



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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John MacKenzie remarks in his preface to Martin Thomas' volume that the interwar period has been the 'Cinderella' of colonial history. Indeed, much study of colonisation has been dominated by the conquest of empire--exploration of the Congo and the Mekong, flag-raising in Timbuktu and Luang Prabang—or about post-1945 decolonisation. The moment at which European empires reached their apogee, or at least their greatest geographical extent, and when they achieved their maximum (though fragile) stability, commands less attention. The vagaries of administration, programmes for economic development, the building of European-style cities on the edge of jungles and deserts, the day-to-day business of running the empire and living in the colonies, the "mechanics of imperial governance" (in Thomas' phrase [p. x]) may seem less exciting than the beginning or end of the game. Thomas' comprehensive and detailed volume not only provides a thorough examination of the French empire in the two decades after the First World War, but also suggests the reasons for paying more attention to this stage of imperial history.

Thomas' framework is what he calls the French "imperial community", those who made a vocation of empire, from politicians to traders, agronomists to manufacturers, settlers to arm-chair geographers. The leaders of this group, the *parti colonial* or the *lobby colonial*, organised countless associations, mounted exhibitions and published journals to support their cause. France and its colonies became ever more closely tied in the interwar period. *Algérie française*, constitutionally a part of France as much as any province of the metropole, matured as a settler

society, though the French, Italians, Maltese, Spaniards and other Europeans who lived there never exceeded more than a fifth of the population. Steamship lines connected colonial and mainland ports, bringing colonial wares: wine from Algeria, coffee from West Africa, rum from the West Indies, and more prosaically, rubber from Indochina, phosphate from Morocco and nickel from New Caledonia. French and indigenous troops—the Armée d’Afrique, *the tirailleurs sénégalais*, the Coloniale, the Foreign Legion—were honoured for sacrifices during the Great War and championed as an important part of France’s arsenal.

Thomas’ view of this imperial endeavour is critical and pessimistic. The empire, the second largest conglomeration of European colonies, was a product more “of accident and error” (p. x) than of design. The empire was “unmanageable”, and France’s “imperial trajectory” was downward”(p. 1) in the interwar years. This “severe decline” (p. 2), just at the moment that imperial promoters were trumpeting the merits of the *oultre-mer*, is demonstrated with ample evidence. Empire was marginal to French national concerns and to the policy-making that shaped them. The best and brightest of civil servants avoided imperial postings. The public was largely indifferent to empire. Plans for economic growth often came to nought, and it was the undynamic and old-fashioned businesses in France that profited most from imperial opportunities. The much vaunted benefits to the colonised of French law, education and medicine were severely limited, when not derisory. The French continually had to quell insurrections in an empire that refused to be ‘pacified’, and colonial nationalism grew steadily more menacing. By the 1930s, even the general staff admitted that the empire would be indefensible in the case of war. Tellingly, a 1936 report on the pitiful conditions of tanks in Indochina revealed that “those in Saigon are only wheeled out on the 14th July; those in Tonkin are beyond repair and are nothing more than scrap iron” (p. 315). The sentence seems almost a summation for Thomas’ judgment of the ramshackle state of Greater France.

Thomas’ documentation is convincing but—to play the devil’s advocate—some of his material seems to point to a greater role for the empire than he concedes. Reorganisation of the imperial administrations, and plans for colonial development, from the post-war *Chambre bleu horizon* to the Popular Front of the 1930s, testified to the government’s willingness to attend to the empire. The writings of such authors as André Gide and Albert Londres, pointing to desperately needed reforms, helped to awaken metropolitan attention, as did the actions of colonial residents in France (such as the *négritude* movement). By the 1930s, the colonies took more than a third of French trade (though the Depression did much to create an unbalanced situation as businesspeople fell back on colonial markets). Eleven per cent of mobilised men in 1939 were colonial troops. A survey showed that just over half of the French would regard loss of any colony as a grievous blow. The empire was not the centre of France’s political, military and economic solar system, but it was hardly on the outermost orbit.

