



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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International historians, as diplomatic historians now term themselves, have remained largely mesmerized by the traditional twentieth century narrative focusing on a “century of total war” that begins with a “thirty years’ war,” 1914-45, and continues with a cold war from 1945-1989-91. Intertwined with this narrative is the historic struggle between ideologically driven regimes, communist, fascist, and liberal-capitalist democratic: the victory of the latter, in the once-popular Whig view of the past, was even said to have constituted the “end of history.” This narrative has been challenged by the intellectual movement known as postcolonialism, which privileges imperialism and decolonization as the determining historic forces of the 19th and 20th centuries. Postcolonialism makes sense to a world coming to grips with the reality of globalization, for which imperialism and decolonization would seem to provide the back drop and the pre-history. This is not to say that more traditional historians have ignored imperialism and decolonization as subjects -- one view has both world wars the product of rival imperialisms—but where decolonization has been treated it has been done so in terms of the epic world wars or the cold war, rather than in its own rite, as a north-south conflict between the developed and under-developed or developing worlds.[1]

The books under review here invite reflection about this crucial question of how to address the major historical themes of the century. They address the history of the French empire, which in several ways is particularly apposite. Although the British empire was larger, to be sure, much of

it was the successful product of an older imperialism, resulting in an entrenched Anglo-Saxon world that was peopled by Great Britain and rallied instinctively to it in time of war: Canada, Australia, New Zealand, even the United States can be said to fall into this category. India looms as a special case, a product of the Old Imperialism, but decolonized with the new. When one looks at the new imperialism proper, however, the period beginning in 1881 and ending in the 1960s, the French empire looms as commensurate in size and equally, if not more important than the British. It covered 12,540,000 square kilometers, 9% of the earth's land mass, and was peopled by 86 million human beings. And of course it became central in the decolonization struggle after World War II: Algeria and Vietnam, the sites of the century's bloodiest colonial wars, were its major African and Asian possessions.

To read these excellent studies is to reflect on the paradox of the violent French decolonization process. The ferocity with which the French vainly fought to hold on to Vietnam and Algeria stands out all the more absurdly when measured against the pre-war imperial reality. The picture of the French empire that Thomas paints for us is of an empire that wasn't: it was a diffuse, varied, virtually unmanageable mass of territory and humanity that the French could neither develop economically nor defend militarily against the varied threats against it from without and within. It was, in the period of its greatest physical extent and coherence, clearly already in decline; indeed, from the beginning of the period in 1920, Thomas assures us, it contained the seeds of its own destruction. Parts of it were reachable only by inland waterways and had no communications with the outside world; other parts were perennially in rebellion and had never been pacified. Its economy was rather competitive than complementary with that of metropolitan France. If under the impact of the depression France took a majority of imperial exports in 1939, that figure had been only about 12% ten years earlier. And the empire's vast territorial expanse was governed by very few Frenchmen: in French Equatorial Africa there were 500 officials governing 15 million people; in Indochina where the ratio was much better, 5000 officials for 21.5 million people, it was still pathetically few.

The entire French population of Indochina, bureaucrats, soldiers, businessmen, and missionaries, amounted to no more than 20,000 persons. French Equatorial Africa, a vast expanse, contained only 2000 French. The only colonies of extensive French presence were the settler colonies: Algeria first, where by the end of World War II there were almost a million Europeans living among 9 million Muslims, but also Tunisia and Morocco, where the colon population numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Given the empire's virtual lack of effective government and French population elsewhere, the scale of social disruption of the lives of native peoples that it managed to accomplish in the areas that fell to its charge is astonishing. And yet the war-torn France that embarked upon the re-conquest of Indochina in 1945, leading to seven years of painful struggle, was the same country that was willing to write the colony off as indefensible in 1939. Indeed, one of Thomas's most salient points is that France never devised a plan for the defense of its colonies between the wars. Eurocentric as France was, the colonies were seen as reservoirs of soldiers and treasure to be exploited for the defense of France; their own defense would have to take care of itself.

