



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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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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Author's Response by Martin Thomas

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I'd like to express my thanks to the roundtable participants and to its organizer, Diane N. Labrosse, for putting together such thoughtful – and thought provoking – reviews. Talbot Imlay has done a fine job in summarizing them, and it is my pleasure to respond to their comments.

As Talbot notes in his opening remarks, historical interest in France's recent colonial past is stronger than it has been for many years. The legacy of colonialism and its aftermath has become strikingly apparent to western commentators in a post-Cold War world in which gross wealth disparities between societies, disputes over quasi-imperialistic interventions in sovereign states, and scholastic arguments over the validity of the 'clash of civilizations' concept show little sign of easing.

If the recent history of colonial domination has much to tell us about the twenty-first century world, any historian tackling it must first decide where and when to begin their study. Difficult choices of chronological and geographical focus, source selection, and prioritization have to be confronted. Investigating Europe's colonial past, as one recent historian of British decolonization has put it, is as close to 'total history' as one can get.[1] The very idea may seem, at worst, off-putting; at best, daunting. But it makes a good deal of sense nonetheless. The study of colonial empire is not easily disaggregated into social, cultural, or purely 'imperial' history, into the politics of decision-making at the centers of imperial power or life in the colonial 'peripheries' where those decisions had most immediate effect. Instead, historians of empire have to wear

several subject specialist hats at once if they are to relate the discreet histories of individual colonies to the actions of imperial governments and the racial, juridical and cultural arguments that underpinned colonial exploitation. As Irwin Wall shrewdly points out, in a world blighted by the iniquities of trade between affluent north and developing south, a further aspect of this 'total history' must be some awareness of the economics of colonial dependency and their lasting consequences. Then, of course, there is the problem of hindsight. In his treatment of labour history in post-war Africa, historian Frederick Cooper has stressed that the fact that we know the end point of formal colonial rule makes it harder to clarify the processes at work in decolonization. It is all too easy to ascribe undue influence to abstract forces of nationalism, Cold War pressures or a collapse of will to rule among the colonial powers. Such simplistic generalizations leave no room for agency among colonized peoples themselves and treat both rulers and ruled as essentially homogenous.[2] Nor can colonial historians afford to ignore the insights of their colleagues in political science. The complexities of colonial states, at once nations in the making and societies denied the building blocks – ethnic, cultural, and constitutional – of meaningful national identity, have been more thoroughly explored, at least at the theoretical level, by political scientists.[3] So, too, scholars of political economy and international relations have theorized most extensively about the 'political topographies' of post-colonial nation-states and the loaded terminology of 'failed states' in the developing world.[4] The prevalence of political violence in former colonial states and the origins of that violence in the traumatic national paths to decolonization also engage scholars trying to connect colonial histories to contemporary societal conflicts. [5]

As several of the reviewers point out, the specter of decolonization is a recurrent theme in my study of France's interwar empire, the essence of my argument being that the French empire at its zenith was a more tenuous construction than its vast physical extent and copious human and material resources might imply. The twentieth century's World Wars were decisive in France's road to decolonization, but my feeling is that it was the first of these more than the second that marked the tipping point from an empire that France could manage to one that it could not. This is not to dismiss the importance of the 1940 defeat, the Franco-French colonial civil wars of 1940-44, or the impact that the Vichy regime made upon overseas territories. Rather, it is to suggest that many of the salient features of colonial breakdown from the 1940s onward: nationalist mobilization, urbanization and colonial worker militancy, armed revolutionary insurgencies, and chronic shortage of metropolitan funds for colonial development, all became manifest in the interwar years. Underlying all this was a more profound and ultimately insoluble problem. How could colonial domination be justified or sustained by its enthusiastic supporters without the material backing of long-term state investment to underpin the developmental, cultural, and political projects they proposed? The alleged benefits of republican acculturation, of French language and tradition, could only go so far to fill the gaps left by lack of government money, and this financial problem, already severe in the early 1920s, became truly overwhelming in the 1930s as the impact of depression drove France toward economic expedients that pushed numerous colonies from Tunisia to northern Vietnam over the edge into starvation conditions. In this sense, an important subsidiary objective of my book was to put the colonial and metropolitan impact of the depression at the heart of the analysis of French decolonization. How, then, can this generally pessimistic view of France's interwar empire be reconciled with the fact that a further three decades of French colonialism – Vichy and Free France, French Union, bloody wars in Indochina and Algeria – all lay ahead? Kim Munholland

reminds us of the way in which the events of 1940 can mesmerize, captivating historians of the late Third Republic like rabbits in the headlights transfixed by the inevitable juggernaut. With colonial matters, this just won't do. While the 1940 defeat involved a heavy and still poorly acknowledged spilling of colonial blood, it was peripheral to some colonial populations, and welcomed by others. As Eric Jennings and Jacques Cantier's excellent collection makes plain, the Vichy years would be a more decisive experience for most. Furthermore, as Irwin Wall notes, the empire survived World War II in spite of the hostile attentions of stronger powers and the impact of Vichy. But, as he further points out, there is something false, or at least arbitrary, in an 'either – or' judgment that insists on the primacy of a particular date or event in determining that France's empire would collapse. My point is not that the French empire was about to collapse on the eve of war in 1939, but that it had already been brought close to collapse by 1939. In other words, the seeds of its destruction were already sown by the end of the interwar period, even if the nature and timing of the outcome remained uncertain. Long-term neglect from Paris, reforms aborted or blocked time and again, and simmering popular discontent all pointed to impending crisis, even if the precise form of this crisis had yet to take shape.

