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Martin Thomas, *Empires of Intelligence: Security Services and Colonial Disorder After 1914*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. xi + 428 pp. Bibliography, notes, and index. Cloth \$49.95. ISBN 978-0-520-25117-5

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*Empires of Intelligence* makes a major contribution to the study of the world's two largest overseas empires, France and Britain, in the generation after the Great War. Martin Thomas builds on a generation of work that has understood European overseas expansion most often in abstract, ideological terms, as an effort to mark boundaries and define categories of self and other. Here, however, rather than concentrate on the work of anthropologists, philologists, or artists, Thomas turns instead to the work of military intelligence officers. His interest lies in a form of practical knowledge, and its exploration sheds important new light on the way the French and British colonial states functioned—or, as all too often, failed to function—at a critical juncture. He looks directly at colonial governments' everyday efforts to impose law and order and the specific institutions that brought coercive force to bear, at once synthesizing and contributing original research of his own.

The scope of the book deserves recognition at the outset, both for its uncommon geographic breadth and chronological focus. While most works on North Africa and the Middle East restrict themselves to individual states, Thomas considers all three French Maghrebi territories, namely, Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco; the French Syrian mandate, British Palestine and Iraq; Britain's Egyptian protectorate and its Sudanese condominium. He considers patterns of influence between the colonies and the European mainland as well. Thomas has read broadly and deeply in the secondary literature; and he adds important, at times path breaking, archival research on all of the areas he covers. Readers of *H-France* will be particularly interested in his use of French military intelligence archives, recently returned from Moscow.[1] To my knowledge, this is the first sustained work to rely on those records. The book's chronological scope, readers should be aware, is more focused than the subtitle suggests. There is relatively little on World War I, and the book concludes before 1940, not to mention the independence of most of the territories in question. As in his recent synthetic survey of the French empire, Thomas concentrates his attention on the interwar years, reinforcing and extending his argument that the French (and here, the British) empire were in severe decline.[2] No sooner had the phase of conquest ended and routine administration begun than both empires were beset by intractable problems. Neither Great Power managed to pacify the areas they claimed, extend legal regulation or control subaltern groups with civil police forces as they had on their respective mainlands.

Thomas takes the reader beyond newspaper accounts and ministerial directives to the military security services charged with detecting threats to imperial rule. These services served as critical intermediaries between European imperial authority and indigenous societies. They provided their superiors day-to-day information on the workings of local clientage systems, on competition for resources, influence, and power. A central element of the colonial states' police apparatus, security services monitored organized political opposition across the Maghreb and Middle East. The French military Service de renseignement officers in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Syria and the British political officers in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, or security service personnel in the southern desert of Transjordan and Iraq, all

served as what Thomas calls “force multipliers” (p. 7). Intelligence about enemy organizations, imminent threats, and potential subversion allowed militaries and civil police forces—notoriously thin on the ground in these territories—to head off dangerous protest before it spiraled out of control. Thomas goes so far as to call the interwar British and French empires “intelligence states” because of their dependence on these units. Not only did military intelligence agencies observe and pass along news to their superiors, they played an active role themselves in the political life of North Africa and the Middle East. They set out to control political participation, to channel it to their own advantage. They could restrict freedom of movement and impose limits on public gathering or trade. Like political police forces everywhere, they struggled with an ambiguous mandate that in principle left them passive observers but in practice central agents of state violence.[3] It fell to them both to preempt violent uprisings and to call in the troops when that became impossible.

The book opens with three broadly contextual chapters. In the first, Thomas provides an overview of different types of intelligence and charts the complex, often overlapping bureaucratic entities responsible for colonial intelligence gathering. On the French side, the key agency was the Section de Centralisation du Renseignement (SCR), attached to the Army’s deuxième bureau within the War Ministry. The central office worked with local offices (Bureaux centraux de renseignement—BCR) within each military region; the BCR staff, in turn, worked in liaison with the local civil police forces both in France and overseas. Thomas skates rather quickly over the relationship between civil and military intelligence units (p. 35): a fundamental issue in the literature on colonial policing, and minimizes any friction between the two. Given the endemic conflict between different branches of the police on the French mainland, this last point deserves greater attention.[4] The notorious weakness of the Sûreté générale on the mainland before its overhaul in 1934 and the absence of files on Algeria in the F7 series in the National Archives (Police générale) or in the ministry of the interior files returned from Moscow makes me suspicious of Thomas’ claim that the Place Beauveau effectively maintained control of its subordinate units across the empire.[5] On the British side, Thomas describes a more piecemeal organization and hazier boundary between civil and military forces. In both cases, European authorities drew upon administrative methods and record-keeping systems developed in Europe and approaches to political policing first tried elsewhere, especially in their eastern colonies. Thomas is particularly strong on the debt British authorities in the Middle East owed to their colleagues in India and Ireland.[6]

Both European powers brought with them a series of prejudices about non-European peoples inherited from the pre-World-War-I period. Domestic concerns dominated British and French security assessments. Unlike the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional land empires that collapsed during and immediately after the war, Britain and France had supported Woodrow Wilson’s efforts on behalf of the idea of national self-determination on the international stage, if only half-heartedly. They presented themselves as protectors and liberators and, as a result, had terrible difficulty admitting that any unrest in areas they controlled might have resulted from their very presence. European politicians and intelligence analysts dismissed Muslims’ ability to organize themselves politically and systematically blamed unrest on outside agitators, especially at the behest of the Comintern, manipulating the supposedly docile heard. Analysts proved fatally unable to recognize internally generated threats to state security or potential indigenous allies.