Thomas's most serious indictment of the Empire, perhaps, lies in its doctrinal incoherence. There were, in fact, two competing ideas that justified the empire in the eyes of the French. The first was assimilation, the belief that colonial peoples would eventually become Frenchmen with equal rights to those in the metropole and constitute the elements of a greater France. The second was

association, whose adherents envisioned a network of countries preserving their own cultures and traditions but modernizing in the French mode and making up an eventual French commonwealth or community of nations. Nobody had worked any of this out consistently, and it is most accurately seen as *ex post facto* ideological justification for the existence of an empire based on rapacious exploitation and greed. But insofar as doctrine meant anything in practice, the imperial reality was association; very few *évolués*, as the French termed those indigenous persons who had achieved French acculturation and education, actually became citizens. In the entire empire there were no more than 20,000 naturalized French citizens by 1939, and proposals to broaden the entitlement of citizenship, particularly in North Africa, ran into the ferocious opposition of the settler population which did not wish to share its monopoly on power. Muslims, to achieve French citizenship, had to renounce Islam, whatever their level of French acculturation, something very few were willing to do. The empire was governed otherwise by traditional authorities who were privileged and collaborated with the French: mandarins in Indochina, tribal chiefs in Africa, the Sultan and Bey in Morocco and Tunisia. Only Algeria, formally part of France, was directly ruled by the Ministry of the Interior, and even there the Muslim population were colonial subjects, not citizens, and subject to the hated code of the *indigénat*, which meant heavy taxes, a regime of forced labor, and an authoritarian regime totally inconsistent with the democratic Republic France pretended to be. The only exception in this dismal picture lay in the departments of the French Antilles, Martinique and Guadeloupe, where the black population had achieved citizenship if not real equality. Only in France's island possessions, where the total population numbered in the hundreds of thousands, was assimilation practiced on a scale approaching reality.

Thomas is at his best analyzing a colonial empire that fell into increasing crisis in the 1930s. The depression, and the reality of an overvalued franc, impacted colonial exports severely, aggravating a miserable reality of endemic grinding poverty throughout the empire. France turned increasingly to its empire in the 1930s as its own export markets collapsed, taking a larger share of a declining volume of imperial trade and selling a larger part of its own products. But autarky was no substitute for the flourishing international markets of the twenties. The empire remained very much a male enterprise, an expression of military virtues of conquest and virility; colonial white women were fewer than the men, subject to traditional French patriarchy (women did not attain the vote in France until 1945), while under pressure to observe lines of propriety and distinction in what was, after all, in the end an oppressive and racist enterprise. Colonial women were twice colonized, by their traditional societies and by the French. Where French culture might have seemed an avenue of liberation, removal of the veil in North Africa, for example, it was a case of "white man protecting brown woman from brown man," so aptly described by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, which in the case of North Africa led to the paradoxical result in Muslim countries of the veil becoming a symbol of national liberation.

Thomas takes us through the dreary saga of colonial rebellion in his period. He is on weaker ground in asserting that the empire was never really pacific or pacified. The Rif war in Morocco, to be sure, was a major rebellion and looms large in nationalist history in North Africa: Mohammed Abd el-Krim ran a virtual mini-state of his own in 1925-26, resisting successfully the efforts of the famed Marshal Lyautey to tame him, causing an anti-war movement to erupt, led by the Communist party in France, and only defeated by heavy weapons, tanks, planes, and artillery, brought to bear against him by Marshal Pétain. The revolt in Syria was the most serious dilemma faced by the French; the Levant was a case of the French swallowing more than they could digest

during the first World War, and by 1936 they found themselves in the unhappy position of initialing a treaty of independence with Syria and Lebanon, although the French parliament never ratified it and war prevented the treaty from taking effect. But the Yen Bay uprising of 1930 in Indochina, for all its importance in the history of the Vietnamese communist party, was a localized insurrection quickly suppressed by the French, although Thomas shows it spread to other provinces before being briefly contained. And the Kongo Wara uprising, in a localized region of the French Congo, was quickly suppressed and hardly threatened the structure of imperial rule. Perhaps it is so little known today because of its minor importance.

