



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.

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A reviewer faces a daunting task in finding a common thread to link two books that differ in scope, method and period. One is a broad work of synthesis on French colonialism between the two world wars that combines Martin Thomas's extensive reading of the secondary literature on French colonialism with his familiarity with archival sources. The other is a compilation of essays on discreet topics about Vichy's National Revolution as it played out in selected parts of the empire. The common thread that links the broad overview with the specific examples of Vichy in the tropics is the defeat of 1940. Why, on the one hand, did the empire fail to save France from humiliation, and then how did Vichy authorities try to refashion the imperial relationship as part of a renewed France to be constructed on the ruins of republicanism?

The books under review either implicitly or explicitly have in mind the question of when France headed down the road toward decolonization. A kind of truism is that the defeat of 1940 was the decisive humiliation for imperial France by revealing a vulnerability and weakness that would lead to wars of national liberation after 1945. One of the many virtues of Martin Thomas's impressive synthesis is that in ten densely packed chapters he effectively demonstrates the extent of these weaknesses and opposition to French rule to be found throughout the empire before the defeat in 1940. Even as the empire contributed to the victory over Germany in 1918, evidence of resistance to French authority tempered the image of a loyal empire. For the Vichy rulers who came to power in 1940 the shortcomings of French imperial policy provided a further indictment of republicanism and its mistaken approach to empire. The National Revolution would restore

the health of the empire and overcome the humiliation of defeat as it would forge a new, more dynamic France in Europe.

These two books also should be placed within a historiography of French imperialism that has analyzed the importance of the French Empire within the context of power politics. Was the empire an asset or a liability? From the early stages of French expansionism in the late nineteenth century the imperial lobby of the Third Republic argued that France's overseas conquests provided evidence of French strength and recovery from the defeat of 1870-71. In the aftermath of World War I the contributions to victory on the part of soldiers and workers recruited from the empire gained popular recognition and bought a greater appreciation for the value of colonies. But the empire was and would remain in the minds of French imperialists a source of strength for the French nation-state [1].

Strength through empire reemerged again when a German menace reappeared under Hitler's leadership in the 1930s. The idea of a "greater France" was a source of comfort but, as it turned out, provided a false sense of security. Martin Thomas's critical read of French imperial policies during the inter-war years leads to a scathing conclusion: "By 1939 France was a declining European power in crisis, with an unmanageable colonial empire." He then adds, "But so it was in 1920" (p. 347). What happened between the euphoria of victory in 1918, when the empire was praised for its contribution of workers and soldiers to victory, and the inability of the empire, which again provided soldiers, to save France from defeat?

For Thomas the history of the French Empire between the wars is a tale of mismanagement and exploitation that belied the mythology of France's "civilizing mission" in which republican values and economic progress would spread to the peoples under French rule overseas. A parallel myth of imperial France, or "*la plus grande France*" emerged in which "France" was an imperial nation over one hundred million strong. Yet scholars studying French colonialism have long recognized the hypocrisy beneath the Third Republic's ideology and myth of empire. These were not one million equals, and a postcolonial critique argues that the "civilizing mission" yielded to the need of empire as a construction of a greater and presumably stronger France, but it was a France of inequality. As Thomas notes (p. 5), the imperial community was based upon a system of racial and political oppression.

The gap between theory and practice of republican imperialism became starkly apparent during the First World War and in its aftermath, and it brought resistance. Thomas documents the extensive anti-draft riots in French West Africa and Indochina during World War I. Demand for troops and labor provoked extensive migration to escape the manpower demands of France engaged in a desperate struggle. The colonial contribution to victory was significant. Colonial veterans returned from the war only to find their expectations of citizenship denied. This rejection, as Alice Conklin has demonstrated, exposed the hollowness of any notions that the vaunted "civilizing mission" would offer access to French political rights and social equality, save for a very narrow elite [2]. Rather than offering concessions even to veterans as a reward for contributions to victory, the French government was anxious to consolidate its hold upon what was seen as a strategic and economic asset, particularly as a source of manpower for a stagnant population in metropolitan France.

