the fury of the settlers and their friends, there was concern in Britain at reports of what was happening, churchmen and many others were protesting, MPs visiting the country. Non-white members of the Commonwealth had to be taken into account, and Nehru, now Indian premier, was critical of the repression from the outset. By 1960 London was ready to think about independence, and at the end of 1963 this was granted. The new government headed by Jomo Kenyatta was conservative, its policies designed to benefit the propertied more than the poor who had done the fighting. Withdrawal could not stop with Kenya. The notion of an indefinite series of other such conflicts was uninviting. Just as Algeria compelled French withdrawal, real or nominal, from black Africa, Kenya compelled British.

It was the oldest empire in Africa, the Portuguese, that hung on longest, and, like its Spanish coeval in America and Asia, behaved worst as it neared its last gasp. Transition elsewhere in Africa helped to kindle aspirations in the Portuguese colonies. Angola rebelled in 1960, Guinea in 1963, Mozambique in 1964. By its obdurate rejection of any change Portugal was condemning itself to an ordeal shared by no other imperial nation, of having for a whole decade to fight three distinct colonial wars at once. Military preparedness for it was very

scanty. Troops in Africa at the start were astonishingly few; African patience or inertia was regarded as inexhaustible. In quality they are not likely to have been much better than those described by a British officer in East Africa in the Great War as 'badly commanded, untrained, undisciplined and disorganized', along with African soldiers mostly 'just raw natives, impressed and given uniforms.'²⁷

In the 1960s when large forces had to be put into the field Portugal would have been incapable of arming them had it not been for the benevolence of its allies, who tacitly allowed it to make use of munitions of all sorts, napalm among them, given it by NATO supposedly as part of Western defence against communism. Arms-manufacturers were happy to coin an extra penny out of the war, and by now their trade was one of the principal motors of the 'free world' economy. Bombing from the air could therefore be carried on *ad lib*; the navy too was in action, patrolling coasts and making dashes up rivers. Methods as well as weapons were being borrowed. Training in counter-insurgency drew on British experience in Malaya, defoliants were dropped on forest hide-outs as in Vietnam. Man-power Portugal had to find for itself. For a long time after the initial outbreaks the army hesitated to use black troops, until necessity obliged it to take the risk. In 1967 service for Portuguese conscripts was extended to four years, two of which had to be spent in Africa. Before the end of 1968 between 120,000 and 150,000 men, out of a total army strength of 180,000, were in Africa, vastly more than Britain ever required to garrison India. There was massive emigration from Portugal, largely of draft-evaders or deserters.²⁸

Rebellion began in 1960 in the northern part of Angola, in a premature, chaotic fashion, closer akin to Mau-Mau than to the well-led movements in other parts of the third world. Barbaric attacks on white settlements and their African dependents, fearful reprisals by the settlers, left the insurgents by the close of the year quelled or in flight; the death-roll was estimated at 2000 whites and 50,000 Africans. Tribal frictions and rival leaders further weakened the cause. Of the three organized movements which took shape the one that posed in course of time a serious challenge to white rule was the MPLA. It was led by Agostinho Neto, one of the many intellectual men of action now being thrown up by colonial movements. He and his lieutenants were careful to disclaim any racial animosity against white men, and to insist that they were fighting only against imperialism. But after failure in the north in 1966 they had to shift to new, safer, but less promising terrain, in the dense eastern forests. A friendly neighbour, in this case Zambia, was a crucial factor as in

the Algerian war. Tanzania was another well-wisher, and some equipment, most of it from communist countries, came in trucks, and then on men's heads, from the east coast two thousand miles away. Still, in 1970 only half the five thousand or so fighters had proper weapons, and they were cut off from the rest of the territory.²⁹

In Portuguese Guinea, smallest and poorest of the three colonies, whose population of less than a million was an ethnic and linguistic mosaic, another outstanding intellectual came to the front, Amílcar Cabral, in 1956 one of six founder-members of the PAIGC party. This was revolutionary and Marxist in outlook, but distrustful of ideas like Che Guevara's that the first thing to do was to start an insurrection, somewhere or anywhere, and count on its attracting spontaneous support.³⁰ Several years were devoted to political preparation before armed action was initiated in 1963. As in Angola, there was much faith at first among volunteers in the protection of *mezinhas*, or fetishes; the leaders did not try to ban these, but left their men to learn by trial and error that 'the best *mezinha* is the trench'.³¹ In 1966 their numbers were estimated at 6000, and by 1968 a mobile force, the nucleus of a small standing army, was getting into its stride. Arms and medical supplies were sought from other African countries and from outside the continent. Cabral was assassinated in mysterious circumstances in January 1973, but the struggle went on. By then airmen were no longer safe; low-flying planes and helicopters were being hit by ground-to-air missiles.