The question of the importance of empire is a key one in present-day colonial history-writing, illustrated in the British instance by debates on ‘absent-minded imperialism’. In the French case, many historians have taken a minimalist view of the role of empire. For instance, scholars such as Christopher Andrews and A.S. Kanya-Forstner have underlined the role of the colonial lobby, rather than the public at large, in promoting imperialism. Jacques Marseille has shown that the empire braked the modernisation of the French economy. Others, however, take a maximalist view. Often basing their perspectives on the omnipresence of ‘exoticism’ in French culture -

colonial images in literature and cinema, the regularity of colonial exhibitions, the ‘negrophilia’ of the interwar years, the subtle ways that colonialist stereotypes lodged themselves in the French mind – they see the empire as a dominant force in French public (and private) life from the last decades of the nineteenth century until, and even after, the decolonisation of the early 1960s. Indeed, such authors as Herman Lebovics, in *Bringing the Empire Back Home: France in the Global Age* (2004) link imperialism with France’s wholesale modernisation, with intersecting lines from metropole to colonial outposts.

To what extent was the empire bread and circus – or at least the coffee, tea and chocolate advertised with colonial labels and the circus of exhibitions in Marseille in 1922 and Paris in 1931? Perhaps it is overly ambitious of writers of either maximalist or minimalist views to try to judge the empire as whole. Certain colonies clearly held no importance to France; the tiny Comoros islands in the Indian Ocean and the Chinese enclave of Guangzhouwan are the most obvious (and understandably go unmentioned in Thomas’ study). Other possessions, such as Mauritania, an arid and sparsely populated territory from which the major export was dried fish, were of similarly nominal significance. Djibouti never became the French Aden, and only when Mussolini threatened it after the conquest of Ethiopia did the French pay much attention to the hot and dusty port. Wallis and Futuna, in the central Pacific, stimulated the interest only of the priests who ruled it as a virtual theocracy. However, the story is different for other spheres of control. Algeria, as post-1945 events would prove, was a key site for French action, and as Thomas states, “the Indochinese federation remained a lucrative asset to France in the 1930s” (p. 330). Disaggregating the empire suggests that it was more than the sum of its parts.

Comparative essays might provide somewhat differently balanced weightings of empire. The implicit comparison is always between France and Britain, and no one would deny that the empire played a far lesser role for Paris. The geopolitical and other stakes in the French colonies might interestingly be compared, however, with those of Belgium, the Netherlands or Portugal, or with newer powers such as Italy and Japan, to determine the importance of overseas possessions to the interwar nations.

Thomas’ sources are rich. Whereas some authors might have been content to rely on published works, both colonial-era publications and subsequent monographs, Thomas has delved deeply into the French archives – this work is not just what the French, with a sniff of criticism, sometimes brand a *synthèse*. He brings to light much new material from the overseas archives in Aix, the Foreign Ministry archives in Paris, and diverse military, police and diplomatic repositories. Especially rewarding is his pioneering use of the papers of Albert Sarraut in Carcassonne. (Sarraut, governor-general of Indochina, Minister of the Colonies and promoter of *mise en valeur* of the overseas domains, was the most important architect of colonial policy in the 1920s). Thomas’ arguments about the worries the French expressed concerning the health of the empire are well demonstrated by comments confided to such primary documents -- he notes, in one case, how civil servants anxiously circled in red references to the spectre of Communism in distant outposts. Thomas has made a conscious, and successful, effort at global coverage of the empire, and readers will appreciate learning of such relatively little known but illustrative figures as the Malagasy Communist nationalist Jean Ralaimongo and the conservative Algerian reformer Emir Khalid, as well as such relatively obscure events as a rebellion in the Congo in the 1920s.

