

Martin Shipway. *The Road to War: France and Vietnam, 1944-1947*. Providence, R.I. & Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1996. xiii + 309 pp. Map, appendices, notes, bibliography, and index. \$59.95 US. ISBN 1-57181-894-4.

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War Origins Again?

This is an important book. It is not customary to inquire into the origins of colonial wars; we seem rather to take them for granted as part of an inevitable tide of postwar decolonization, their origins thus requiring no explanation. Yet despite, or perhaps because of these conflicts, much of imperialism's end occurred peacefully, or amid disturbances short of war. France's long and tortured Algerian conflict from 1954 to 1962 followed immediately after the French termination of their phase of the war in Indochina, but obscures the simultaneous granting of independence to Morocco and Tunisia in 1956 and the progressive acts of legislation marking the end of the colonial dependence of French black Africa by 1960. The Indochinese conflict was prelude to all of these events, yet its significance is far greater. In its later stages the conflict was absorbed by the cold war, financed by the United States, and finally taken over by the Americans, stretching out into a thirty-year war that ended where it started, with Vietnam under the control of the Viet Minh, but with the United States altered almost beyond recognition and the cold war itself transformed. Like all wars however, it had a beginning, and its origins and "causes" beg for explanation. Martin Shipway, Professor of French at Birkbeck College, University of London, has gone a long way toward providing one.

Shipway casts his net widely, situating Vietnam in the context of the broader question of postwar decolonization. The Dutch and British also pursued the chimerical goal of bridging the distance between nascent colonial nationalism and the preservation of empire, whether in the form of commonwealth, federation, or ill- defined "union". But was the project for a French Union bound to fail? Were the French pursuing an illusion? To take such a position is to take the easy way out as an excuse for failing to examine the specific reasons why this particular war broke out where and when it did. Shipway shows that once one gets into the specifics, the broader context of decolonization appears increasingly problematic as explanation. God is indeed in the details.

The plan for a renewed and modernized French Union was laid down at the conference of Brazzaville, French Congo, in 1944, and assumed a hallowed place in Gaullist mythology as a liberal and progressive call for an end to imperialism, appropriate to de Gaulle's movement of Free French seeking to liberate metropolitan France from the Nazi scourge. As a number of French scholars have shown, the

Brazzaville conference was nothing of the kind. It was a closed meeting of a small number of colonial administrators, admitting no representatives of subject peoples themselves (Felix Eboué, the one assimilated black, was part of the French colonial administration), which left an ambiguous legacy, advocating economic and cultural reforms but rigidly excluding any idea of independence for France's former colonies. Henri Laurentie, whose papers provide a good deal of Shipway's most interesting source materials, sketched the plan for the French Union--which eventually categorized France's former colonies as Associated States, Territories, and Overseas Departments within the French Union--but his ideas were rejected at Brazzaville. De Gaulle took them over later and attributed them to Brazzaville, however, creating its myth, much as he did the myth of Vichy as the shield and the Resistance the sword, both in some sense working for French liberation.

Laurentie, the Director of Political Affairs in the ministry of colonies, pursued his ideas for a French Union against a backdrop of constraints imposed, in Shipway's terms, by considerations of salience, ideology, and institutional solidarity. "Salience" referred to the degree of importance colonial affairs assumed in the domestic political maelstrom of Paris from 1944 to 1947; "ideology" was defined by the parameters of the postwar Gaullist-Republican synthesis; and "institutional solidarity", which turned out to be the most critical of the three, involved the degree of control Paris was able to exercise over its colonial bureaucracy. The Indochina war established the disastrous pattern of unauthorized actions by colonial and military officials in the colonies later being rationalized and "covered" by weak Paris politicians preoccupied with domestic political crises, the malady which eventually was to destroy the Fourth Republic in 1958. These three constraints were relatively inoperative in 1944-45, allowing the parameters of a reasonably rational Indochina policy to be laid down. Salience was low, Gaullism and Republicanism appeared part of a unitary vision, and the colonial administration was in hand. Unfortunately this happy situation was not to last: colonial issues became part of internal Paris politics, Gaullism and Republicanism were to appear antithetical to one another, and the colonial bureaucracy went its own way by the war's outbreak in 1946. But this gets us ahead of our story. For even when these constraints were not yet operative, Laurentie found his federalist ideas running up against traditional French myths of the unity and indivisibility of the Republic and the assimilation of colonial peoples into a nation of "100 million Frenchmen". France would not abandon its *mission civilisatrice*.

