



**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

H-Diplo Roundtables Editor: **Diane Labrosse**, Faculty Lecturer, Concordia University, National Security Archive H-Diplo Fellow

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**Author's Response by Eric T. Jennings**

University of Toronto

A warm thank you to the participants and organizers of this round-table for a lively and informed discussion. I am, moreover, flattered that Jacques Cantier's and my edited volume would even be included in this forum, given that, as many of the reviewers remark, ours is not a work of diplomatic history. It should, however, qualify as international history, as we quite consciously tried to bring together Africanists, Caribbeanists, Asianists, and French colonial historians, not to mention historians of multiple nationalities and perspectives, in a single comparative volume.

I want, firstly, to echo Irwin Wall's observation that the "turning-point of decolonization" issue may constitute a "false debate." False because the French empire was never coherent nor homogenous—places like Gabon, Saint-Pierre and Miquelon, and Laos share little in common. False also because of multiple chronologies arising in part from these differences. To be sure, if one focuses on Algeria or continental sub-Saharan Africa, then the Second World War looms less large in the process of decolonization than if one were to concentrate on Syria, Indochina, or Madagascar. If one zooms in on these last examples, it becomes apparent that the empire was indeed profoundly shaken by the Second World War. Tremors extended to Sétif in 1945, to Madagascar in 1947, and to Syria-Lebanon between 1941 and 1948, as well as to the South Pacific, which underwent quite different transformations [1], and finally to the French overseas departments that opted to constitutionally join France in 1946. False, finally, because decolonization, though it certainly featured a series of catalysts like the Vichy period, cannot be reduced to an abrupt or sudden rupture. In a colony like Madagascar, initial late nineteenth

century royalist rebellions (the Menalamba) made way to the opposition of secret societies (VVS) during the time of the First World War, replaced in turn by calls for internal reform, and finally by a surge in support for outright independence spearheaded by a variety of resistance movements in the wake of the Vichy episode [2]. This is not to suggest that the empire was somehow preordained to collapse: Talbot Imlay and Robert Aldrich are right to reject any teleology of this sort.

Only through a vast comparison, Cantier and I thought, could we bring some of these complexities and nuances to light. We strove, moreover, to combine methodological approaches, by including pieces, for example, on colonial propaganda and representations (Ginio), POWs (Thomas) youth (Cantier), repression (Zytnicki, Levisse-Touzé), networks (Ramognino), resistance movements (Brocheux), and memories (Cantier, Bavoux).

Turning to two much smaller points surrounding my own chapters: Kim Munholland and William Hoisington Jr. rightly underscore how neither association policies, nor notions of cultural or racial authenticity were in any way new to Vichy. This I fully acknowledge. However, Vichy marked a very significant change of both degree and kind. Let me focus for a minute on Indochina, where the intensity of Vichy's National Revolution was first recognized by none other than William Hoisington Jr in 1972 [3]. Never before Vichy had a governor general dared pronounce the word "Vietnam" in public, let alone call for the adulation of local heroes and heroines, the rejection of Frenchification as a chimera, the exaltation of local pasts and languages. This new paradoxical permissiveness allowed Vietnamese nationalists, long foiled in their attempts to publish such materials, to print ultranationalist poems, to delineate and articulate a new nationalist vision of the past, and to explicitly condemn the colonizers for having "denatured" Indochina through attempts at assimilation [4]. Most astonishingly, Vichy encouraged thousands of Indochinese youngsters to enroll in martial youth camps, where they were subjected to nationalist (and often anti-Japanese) training. Ultimately, the question of how Vichy's governor Jean Decoux differed on these policies from someone like republican governor Pierre Pasquier (they do differ, I contend) bears strong resemblance to the endless debate over whether Vichy marked a rupture or a continuity with the republic in metropolitan France.

Lastly, a point of clarification. Wall mentions that the answer to my question "was Vichy any more anti-Black than the Third Republic?" seems obvious. And yet, few attempts have been made to understand the precise nature of Vichy discrimination. Was Vichy's exclusionary apparatus and ideology aimed exclusively at Jews, and if so, what does this tell us about the nature of Vichy's racism? In this particular chapter, I hope to have engaged with, and problematized, Robert Paxton's claim that "Vichy xenophobia was more cultural and national than racial" [5].

Notes:

[1] See Kim Munholland, *Rock of Contention: Free French and Americans at War in New Caledonia, 1940–1945* (Berghahn Books, 2005).

[2] See Solofo Randrianja, *Société et lutttes anticoloniales à Madagascar, 1896-1946* (l'Harmattan, 2001).

[3] William Hoisington Jr. "Politics and Postage Stamps: The Postal Issues of the French State and Empire 1940-1944" *French Historical Studies* 7:3 (1972), p. 365.

[4] On this issue, see my chapter in the volume under review, as well as *Vichy in the Tropics*, chapter 7, and Eric Jennings, "Conservative Confluences, 'Nativist' Synergy: Re-inscribing Vichy's National Revolution in Indochina" *French Historical Studies* 27:3 (2004), pp. 601-635.

[5] Robert Paxton, *Vichy France, Old Guard and New Order* (Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 174-5

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