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H-DIPLO ROUNDTABLE REVIEW:
The French Empire between the Wars and during the Vichy Regime

Martin Thomas, *The French Empire Between the Wars: Imperialism, Politics and Society* (Manchester University Press, 2005). pp. xxii + 408. ISBN 0 7190 6518 6.

Jacques Cantier and Eric Jennings (eds), *L'Empire colonial sous Vichy* (Odile Jacob, 2004). Pp. iii + 398. ISBN 2 7381 1544 6.

Roundtable Editor: **Talbot Imlay**, Professor, Université Laval

Roundtable Participants: **Robert Aldrich**, Associate Professor, University of Sydney; **William A. Hoisington, Jr.**, Professor Emeritus, University of Illinois at Chicago; **Kim Munholland**, Professor Emeritus, University of Minnesota; **Irwin Wall**, Visiting Scholar, Center for European Studies, New York University, Professor Emeritus, University of California at Riverside

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Editor's Introduction
by Talbot Imlay

As a field of scholarship, French imperial (or colonial) history is thriving -- as is that of colonial studies in general.[1] Borrowing methods from several disciplines and exploiting archival sources in France and its former colonies, historians are exploring the complex and evolving relationships between metropole and colony, both in the past and in the present. As Robert Aldrich comments, however, the inter-war and wartime years have been somewhat neglected in this scholarly effort, which has focused more on the earlier period of conquest and the later period of decolonisation. This neglect is one reason to welcome the two books under review: Martin Thomas' study of the French empire between the wars and Eric Jennings and Jacques Cantier's collection of essays on the French empire under Vichy. Another reason to welcome them is that all three scholars are experts in the field. A leading scholar of twentieth century French and British history, Martin Thomas, of the University Exeter, has published extensively on various aspects of French imperial history, including a study of the empire at war. Eric Jennings, of the University of Toronto, is the author of an award-winning monograph on "Vichy in the Tropics", while Jacques Cantier of the Université de Toulouse-Le Mitrail has written an important study of Algeria under Vichy.

The four reviewers are no less distinguished. William A. Hoisington, Jr., recently retired from the University of Illinois at Chicago, is the author of several studies of French colonial policy in North Africa; Robert Aldrich, of the University of Sydney, has written widely on the French empire and on colonialism more generally; Irwin Wall, emeritus professor at the University of

California at Riverside and Visiting Scholar at New York University's Center for European Studies, is the author of several studies on France's post-1945 international policy, including one on Franco-American relations and the Algerian war; and Kim Munholland, recently retired from the University of Minnesota, is an expert on twentieth century France and the author of a recent study of wartime New Caledonia and the Free French.

In his contribution to the roundtable, Kim Munholland remarks that the reviewer "faces a daunting task in finding a common thread to link two books that differ in scope, method and period." While Thomas' study is an overview of the empire between the wars, based on an enviable familiarity with primary sources and secondary literature, Jennings and Cantier's book offers several perspectives on the theme of Vichy's colonial policies. But despite the obvious differences between the two books, Munholland and his fellow contributors prove themselves up to the task of identifying a "common thread": that of the empire's long-term viability. The question of viability is evident in the reviewers' discussion of Thomas' book and, in particular, of his argument that inter-war France failed to forge a "coherent imperial power system"—a failure that presaged the empire's eventual demise. Although Munholland and Hoisington appear to find little fault with this negative assessment, Aldrich and Wall are less willing to accept that the interwar empire suffered from grievous, if not fatal weaknesses. Turning some of Thomas's evidence on its head, Aldrich suggests that repeated reform proposals, for example, indicate that the empire was far from marginal to French politicians. More generally, he notes that gauging the empire's importance greatly depends on who or what one looks at: if, as Thomas shows, imperial issues were merely one of a multitude of problems competing for the attention of policy makers in Paris, other scholars, exploring the realms of elite and popular culture as well as of imagination, insist that the empire occupied a prominent place. Wall, for his part, argues that Thomas' emphasis on the empire's weakness cannot explain Vichy's success in winning and maintaining the adherence of so many colonies. If the empire really was so fragile, one would expect the stress of France's military defeat in 1940 to have had a centrifugal rather than centripetal effect. In the end, Wall contends that the reasons for the empire's collapse should be sought not in the pre-war or wartime periods, but in the post-1945 period.

