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Twenty years ago, Adam Hochschild catalogued the bald-faced lies behind King Leopold II's strategic deployment of the language of humanity in the establishment of his Congo Free State. The enduring power of Hochschild's best-selling popular history is its reassuring moral clarity; Leopold's cynical use of humanitarian discourse to mask colonial atrocities is set against a heroic international humanitarian campaign to expose them.¹ Historians of empire now see the relationship between humanitarianism, imperial expansion, and colonial violence—in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Africa especially—as more complex. Recent work has drawn out the contradictory logics of antislavery, concern for native welfare, and international oversight of colonial regimes. Sincere or not, these humanitarian impulses often fueled violent conquest and new forms of political subjugation, forced labor, and racial prejudice as much as they led to meaningful reform and better lives for Africans.² With this article, J.P. Daughton adds to his earlier contributions to this literature that explore the interconnected history of humanitarianism, internationalism, and colonialism between the World Wars.³

The article makes three key interventions. First, it highlights the central role of state-sanctioned violence in what was supposed to be a more humane form of empire-building based on mutually beneficial economic development (*mise en valeur*) in interwar French Equatorial Africa (AEF).⁴ In this corner of France's African empire—part of a trans-colonial region infamous for private sector abuses in extractive industries (rubber, timber, mining)—the French administration's new

¹ Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1998).

² Richard Huzzey, *Freedom Burning. Antislavery and Empire in Victorian Britain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012); Amalia Ribí Forclaz, *Humanitarian Imperialism: The Politics of Antislavery Activism, 1880-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Yan Slobodkin, "State of Violence: Administration and Reform in French West Africa," *French Historical Studies* 41:1 (2018): 33-61.

³ J.P. Daughton, "Behind the Imperial Curtain: International Humanitarian Efforts and the Critique of French Colonialism in the Interwar Years," *French Historical Studies* 34:3 (2011): 503-528; "ILO Expertise and Colonial Violence in the Interwar Years," in Sandrine Kott and Joëlle Droux, eds., *Globalizing Social Rights: the International Labour Organization and Beyond* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).

⁴ The Federation of French Equatorial Africa (1910-1958) comprised Moyen-Congo, Gabon, Chad and Oubangui-Chari (contemporary Central African Republic).

focus on development centered on state-led infrastructure projects. But public works in interwar AEF continued to rely on multiple forms of coerced labor, from an annual labor tax (*corvée*) to mass recruitment drives that relied on many of the same terror tactics that were hallmarks of the brutal concessionary regimes in both Leopold's Congo Free State and the French Congo around the turn of the century.⁵

The construction of the Congo-Océan (1921-1934), a railway line linking the inland capital Brazzaville up the Congo River to Pointe Noire on the Atlantic coast, proved no exception. Brutal recruitment methods, combined with horrendous working conditions, had predictably catastrophic consequences. According to an internal French investigation from the late 1930s, the Congo-Océan consumed the lives of 15,000—23,000 African workers. Critics then and now contend the real human toll was closer to 30,000—60,000 lives lost (493-4). Neither the transfer of authority from private companies to a French civilian administration nor the colonial regime's explicitly humane development goals curtailed this staggering loss of life or the wider culture of systemic violence in interwar AEF.

The article's second intervention concerns how the French administration responded when that culture of violence was exposed. The interwar years may have been an era of heightened international oversight and public scrutiny of colonial rule, but Daughton shows that even the most sensational and best publicized scandals of the period, like the titular "Pacha Affair," resulted in "little more than debate, bureaucratic self-inspection, denial, and continuation" (523). In 1925, renowned French author André Gide, touring the remote borderland between northern Moyen-Congo and Oubangui-Chari, had a chance encounter with a local man who described the brutality of the colonial regime in the region in harrowing detail. Samba Ngoto recounted to Gide and his companion how just before their arrival, the district's lone French administrator Georges Pacha sent an African deputy to a nearby village to force its inhabitants to relocate closer to a road they were obligated to maintain as part of their *corvée* duties. When they refused, Pacha's deputy and his men unleashed a reign of terror on the community, which left the village in ruins and more than thirty men, women, and children dead.

Ngoto could not have stumbled on a better publicist or more sympathetic ear. Gide, an ardent admirer of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, penned a devastating exposé of the incident and publicly condemned Pacha as a latter-day Kurtz (504-505). Within a month, the administration launched the first of several official investigations, which uncovered even more shocking and widespread atrocities in Pacha's district (507-509). But even with Gide's notoriety, the general public outcry, and mounting documentary evidence, the French response was nothing more than "a performance for audiences in Paris with minimal consequences" (524). The lion's share of the blame fell on Pacha's African deputy, Niamba; he and several of his men were convicted of murder and sentenced to life imprisonment, while Pacha and other Frenchmen implicated in the affair were quickly rehabilitated, reassigned, and went on to enjoy long, successful administrative careers (518).

The third and most important intervention of the article lies in the connections Daughton draws between the Pacha Affair and the construction of the Congo-Océan line. The administration vociferously denied any direct links between the affair and its signature infrastructure project, but Daughton emphasizes that the same campaign that resulted in the destruction of Ngoto's village and the slaughter of its inhabitants yielded some 300—400 potential "volunteers" for the Congo-Océan. Indeed, just a month earlier, Pacha received direct orders from Brazzaville to furnish at least a hundred new recruits for the railway. When Pacha protested that it would be impossible to find so many Africans who would go willingly, he was instructed—albeit in vague and euphemistic bureaucratic language—to use force as necessary, a directive he passed on to his man Niamba (515-518).