Yet this was a troubled asset. Wartime resistance to French demands found a parallel in the uprisings that required military operations to contain them during the inter-war decades. Thomas describes “an empire in revolt” as the colonial army was called upon to repress the Druse uprising in the Syrian mandate, the Rif rebellion in Morocco, Yen Bay in Indochina and the less well known Kongo Wara revolt in French Equatorial Africa. These were reminders that the empire was far from pacified. Anti-colonial nationalist movements in Tunisia and Algeria, that strengthened as a result of the economic crisis of the Depression, also led to severe repression.

Theoretical options for governing the empire were laid out in Raymond Betts’s classic formulation: either assimilation, which would fulfill the republican promise of access to the benefits of French civilization, or association, which would respect the hierarchies and different traditions to be found among the peoples of the sprawling and diverse empire [3]. A whiff of assimilation could be seen in reform proposals for a liberalization of French imperial rule that appeared during the Popular Front era or in Albert Sarraut’s call for a more inclusive administration and his appeal for economic development that would more closely link the empire with metropolitan France. Instead, the choice was a policy of association, which assured stability, the preservation of the status quo, and was, as Thomas notes, a more economical and less disruptive method of rule (pp. 60-61). While ostensibly showing respect for colonial traditions, association confirmed the basically conservative approach of the Third Republic to colonial issues between the wars. The search for order meant security and strength for France in Europe rather than the introduction of reforms that would have brought political rights, economic prosperity and military security *to la plus grande France*.

The “civilizing mission” had been turned on its head as association prevailed. Rather than bringing the benefits of a western civilization to the peoples under French rule, an empire characterized by authoritarianism, racism and male gender bias (see Thomas’s chapter on the subject of women in the empire) was exploited to guarantee the security of a Eurocentric France. When the Popular Front tried to introduce modest reforms (the one glimmer of hope in Thomas’s critical account) opposition by entrenched economic interests, right-wing politicians, the colonial military and the reactionary views of the settler populations frustrated the endeavor. Within the Popular Front itself, including Premier Léon Blum, colonial issues were not high on the priority list.

Despite efforts to raise an imperial consciousness in metropolitan France through the cinema, promotions of colonial tourism, colored maps of empire in classrooms, colonial exhibitions (1930, 1931), illustrated press (*l’Illustration*, *l’Illustration Coloniale*), the empire was not an empire “for the masses” as yet. As the threat of war in Europe intensified in 1938, however, the empire acquired a new importance. Thomas notes that nostalgia for imperial grandeur gained popular acceptance across political lines, but this imperial role did not include planning for a defense of the empire itself. Instead, imperial subjects were called to the colors for the purpose of protecting greater France in Europe. Over five hundred thousand colonial troops were mobilized, but could they be trusted? Military planners feared subversion, but their concerns were misplaced, as colonial troops fought with determination to the end and were often victims of German racist atrocities in the last stages of the 1940 campaign [4]. Thousands joined their metropolitan comrades, enduring harsh conditions of treatment as German prisoners of war, the

topic of Martin Thomas's contribution to the volume of seventeen essays edited by Jacques Cantier and Eric Jennings.

France had fallen but the empire was still standing. For a crucial week, as Marshal Pétain's government negotiated the terms of an armistice, the empire offered the possibility of continued resistance. The key figure among the colonial governors who indicated a willingness to fight on was General Charles-Auguste Noguès, high resident in Morocco and commander-in-chief of French forces in North Africa. Noguès feared that capitulation would lose the confidence of the native population, perhaps provoking an uprising. Pierre Boisson, at the time governor-general of French Equatorial Africa but later to become one of Vichy's most repressive colonial governors as high commissioner for French Africa, urged Noguès to resist, and he pledged to continue the struggle [5].

The temptation passed with the signing of the armistice and assurance that Vichy retained control of the empire. Although French colonies in the Pacific and Equatorial Africa rallied to de Gaulle in 1940, the most valuable parts of the empire –North Africa, Indochina, West Africa, Madagascar, the Antilles, Syria and Lebanon— chose obedience to Marshal Pétain's authority. Each in its own way, as the essays in the Cantier-Jennings volume make clear, installed Vichy's National Revolution. This was "pure Vichy" outside any pressures of occupation save Indochina where the Japanese were a constraining presence but otherwise left Admiral Decoux a relatively free hand to govern according to the precepts of the National Revolution. Vichy in the tropics included both implementation of Vichy's racist and authoritarian doctrines and denunciation of Gaullist traitors, who were accused of betraying the empire to the British.