Indochina was under a Vichy administration covered by a virtual Japanese protectorate for most of the war; only in March 1945 did the Japanese finally push the Vichy administration aside in a coup d'état. In March 1945 the French government made its first declaration on Indochina, which had been targeted by U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt as a flagrant example of historical French misrule. The declaration

promised Indochina freedom within the context of the yet-to-be French Union. But the declaration bore little relationship to events on the ground, where Ho Chi Minh and the nationalist Viet Minh had seized power in the wake of Hiroshima and the Japanese defeat. Shipway tries too hard, I think, to portray Laurentie as a relatively enlightened and liberal official. He undercuts his case by showing that Laurentie's liberalism reflected a pragmatic consideration born of French weakness rather than any altruistic spirit of generosity. Laurentie's policy reflected the French desire to salvage what it could.

The contradiction became at once apparent when France returned to Indochina, prepared, to be sure, to negotiate with Ho Chi Minh even to the point of uttering the fatal word "independence", however defined. But de Gaulle chose to send an uncompromising Governor General in the person of the redoubtable Thierry d'Argenlieu, whose imperialism was held with all the fervor of his Catholicism (d'Argenlieu was a former monk and returned to the monastery when he retired). D'Argenlieu was endowed with the traditional powers equivalent to those of a dictator, and instructed to apply a program of "five lands" in Indochina, Cambodia, Laos, and a divided Vietnam into three provinces or *ky*, Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina. To back this up the French came with four French divisions under the heroic General Philippe Leclerc, who wasted no time in establishing a tenuous control in the South. Little wonder that Ho Chi Minh proved so compliant and agreed to negotiate on the basis of independence within the context of the French Union. A consensus built of mutually pragmatic considerations drove the two sides into the accords of March 6, 1946. Ho Chi Minh agreed to abide by the results of free elections to determine the question of the unity of the three *ky*, and he accepted the return of French troops to the North. Paris in turn agreed that Vietnam would enjoy independence within the Indochinese federation and the French Union, and French troops would withdraw within five years. But both sides chafed under these terms, and meanwhile de Gaulle resigned and France entered a cycle of constitution making, referenda, and elections. A three-way argument over the locus of power developed between d'Argenlieu on the ground in Vietnam, the colonial bureaucracy in Paris, and the special inter-ministerial committee charged with Indochinese policy under the prime minister, known by the unlikely appellation of "Cominindo".

The March accords provided for negotiations, first at Dalat, to settle the terms of Vietnam's place in the Indochinese Federation, and then in Paris, to determine Vietnam's role in the French Union. Dalat turned quickly to stalemate: Ho returned to the issue of the unity of Vietnam, and was shocked to discover that France meant to monopolize the diplomatic representation of the Indochinese Federation: a "free" French Vietnam in the French Union in fact was intended to enjoy autonomous powers neither in defense, foreign policy, finances, or education. Ho firmly rejected

these terms, counting on his ability to mobilize more progressive support in Paris, but he arrived there in June 1946 to discover yet a further set of unpleasant facts. The constitutional draft for the Fourth Republic was in the process of being rejected by the voters, a relatively progressive government of Socialist Felix Gouin gave way, after new elections, to a government headed by colonialist Georges Bidault of the *Mouvement républicain populaire* (MRP). And back in Vietnam, in a policy of establishing new "facts" on the ground, d'Argenlieu declared an autonomous Republic of Cochinchina. Marius Moutet, Gouin's minister of colonies, approved d'Argenlieu's action and the government's negotiator in Fontainebleau, Max Andre of the MRP, was the same person who had refused any and all concessions at Dalat. Finally, de Gaulle laid down his challenge to the restored "system" of political parties at Bayeux, calling for a strong executive, indicting it, among other deficiencies, for its failure to affirm the integrity of the empire, with none other than D'Argenlieu, back in France for a strategic visit, at his side.