Thomas' chapter on "An empire in revolt?", on the Rif wars in Morocco, the Druze rebellions in Syria and Lebanon, the 1930 Yen Bay rebellion in Indochina and the Kongo Wara incident is one of the most riveting, as he discusses the unfolding of these colonial dramas and their repercussions in Paris. (The chapter's conclusion leaves teachers a fine chance to set as an assignment a comparison of the origins, forms and results of the rebellions!) The last chapter, "Approaching war", also stands out for the way in which Thomas shows the inability or unwillingness of governments to plan for a future conflict or to marshal colonial resources for such a campaign. Amazingly, Léon Blum's government even vaguely considered retroceding the former German colonies of Togo and Cameroon, ruled by France under a League of Nations mandate after 1919, in the daft hope of appeasing Hitler in Africa to secure peace on the Rhine. One of Thomas' most striking arguments concerns the irony of policy-makers foreseeing that they would have no choice but to relinquish Indochina to Japanese expansion – an irony considering the costly efforts made to retain Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos during the Indochinese War after 1945.

In a work as wide-ranging as this one, it seems greedy to ask for more. A chapter on French *colons*, and indeed on the life of the colonised under French rule, would nevertheless have been a useful addition; readers glean much information by the by, but a portrait of colonial Hanoi or Algiers, and of the cleavage lines and alliances within specific colonial societies, would have provided further insight. One wonders, for instance, about the evolution of French colonial residents and of such groups as missionaries; little is said about how settler societies worked through the legacies of slavery, indentured labour and penal colonisation, or failed to do so. A more specific issue on which one would like to know more (and on which little is written) is links between colonies. Thomas refers to the use of contracted Indochinese labour in New Caledonia, but what of Syrian traders in West Africa, Réunionnais businessmen in Madagascar, West Indian administrators around the empire, and black African troops used wherever soldiers were needed? The interwar policy of *entr'aide coloniale*—richer and larger colonies were meant to aid less well off relations—never produced a true imperial family, but further consideration of ties between colonies might provide useful ideas about the ways in which Paris tried to draw together its colonies.

Thomas identifies the imperial stakes at the beginning of the Second World War: promoters and policy-makers had been hoping for "*salut par l'empire*"—an imperial solution to France's economic and geopolitical problems -- while aware of the weakness of the imperial and metropolitan armour in the face of the Axis. The German invasion, the French surrender and the establishment of the Vichy regime provided enormous shocks, leading to a struggle on whether colonies would pledge allegiance to Marshal Pétain's new regime or rally to de Gaulle's Free French. Martin Thomas and Eric Jennings have already provided two splendid studies of the war years. Thomas' *The French Empire at War, 1940-45* (1998) concentrated on the international situation, the fraught relationship between de Gaulle and the Allies, and the fashion in which most of them controlled by Vichy delegates—initially all of them except French Equatorial Africa, and outposts in the South Pacific and India—were brought round. Jennings' *Vichy in the Tropics: Pétain's National Revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe, and Indochina, 1940-1944* (2001) provided a view from inside: how the Vichy government established and maintained its hold in three colonies, and how Pétain's *révolution nationale* was exported overseas.

Jacques Cantier and Eric Jennings' collection provides a complement to these pioneering works. Case studies of the Vichy years in Algeria, Tunisia, West Africa, Madagascar, Indochina and the Antilles chart the ways in which the Vichy regime and the National Revolution were played out in the colonies, with the central argument that Vichy cannot be understood without the empire. Jennings' piece on the administration suggests that many upper-level bureaucrats took a crucial role in opting for Vichy, and numerous subordinates followed because of fear of being cut-off from the *mère-patrie* and because of dislike of the British (especially after the British destroyed the French fleet at Mers-el-Kébir). The role of propaganda was a key, and Ruth Ginio demonstrates how official institutions and the media championed Vichy's ideology. Particular groups served as vectors for the transmission of new doctrines, such as the *Légion française des combattants*, sports teams and scouts, as detailed, in the case of youth, by Cantier. However, submission to Vichy was not always a matter of coercion. Many in the white elites proved active supporters of Vichy, among them Békés in Martinique (examined by Laurent Jalabert), *pieds-noirs* in Algeria (illustrated in Cantier's study of celebrations in 1941), the Catholic church (as shown in Serge La Barbara's study of the stance of the Tunisia-based French Primate of Africa). Ginio, in a second chapter, shows that for many of the traditional African elite, the replacement of one French regime with another made relatively little difference, just as Europeans in West Africa accommodated Vichy with little inconvenience or opposition.