French political control of the empire was not really in question when the Popular Front came to power, and the Blum government's attempted reforms, expressing a republican-imperialist ideology rather than any emancipatory aims, were limited to the widening of citizenship and the extension of French social legislation of the 1930s to the colonies. Both these limited aims were frustrated by an unholy alliance of settlers and colonial bureaucrats. This hardly would seem to amount to an empire whose political control was slipping, although nationalist movements were taking shape, particularly in North Africa, and they were radicalized by the failure of the Blum-Viollette proposal to extend citizenship to small categories of Muslims in North Africa. When political reformers who previously had believed in assimilation, like Algeria's Ferhat Abbas, realized the French would never allow Muslims to retain their faith and culture while becoming citizens, they turned to demands for autonomy and eventually independence.

Perhaps the greatest weakness of the empire for Thomas, other than its doctrinal incoherence, was its lack of a popular base of imperial culture in France. There was a formidable colonial lobby of commercial interests, military figures, missionaries, and assorted settler lobbyists who kept up a regular drumbeat of imperial propaganda throughout the 1930s and they mounted some spectacular exhibitions like the colonial extravaganza of 1931 at Vincennes, where a replica of the temple at Angkor Wat mesmerized millions of visitors. Politicians believed in the empire as a manifestation of French power and grandeur; it was the political right that governed France for the most part in the interwar period and it set the colonialist agenda, the left offering mild criticism but never serious opposition. This was true of the Communist party as well, which largely saw the emancipation of colonial peoples one day brought to them as a gift by a Communist France, and whose vision for the empire frankly borrowed from the solution to the nationalities problem in the USSR, a system of soviet socialist republics. The narrowness of French vision for the empire was expressed by the Eurocentric belief that no imperial defense plan was necessary, the defense of the empire lay on the Rhine, and the mission of the empire was to provide human cannon fodder for the front. This the empire did. Over 500,000 colonial troops were mobilized, about 9% of the total French army in 1940, and that high a percentage of colonial troops were among the dead and missing in the Battle of France, about 16,000. The colonials paid the blood tax, as Thomas points out. But is this a manifestation of an empire in decline?

The more traditional view of the collapse of French imperialism attributes much more importance to the Second World War and the French defeat of 1940 than to the interwar period in the saga of imperial decline. A defeated regime, which owed its liberation to a foreign traditionally anti-colonial power like the United States, could hardly enforce its postwar imperial claims against nationalist demands for liberation. There are three major, not necessarily competing explanations for decolonization in the postwar era: the growth of internal nationalist movements in the colonies, making them ungovernable, the distaste of populations in the imperial powers for the

war, repression, and sacrificed entailed in colonial conflict and repression, and the pressure of two outside nominally anti-colonial super-powers in conflict with each other, the U.S. and the USSR, during the cold war. World War II is traditionally seen as critical in the growth of colonial nationalisms and the postwar disillusionment of public opinion in imperial powers that were democratic with colonial conflict. This was the logical result of the victory of the allies and the corresponding successful challenge to Vichy rule in the colonies by the Free French under Charles de Gaulle. It was the empire that rallied to de Gaulle after all, and the French National Committee of Liberation took up residence in Algiers, where it declared itself a Provisional Government of all France prior to the Normandy invasion and the liberation of metropolitan France.

