

HI250 The Postcolonial Transition in Africa

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Office Hours: by appointment
Monday: 10:00-13:15

Course Description

This seminar explores the complex history of Africa's transition from empire to nation during the twentieth century, introducing students to key themes and debates in African history. The course traces how the postcolonial transition unfolded in different contexts—from the rise of powerful anti-colonial movements after the First World War to the emergence of a constellation of sovereign nation-states between the late 1940s and the 1960s. These developments are situated within their broader historical contexts: the crises of the 1930s, the Second World War, and the onset of the Cold War. Reflecting the heterogeneity of decolonisation processes, our discussions will address topics such as: the nature of colonial rule and the meaning of decolonisation; the formation of postcolonial states and the emergence of new forms of citizenship; the social and economic transformations across African societies during this period; and the challenges of writing a social history of these regions. Our work will be grounded in a wide range of readings, including historical surveys, academic articles, and primary sources. We will also reflect on methodological questions, critical historiography, and the use and status of archival material.

Requirements

Students are required to come to class prepared and with the relevant materials and texts, as well as to take part in fieldtrips to places off-campus. This may involve allowing for extra-time for making the way to and from BCB campus.

Participation consists in contributing productively to class discussion in a respectful manner, and in demonstrating a sound knowledge of the texts assigned.

Reading materials will be made available through Google Classroom prior to classes dedicated to these texts and subjects.

All assignment must be completed to pass the course. Assignments and deadlines are specified in the schedule below.

The sessions will be structured around the analysis of mandatory readings and collective work on different materials and sources: archives, scientific articles, audiovisual documents, think-tank reports, press, etc. These sessions can only work with the active investment of the students.

The sessions will be structured as followed:

- Short introduction of the thematic
- Discussion and analysis of mandatory readings
- Collective work and discussion on materials or sources

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Accommodations

Bard College Berlin is committed to inclusion and providing equal access to all students; we uphold and maintain all aspects of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and Section 3 of the German Disability Equality Act of April 27, 2002 (Federal Law Gazette I p. 1468). If you have a disability, or think you may have a disability, please contact the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, Atticus Kleen, (accommodations@berlin.bard.edu) to request an official accommodation.

Requests for accommodations should be made as early as possible to ensure adequate time for coordination and planning. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and may require advance notice to implement.

If you have already been approved for accommodations with the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, please arrange to meet with me outside of class so that we can develop an implementation plan.

Students may face extenuating circumstances related to various personal or external factors, which impact their academic performance. While these circumstances often do not fall within the legal framework of Disability Accommodations, Bard College Berlin is committed to supporting students experiencing such circumstances. A student needing a short extension or a replacement assignment because of an extenuating circumstance is encouraged to make arrangements directly with instructors if possible. If further support is needed, please visit the [Bard College Berlin Accessibility page](#). Questions about this process can be directed to James Harker (j.harker@berlin.bard.edu) or Maria Anderson-Long (m.andersonlong@berlin.bard.edu).

Use of Generative AI in This Course

It is generally acceptable to use generative AI to search for information and to deepen your understanding of course content. For example, using AI-powered web searches or engaging in conversations with tools like ChatGPT can be helpful for exploring ideas, refining your thinking, identifying examples, or clarifying complex material.

However, unless explicitly stated otherwise, it is not permissible to submit work that has been predominantly written by generative AI. This includes simply rewriting or slightly editing a draft produced by an AI tool. Such use would be comparable to copying from a book or article without proper attribution and does not meet the academic integrity standards of this course.

Please note that computer-generated text and ideas (including anything from ChatGPT) are sources that require citation.

Attendance

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, two absences from twice-per-week courses or the equivalent (e.g. one absence from a once-per-week course) should not affect the participation grade or require documentation.

Bard College Berlin may not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

Assessment

This course combines active participation and two formal essays. Students are expected to come prepared, submit drafts on time, and revise based on feed-back. Writing support (peer feedback or Learning Commons) is strongly encouraged, especially for the longer assignments.