Not everyone, of course, joined the Vichy camp, or was welcome to do so. Jacques Ramognino points to systematic general repression of dissidents in West Africa by Governor-General Pierre Boisson. Attempted insurrections in Indochina in the wake of the French capitulation of 1940, as Pierre Brocheux documents, were put down with ferocity. Rebels, Jews and Freemasons were particularly in the line of Vichy fire. According to Colette Zytnicki, in France's three North African territories, there were over 400,000 Jews, and the Vichy government avidly pursued anti-Semitic policies. Already in October 1940, the Crémieux decree, which had made Algeria's Jews French citizens in 1870, was repealed, and a year later Jews were barred from most liberal professions. (The Jewish governor of Togo, Léon Geismar, was demoted to the rank of chief-paymaster.) An estimated 7871 Jews were sent to internment camps in North Africa, even though Vichy policy was one of humiliation and exclusion rather than systematic detention or deportation. (Further details are given by Christine Lévisse-Touzé.) Elsewhere in the empire, anti-Semitic legislation was promulgated, even in colonies with almost no Jews. Julien Fouquet examines how the new regime closed down the Masonic lodges of the empire, an ironic gesture given that Freemasons had stood in the forefront of colonisation efforts in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Another chapter by Jennings asks to what extent Vichy was more racist than the previous administration. He concludes that the new order accentuated racism, citing one law that removed race from a list of offenses for which perpetrators might be indicted for defamation, and another making it possible to revoke the citizenship of 'natives'. The *évolués*, the tiny group of French-educated and Westernised indigenous people, probably suffered most; hard-won political rights amounted to nothing under an anti-democratic government and privileges disappeared. Discrimination extended back to the metropole, where a sign at the border between the occupied and Vichy zones stated that foreigners, Jews and people of colour were not allowed to cross. Martin Thomas discusses the unenviable situation of over 100,000 colonial soldiers who became German prisoners of war in Europe--15,947 had died or gone missing in action in 1940.

The Vichy regime in the colonies was not a clone of that in metropolitan France. Ginio sagely warns that ‘collaboration’ and ‘resistance’ cannot be seen in the same light in the empire as in France itself. Many in the colonies, settlers and some indigenous peoples, did genuinely believe in France and felt sorrow at its humiliation – ‘What! France is defeated, and my two sons are still alive?’ bewailed one African. Jalabert notes that, at least in popular memory of this period (even if he adds that the version is not entirely sustainable), there were two resistances: a white one against Vichy and a black one against colonialism. In Indochina, Vichy, the Free French, the Japanese and various nationalist movements, particularly that of Ho Chi Minh, competed for support. However, Vichy and its lieutenants sought as much as possible to bring about a colonial national revolution, with considerable sympathy, and the Free French faced a formidable challenge—evidenced by the failed attempt to win back West Africa in September 1940 and Indochina in 1945 in order to reconquer the empire.

One of the most interesting, and important, perspectives that emerges from this collection is that the Vichy regime, at least for most *colons* and many administrators, actually suited the colonies. Ginio has pointed out that the regime’s “Work, Family and Homeland” was an easier slogan to teach than “Liberty, Equality and Fraternity”. Institutionalised inequality, emphasis on order and hierarchy, paternalism, alliance between the state and church, censorship, unwillingness to extend political rights to ‘natives’, administrative reliance on chiefly elites rather than Westernised ones: such principles promised to entrench the colonial order and forestall destabilisation (or change) from inside or outside. The ideas of republicanism proclaimed since 1871, and efforts at a more humane colonial policy promoted by the Popular Front in the 1930s, had sat uneasily in a colonial situation. Settlers had been horrified by Blum’s initiatives, they disliked socialists, Jews and ‘uppity’ natives, and they were troubled by Free French alliance with the British. Pétain’s ideology allowed them to pursue their colonial aims without the encumbrance of democracy. Vichy, the authors imply, showed colonialism’s true colours.

