



**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

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**Review by William A. Hoisington, Jr.**

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General George Patton once remarked that writing history, like winning battles, was only a matter of organization. Martin Thomas's survey of the interwar French empire with its diverse entities (Algeria, the colonies, the mandates, the protectorates) and their individual twists and turns required solid organization, but much else besides. Thomas succeeds in reporting on the overall state of the empire as well as on those matters that he wishes to explore up close: colonial planning and administration, education in the colonies, the colonial economic system, urban development, women and colonialism, reform (including political and civil rights), anti-colonial nationalism and revolt, popular imperialism in France, and empire preparations for war. He concludes that by 1939 (and not as a direct result of France's military defeat the following year) the empire was no longer a 'coherent imperial power system.' (p. 354)

What does this mean? Perhaps that this Paris-based world empire could no longer handle the significant needs and aspirations of a large slice of the globe's population in an efficient and effective manner and with the requisite talent and cash. In the interwar years France did attempt to unify and coordinate its empire in order to create something that operated more smoothly. That effort failed. The greatest empire successes came in individual spots such as Morocco and as a result of breaking with rather than accepting the dogma from Paris.

Still, Morocco under a Marshal Hubert Lyautey or a General Charles Noguès was no easy road. Thomas analyzes the Rif War (1925-26) which put an end to Lyautey's career, the unfortunate

Berber decree of 1930 and its far-reaching consequences, and the approach of the Second World War, a conflict which destroyed Noguès if not the empire. This he does with care, intelligence, and insight, employing a bibliography that ranges from the best current materials (such as C.R. Pennell's splendid *Morocco since 1830, a history* [2000]) to the most significant specialist literature. In addition, Thomas has sampled archives across the empire and thus adds his own touch to this comprehensive study.

A colonial paternalism was the guiding notion of progress and modernization during the interwar period despite the important reform packages named for their Paris sponsors: Charles Jonnart, Albert Sarraut, Maurice Viollette, Marius Moutet. Thomas is very good on these reform initiatives. However, whether the issue was schools, justice, health, industrialization or limited (and usually indirect) political participation, Frenchmen assumed that they would call most of the shots as benefactor or educator (or, if not, they would surely be consulted and listened to.). They agreed with Victor Hugo's famous dictum: 'Without France the world would be alone.' [1] But the confident collaboration that Lyautey sought to foster with the Moroccan elite in the 1920s and the 'associationism' (often tinged with racism) that developed in the settler colonies in the 1930s could not flourish when one partner remained unequal. Even generous and deeply felt political convictions at home (expressed by socialists, communists, and republicans of all sorts) did not level the playing field abroad. And in times of national crisis, as Thomas makes quite clear, it was always France first, empire second.

Would it have been better not to go on this empire quest at all? Perhaps. But, given the forces at work in the West was there a choice? And are we sure that the world would have been better off 'alone'? This debate continues, recently joined vigorously by Barnett Singer and John Langdon in *Cultured Force: Makers and Defenders of the French Colonial Empire* (2004) and shows no sign of quieting. And Lyautey always has something to say, this time transforming his work in Tonkin into a sacred mission: 'Even if France derives nothing from this, we would not have been less the workers for providence on this earth, if we brought back life, cultivation, and humanity to regions given over to brigands and barrenness, if we made these rivers the paths of communication which are their part in the economic scheme of things, if we exploited the forests and restored these fertile and uncultivated valleys. The most important thing is to leave on this earth some useful trace of one's passage. Man has only been put here to till the soil by the sweat of his brow and in the sight of God it makes little difference whether this cultivation, which is man's reason for existence on this earth, profits one or another national group, which sooner or later is destined to disappear' (André Le Révérend, Lyautey [1983], pp. 236-7).