Graded Components and Timeline:

- Mid Term Essay – Draft (Friday, 13 March), Final (Friday, 27 March)
- Final Essay – Draft (Thursday, 30 April), Final (Thursday, 14 May)
- Preparation and Participation (ongoing)

Assignments

Over the course of the semester, students will complete a series of written assignments totaling approximately **5500 words**, in accordance with departmental guidelines. These include shorter and longer writing formats designed to build toward critical independent analytical thinking and structured academic writing.

Mid-Term Essay Draft & Final Version

The aim of your mid-term essay is to practice different kinds of academic analysis and writing. It consists of two exercises:

1. Analysis of a primary source (or corpus of sources)

You should select a source that is sufficiently substantial (ex: series of journal articles on a given topic, a section of a government report, etc)

It should:

- 1/ contextualise the source (what kind of source, when was it produced, by whom, in what circumstances, what was its purpose etc)
- 2/ describe and analyse its content (there can be different sides to the same source)
- 3/ Reflect on how you would use it in a research paper – what question(s) would you try to answer with it

Whenever you quote from the text or refer to a specific argument, you need to indicate the relevant page number.

2. Analysis of a research article of your choice

It should

- 1/ introduce the article and summarize its argument
- 2/ reflect on the methodology – the overall question asked by the article and the method used to address it, the sources mobilized, etc
- 3/ locate the article in the broader literature (is it a foundational article / a recent contribution / a piece that seeks to open a new field, etc)
- 4/ reflect on the interest and limits of the article

Note that you do not have to structure the paper according to these four sections – they are merely indicative of the expected content of the paper. The structure of the text will partly depend on the article you select.

You are encouraged to refer to other relevant texts (starting with those mentioned in the article itself), to better locate the article in historiographical field.

Whenever you quote from the text or refer to a specific argument, you need to indicate the relevant page number.

A draft is required and must be submitted two weeks prior to the final version. It will receive oral feedback (appointment to be made). Estimated total: 2500 words

Final Essay – Draft & Final Version

A 3000 words essay due at the end of the semester.

This assignment invites you to write a research paper addressing a historical question (explored during the course), by drawing on secondary literature and primary sources.

The essay includes a full introduction, presenting the overall theme, the way it has been tackled in the literature and the specific perspective the essay proposes to develop, followed by a structured text (2-3 sections with titles, themselves organized into sub-sections (with or without titles))

The essay needs to be fully referenced (footnotes): every source that you drew on to build a narrative or an argument should be mentioned in footnote (typically, there should not be a single paragraph without several footnotes, except when you develop your own analysis). Essays without proper referencing will not be examined.

When grading, the following elements will be taken into account:

- *Clarity and coherence*: the different ideas presented in the essay should be clearly enunciated and substantiated, and the essay should be well-structured
- *Ability to delineate a topic of enquiry*, and develop a research question
- *Source material*: quality and diversity of the bibliographical references mobilized, use of primary sources.
- *Originality*: attempts at developing an original approach to a research question will be valorized

A draft is required and must be submitted two weeks prior to the final version. It will receive oral feedback (appointment to be made). Estimated total: 3000 words

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where a professor agrees to accept a late assignment, it should be submitted by the new deadline agreed upon by both parties. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students will receive feedback for their course work during and at the end of the semester. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

Grade Breakdown

Preparation and Participation (weeks 1 – 7) 20%
Preparation and Participation (weeks 8 – 14) 20%
Midterm Essay (ca. 2000 words): 25%
Final Essay (ca. 3500 words): 35%

Schedule

Please note that this schedule is subject to change.

We will often read only excerpts from the works listed (around 30 pages per session). If we find that we wish to devote more time to a specific aspect, or if you have reading suggestions based on your own studies, we may adapt accordingly. Readings can be adjusted or rescheduled in response to our shared interests.