With yet another irony, however, the Vichy period promoted anti-colonial nationalism. Defeat in 1940 provided dramatic proof that France was not invincible, then separation between colonies and metropole distended ties, and Nazi-style racism compromised the racialist ideas that had served as the foundation of colonial control. In Indochina, the Japanese occupation, and proclamation by the Communists of Vietnamese independence, began the long struggle for sovereignty. The authors here point to some further, and sometimes unexpected, ways in which the regime sparked anti-French nationalism. The National Revolution with its stress on traditional cultures—even exalting the example of the Vietnamese Trung sisters, who in the first century AD fought against invading Chinese – could awaken dormant sentiments. Emphasis on folklore and traditions revived cultural referents that had fallen into abeyance. Disciplined organization, such as the scouts and the *Légion des combattants*, provided training-grounds for future cadres of revolution and independence. Increased racism, such as the division of beaches into white and black zones in Senegal, hardened the divide between groups. The removal of *évolués*’ privileges, and the end of even tokenistic political participation, helped further to weaken the idea of assimilation. The circumstances allowed nationalists to regroup clandestinely (as Claude Bavoux shows for Madagascar), or to recoup earlier setbacks (as occurred, according to Brocheux, in the case of Ho’s forces). Talk of political change led to calls for full-scale incorporation of colonies into France, autonomy, or independence. Not surprisingly, in the war’s

immediate aftermath, rebellion broke out in Indochina, there soon occurred an enormous insurrection in Madagascar (suppressed with bloodthirstiness), and a signal demonstration in Sétif in 1945 foreshadowed the Algerian war of independence. Hopes of restoring the old imperial order would not be realised.

Cantier and Jennings's volume offers an important contribution to understanding this difficult period in French history, in helping to overcome what Henry Rousso famously termed the "Vichy syndrome" of collective amnesia about a time of defeat, collaboration and fratricidal conflicts. The events of June 1940, the Vichy regime and the Occupation, as Jennings points out, were not limited to metropolitan France but also produced an "imperial civil war". The Vichy ideology of National Revolution was not entirely foisted onto colonial settlers and the colonised, but adopted – for complex reasons – by those left in control. This book provides great insight into the preachings and practices of Vichy in the colonial arena, presenting the work of scholars who have also completed full-scale books or theses on the subject (e.g., Ginio on West Africa, Cantier on Algeria). Interest in the Vichy period will no doubt spark other case studies of regions of the empire, particular themes, and the long-term effects of the war years. It would be interesting, for instance, to compare the Vichy and non-Vichy colonies, to know more about the stances of particular colonial groups during these years, to chart the *épuration* after the Liberation (and the subsequent activities of some of the pro-Vichy supporters).

Cantier points out that two-thirds of the French army that liberated the *mère-patrie* at the end of the Second World War was recruited in Africa, and that indigenous soldiers comprised more than half of the troops. Thomas' work on the interwar period, however, reminds us that it was easier for a non-Frenchman, even a criminal, who served in the Foreign Legion to acquire French citizenship than it was for a colonial subject. This paradox brings added meaning to the words of a Senegalese *député* (publicly, a supporter of Vichy) quoted by Ginio: 'Blacks [*les negress*] are good Frenchmen and fine brothers when they work and die for France. But when it comes to assimilating them with certain advantages that some of their white brothers have, we are dirty blacks and good-for-nothings' (in Cantier and Jennings, p. 252). Such were the contradictions of empire, a colonialism whose prime beneficiaries were the colonialists.

Thomas and Jennings are two of the foremost English-language scholars of French colonial history, and the other contributors to *L'empire colonial sous Vichy* include a number of notable early-career researchers. Such high quality work underlines the widespread interest in French colonial history. These studies of the interwar and the Second World War also make two general statements: how important it is to integrate colonial developments into national (and European) historical narratives, and how significant a link there exists between colonial and international history.

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