Decolonization is surely among the most significant events or processes of the twentieth century. In the span of less than two decades, longstanding European empires in Africa, Asia, and beyond were largely dismantled to create dozens of new nation-states, and with them a new geopolitical landscape. The magnitude of change was immense: in Africa alone, more than fifty new states were created, beginning in the 1950s.1 The United Nations provides another example of the scale of geopolitical transformation that decolonization precipitated. From its inception in 1945 to 2002, membership in the United Nations went from 51 to 191; “most of these new members,” Raymond Betts notes in his study *Decolonization*, “came from the failed colonial empires.”2 Indeed, one can suggest without hyperbole that decolonization fundamentally shapes the world we live in.

While this may be true, such an accounting emphasizes decolonization as a political event, one “whereby colonial powers transferred institutional and legal control over their territories and dependencies to indigenously based, formally sovereign nation-states.”3 A focus on this “transfer of power” was once the mainstay of historiography on decolonization, but as more recent scholarship has recognized, such a focus narrows our understanding of decolonization, limiting it to an event, and tying it to a moment. Decolonization in this mode of narration is discrete, delimited, finite; from a nationalist perspective, decolonization becomes a moment of arrival. The formal transfer of power from colonial to national governments is of course crucial to any understanding of decolonization. But decolonization—for all the elegant simplicity of the term—is more complex and difficult to define; the transfer of power is one aspect of a broader historical process, the exact contours of which have thus far defied any historiographical consensus.4

4 Here my reading of the historiography differs from that of Ashley Jackson (and, I imagine, others), who writes, “decolonisation is one of the few fields of historical research where, with the exception of a few polemists on the fringes, consensus among experts is something of a norm.” Jackson, review of *Decolonization and Its Impact: A Comparative Approach to the End of the Colonial Empires* by Martin Shipway, *English Historical Review* 124, no. 507 (2009): 503–505, here 504.
Decolonization may be more than the transfer of power, but how capacious the term (and its accompanying analytics) should be is a matter of debate. One scholar has recently argued, for example, that decolonization should encompass post–World War II processes in dominions such as Canada, Australia, and South Africa, despite the fact that they enjoyed self-rule. Another has suggested in the context of Iran, which was not formally colonized, that decolonization be defined as “a twentieth-century policy . . . aimed at retaining, transforming, or reasserting influence in the Middle East.” Repurposing decolonization in this way may be effective for the analysis of local and/or national histories, but where do the bounds become so expansive that the term ceases to be meaningful analytically?

Part of the complexity posed by decolonization, as Prasenjit Duara writes in his influential volume on the subject, *Decolonization: Perspectives from Now and Then*, is that it “is neither a coherent event such as the Russian Revolution, nor a well-defined phenomenon like fascism. The timings and patterns of decolonization were extremely varied, and the goals of the movements in different countries were not always consistent with each other.” Writing about the process as a whole—that is, beyond national or imperial histories—presents particular challenges. It is therefore not surprising that there is no prevailing historiographical consensus about the definition of decolonization, what precipitated it, what its effects were (and are), or whether societies—or even, for that matter, states—have achieved it. Even for those scholars who identify decolonization as largely a twentieth-century phenomenon, the temporality of the process varies quite widely. In Duara’s volume, he defines the book’s “core period and region” of consideration as Africa and Asia in the twentieth century. But rather than take World War I as his starting point, as most historians do, he identifies the Japanese victory over tsarist Russia in the War of 1905 as the symbolic starting point of the process, and the Bandung Conference of 1955 as “the event symbolizing the culmination of this movement.” Raymond Betts’s *Decolonization* also focuses on the twentieth century, but he chooses World War I as his starting point, and although his narrative ends with Kenyan independence in 1963, he asserts: “One matter is certain: in the political sense of the word, decolonization is over and done with. The exceptional moment announcing the fact occurred at midnight on June 30, 1997, the beginning of the first day of Hong Kong’s reversion to China after a century-and-a-half of British control.” A recent study analyzing the histories of the British, French, Dutch, Belgian, and Portuguese empires concludes in 1975, with the end of Portuguese colonialism in Africa. My examples could abound, but the point is clear: every study of decolonization presents a temporal frame that depends on the authors’ conceptualization of decolonization and the imperial/geographical context chosen as the locus of study.