Thomas's fine book is his second empire survey, the prequel to his excellent *The French Empire at war, 1940-45* (1998). He has already shown his ability to integrate domestic, colonial, and foreign policy in two other books: *Britain, France, and appeasement: Anglo-French relations in the Popular Front era* (1996) and *The French North African Crisis: Colonial Breakdown and Anglo-French relations, 1945-62* (2000). Nevertheless, in spite of the worst military defeat in France's history, the empire did not collapse or break away. In fact, this seemingly fragile empire stayed close to France throughout the Second World War yet became the battleground over which Frenchmen themselves fought for almost three years and a key element in French resistance and liberation. How could this be? The Gaullist tale has been told again and again in

song and story. Now the historians have turned to Vichy and the empire, most recently in Jacques Cantier and Éric Jennings (eds), *L'Empire colonial sous Vichy* .

With an elected National Assembly that placed France's future in its hands and a Franco-German armistice that left the empire intact and under French control, a dazed, defeated, yet surprisingly bold 'Vichy France' proclaimed its sovereignty at home and abroad and set out a program for French renewal. This collection of essays by a group of historians – from senior scholars to those ready to publish their first book – examines the empire's response to Vichy's 'National Revolution' and evaluates the impact of its 'colonial policy' on the peoples over which it ruled.

'Sovereignty first, security second, politics never' was an empire slogan. Vichy claimed to guarantee the first and worked at home and overseas to display the icons of the new French State which centered on the image of Marshal Philippe Pétain. Before the war Pétain had had little interest in the empire and was openly contemptuous of those, like Lyautey, who did. Now he preached an imperial stability, order, and unity that the always vulnerable empire craved more than ever.

Security was up to the empire hierarchs and most of them were military men or old colonial hands with extensive overseas experience – Admiral Georges Robert in the Antilles, General Maxime Weygand in North Africa, High Commissioner Pierre Boisson in West Africa, and Admiral Jean Decoux in Indochina. From them Vichy demanded a vigorous empire defense and got it in West Africa, Indochina, Syria, Madagascar, and North Africa.

Laurent Jalabert's essay examines the Antilles under Robert while Pierre Ramognino looks carefully at French West Africa under Boisson who defended Dakar too successfully against an Anglo-Gaullist 'assault' in 1940. Weygand, Vichy's delegate-general for French Africa (and after July 1941 also governor of Algeria), appears in several essays, especially two by Jacques Cantier whose grand passion and expertise is Algeria and one by Éric Jennings in the overall introduction to the collection. Jennings, whose interest is Vichy under the palms (Madagascar, Guadeloupe, Indochina), contributed the article on Decoux in Indochina.

Vichy's colonial policy (and the important matter of internal security) is a defining issue of the essays. These historians show that 'politics never' was honored only in the breach, for Vichy exported its laws and institutions which were eagerly adopted and easily stitched into the authoritarian paternalism of the Third Republic's colonial style. Vichy also sent along its 'enemies' list often with enforcers to boot. There were some differences in the level of empire enthusiasm for the Vichy package. This speaks to the history, geography, and culture of each of these French possessions; to the sentiments, background, and rivalries among the colonial leaders; and to the ever-changing mix of issues (most importantly the challenges and opportunities of the war itself) which affected the administration, the European settlers, and the indigenous population. For example, the National Revolution's key institution, the *Légion française des combattants et volontaires de la Révolution nationale* (LFC), undermined Resident-General Charles Noguès's authority in Morocco and therefore was held in check, whereas in Indochina its strength and vitality bolstered Decoux.

Jacques Cantier explores the impact of Vichy's youth organizations overseas since Pétain's 'new order' sought to capture the hearts, minds, and energy of young people. In another article Cantier assesses the public celebrations of the National Revolution (including those of the *Légion française des combattants*) in Algeria in 1941. Ruth Ginio, whose book on French West Africa under Vichy will soon appear with the University of Nebraska Press, discusses empire propaganda broadly then shows how it played out in West Africa; in a second essay she measures the response of both the European and the 'modern' and 'traditional' West African elites to the 'new order'. Serge La Barbera describes the politically in/correct path walked by the French Catholic church in Africa in his essay on the archbishop of Carthage and primate of Africa, Monsignor Charles-Albert Gounot, a sympathetic churchman who supported Vichy with 'real enthusiasm' (p. 303).