What, if anything, does this suggest about the role of empire in French society and culture, a vital point raised in Robert Aldrich's review? As he notes, there is something of a dichotomy between the 'minimalists' who focus primarily on politics and economics, and the 'maximalists' whose cultural approach points up the omnipresence of colonial exoticism in French culture and its concomitant impact on popular attitudes to empire, race, and gender relations. Certainly, French colonial history has been transformed over recent years by the closer attention paid to these markers of popular imperialism, and is much the richer for it. Furthermore, as both Robert and Irwin comment, perhaps the deepest, most lasting effects of France's colonial enterprise are to be registered in the cultural, not the political or economic sphere: in the spread of language, the transformation of former colonial cities, the consumption patterns of the French and their former colonial subjects. Here, as Robert gently suggests, I've perhaps left too much unsaid, driven, I'm afraid, as much by limitations of space as by absence of mind. But, insofar as my book falls into a minimalist school, it does so because it tries to separate the pervasiveness of colonial cultural symbols in interwar France from the lack of active political or economic engagement with colonial problems during the interwar years. Colonial issues, as Robert notes in his guise of devil's advocate, did loom large on the radar of some interwar governments, the National Bloc of the early 1920s and the Popular Front of 1936-37 especially. Yet neither of these administrations, nor their successors, followed through with any of the investment projects, limited constitutional reforms, or social policy initiatives that they debated. Settlers, an obstructionist Senate, and powerful colonial lobby groups were partly to blame. But so, too, was the absence of much real popular engagement in France with the most pressing problems of colonial rule and life for colonial subjects. In this sense, empire in France was everywhere and nowhere at the same time, or, as Irwin Wall neatly frames it: it was "an empire that wasn't".

Perhaps the more interesting conceptual difficulty here is quite how historians of empire should measure the persistence of cultural remnants of empire in former colonies and 'mother country' next to the more abrupt endings of formal political control that customarily dominate the timelines of decolonization. Factoring post-colonial economic dependence, currency alignments, and patterns of trade into this equation make the task harder still, but seem to indicate that the old certainties of the 'transfer of power' school of imperial history must be rethought. Here, too, my

point about the political and economic decline of France's interwar empire is that it should form part of a longer-term continuum of colonial disintegration that attaches as much weight to World War I as to World War II.

And so we come full circle, back to the nature of decolonization, its duration and extent, and its resonance in the twenty-first century. Both William Hoisington and Kim Munholland reflect on a fundamental question: ethical considerations aside, was empire worth it for France? Inevitably, the interwar aspect of this question invites a mixed response. Politically, imperial problems did not bring down governments or split parties. However, those same problems confronted the French parliamentary right with the strict financial limits to its imperialism while exposing the hypocrisies of the 'colonial humanism' and interest in worker rights that supposedly informed the actions of the Communist and non-Communist left. Colonial commitments drew off relatively little budgetary expenditure and closed colonial economies offered some reassurance to otherwise uncompetitive export producers in difficult economic times, albeit at appalling human cost to colonial peoples. Those same colonial commitments created insoluble strategic dilemmas for France, many of which would become more apparent after 1940. Culturally, for better or worse, metropolitan France and its colonies were in some ways drawn closer together, but always in a hierarchical, one-sided, and racially ordered relationship whose adverse consequences remain with us today. But can we really leave matters there? Can we ever put the ethical considerations aside? At a time when 'empire nostalgia' of various types seems dangerously prevalent, surely it is most incumbent on the colonial historian to reiterate the most salient point of all: whatever it purported to be, colonial empire was a system of racial exploitation. Ultimately, it was as untenable as it was unjustifiable. Over the course of the interwar period, driven in large part by the effects of the depression on France and its empire, it seems to me that this underlying reality became increasingly manifest.

Notes:

[1] L. J. Butler, *Britain and Empire. Adjusting to a Post-Imperial World* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002).

[2] Frederick Cooper, 'The Dialectics of Decolonization: Nationalism and Labor Movements in Postwar French Africa', in Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, *Tensions of Empire. Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 406-35.

[3] The pioneer here has been Crawford Young. See his *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), and his 'The Colonial State and Post-Colonial Crisis,' in Prosser Gifford and Wm. Roger Louis (eds), *Decolonization and African Independence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 1-31.

[4] Catherine Boone, *Political Topographies of the African State: Territorial Authority and Institutional Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Robert H. Jackson, *Quasi-States: Sovereignty, International Relations and the Third World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[5] Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, *Africa Works. Disorder as Political Instrument* (Oxford: James Currey, 1999); Jeffrey Herbst, *States and Power in Africa. Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000); Gil Merom, *How Democracies Lose Small Wars. State, Society, and the Failures of France in Algeria, Israel in Lebanon, and the United States in Vietnam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

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