



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### [Review of: R. Eyerman, G. Sciortino (2020) The Cultural Trauma of Decolonization: Colonial Returnees in the National Imagination]

Buettner, E.

**DOI**

[10.52024/tseg10843](https://doi.org/10.52024/tseg10843)

**Publication date**

2021

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis

**License**

CC BY

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Buettner, E. (2021). [Review of: R. Eyerman, G. Sciortino (2020) The Cultural Trauma of Decolonization: Colonial Returnees in the National Imagination]. *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis*, 18(2), 166-169. <https://doi.org/10.52024/tseg10843>

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

*UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)*

Ron Eyerman and Giuseppe Sciortino (eds.), *The Cultural Trauma of Decolonization. Colonial Returnees in the National Imagination* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). xv, 231 p. ISBN 9783030270247 (E-book 9783030270254).

DOI: 10.52024/tseg10843

Scholarship on decolonization migration – broadly construed as flows of colonial peoples into imperial metropolises as empires became history in the mid- to late twentieth century – extends to a wide variety of individuals, groups, and places. Arrivals from lost colonies encompassed both ‘colonized’ as well as ‘colonizers’, with the former often having far more social visibility than the latter, particularly if upon arrival they became ethnic minorities who were frequently understood as not ‘belonging’ to mainstream society. This happened despite, in many cases, their having formal rights to settle as citizens. Disproportionate academic attention to the formerly colonized long mirrored that of wider societies at large. Yet since the 1990s a growing body of work has addressed colonizers’ returns ‘home’, usually to Western European nations but also to Japan. Edited collections that mark milestones in this emergent

scholarship include Jean-Louis Miège and Colette Dubois' *L'Europe Retrouvée: les migrations de la décolonisation* (1994) followed by Andrea L. Smith's *Europe's Invisible Migrants* (2003), and a substantial section within Caroline Elkins and Susan Pedersen's *Settler Colonialism in the Twentieth Century* (2005). Running parallel to these multi-authored volumes and continuing in their wake was a substantial body of single-authored monographs devoted to particular cases. As this corpus continues to grow, it attests to a dynamic area of study that has evolved to take new cases, themes, and approaches on board.

*The Cultural Trauma of Decolonization: Colonial Returnees in the National Imagination*, edited by Ron Eyeran and Giuseppe Sciortino, now joins this field. Both reflecting and summing up the current state of play, this book, as its title conveys, uses the sociological cultural trauma paradigm advanced by scholars like Jeffrey Alexander, as well as Eyeran and Sciortino themselves, as its frame. Contributors evaluate Italian, Japanese, Dutch, Belgian, French, and Portuguese returns from collapsed empires with a focus on questions such as 'when and how did such individual and group suffering become – or fail to become – a collective trauma, a narrative capable of providing a shared identity and commanding at least some solidarity beyond the boundaries of those who directly suffered it? How and when did this suffering become part of the collective memory of a larger group? How were the returnees able to shape (positively or negatively, partially or fully, controversially or consensually) the ways in which their respective countries remember their colonial past? Contrarily, when and how was their suffering silenced or fully subsumed into the narrative of a larger, all encompassing, collective pain?' (p. 208).

Readers of the *Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History (TSEG)* might find themselves especially drawn to the chapters on the Netherlands and Indonesia by Gert Oostindie and on Belgium and the former Belgian Congo by Rosario Giordano. Both authors make strong contributions to the collection, effectively summarizing the wider context for readers who lack prior familiarity, while also going into greater depth to the extent possible in the space available. Giordano underscores the gendered nature of Belgian decolonization violence that led to a spectacular airlift out of its former colony in July 1960, as well as the key role played by 'Anciens du Congo' (former Belgian residents in Congo) repatriate organizations up until the present day; he discusses how these groups recurrently step forward to defend the nation's colonial record both from public neglect and from critical challenges. And

challenges there most certainly have been, particularly since the late 1990s, when damning public debates developed around the atrocities in Congo under King Leopold II as well as Belgium's culpability in the assassination of Patrice Lumumba in early 1961.

Giordano takes his story into very recent times, as does Oostindie, who deftly outlines the diversity of the civilians and soldiers who resettled in the Netherlands during and after the decolonization war in Indonesia. Highlighting the changes in their status and representation across the more than seventy years that have since elapsed, among the many issues Oostindie raises is how – for many people across wider Dutch society today who were not directly affected – the colonial past may well not be considered traumatic at all. 'There is always the reassuring option of refusing to look back or recognize the colonial past for what it was' and accept shared responsibility (or guilt), either for it or for present-day racism suffered by many postcolonial minorities. Such an outlook, Oostindie argues, seems to prevail and serves as 'an antidote to any cultural trauma that might arise should we link centuries of colonialism to the core characteristics of Dutch culture' (p. 107). This attitude also helps explain the absence of any comparable Dutch attention to commemorating faraway Indonesian victims – as distinct from the Dutch, Indisch Dutch, and Moluccans who later resettled in the Netherlands – not just of the Japanese wartime occupation but also of the decolonization war that followed, when the Netherlands tried, ultimately unsuccessfully, to regain control of the archipelago.

Readers, however, should certainly not limit themselves to these Low Countries studies, regardless of their main regional foci. Other pieces have a great deal to offer in terms of general background points accessible to non-experts: they address important analytical questions about Portugal's *retornados* (returnees) from Africa (by Rui Pena Pires, Morgane Delaunay, and João Peixoto) and France's *pieds noirs* from Algeria (by Sung-Eun Choi), together with Italy's decolonization migrants (by Pamela Ballinger) and Japanese repatriates from Manchuria (by Akiko Hashimoto, which indeed qualifies as one of the most engagingly written, informative, and stimulating contributions to this solid collection). Like Oostindie and Giordano, these contributors discuss recent political developments alongside works of fiction and non-fiction, museum engagements, and other popular cultural portrayals of decolonization migration with its diverse effects. Their essays provide up-to-date evaluations of the place that decolonization traumas have (or have

not) achieved within wider national cultures of memory and identity politics.

What all the authors make clear, regardless of the case in question, is that histories of decolonization migrations and their national resonance – or lack thereof – are still in the process of unfolding. They are certain to enter new phases in accordance with generational changes as well as ever-evolving social and political contexts and agendas. Their chapters also invite readers to consider topics that call for more intensive future research. Pamela Ballinger, for instance, impressively brings repatriates, refugees, and expellees from Italy's former African, Balkan, and other territories into a single analytic field – a promising move that will hopefully encourage more scholars to compare and contrast migration flows that occurred within Europe with those that connected Europe with other continents. As Manuel Borutta and Jan Jensen's 2016 edited volume *Vertriebene and Pieds-Noirs in Germany and France: Comparative Perspectives* also indicates, scholars are gradually doing more to juxtapose intra-European mobilities (together with the rise and fall of European continental empires) with population flows from and to Europe from overseas imperial settings, as they expanded and contracted. Whether within collectively researched or single-authored studies, engaging further with multiple, and often overlapping, imperial and migration histories on a comparative and transnational/transimperial level would take research into invaluable new directions.

Elizabeth Buettner, University of Amsterdam