The heart of the book provides a series of detailed case studies of colonial disturbances and the consistently ineffective responses of European intelligence officers. According to Thomas, those efforts failed for one of two reasons: either the colonial authorities had a tenuous, uncertain grasp of the territory they occupied, with only limited access to indigenous sources (in Egypt and Iraq in 1919-1920, and Palestine in 1936); or, even when they enjoyed access to information, they over-reached and used it poorly (in southern Kurdistan in 1919-1921, Syria’s Jabal Druze in 1923-1925, and in the Moroccan Rif leading up to the war with Mohammed Ben ‘Abd el-Krim el-Khattabi). Even the extended compass afforded by H-France reviews can only begin to hint at the richness of these narratives.

The Egyptian revolution of 1919 caught British authorities completely off guard. Rioting and inter-communal political violence exploded when authorities denied indigenous demands to send a delegation to the Versailles negotiations after World War I. British political officers had relied on a narrow range of sources in their efforts to understand Egyptian society. Their information came predominantly from human intelligence gathered from informants by local, indigenous police agents. Those local police officers, in turn, hardly represented a cross-section of Egyptian society. Mounted units in particular came from a class of conservative landowners. The energetic repression of the Mutual Brotherhood Society, the most important secret society in Cairo before the war, had further alienated Egypt's urban population from the colonial authorities. The British drew recruits for rural police forces from a broader cross-section of the local population, but their militarization of those units compounded resentments in the countryside. In 1919 neither urban nor rural police forces provided reliable intelligence. Drawing on this narrow range of informants High commission reports to the Foreign Office consistently missed the depth of resentment and the breadth of forces arrayed against them. Those reports linked the nationalist Wafd Party with international communism; they blamed a handful of extremists under the sway of foreign influence and assured London of the loyalty of the general public.

Military intelligence officers played a more active role in French Morocco and Syria than they had in Egypt, but their results were no more impressive. Intelligence units had been central to French efforts to stamp out dissent since Marshal Louis-Hubert Lyautey first set out to consolidate France's position there in 1912. Tribal control specialists in the 1920s used locally raised irregular units to police the Rif, the Anti-Atlas, and southeastern Morocco. Intelligence agents incited inter-clan violence to undermine rural opposition and took charge of punitive livestock raids against any groups that held out against French control. In the more prosperous regions of northern Morocco, which Lyautey called "useful Morocco," his men resorted to a complex mix of negotiation, material reward, threats, and physical violence targeting local elites. Outside of "useful Morocco," it fell to the military native affairs personnel to build workable power-sharing arrangements between established indigenous authorities and the protectorate. In the Berber-dominated Middle Atlas, intelligence agents created an archive of ethnographic data and geographical information on local populations. The military Service de renseignement studied the local Berber populations in depth and built up a considerable documentary record about local economy, customs, and attitudes. In early 1925, Lyautey's senior native affairs service officers persuaded him that indigenous leaders in the northern Rif Mountains had only joined 'Abd el-Krim's five-year-old revolt against Spanish Morocco as a result of intimidation.

Even that dissidence, intelligence analysts claimed, was the work of a Berber minority upset with inept Spanish rule. As in the Egyptian case, the depth of resentment and the breadth of the mobilization arrayed against them caught European authorities by surprise. When the revolt spilled into French territory, the violence quickly escalated. French efforts to pit indigenous groups against one another failed. By October 1925, the French had lost over 2,000 soldiers in the Rif War, the highest death toll they had sustained since World War I. Only the arrival of massive military reinforcements and a new commander, Philippe Pétain, put an end to the uprising. Although major military opposition ended with the Rif War, bloody "pacification" campaigns continued for another decade.