Aldrich and Wall both make important points. If it is true, as Aldrich proposes, that the empire sunk deep roots in France at the conscious and sub-conscious levels, then it was arguably more viable than Martin contends. The same can be said for Wall's argument that France's ability to control dissent was never in doubt between the wars. Nevertheless, I do think there is much to be said for Thomas' general point that the inter-war empire was a failing enterprise. As students of twentieth century U.S. foreign policy have suggested, the Americans after 1945 were able to establish an "informal" empire in Western Europe because of their success in creating a community of interests. [2] From this perspective, the countries of Western Europe found American dominance acceptable because it provided important benefits, most obviously security and prosperity. Although the "informal" nature of the American empire does distinguish it from the interwar (and wartime) French empire, the more important point is that the ultimate viability of empire rests on the ability of both sides—those in the metropole and those in the colonies – to benefit. And as Thomas shows, inter-war France proved unable to create this type of relationship, one closer to partnership than to vassalage. For the French, the empire was something to be exploited to the benefit of France and of those Europeans within the colonies. Vichy's harsher policies exposed this unequal relationship by stripping the latter of all pretence,

but the fundamental principles underlying the relationship – those of exploitation, dependence, inequality, racism—existed beforehand. Indeed, these principles were at the very heart of the French colonial effort—as of all colonial efforts—during this period. The French empire, in other words, lacked a legitimacy founded on the willing adherence of its subjects, which itself was based on mutual interests. [3] In this sense, Thomas is right to describe the inter-war empire as unviable.

The four reviewers also address the question of viability in their discussions of Jennings and Cantier's collection. All four reviewers respond to the argument advanced in the book, particularly in Jennings' chapter on Indochina and Cantier's on the post-war consequences, that the Vichy experience contributed directly to the empire's demise by strengthening nationalist, anti-colonial sentiments within the colonies while weakening France's overall authority. One implication is that, if not for Vichy and the war, France's hold on the empire would have been far stronger than it was in 1945. Hoisington and Munholland, however, question the notion of Vichy as a new departure, observing that its policies, such as that of encouraging differences among the Vietnamese in a divide-and-rule strategy, was common practice well before the war. As Munholland concludes on a more general note, "Vichy's imperial rule...often did not reverse but intensified trends that could be found in pre-1940 France and its approach to the empire." At most, then, the experience of Vichy accelerated the process of post-war imperial demise, which if true would lend support to Thomas' argument that the inter-war empire was a failing enterprise.

Of course, there are no easy answers to the question of how viable was the French empire before and during the war. Even if one admits that it was a failing enterprise, that its ultimate demise was as close to inevitable as anything can be in history, this in no way detracts from the value of studying the French empire in all its diversity and complexity during the pre-war and wartime periods. Imperial history during these periods is not only fascinating in its own right, but also has the potential to tell us much about the world after 1945 and even today. For as colonial scholars have convincingly argued, we are all products of empire.

Notes:

[1] For a recent discussion of the field, see Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005).

[2] The classic statement of this view is Geir Lundestad, "Empire by Invitation?: The United States and Western Europe, 1945-1952", *Journal of Peace Research* 23 (1986), pp. 263-77. Also see G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and other Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 163-214. Another worthwhile comparison might be with Napoleon's empire, another enterprise that lacked the legitimacy based on a community of interests. The literature is large, but compare Alexander Grab, *Napoleon and the Transformation of Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) and T.W.C. Blanning, *The French Revolution in Germany: Occupation and Resistance in the Rhineland, 1792-1802* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983).

[3] Neta Crawford has recently made a case for the role of moral arguments in the demise of empire. It might be interesting to explore the links between morality and material interests. See Crawford, *Argument and Change in World Politics: Ethics, Decolonization, and Humanitarian Intervention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).