To what extent was the National Revolution welcomed in the tropics, and by whom? Among the colonizers there is no doubt that the demise of the Third Republic was generally unlamented among a significant proportion of the French residents and settler populations. The Popular Front's reform proposals, insofar as they implied a challenge to settler dominance in Algeria or elsewhere, were resented. Jennings highlights support for Vichy in Indochina. The colonized had no choice in the matter. There were signs of resistance that reflected some measure of republican patriotism both in the colonies that rallied to de Gaulle and in those colonies that remained under Vichy, where Gaullist resisters were repressed along with other of the regime's undesirables [6]. Martinique seemed inclined to resistance until Admiral Robert cracked down on dissent.

Gaullists, Jews, Blacks, communists, freemasons, were anti-France overseas. These were the elements responsible for France's decline and defeat. The National Revolution would remedy the corruption and false ideas of the Third Republic. The Vichy program varied slightly in its application according to the circumstances that prevailed in the different parts of the empire, but a major virtue of the essays collected in *L'empire colonial sous Vichy* is to permit comparison of how Vichy came to North Africa, West Africa, the Antilles, Madagascar and Indochina. In keeping with the precepts of association, local traditions and customs would be respected and not subject to the misguided, modernizing principles of assimilation. The defeat enabled a break with the past, and Vichy propaganda stressed a new order and a new caring for the welfare of the empire, but always on Vichy's terms. Vichy organizations: the Legion, a youth culture, athletics, a cult of Pétain, family, respect for the Church, all became central to Vichy's imperial enterprise, as several authors explore in their contributions. Vichy's propaganda, as Ruth Ginio argues,

deplored the “criminal neglect” of the empire by the republic (p.122). Vichy claimed that its respect for traditional values was more in keeping with the authentic traditions to be found among the diverse peoples of the far-flung empire, and its program was closer to the everyday life of the people than the abstract formulas of the Third Republic (p. 134).

The defeat of 1940, then, offered a chance to reframe the colonial relationship on a firmer foundation. Yet the break implied by this reading was less dramatic or fundamental than Vichy propaganda claimed. Rejection of the promise implicit in assimilation in favor of association had already taken place under the Third Republic during the inter-war years and even before. While Vichy rulers claimed that their values could more easily be reconciled with local traditions, they often had the unintended consequence of giving ammunition to anti-colonial resistance, as could be seen in Indochina. Although created for different purposes, Vichy’s detention camps in Algeria reflected the camps set up by the Daladier ministry in 1938-39 to receive refugees from Spain and Nazi Germany. In the final analysis Vichy’s imperial rule in the empire often did not reverse but intensified trends that could be found in pre-1940 France and its approach to the empire.

While the essays in the Cantier-Jennings collection provide more detail as to what Vichy’s new order meant for the empire, they also raise issues of continuity by placing Vichy’s colonial policy within the *longue durée* of France’s imperial history. As with the revisionist interpretation of the Vichy regime, Vichy’s empire was not merely a parenthesis between two republics. For instance, Vichy’s condemnation of assimilation and vaunting of its concern for traditions of the peoples of the empire was anticipated by the Third Republic’s practice between the wars in which ideas and methods of association prevailed. Repression under Vichy rule might have been more severe than under the Third Republic, but both regimes were determined to preserve the colonial order. The basic goal of preserving the empire as evidence of French status remained the same.