While this multiplicity—a proliferation of understandings of what constitutes de-
colonization and approaches to studying it—might be considered by some a failing of scholarship on the subject, pushing the parameters of decolonization so broadly as to challenge its analytic usefulness, I see it rather as a sign of the field’s intellectual vigor. The push outward, as it were, reflects in large part the impact of various intellectual currents on historians of decolonization over the past twenty years. The impact of cultural history, postcolonial studies, subaltern studies, and the new imperial history is clearly visible in the shift away from histories of the “transfer of power” (which invariably reflected metropolitan dynamics if not imperatives) to histories that attempt to reflect both metropolitan and indigenous perspectives and contingencies, address the interpenetration of colonial and metropolitan histories, engage questions of power (beyond ceremonial “transfers”), and are attentive to issues of race, identity, and representation.11 Studies of decolonization have been invigorated by these broader intellectual trends and are in turn contributing to these fields in significant ways. Indeed, decolonization appears to have gained currency as a site of scholarly inquiry in the last decade in particular, if the publication in quick succession of a number of “readers,” “companions,” and histories is any indication.12

The present roundtable reflects the new spirit in scholarship on decolonization, which questions rather than assumes what it means, and interrogates its histories in diverse settings and through varied lenses. Jordanna Bailkin, for example, opens her essay by posing two fundamental questions that drive the study of decolonization today. “What is decolonization?” she asks, and “Where and when do we believe that it took (or is still taking) place?” She also identifies one of the principal challenges of studying decolonization, as “even for a single empire, there were always multiple decolonizations, taking place on different timelines for varied populations.” The essays in this roundtable all share the perspective suggested by these questions and an attention to the local. Put another way, they share a theoretical orientation to a broader understanding of decolonization, while they analyze it in the context of diverse imperial formations, colonial and metropolitan settings, and communities. At the same time, they also strike an important balance between the multiple scales of analysis through which decolonization can most effectively be understood. There is the broad and shared history of decolonization that spans empires and continents,

11 For a particularly cogent analysis of the potential benefits and limits of postcolonial studies for imperial history (and by extension decolonization), see Dane Kennedy, “Imperial History and Post-Colonial Theory,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 24, no. 3 (1996): 345–363. For a volume that captures the promise (as well as the pitfalls) of the new imperial history, see Kathleen Wilson, ed., *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660–1840* (Cambridge, 2004). See also Stephen Howe, ed., *The New Imperial Histories Reader* (New York, 2009); and Durba Ghosh, “Another Set of Imperial Turns?,” *American Historical Review* 117, no. 3 (June 2012): 772–793.

and there are the local histories that simultaneously constitute it. The essays thread these two levels of analysis together in productive ways, so that we gain insights into British, Algerian, French, Kenyan, Middle Eastern, Jewish, and American history, as well as into decolonization more generally.

While informed by the ferment in the study of decolonization, this roundtable also makes a significant contribution to the field by drawing it into more explicit dialogue with scholarship on archives and the production of history.13 The essays here, then, take a very particular approach, with each focusing explicitly on the relationship between the archives of decolonization (broadly conceived in some cases, as in H. Reuben Neptune’s contribution) and the history of decolonization. Bailkin articulates the value of the approach eloquently: “Conceiving of decolonization as an archival event,” she suggests, “can enrich our understanding of its diverse histories and give it a new multidimensionality.” Indeed, taken together, the essays in this roundtable admirably accomplish this task.