Thomas is particularly critical of British and French responses to organized nationalist groups. In the French case, police and security officials looked at Communist ideology and nationalist sentiment as foreign imports: the first from Moscow, the second from a network of pan-Arabist groups and Islamist committees in Berlin, Switzerland, and Cairo. They paid little attention to massive discontent of a growing urban underclass or to the majority in the countryside bitter over settlers' appropriation of prime land, property, and commercial wealth, as well as unequal taxation distribution of public revenue. Nor did they see any overlap between discontent in urban and rural areas. Until the late 1930s, Thomas points out repeatedly, the overwhelming majority of threats to French imperial security were home-grown, yet police and security forces persisted in blaming outside influences: "The dubious official

identification of organized nationalism in Muslim territories as a left-wing phenomenon suggest that the threat perceptions of colonial administrations were skewed by domestic French political concerns. . . . [S]ecurity service anxiety about Maghrebi nationalists' Communist connections was misguided." (pp. 209-210). French law military and police forces could not help but impose their own priorities, fears, and assumptions on the territories they set out to protect. Their prejudice blinded them to the nature and source of their subjects' grievances, and they certainly exaggerated Communist influences. But French authorities were not wrong to link the North African nationalism, especially the North African Star (Étoile Nord Africaine), to the Comintern. Thomas goes too far in minimizing international influences.[7]

The very breadth of Thomas' project creates the occasional misstep. Some are harmless, as in his confusion of the location of the present-day Paris police archives in the fifth *arrondissement* with police headquarters, on the Isle de la Cité (p. 208), or labeling Pierre Godin, the politician behind the city's North African brigade, a member of the staunchly nationalist, center-right *Républicains de gauche*, a "caustic reactionary" (p. 212).[8] More seriously, given the role of European racism in his analysis, Thomas identifies J. B. Lamarck as "France's leading social Darwinist thinker" (p. 56); Lamarck died in 1829, a generation before the publication of *The Origin of Species* (1859).

These mistakes, however, are more than offset by Thomas' ability to unearth new sources and synthesize a generation of work in what has become the most dynamic field in European history. Everyone working on European imperialism owes Thomas a considerable debt for his broad, comparative analysis of security forces and colonial states and his exploration of the grey zone between sporadic, intense, military violence, and more modern, capillary, civil forms of administration in the colonies. Above all, we owe him a debt for the finely crafted, deeply researched narrative chapters on anti-colonial unrest that make up the core of this important book.

## NOTES

[1] When the Nazis invaded Paris in 1940, they confiscated vast quantities of French archives and took much of that material back to Berlin. When the Soviets took Berlin at the end of World War II, they took those archives and kept them in Moscow. In the early 1990s, the Yeltsin government returned several trainloads of records from the French ministry of the interior, which have been available, intermittently, at the Centre des Archives Contemporaines in Fontainebleau since the mid-1990s. (Sophie Coeuré, Frédéric Monier, and Géraud Naud, "Le retour de Russie des archives françaises. Le cas du fonds de la Sûreté," *Vingtième siècle*, no. 45 [January-March 1995]: 133-139.) More recently, the Service historique de l'Armée in Vincennes has made available the archives of French military intelligence in Algeria.

[2] Thomas, *The French Empire Between the Wars: Imperialism, Politics, and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

[3] Jean-Marc Berlière and Denis Peschanski, eds., *Pouvoirs et polices au XXe siècle: Europe, Etats-Unis, Japon* (Brussels: Éditions Complexe, 1997); and Mark Mazower, ed., *The Policing of Politics: Historical Perspectives* (Oxford: Berghahn, 1997).

[4] See Peter Zinoman, *The Colonial Bastille: A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), who makes the contrast between old-regime-style brutality in the colonies and rational, modern, civil administration in Europe the heart of his argument; and Jean-Marc Berlière, *Le monde des polices en France, XIXe-XXe siècles* (Brussels: Complexe, 1996), who calls attention to conflict between different branches of the police on the French mainland.

[5] The example Thomas cites (p. 35), the North African brigade of the Paris prefecture of police does not support his argument. The brigade operated independently of the ministry of the interior, as Léon Blum and the Socialists learned, much to their chagrin, during the Popular Front. If the Paris prefect of police was nominally subordinate to the minister of the interior, in practice successive prefects of police enjoyed tremendous latitude. The Sûreté itself was modeled on the Paris Prefecture of Police (PP) and never enjoyed the latter's financial resources. The director of the Sûreté was generally a short-term political appointee; most men who held the post hoped for a promotion to the safer waters of the PP. Berlière, *Le monde des polices* is the place to start for these relationships. For the inability of the ministry of the interior to control the North African brigade, see my *Policing Paris: The Origins of Modern Immigration Control* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), esp. pp. 194-97.

[6] He might have made a similar point about the influence of the Indochinese Sûreté on the rest of French colonial police efforts. In addition to Zinoman, see Patrice Morlat, *La répression coloniale au Vietnam (1908-1940)* (Paris: Harmattan, 1990); and Mireille Favre, "Un milieu porteur de modernisation: Travailleurs et tirailleurs vietnamiens en France pendant la première guerre mondiale," 2 vols. (Thèse pour l'obtention du diplôme d'archiviste-paléographe, École nationale des chartes, 1986).

[7] Thomas presents a more balanced portrait in *The French Empire Between the Wars*, chapter eight.

[8] On the place of the Républicains de Gauche in the French political landscape, and their difference from backward-looking, traditional conservatives, see René Rémond, *Les droites en France*, rev. ed. (Paris: Aubier, 1982), p. 190.

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