- **January 26 (Week 1) Introduction to the Seminar**
- **February 2 (Week 2) The postcolonial transition, themes and debates**

R. Betts, "Decolonization: A brief history of the word", in Els Bogaerts and Remco Raben (eds.), *Beyond Empire and Nation*

I N Chimee, "African Historiography and the Challenges of European Periodization: A Historical Comment", TRAFO, Online : <https://trafo.hypotheses.org/11518>

- **February 9 (Week 3) From Empire to Nation**

A Getachew, "Introduction", *World Making After Empire, The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*

F. Cooper, "introduction" *Africa Since 1940. The past of the Present*,

- **February 16 (Week 4) Anticolonial movements and everyday resistance**

E Allina-Pisano, "Resistance and the social history of Africa", *Journal of Social History*, 37, 1

F. Cooper, "'Our Strike': Equality, Anticolonial Politics and the 1947-48 Railway Strike in French

West Africa", *The Journal of African History*, 37, 1

- **February 23 (Week 5) Sources and the Writing of African History**

A Stoler, "The Pulse of Archives", *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, p. 17-53

Luise White "Suitcases, Roads, and Archives: Writing the History of Africa after 1960 (challenges of the writing of the postcolonial history of Africa), and "Hodgepodge Historiography: Documents, Itineraries, and the Absence of Archives" in: *History in Africa*, 42, 2015

- **March 2 (Week 6) Cold War in Africa**

E. Schmidt, "Africa", *The Oxford Handbook of the Cold War*

E Burton, "Socialisms Between Cooperation and Competition: Ideology, Aid and Cold War Politics in Tanzania's relations with East Germany", *Socialism in Africa*, 2021. Online : <https://books.openedition.org/editionsmsmh/51520?lang=fr>

- **March 9 (Week 7) The meanings of (post)colonial citizenship**

F. Cooper, "Decolonization and citizenship Africa between empires and a world of nations", *Beyond Empire and Nation: The Decolonization of African and Asian societies, 1930s-1970s*

C Nicolas, "Physical Education in the Colonial Gold Coast: From a Civilizing Mission to "Useful Citizens"", *Social Sciences*

Friday, March 13: Draft Midterm Essay due

- **March 16 (Week 8) Visit of the *Auswärtiges Amt* Archive Berlin**

- **March 23 (Week 9) Developing the Nation**

F. Cooper, "Development and disappointment: social and economic change in an unequal world, 1945–2000", *Africa Since 1940. The past of the Present*, p.91-122

P. Lal, "Self-Reliance and the State: the Multiple Meanings of Development in Early Post-colonial Tanzania", *Africa*

Friday, March 27: Midterm Essay due
Spring Break (Mon March 30 / Mon April 6)

- **April 13 (Week 10) : Gender and (post)coloniality**

A Mama, "Sheroes and villains: conceptualizing colonial and contemporary violence against women in Africa", *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*

M. Muschalek, "Intimacy, comradeship and everyday police violence: the rape of Sophie M. in German South West Africa in 1910", *Africa*

- **April 20 (Week 11) Security and (Post)colonial Order**

E. Blanchard, M. Bloembergen, A. Lauro , "Tensions of Policing in Colonial Situations", in *Policing in Colonial Empires. Cases, Connections, Boundaries (ca. 1850-1970)*

C. Evrard, "Transfer of Military Power in Mauritania", *Africa in the fifty.*

- **April 27 (Week 12) City Tour: Post(colonial) Berlin**

Thursday, April 30: Draft Final Essay due

- **May 4 (Week 13) Colonial Legacies and the Question of Neocolonialism**

A Meyer, "The End of Françafrique: A Second Decolonisation Wave in Africa", Trend Report 3, 2025 <https://www.oii.ac.at/publikation/the-end-of-francafrigue-a-second-decolonisation-wave-in-africa/>

B Dobos and A Purton, "Proxy Neo-colonialism? The Case of Wagner Group in the Central African Republic", *Insight on Africa*, 16(1),

- **Week 14 Completion Week**

Thursday, May 14: Final Essay due