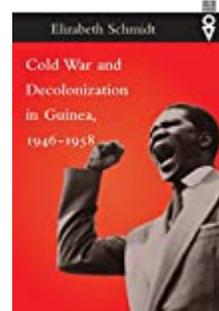




Elizabeth Schmidt. *Cold War and Decolonization in Guinea, 1946-1958.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007. xiv + 310 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8214-1763-8; \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8214-1764-5.



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Who Voted Non in Guinea

With the publication of *Cold War and Decolonization in Guinea, 1946-1958*, which followed her 2005 release of *Mobilizing the Masses: Gender, Ethnicity and Class in the Nationalist Movement in Guinea, 1939-1958*, Elizabeth Schmidt has established herself as one of the preeminent historians of the decolonization process in the West African nation of Guinea. Schmidt, professor of history at Loyola College in Maryland, has drawn on previously untapped archival sources and extensive oral interviews to produce an exhaustively researched book. In *Cold War and Decolonization in Guinea*, Schmidt analyzes the grassroots political process that formed and shaped the position of the Guinean branch of the Reassemblement Democratique Africain (RDA) and its secretary-general, Sekou Toure. Schmidt maintains in the introduction that many prior histories of decolonization in French West Africa have focused excessively on the role played by elites in forming the political stance of the nationalist parties across the region. In regard to the RDA, Schmidt maintains that scholars generally have not recognized that the party line was the product of struggle, repre-

senting the domination of one point of view over others, and that, when looking at the disagreements within the highest echelons of the party, they fail to carry the discussion down to the grassroots (pp. 2-3). Schmidt effectively and admirably does her part to correct this failure.

For readers unfamiliar with the complex history of decolonization in French West Africa, the 1946 French constitution allowed for the seating of African representatives in the National Assembly. The RDA was formed at the Bamako Congress in the same year as an umbrella organization representing the demands of the French West African territories. The RDA was initially regarded as a radical party tied to the French Communist Party (PCF). With Cold War tensions escalating in these same years, and with the United States taking an interest in decolonization, the RDA and its leader, Felix Houphouet-Boigny, was pressured by France to take a more moderate stance. In 1951, Houphouet-Boigny severed the RDA's ties to the PCF. Under the leadership of Toure, however, the Guinean branch of the RDA emerged as a radical, left-leaning organization that led to Guinea becoming the

first French West African territory to achieve its independence on October 2, 1958; that is, Guinea became the only territory to vote in favor of severing its ties with France when Charles de Gaulle put the issue to a straight yes or no vote. In short, Guinea voted *non* (no) to remaining in the empire. The result was the immediate end of French aid.

Schmidt argues effectively and persuasively that, while the historiography has generally held that the Guinean RDA was radical from the beginning, the reality is that Toure was pushed to the Left by grassroots militants, particularly trade unionists, students, women, and youth—not the other way around (p. 3). In so doing, Schmidt disengages this period of Guinea's history from the elitist focus of past histories and reconnects it to the Guinean people at the grassroots level. The result is a far more complete, inclusive, and engaging history of this pivotal moment in Guinea's modern history. For students and scholars of diplomacy, Schmidt demonstrates how activists on the local level, in this case Guinean activists, shaped and determined their own destiny in the face of high-level Cold War politics, rather, as is often supposed, than being manipulated by the Great Power actors.

Structurally the book is divided into six chapters with an introduction and a conclusion. Chapter 1 begins with an examination of the immediate post-World War II period. Schmidt explains the difficult position in which France found itself as a former Great Power under pressure by the demands for more autonomy from West African nationalists and the United States. One of Schmidt's observations overlooked by many general histories of Africa in this era is that during the Popular Front period (1936-38), numerous French Communists attained positions in the colonial administration and thus many West African intellectuals were well versed in Marxist-Leninist theory by the 1940s. Far from being radical nationalists, however, many French Communists mirrored the view of the Right that Africans were not ready for independence and that emancipation could occur only within the framework of French governance (p. 18). Holding similar views to the PCF in regard to colonial policy and having been educated in Marxist-Leninist theory, the RDA's elected representatives to the National Assembly in 1946 found common cause with the PCF. The result was that having barely taken their seats in the assembly, the RDA was the victim of anti-Communist repression when successively conservative regimes in France in 1947 sought to force its break with the PCF, now a much-maligned opposition party, rather

than a member of the ruling coalition (p. 34). Thus, the years from 1947 to 1951 were ones of oppression for the RDA and its Guinean arm. Not only were RDA members the victims of persecution, but also no colonial reforms came from Paris in these years.