Bailkin’s essay, “Where Did the Empire Go? Archives and Decolonization in Britain,” both lays out a manifesto for the roundtable, as it were—to consider decolonization as an archival event—and powerfully illustrates the value of foregrounding analysis of the archives of decolonization. Her launching point is a discussion of the scholarly depth of work on colonial archives and their production, drawing attention to the centrality of this theme in scholarly analyses of colonialism. That Bailkin cites scholarship that is among the most influential on colonialism writ large, including works by C. A. Bayly, Antoinette Burton, Bernard Cohn, Nicholas Dirks, and Ann Laura Stoler, further underscores her point—namely, that while the archive has been central to analyses of colonialism, this scholarship “often cuts off abruptly with the transition to independence, as if archives became more straight-

forward at this juncture.” Of course, this was hardly the case. If anything, her essay highlights—as do others in the roundtable—that questions of what to archive, and where, became ever more complicated in the context of decolonization.

“Where Did the Empire Go?” interrogates what archives are used to write the history of decolonization, on the one hand, and examines the impact of decolonization in British society, on the other. In the process, Bailkin queries a number of traditional emphases and perspectives in existing approaches to decolonization. Pushing against the depiction of the metropole as the center of political power from which high politics and statecraft emanated, Bailkin focuses on the individual and on the social experience of decolonization in the (now former) imperial center. Her particular innovation lies in finding a history of decolonization in an archive not intended for that purpose. Working in the British National Archives in the records of domestic institutions—rather than with Foreign Office, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, British Colonial Office, or India Office files, for example—reveals an unexpected story of “how decolonization transformed personal and familial life.”

Bailkin presents a history of the interconnections between decolonization and the welfare state in Britain that defy the kinds of neat divisions between Britain and the empire that the organization of the archives itself perpetuates.

Todd Shepard’s essay, “‘Of Sovereignty’: Disputed Archives, ‘Wholly Modern’ Archives, and the Post-Decolonization French and Algerian Republics, 1962–2012,” focuses on the role that archives play in constituting national identities. Shepard frames his discussion around an archival controversy (“the Dispute”: “le contenterux”) between the French and Algerian states about the rightful place of the state archive of French-ruled Algeria (1830–1962). At issue is a vast array of documents—anywhere from 53,000 to 200,000 cartons, depending on French or Algerian sources, respectively—that were taken from Algeria to France at the end of empire. Algerian proponents argue that these documents belong to Algeria and should be repatriated. Shepard situates the Dispute in a broader context of the significance of archives as key institutions of modern states, and particularly the role they play in “defining what national sovereignty means post-decolonization.” In Algeria, Shepard shows that the Dispute is intertwined with complex issues of sovereignty that relate both to a French colonial past and to postcolonial politics in Algeria, arguing that “the archives appear to offer the possibility of returning sovereignty to the people.” These same archives play a similar role in France, however, where this material has become linked in particular ways to ideas of French sovereignty. If sovereignty is fundamental to any understanding of decolonization, then Shepard shows how archives and their constitution, in both former colony and imperial center, are deeply implicated in how sovereignty is imagined and constituted.

Caroline Elkins’s essay, “Looking beyond Mau Mau: Archiving Violence in the Era of Decolonization,” complements Shepard’s essay, opening in a similar vein with reference to the destruction of archives by colonial state officials on their impending retreat. Her reflections push in a slightly different direction, however, to note how as a result of colonial action, “gaping holes became an imperial legacy in postcolonial archives,” and how the incomplete archives of postcolonial states would, in time, “come to reflect the seeming disorder of the postcolony.” The fragmentary nature of the archive so evident in postcolonial states, she points out, is masked in the
archives of imperial centers. Reflecting on Britain’s National Archives at Kew, she
notes, “From the carefully managed files, a sense emerges of a coherent decoloni-
zation process.” That coherence went unchallenged by earlier generations of his-
torians of the end of empire, she argues, who reflected in their histories “that which
the archives beckoned us not only to remember, but also to forget.”