FRELIMO, the liberation movement of Mozambique, was formed by a meeting of several groups of exiles in Dar es Salaam in 1962. It was plagued by dissension, and like many others had to go through a process of shedding older, more conservative and tribalist leaders, who were supplanted by more modern-minded figures. It was from Tanganyika that the first raids came in 1964, across the northern border. Little by little the rebels were able to win control of a northern zone, and to push southward through the eastern uplands fringing Lake Nyasa (Malawi). They were trying to break out into other areas, while the Portuguese endeavoured to hem them in. Exploiting tribal grudges in a familiar imperial style, they were recruiting auxiliaries from among the Makua, who had old scores to pay off against the Makonde, backbone of the FRELIMO forces. Forcible resettlement under military supervision was being carried on urgently, on a massive scale.

By 1969 the insurgents were forcing their way down into the Tete region south of the lake, and threatening the huge Cabora Bassa dam being built on the Zambezi. Their armoury was steadily improving:

in 1973 powerful Soviet rocket-missiles were in use. Portuguese reactions became more and more brutal, a symptom of desperation. On 16 December 1972, the inhabitants of three villages were massacred at Wiriyamu. This was brought to light by Father Adrian Hastings, and other missionaries were making known abroad other atrocities, including the burning alive of the people of one whole village.³² News was leaking out too, partly through disgusted Portuguese officers, about the sinister DGS, or security police, among whose methods torture ranked first. In spite of all such efforts, late in 1973 and early in 1974 determined guerrilla offensives were opened. It may have been pressure here, much more than in the other colonies, that brought the breaking-point of the imperial will.

On 24 April 1974, Caetano, who had succeeded the old dictator Salazar in 1968, was overthrown by a 'Movement of the Armed Forces', and General Spínola put in power. It was one of the very exceptional cases of an army bred by colonial warfare making an irruption into the politics of the metropolis in a progressive instead of reactionary direction. Spínola himself was no liberal, and had been heavy-handed enough while in Africa, but he was realistic enough to see the hopelessness of going on. Attempts were made to reach a compromise with the rebels, but it was too late, and at the end of July unconditional withdrawal was announced. It was received by the public with mixed feelings, but on balance with relief; within a very few years the empire was no more than a fading memory.

In November 1965, rather than tolerate any possible interference from Britain on behalf of the native majority, Rhodesia made its unilateral declaration of independence. Settler loyalty is always conditional on the assurance of a free hand with the natives. Africans everywhere contrasted Britain's readiness to use force against them, or against Asians, with its refusal to act now. All along, indeed, and very notably in the history of Kenya, the British lion showed a craven fear of asserting itself against recalcitrant settlers.³³ Ministers could not be sure of backing from public opinion at home, or rather could be sure of conservative opposition; since 1914 in Ulster, they could not count on the obedience of the officer corps.

A first spluttering of revolt came in 1966-7. Two African bodies, ZAPU and ZANU, were already in being; they kept at arm's length from each other, or at most joined in a very loose Patriotic Front, in spite of both moving towards acceptance more or less of Marxism - as all colonial movements that meant anything were by now virtually bound to do. From 1972 rebellion was taking on broader proportions, and securing advanced weaponry from outside. Zambia and after

1974 Mozambique both offered supply routes, and sanctuaries. Tactics resembled Algeria's. Considerable forces were mobilized, but they were kept for the most part in reserve, in the bush or across the borders, instead of risking battle on a bigger scale than harassing raids and skirmishes. Joshua Nkomo, leader of ZAPU, though not a Matabele had his main strength in the old Matabele region round Bulawayo. Robert Mugabe's ZANU was drawn mainly from the Shona majority, and seems in general to have done, as it claimed, more of the fighting. Of the two the Matabele had been far more a warrior people, and 'martial races' have sometimes, but not always, been in the vanguard of liberation movements. Defeat and loss of their arms may rob them of their old spirit, while previously more pacific peoples may be readier for new forms of struggle, which in modern conditions may have to be military but must be also political.

'The fascist terror and the striking power of the Rhodesian police cannot be overemphasized', an Indian observer wrote; it had been trained for years in counter-insurgency, on South African or European lines.³⁴ In September 1977 a 'Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Rhodesia' reported wholesale killing of suspects by the security forces. Religious and missionary feeling about colonial bloodshed was coming to be strikingly different from what it had been not long since, and it was not without weight. Increasing help had to be sought by the Smith regime from South Africa. White manpower was very limited, and there was draft-dodging, or emigration to avoid conscription, especially by the large non-British element. Some black auxiliaries had always been made use of, and now it was necessary, though risky, to add to their number by the conscription announced in January 1979.

But if the guerrillas were not winning the war, they were proving that their rulers could not win, and they were transforming the external situation. Liberal opinion abroad was hostile to the white regime; conservative opinion in Britain, though always very well disposed towards it, was perturbed by the danger of prolonged conflict bringing a further spread of communist influence in southern Africa. The upshot was that at the end of 1979 a very right-wing government in Britain had to compel Smith to abdicate and make way for free elections, which brought to office next year a coalition led by Robert Mugabe. It was left to South Africa to take over the torch and keep the flag of 'civilization' flying, and to go on fighting a similar war in Namibia. It too has perforce had to go in for training native troops to augment its manpower; whether this can be a success in today's altered Africa must be doubtful. In January 1979 the

centenary of Isandhlwana was celebrated by Africans in London; doubtless it was remembered by many at home.