That is a significant empirical finding in its own right, but even more striking is the relationship Daughton posits between the *fallout* of the Pacha Affair and the ongoing violence of labor recruitment for development projects like the Congo-Océan that were supposed to be both profitable *and* humane. Daughton argues that it was precisely through public scandals

⁵ For a good overview, see Richard Roberts, "Coerced Labor in Twentieth-Century Africa," David Eltis, Stanley L. Engerman, Seymour Drescher and David Richardson, eds., in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, vol 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017): 583-609.

like the Pacha Affair that French colonial officials became “increasingly adept at deflection and denial,” and the administration as a whole honed “its capacity to frame and downplay potentially embarrassing incidents of inhumanity” (522, 499). Gide had painted Pacha as a cruel tyrant with a pathological hatred of Black Africans, which cast the affair as an isolated instance rooted in one man’s personal prejudices. The exceptional nature of the case was also a dominant theme in the reams of reports that were produced in the course of the administration’s investigations, but with a crucial difference: in the official narrative, Pacha emerged as a ‘bad apple’ insofar as he was inexperienced, understaffed, and overwhelmed, not because he was a bloodthirsty racist. According to this line of thinking, the thinness of French personnel on the ground led Pacha to make poor decisions and overly rely on his African subordinates (496-497). In sparsely populated and isolated districts like Pacha’s, African auxiliaries had to be recruited and brought in from different parts of AEF. As men like Niamba and his troops had no natural sympathy with the local population, their supposed “savage instincts” went unchecked (517).

In the end, French officials concluded that African underdevelopment created the structural conditions that made the Pacha Affair possible, while intra-African ethnic conflict, not colonial racism, accounted for its gruesome particulars. This set a powerful precedent. As Daughton writes, “Blaming Africa and its inhabitants would become central to the explanation of the violence surrounding the Congo-Océan” (517). Framed in this way, the murder, torture, and terror at the center of the Pacha Affair actually bolstered the case for colonial development and French rule more generally, whatever the near-term human cost. As Daughton notes, “in a brilliant twist of logic—and the truth—[the governor-general of AEF] not only denied any links between the atrocities and the railroad; he also stressed the importance of building the Congo-Océan to minimizing future violence” (517). In other words, the railroad was extolled as the solution to endemic violence in the region rather than its source. After the affair, this became the party line. By the late 1920s, French officials were so convinced by their own circular reasoning they even urged the International Labor Organization (ILO), which tried to regulate forced labor around the world in the interwar period, to promote the Congo-Océan as a global model for managing colonial labor (522).

Daughton’s close and careful reading of the copious administrative correspondence and official reports concerning the Pacha Affair brings this pernicious feedback loop between colonial development and systemic violence into sharp relief. As such, the article is an excellent example of how colonial archives can be read in productive new ways.⁶ But reliance on such sources is not without its pitfalls. At times, Daughton’s rhetorical framing of key interpretative issues like intentionality and generalizability seem to be guided more by the administration’s perspective than his own evidence and analysis.

Towards the beginning of the article, Daughton characterizes Pacha less as “an agent of colonial authoritarianism than a woefully undertrained official working in conditions that made it impossible for him to live up to the expectations of the colonial administration in Brazzaville.” This statement is at odds with Daughton’s penetrating critique, in the very next sentence, of the colonial administration’s strategic deployment of bureaucratic euphemisms that “condoned and encouraged the use of intimidation and force” (497). Daughton’s documentation of that euphemistic bureaucratic language in Pacha’s instructions from Brazzaville is difficult to square with his concluding assertion that Pacha was neither “following orders” nor carrying out “the intentions of colonial policy” in using such force (521). On the contrary, the article compellingly makes the case that violent compulsion was indeed a key feature of colonial policy in interwar AEF.

The systemic nature of that violence, which plays such an important role in Daughton’s overarching argument, could also have been articulated more consistently. Daughton often poses the generalizability of Pacha’s actions as an open question, even after having presented hard numerical data and Pacha’s superiors’ own admissions to the contrary in painstaking detail (518). Throughout the article, Daughton’s use of the language of “the case” or “the incident(s)” supports the administration’s position that at issue was discrete acts of violence rather than an endemic, structural phenomenon. That position is further reinforced by Daughton’s characterization of the entire study as a “microhistory” in the conclusion (519).

⁶ Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

By framing his research as a “microhistory,” Daughton concedes a lot of ground to the French colonial administration’s point of view, tempering the power of his own findings and foreclosing consideration of more comparative, regional, even global, perspectives. Indeed, as I read Daughton’s empirically rich account of the Pacha Affair, I kept thinking it could just as easily be narrated as part of the global history of “railroad colonialism,” Manu Karuka’s term for the nexus of the expropriation of indigenous land and labor, colonial violence, and capitalist development that helped consolidate global white supremacy.⁷ As I write this, a global reckoning with histories of state-sanctioned violence against Black people, the privileging of profit and property over Black humanity, and justice systems that do not hold white people accountable for taking Black lives is underway. It should come as no surprise that the protest movement against anti-Black racism in contemporary Belgium has targeted statues of Leopold II, who has been so closely associated with all of those histories for more than a century.⁸ With this article, J.P. Daughton lays the foundation for inscribing the Pacha Affair and the construction of the Congo-Océan railroad in interwar AEF in those histories as well.

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⁷ Manu Karuka, *Empire’s Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019): Chapter 3.

⁸ Monika Pronczuk and Mihir Zaveri, “Statue of Leopold II, Belgian King Who Brutalized the Congo, Is Removed in Antwerp,” *New York Times*, 9 June 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/09/world/europe/king-leopold-statue-antwerp.html>; Georgina Rannard, “Leopold II: Belgium ‘Wakes Up’ to Its Bloody Colonial Past,” *BBC News*, June 13, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53017188>.