Like Bailkin, Elkins pushes against the story the archive most obviously wants to
tell. By recovering the history of systematic violence and forced labor in late colonial
Kenya through her comprehensive 2005 account of the Mau Mau detention camps,
Elkins penetrated “the field’s code of silence” on these issues. In this roundtable,
she considers her role as an expert witness in a case heard before London’s High
Court in 2011, in which five Kenyans alleged abuse at the hands of British colonial
authorities during the Mau Mau Emergency of 1952–1960. Reflecting on her in-
volve ment in the case provides Elkins an opportunity to address the systematic de-
struction of archival material by British colonial authorities at the end of empire. The
fragmentary evidence of wholesale destruction across the empire that she compiles
here is astounding, and suggests the formidable challenges that face the historian of
the decolonization of the British Empire. But Elkins does not despair. Rather, she
provides important methodological insights that can help one “make better sense of
the ashes and fragments that have recently been laid bare, as well as the logics, actors,
and processes of British colonial violence at the end of empire.”

Omnia El Shakry’s contribution focuses on another aspect of the problem of missing,
incomplete, and destroyed archives. “‘History without Documents’: The Vexed Archives
of Decolonization in the Middle East” addresses two crucial issues in Middle East his-
toriography: the (increasing) inaccessibility of archives, and what she calls “the com-
opositional logics of archival imaginaries.” In the wake of events such as the reassertion
of military power in Egypt despite the “Arab Spring” of 2010–2011, the near-destruction
of Syria in its civil war, and the pillage of archives during the U.S. invasion of Iraq, El
Shakry’s reference to a “history without documents” may increasingly be the reality of
Middle Eastern historiography. Such contemporary problems are not without their an-
tecedents, however, and she alerts us to the alternate methodologies that Middle East
historians have employed in the face of the paucity of (access to) the written record. El
Shakry argues that more significant than the question of access is how the very possi-
bilities for archives have been circumscribed in the Middle East by structures of thinking.
Her analysis focuses on two tropes. The first of these is “the nahda/naksa (awakening/
catastrophe) narrative,” which structures Arab history around “a fin-de-siècle cultural
renaissance” and “a tragic post-1967 decline.” The second is “an ‘incommensurable di-
vide’ between Islamism and secular nationalism in the era of decolonization.” In arguing
that we think of decolonization as “an ongoing process and series of struggles rather than
a finite event,” El Shakry suggests that these tropes impinge on what constitutes the
archives of decolonization—particularly which thinkers get included and which excised
from them—which in turn impacts the possibilities for more complex histories of this
process. El Shakry focuses on two intellectuals, the Islamist Sayyid Qutb and the secular
political theorist Ilyas Murqus. Neither has figured prominently in discussions of de-
colonization in the Middle East. She argues, however, that “they were part of a group

14 Caroline Elkins, Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of the End of Empire in Kenya (New York,
2005).
of thinkers and activists who conceptualized decolonization as simultaneously a question of political revolution . . . and social revolution.” El Shakry not only insists that they be included in the archives of decolonization, but also—and critically—that they be understood as occupying “the same discursive terrain.” “To archive them separately,” as the normative “archival imaginary” of Middle Eastern history demands, she suggests, would be “to reify the distinction between Islamic and secular thought, and therefore to miss the opportunity to address the question of decolonization from the perspective of ostensibly vastly differing ideological positions.” One hopes that historians of decolonization in the Middle East will heed her call “to denaturalize the dominant categories and dystopic narrative of Middle Eastern social and cultural history.”