The years between 1951 and 1955, covered in the second and third chapters, were marked by continued repression and division within the RDA. In 1950, Houphouët-Boigny was persuaded by Overseas Minister François Mitterrand to forge an alliance with his Union Démocratique et Socialiste de la Résistance (UDSR) party and sever the RDA's ties to the PCF, with the promise of a relaxation of pressure on the party. Houphouët-Boigny's decision to realign the party, however, was not met with universal support from the Guinean RDA. While the territorial representatives of the RDA were forging new alliances in Paris, the Guinean branch and its leadership, represented by Toure, were expressing their displeasure. Toure opposed the move as did many grassroots activists and trade unionists. It is worth noting as well that PCF money quite often fueled the Guinean RDA's disagreements with the territorial leadership of the party. The turmoil was intensified when, in the 1951 elections, Toure was defeated by an anti-RDA candidate. The Guinean RDA charged fraud and voter intimidation; Schmidt supports the claim.

Denied access to power, the Guinean RDA turned inward to organize and build its base, ensuring as well that it remained under suspicion as colonial authorities correctly surmised that many of its members remained deeply sympathetic to the PCF. Pressure by the authorities had the desired effect by the end of 1951 when the Guinean RDA found itself divided and in conflict over which course to follow. In October, Toure recanted his opposition to Houphouët-Boigny and fell in line with the territorial leadership of the party. Toure's new course was opposed by many on the Left in the Guinean branch even while Toure was still being criticized by the RDA leadership for not fully disassociating himself from the PCF. It goes perhaps without saying that the colonial authorities doubted the sincerity of Toure's new course. Nonetheless, Toure's balancing act paid off when he prevailed in the 1953 elections and became Guinea's only representative to the RDA's Territorial Assembly. The 1953 election of Toure, however, ended neither the divisions with the Guinean party nor the official suspicion of the party's sympathies. The outspoken militancy of the Guinean activists was taken by the authorities as evidence of the party's deceit when, in fact, it was evidence of a growing fissure between the leadership and the rank

and fileâ of the party (p. 67).

Chapters 3 and 4 continue to elaborate on the struggle within the Guinean RDA as colonial repression on the party continued, including, yet again, fraudulent interference in the 1954 elections to defeat the RDA. Nonetheless, by 1955, colonial attempts to suppress the RDA had failed as the âmajority of the ... population had rallied to the RDAâ (p. 95). Moreover, the failure of the colonial administration to quell RDA activists on the ground in Guinea coincided with growing international pressure on France from insurrections in both Indochina and North Africa. Faced with such considerations, the National Assembly implemented yet a new series of electoral forms known as *loi-cadre*, reforms designed to ultimately lead to limited self-government. Buffeted by *loi-cadre* and an easing of pressure by the administration, RDA activists swept to power in the municipal elections of 1956 and in the Guinean territorial elections of 1957, winning â75 percent of the vote and ... 56 of the assemblyâs seatsâ (p. 121). Schmidt notes, however, that while the RDA dominated all elected bodies as well as the new local government by May 1957, intraparty conflicts continued between the RDA leadership and its rank and file.

In the final two chapters, the author explains how the issue of De Gaulleâs Bayeux Constitution forced a final showdown between the Guinean RDA leadership and its persistent critics from the RDA Left. The Bayeux Constitution, a last-ditch effort to save the French Empire, proposed the creation of a French Community to replace the French Union. While supported initially by the RDA leadership in Guinea, as well as the interterritorial RDA, the constitution would have effectively disempowered Africans by leaving the Republic and the French president with sovereignty over âforeign, economic and defense policiesâ as well as âjustice, higher education, telecommunications and transportationâ (p. 141). Breaking again with both the interterritorial leadership and the initial position of the Guinean leaders, RDAâs grass-

roots activists rallied teachers, students, women, and trade unionists to overwhelmingly (94 percent) vote *non* to membership in De Gaulleâs French Community. By defeating the Bayeux Constitution in the September 1958 referendum, RDA activists secured full independence for Guinea, and the vengeful wrath of France. Guinea was, as Schmidt notes, the only territory to vote no. Under enormous pressure from the RDA Left, Toure himself endorsed the no position. French retaliation was swift, severe, and ultimately supported by the United States, having the effect of pushing Guinea into the arms of the Soviet Union.

Cold War and Decolonization in Guinea, while perhaps complicated for non-Africanists, is a worthwhile read for any scholar seeking to understand the unique decolonization course taken by this small West African nation. Schmidt very credibly marshals the evidence to demonstrate that the Guinean people were not captive to events and strong leaders, either in their party, whom they often saw as too accommodationist, or French politicians, who were only seeking a middle ground to save a colonial empire that was on life support. In this sense, the book is a fine example of what social history has to offer historians of the Cold War and diplomacy. Schmidt demonstrates that time and time again grassroots activists in the RDA were acutely aware that the path they were being led down, frequently by their own leadership, including, at least until the eleventh hour, Toure, was designed to continue their subservience and not secure their liberty. The final irony, as Schmidt elucidates, is that the French failure to understand this dynamic ended with the very result the Western powers had hoped to avoid: a Communist-affiliated Guinea and a Soviet ally in West Africa. Historians of diplomacy would do well in the future to continue to seek a deeper understanding of how local political dynamics, wherever the arena, often stymied Cold War policies for the Western powers. Schmidt has provided a highly admirable start.

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