Nor did Vichy’s vaunted concern for the welfare of the empire obscure that possession of the empire enabled Vichy to claim that despite the defeat in 1940 France remained a power of importance, justifying a favored place in Hitler’s New Order. Like much else about Vichy, this was an illusion that became apparent when Vichy lost control of virtually all of its empire, beginning with the rallies to de Gaulle, British-led military operations in Syria and Madagascar and reaching a moment of truth with the Allied invasion of North Africa. The purge of Vichy personnel began in Algeria as soon as de Gaulle outmaneuvered Giraud and was able to end what Cantier and Levisse-Touzé deplore as a six month American protectorate over Vichy bis. Despite Gaullist purges, the memory of Vichy as a time of repression would be felt in the postwar world and would feed resistances to the French colonial order.

The alternative to Vichy’s imperial project was the empire of resistance. Jacques Cantier’s thoughtful contribution, “Les horizons de l’après Vichy. De la ‘libération’ de l’empire aux enjeux de memoire,” provides a solid, brief account of the way in which the empire played a critical role in de Gaulle’s recovery of France from the humiliation of defeat and the shame of Vichy. Soldiers from the empire, who constituted over half the troops in the French First Army, thought that this time their expectations for a more equal status in a new colonial order would be met. In early 1944 the Brazzaville conference promised a new French community for the postwar

world and it seemed to offer the prospect of greater equality for imperial France, but the hopes of liberation of the empire gave way once more to the demands of power politics. As Cantier notes, colonizers and colonized shared common memories of liberation that reflected contradictory aspirations (p. 363). Brazzaville basically reaffirmed French control of the empire.

Frantz Fanon had signed up to fight for liberty, but his experience in France turned him toward revolutionary violence when he realized that the blood of colonial soldiers had been spilled more for France than for liberty in the empire (pp. 335-36) [7]. On the other side of the world, Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnamese independence at the end of the war. In Algeria a celebration of V-E Day turned bloody when French troops fired on demonstrators. Liberation revealed the hopes and disillusionment embodied in the Brazzaville program. The role of the empire in the liberation of France was important, but it was a shared experience that served as a bridge from a wartime empire to an empire in revolt. While de Gaulle recognized that the war had altered the imperial relationship, he and his successors were prepared to fight to preserve an empire as evidence of French grandeur and global reach, making the wars of decolonization unavoidable. Once more the prospect of a reformed imperial relationship, which might have produced another kind of imperial identity, yielded to the demands of power politics.

Both Martin Thomas's magisterial synthesis and the important essays assembled by Cantier and Jennings provide further evidence of the historically complex encounter that was imperial France, an encounter that continues to shape contemporary France as subsequent generations have struggled with the legacy and memories from these years.

Notes

[1] Gary Wilder argues that in light of globalization it is "a-historical" to narrate French imperial history in national terms. See his "Panafrikanism and the Republican Political Sphere" in Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall, eds. *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France* (Durham and London: 2003), 251. While it is important to rethink French history from a global perspective, the issue here has to do with how the empire was perceived from what was basically a Eurocentric perspective during the inter-war and war years that blocked what might have been a more inclusive vision.

[2] Alice Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Stanford: 1997).

[3] Raymond Betts, *Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory, 1890-1914* (New York: 1961) remains the point of departure for measuring the distance between theory and practice in French colonial rule. The University of Nebraska Press will be reprinting this seminal work in paperback edition this Fall.

[4] Raffael Scheck, "'They Are Just Savages': German Massacres of Black Soldiers from the French Army in 1940," *Journal of Modern History* 77 (June 2005): 325-344.

[5] Pierre Ramognino, "L'Afrique de l'ouest sous le proconsulat de Pierre Boisson (juin 1940-juin 1943) in Jacques Cantier and Eric Jennings, *L'empire colonial sous Vichy*, 69-87.

[6] At one point (p. 17) Eric Jennings dismisses the colonial rallies to Free France as made “either under the threat of the cannon, or because they were surrounded by British colonies”. That economic needs and British military support influenced rallies to de Gaulle in 1940 is correct. But a certain republican patriotism was as significant in the rallies to de Gaulle in Equatorial Africa and Oceania as it was for jailed Gaullist dissidents in the Antilles, North Africa, West Africa or the Indochina of Admiral Decoux that Jennings himself discusses (p. 31).

[7] Dennis McEnnerney, “Frantz Fanon, the Resistance, and the Emergence of Identity Politics,” in Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall, eds. *The Color of Liberty*, 259-281.

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