In pointing to a “missing” archive (from the Algerian perspective), the retreating colonial state’s willful destruction of archival material, and the challenges of writing a “history without documents,” Shepard, Elkins, and El Shakry signal one of the more significant issues of the archives of decolonization: destruction and/or removal, and the broader issue of erasure. Sarah Stein’s “Black Holes, Dark Matter, and Buried Troves: Decolonization and the Multi-Sited Archives of Algerian Jewish History” provides a novel twist on this issue. Rather than pointing to the destruction of an archive in the context of decolonization, she examines the curious case of the creation of an archive(s). Stein’s analysis of the creation of documents and archives about the Mzabi Jews of southern Algeria at the moment of French retreat from the country addresses three aspects of the history of decolonization: first, that it is rarely a negotiation between colonizer and colonized alone, but involves a variety of international parties, involved in broader geopolitical negotiations (in this case Algeria, France, and Israel, most significantly); second, Jews’ experience of decolonization; and third, the relationship between archives and decolonization. She relates a fascinating tale of the creation of a register of the Mzabi Jews of southern Algeria at the behest of the French state in order to facilitate French citizenship for them, the creation of a geniza (repository) in southern Algeria in which community papers and manuscripts were buried by departing Mzabi Jews, and the creation of a different register (which is now unavailable) of this community by Israeli officials, who were keen to see it emigrate to Israel and not France. In tracing the story of these archives (including their disappearance), Stein illustrates that the archives from which the history of southern Algerian Jewry can be written are multi-sited, to be found (or not found) in France, Algeria, and Israel. This archival dispersal—a “struggle over documents of the Jewish past,” as she puts it—reflects the conflicting agendas of the multiple parties who each had a stake in the fate of the Mzabi Jews. When these archive stories are traced, a more complex history of this Jewish community is recovered, as is its place in broader narratives of decolonization.

H. Reuben Neptune’s “The Irony of Un-American Historiography: Daniel J. Boorstin and the Rediscovery of a U.S. Archive of Decolonization” may initially appear to be at some remove from the other contributions to the roundtable, since it is not concerned with twentieth-century decolonization. But Neptune’s concerns are very much of a piece with those of the other contributors in pushing for a careful consideration of what constitutes the archives of decolonization and how this impacts the writing of history. Neptune’s intervention is his insistence that the end of colonial rule in the United States be considered alongside twentieth-century decolonization.
Indeed, he argues that when the term “decolonization” entered academic and political currency in the 1930s, “it was used to refer explicitly and principally to the North American republic.” The United States dropped out of discussions of decolonization, he argues, only with the advent of the Cold War, when U.S. historians felt that the United States’ First World standing was incompatible with the Third World experience of the newly decolonized nations of Africa and Asia.

Arguing that the absence of the United States’ inclusion in discussions of decolonization is an artifact of the Cold War, Neptune then presents a rereading of mid-century “consensus” scholarship, suggesting that it be understood as an archive of decolonization. Rejecting the normative historiographical interpretation that the work of Daniel J. Boorstin was “the most egregious source of the pathetically patriotic consensus trend that supposedly swept the field of history-writing in the decade and a half after World War II,” he presents it as “a North Americanist variation on postcolonial studies, an approach concerned with the historically Eurocentric limits of nationalism’s promise to decolonize in former European dependencies.” In reframing Boorstin’s scholarship, and that of the “consensus” historians more generally, as an archive of decolonization, Neptune makes an important historiographical and political point about what is at stake in keeping the United States’ historical experience of decolonization distinct from the twentieth-century experience of “Third World” nations: it is a cultural politics of power, representation, and exceptionalism.

As my brief introduction to these essays suggests, each one presents cogent arguments grounded in the specific historiographies of their local/national/regional fields. Read serially, they provide new perspectives on British, Algerian, French, Kenyan, Middle Eastern, Jewish, and U.S. history and historiography. Considered synthetically, however, the roundtable presents a compelling set of considerations about decolonization. Most fundamentally, it destabilizes any notion that the archives of decolonization are self-evident. In the case of those archives traditionally taken to be the sites from which the history of decolonization is written (both imperial and national), the roundtable pushes for a careful consideration of the material practices and histories that produced those archives in their present form and the ideological structures that govern both their organization and our reading of them. In almost every case, the authors urge us to look for new archives that can tell different histories of decolonization, and to read old archives with fresh approaches. Overall, the perspective presented in this roundtable is of decolonization as a process, in which the transfer of power was but one moment. It also suggests that as a process, decolonization is very much still ongoing. Indeed, one might argue that the historian’s task in excavating the histories of decolonization does not stand outside the process, but rather is part of an ongoing struggle to decolonize.

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