Vichy's enemies (or the 'repression of anti-France') are the topics of essays by Colette Zytnicki (the Jews), who has also written on the post-war Jewish community in Toulouse, and Christine Lévisse-Touzé (the internment camps for political prisoners: native nationalists, communists, Gaullists, Spanish republicans, and others); Lévisse-Touzé's books on wartime North Africa, liberated Paris, and Marshal Philippe Leclerc de Hauteclocque are rightly celebrated. Julien Fouquet, who will soon publish on the Freemasons in the colonies during the Third Republic, contributes an essay on the Freemasons as the enemies of Vichy. And if these were not enemies enough to name and number, Éric Jennings asks if Vichy was not 'anti-Black' as well. His answer is 'yes, but,' noting that this prejudice was nothing compared to Vichy's 'hatred' of the Jews and the Freemasons (p. 231). Martin Thomas also raises issues of race and the Vichy double standard yet in a different context – Vichy's failure to aid, liberate, and repatriate colonial prisoners of war in a timely and efficient fashion.

Is it possible to know where Vichy's National Revolution was applied with the greatest determination or had the greatest success or failure? Perhaps not. But the data on Indochina presented in separate essays by Pierre Brocheux, an important historian of colonial Vietnam, and Éric Jennings makes Indochina under Admiral Decoux an interesting case study. There is no doubt that Decoux's commitment to Vichy was that of a true believer. The postage stamps of Indochina (printed in Hanoi not Paris) substituted the E.F. (*État Français*) of Vichy France for the R.F. of Republican France which happened nowhere else in the colonies. (In fact, the postage of Vichy France, which quickly dropped the R.F., could never manage more than the innocuous '*Postes Françaises*' as replacement.)

Yet how could an ideology based on the 'rejection of republican values, xenophobia, racism, ultra-conservatism, nostalgia, authority, hierarchy, paternalism, in short the narrow vision (*la vision réductrice*) of a return to an idealized past' (p. 24) have found a positive response in distant Southeast Asia? For Europeans, the very isolation from France coupled with an ever-present Japanese threat explains a good deal. What about the Cambodians, the Laotians, and the Vietnamese? Decoux mixed his version of the National Revolution with a colonial policy that emphasized the histories, traditions, and cultures of the colonial peoples – and that relied heavily on their ruling elites – in the hope that France might be the arbiter or federator of an Indochinese union. Nevertheless, Decoux's stress on the individual identities of colonial culture groups, connected to the Vichy cultural project at home, was not new. A '*politique des races*,' a '*politique des elites*,' and a '*politique des égards*' had 'Indochinese' roots in the colonial

strategies of Jean de Lanessan, Joseph Galliéni, and Hubert Lyautey whose writings were required reading for many colonial administrators. Given all this, Indochina under Decoux became a creative mix of the Third Republic and Vichy.

Despite Decoux, timing was everything. As Jennings points out, Decoux's policies would later backfire and serve to bolster an anti-French nationalism. And Brocheux's account of the Vietnamese independence movement from 1939 to 1945 underscores the fact that resistance to France was on the march before, during, and after Vichy.

In the end how potent was Vichy abroad or even the empire itself during the Second World War? This is a difficult question to answer. In *The French empire between the wars* (2005), Martin Thomas argues that the empire was cracking well before 1940. Vichy was merely the penultimate act. The final act (or post-Vichy empire) is the subject of two essays in this collection, one by Jacques Cantier and the second by Claude Bavoux who portrays liberated Madagascar as a comedy of errors.

The empire will be present in French memory one way or another for some time to come. In February 2005 the National Assembly voted to encourage teachers of history to emphasize 'the positive role' of France overseas, sparking heated debate at home and abroad. And the work of these 12 historians makes it very clear that French colonial history is both alive and well.

Notes:

[1] Victor Hugo, 'Without France, the world would be alone.' (Richard Bernstein, *Fragile Glory, A Portrait of France and the French* (NY, Knopf, 1990), p. 7.

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