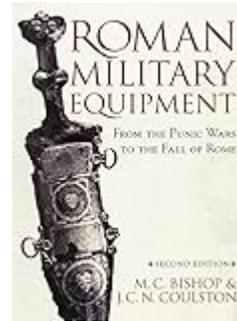


Krishnan Srinivasan. *The Rise, Decline and Future of the British Commonwealth.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. 184 S. \$40.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-84217-159-2.



Reviewed by Marc Frey

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (January, 2007)

K. Srinivasan: The Rise, Decline and Future of the British Commonwealth

Thinking about the Commonwealth immediately causes confusion, starting with terminology: is it the British Commonwealth, the Commonwealth of Nations, or simply the Commonwealth? And what does it stand for: softening Britain's retreat from Empire in the post-war world, a community of countries with a common language and common values, or simply the legacy of the British imperial tradition? Readers who avail themselves to the chapter on the Commonwealth in the readily available Encyclopedia of the British Empire do not get much further, apart from learning that the Commonwealth signifies the "antithesis" of "Empire" and that it forms "the most noticeable part of the Imperial legacy after the English language and cricket" (p. 693, 702). McIntyre, W. David, Commonwealth Legacy, in: Brown, Judith; Louis, Wm. Roger (eds.), The Oxford History of the British Empire. Vol. 4: The Twentieth Century, Oxford 1999, pp. 693-702. Literature on the history of the Commonwealth is sparse, perhaps reflecting the elusive character of an association that officially came into being in 1931 (as the British Commonwealth of Nations) and renamed the Commonwealth of Nations in 1946. All the more important is this short but provocative book by Kr-

ishnan Srinivasan, a historian, Indian diplomat and former senior member of the Commonwealth secretariat.

Krishnan Srinivasan does not write a comprehensive history of the Commonwealth with its many forums, sports events and development outfits. Rather, his interest is high politics, foreign relations, and the role and function of the Commonwealth for its members and, in particular, for the British government since its re-invention in 1946. His main argument is forcefully stated in the introduction: "The Commonwealth was designed by the British political leadership to comfort those in Britain who keenly felt the loss of Empire, and to provide a surrogate for colonial rule." (p. 1). Since its inception, its role underwent significant changes, characterized by three phases. Until the early 1960s it served as an instrument to wield continuing influence in the post-colonial period. Then it tried "with very mixed results" to combat racism in Southern Africa. Since the 1980s, it has lost, as Krishnan Srinivasan argues, its purpose and could be abolished. Or, to put it differently: the Commonwealth provided a symbolic continuity of the Empire as long as the Empire remained an issue in British

politics, media and public opinion. Nowadays, it suffers from and could be killed by amnesia (Richard Bourne, quoted on p. 136).

The book is divided into four chapters, beginning with the history of the Commonwealth until the early 1960s. Appropriately termed 'The Nehru Commonwealth', it deals with the transformation of a club of British white settler dominions into a multiracial and multicultural entity in the wake of the decolonization of the British Empire in Asia. This was indeed no mean feat: in 1947, Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru voluntarily joined the Commonwealth, despite widespread Indian resentment against the former colonial power. Elistic sentimentalist sympathy with British education, language and democracy may have been a motive to join, but soon, as Krishnan Srinivasan points out, the Commonwealth did not only serve British interests – the continuation of the sterling area, the semblance of influence and world power status – but the interests of the new Asian members as well. The Commonwealth symbolized the acceptance of a status of equality in the international system, it provided development assistance in the form of the Colombo Plan, and it served as a corrective to the ensuing bipolar configuration of the Cold War.

This symbiotic relation, however, only lasted until the early 1960s, when it became clear to Nehru and other Asian members that racist notions had not vanished completely and that even the last imperial sentimentalists in Britain realized that the Commonwealth was no real substitute to the Empire. As chapter 2 ('The African Commonwealth') demonstrates, its purpose faded, as the vision of a family of nations with like-minded values collapsed over the issue of South Africa, whose racist white regime withdrew from the association because of pressure from Canada and the Asian and African members. South Africa's decision spared the British government the painful choice between a condemnation of apartheid and an embarrassing support for its strategic ally. As the former African colonies joined the Commonwealth, the association became more and more occupied with the white settler regime in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe. Krishnan Srinivasan is somewhat hesitant to accredit the Commonwealth a decisive role in ending white racist rule in Zimbabwe. He does, however, acknowledge the influence of African and Asian members on the British policy of effecting a change of government in Salisbury/Harare in the 1970s. Srinivasan leaves no doubt, however, that

apartheid and settler racism in Rhodesia brought the Commonwealth to the brink of collapse.

An illuminating third chapter deals with comparable associations like the Organization Internationale de la Francophonie, the Comunidade do Países de Língua Portuguesa, and the ill-fated Dutch-Indonesian Union, all modeled on the Commonwealth. Srinivasan explains that because of the increasing British occupation with Europe and the United States in the 1960s, the French government was much more effective in turning the Francophonie into an organization through which it could wield influence. He maintains that 'in contrast to the British, the French were poor colonizers, but effective post-colonial managers' (p. 104).

The final chapter, entitled 'Nobody's Commonwealth', discusses the role and position of the British Crown in the Commonwealth, as well as the British political and public response to the end of Empire. Analyzing the debate from the 1950s to the early 21st century, he concludes that in effect no one in Britain is interested in the Commonwealth any longer; indeed, a large segment of the younger generation does not know anything about it. So why hang on to an association in which no one is interested in anymore?

Krishnan Srinivasan makes it very clear that the Commonwealth is not an international organization with binding rules and norms. It is held together mainly by informality and tradition, and by the fact that so far the three main donors – Britain, Australia and Canada – have continued to financially support the Commonwealth and its limited institutional structure. If the Commonwealth were an organization like NATO or the EU, the search for new fields of activity could be explained by institutional needs. This is not the case with the Commonwealth. He sees the future of the Commonwealth closely linked to the willingness of British policymakers to rejuvenate the association. In the world of today, that seems unlikely.

Krishnan Srinivasan has written a highly readable, succinct and interpretive account of the Commonwealth, which not only covers the history of the association but gives practical advice on how the difficult task of remodeling it could be pursued. As such, it is an important book. It is of high relevance to all who study British foreign policy since 1945, decolonization, and the end of Empire.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

Citation: Marc Frey. Review of Srinivasan, Krishnan, *The Rise, Decline and Future of the British Commonwealth*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. January, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=21436>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.