But to look at the reality of the colonial empire under Vichy France, as the Jennings-Cantier volume does, is to come to terms with a rather different picture. Only parts of the empire rallied to de Gaulle in 1940, and these were areas that lay close, even within, the sphere of British imperial protection. This eventually included French Equatorial Africa and Chad; but French West Africa, North Africa, Indochina, and remarkably, the French Antilles, rallied to the Vichy regime. Eric Jennings showed in an earlier book, *Vichy in the Tropics*, how the Vichy regime cloned itself successfully in the French empire, where the cult of Pétain and the authoritarian anti-Semitism of Vichy were successfully exported to alien terrain totally free of German influence. Vichy was “pure” in the tropics for Jennings, and his demonstration of its workings in Guadeloupe, Madagascar, and Indochina, reinforces the Paxton view of a demonstrably French reality, however ugly, representing an authentic expression of native French right-wing tradition. Vichy owed little to the Germans, other than the military defeat that allowed it to come to power. The edited volume Jennings has done with Jacques Cantier, here under review, extends this picture to the entire empire. The volume, it seems to me, presents two problems for the Thomas view of French imperial reality. The first is to explain how a declining and defeated empire managed almost effortlessly to reconstruct itself despite the French defeat and German occupation of three fifths of metropolitan France. Yet it did so, even in far-off places like the Antilles, where American power held sway, and Indochina, where the protecting power was Japan. The Americans and the Japanese both came to the conclusion that dispensing with Vichy was more trouble than it was worth, the Americans until July 1943, the Japanese until March 1945. But in the Antilles and Indochina, as in French West and North Africa, despite Gaullist entreaties, colonial bureaucrats and generals declared their loyalty to the Marshall and proceeded to implement his directives. Colonial populations were not asked, and did not, for the most part, protest.

A second problem for Thomas comes from the volume’s assertion that the Vichy period was crucial in explaining the collapse of colonialism. There are several aspects to this: loss of French prestige, due to defeat, the growth of nationalist movements during the conflict, returning colonial prisoners of war and veterans became alienated from the Vichy regime, and curiously, the propaganda of the Vichy regime itself, which encouraged nationalism by stressing the consonance of the Vichy national revolution with native customs and traditions. The new triptych, Work, Family, Fatherland, accorded better with traditional societies’ teachings than the ideals embodied in the slogan of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, while the promotion of local patriotisms and rooting in the soil validated local nationalism. Vichy “volkish” ideology for Jennings resonated with local nationalisms. Pierre Brocheux shows us how the Vietminh successfully adapted some aspects of Vichy propaganda for its own postwar uses. Are we to conclude from this that

Thomas's view of his period as primary in imperial decline is displaced by Jennings and Cantier, who argue for the war as the undermining feature? Or is this not a false debate? If the empire was doomed in 1920, as Thomas asserts, why was it not doomed earlier, indeed from its inception? We do better to understand the new imperialism as historical process, running its course. Imperialism took hold when traditional societies confronted modernized ones in a period of mass native quiescence and the absence of local authority. Imperialism collapsed when more modernized colonial societies produced local nationalism and mass mobilization, which in the postwar era made traditional forms of conquest and occupation obsolete. The most important period in understanding the collapse of empire is neither the interwar period nor the war itself, but rather the period in which empire collapsed.

There was little mass mobilization in the French empire by the Second World War. Thus it was with great ease that colonial bureaucrats were able to declare allegiance to Marshal Pétain, who was the legal head of government. They were helped in this process by the consonance of Pétainist ideology and imperialist practice. Republican ideology of parliamentarianism and democracy was inconsistent with empire, Vichy authoritarianism was not. In the colonies settlers, bureaucrats, and the military, found the Vichy regime congenial, while indigenous colonial populations remained in large part unaware of what was happening. We have close-ups in the Cantier and Jennings volume of Admiral Robert, who rallied the French Antilles to Vichy, Pierre Boisson, who did the same in French West Africa, and Admiral Decoux, who carried on the Vichy regime in Indochina into March 1945 when Vichy itself had already collapsed.

What we are missing in both of these volumes is the issue that might be the most pertinent to international historians, Vichy's foreign policy and how it related to wartime combatants. Vichy was collaborationist, but it presented itself as neutral in the war, controlling part of French territory, the empire, and the fleet. These enabled it to conduct diplomacy, and if it was able to keep the empire, in particular the French Antilles and Indochina, this was due to the tolerance of the United States and Japan. Logically the Antilles should have rallied to de Gaulle, but the Roosevelt administration was in large part responsible for this: when the Free French successfully took the tiny island of St. Pierre-Miquelon, which is off the Canadian coast, from Vichy the Roosevelt administration protested loudly. The FDR administration thus bears responsibility for the imposition of the Vichy regime on the colonies. Japan presents a different question: its wartime propaganda trumpeted the idea of Asia for the Asians, and by claiming that their armies came to the Philippines and Indonesia and Burma as liberators from Western imperialism they were able to find collaborators in all these countries. There was even a faction in India that wanted to liberate it from the British by calling upon the Japanese. These claims, of course, were empty, but we need to understand how Vichy managed to hold Indochina under the Japanese shadow even after the regime in Paris itself had collapsed.

We do have detailed studies in the volume further of how Vichy exported its legislation, its anti-Semitism (even in the almost complete absence of Jews), anticommunism, anti-masonic prejudices, even its concentration camps to the colonies. Was Vichy racist? In the Antilles the black population was alienated from the regime by the fear that it would restore slavery. Vichy defined Jews legally by biological means. On the other hand it had no specific anti-black legislation, and while it blocked new colonial applications for French citizenship, and it reversed the citizenship of Jews, including the many thousands of Jews who had been granted citizenship in Algeria under the historic Cremieux decree of 1870, it did not reverse the citizenship of blacks.

Vichy's first Minister of Colonies was a Mulatto and friend of Marshal Pétain. All this merits an essay by Eric Jennings on whether Vichy was really racist, but this hardly seems to me a question. It clearly was, although not consistently. But human behavior is hardly ever fully consistent.

Thanks to these two volumes we are able to appreciate the importance of the French colonial empire and to understand its internal dynamics that expressed themselves in the postwar dramatic and bloody struggles for decolonization that took place in Algeria and Vietnam. We can also appreciate the less bloody but still turbulent independence movements in Syria, Morocco, and Tunisia, that resulted in the early independence of those countries, and the decolonization of French sub-Saharan Africa, which occurred peacefully and permitted the creation of a French community of nations. But where are we in terms of the postcolonial conundrum with which this review began? Is the history of decolonization equal in importance to the history of the world wars and the cold war? All the colonial wars taken together do not seem to compare to the World Wars in terms of lives lost and property destroyed. It was once fashionable to compare the numbers of victims of British and French colonialism to the number of innocents destroyed by Stalin and Hitler, but I doubt many would want to make that case any more either. When one looks at the paucity of numbers of French persons who spent their lives and careers in the non-settler French colonies one can only be astonished at the impact they had, still visible today in the French architecture of once colonial cities like Tunis, Algiers, and Hanoi. That influence is more contested when we turn to the single crop or raw materials-dominated tributary economies that remain subject to prices set in the developed world that is prevalent in developing nations today. Many of the former French colonies remain today mired in a postcolonial reality that reflects the perverse economics of a distorted imperial past. This is not the place to take up the debate about whether postcolonial regimes should by now themselves be held responsible for the failure to overcome their colonial heritage, or whether the blame and responsibility remain more properly still with the imperial powers. France is still intervening in the politics of its former colonies, currently most actively in the Ivory Coast and Haiti. The authors of these works have made an important contribution to sorting out the underlying past themes that require contemporary examination if that question ever ultimately gets a satisfactory answer.

Notes:

[1] Mea culpa: My own book, *France, the United States, and the Algerian War*, was written very much in a cold-war framework. For a very stimulating alternative, see Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era*.

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