In this situation Ho discovered no more disposition to make concessions in Paris than had existed on the French side in Vietnam. In frustration he worked out yet another "modus vivendi" and returned home to an increasingly restive constellation of political forces in the Viet Minh. Here Shipway begins, alas, to fail us, for he can tell us nothing certain of the pressures and conflicts within the Viet Minh, and he spends precious little time on French perceptions of the Viet Minh either. It takes, after all, two to tango and two to go to war.

Shipway is very good on the Paris side, however, where he now discerns a three-way division over what to do next. Moutet and the government Cominindo wanted to continue negotiations with Ho Chi Minh, putting pressure on him by pursuing the creation of a genuinely democratic republic in Cochinchina which could become the basis of a unified Vietnam under an alternative government to the Viet Minh. Laurentie and the colonial bureaucracy favored a stronger policy and negotiating position relying on a possible show of force, within the context of negotiations, but meant to bring Ho Chi Minh to his knees. Finally, d'Argenlieu, backed by General Jean Valluy, in charge of the expeditionary force, favored a preemptive strike designed to eliminate the Ho Chi Minh government from power. There were rational voices warning against the consequences of this policy. Admiral Pierre Barjot of the chiefs of staff thought it would require 250,000 men to subdue Vietnam. In the event a far too conservative estimate even for the Americans later, and Leclerc, who knew the situation intimately, thought France too weak to endure a protracted war that was sure to ensue.

As the two sides waited for the modus vivendi and new negotiations to begin on October 30, violence erupted in the South where French control was slipping. The Cochinchinese "government" unravelled in the absence of popular support and its

head, Dr Nguyen Van Thinh, committed suicide. France again went to the polls and this time approved the second constitutional draft albeit by a bare plurality. The Communist party emerged the largest in still new elections, and a five week governmental crisis ensued until the designation of a Socialist prime minister, Leon Blum, took place on December 12. Blum was firmly committed to the policy of pursuing negotiations with Ho Chi Minh on the basis of Vietnamese independence within the French Union. With events spinning out of control, Shipway suggests, d'Argenlieu and Valluy, fearing the consequences of negotiations conducted by Blum, decided on their own on a preemptive military strike to destroy Ho Chi Minh and his government. One has here a foretaste of Algeria in May 1958, and if Shipway is right, an eerie parallel. The Third Republic was established and fell as the consequence of two defeats at the hands of Germany. The Fourth Republic was born and died to the tune of military-bureaucratic insurrections in Vietnam and Algeria. Unfortunately, it is impossible to say whether Shipway is right, or is offering us a rather ingenious speculation.

The incidents in Haiphong appear rather straight-forward, and do appear to buttress Shipway's point. The French tried to seize control of customs in the port and impounded an oil freighter. The Vietnamese resisted, shots were fired, and in reaction French troops asserted their control of the city, killing 243 persons in the process (and losing 7 of their own). They then bombarded the city from the sea for good measure, killing anywhere from 600 to 6,000 people, depending upon whom one believes. On December 16 there occurred in Hanoi a secret meeting chaired by d'Argenlieu with Valluy and others present. We have no minutes, but Shipway assures us it had all the signs of a "war council". On December 19 French troops set about demolishing barricades which the Vietnamese were constructing in various areas of the city, apparently in an effort to forestall another French attempt like the one which had just occurred in Haiphong. The Vietnamese again resisted; there was a period of standoff, French troops appearing to stand down, but in the evening a series of brutal Viet Minh attacks occurred on French forces throughout the city. Was it the result of provocateurs? The French *Suret e g n rale*? Dissidents in the Viet Minh challenging Ho Chi Minh? General Vo Nguyen Giap, Vietnamese minister of defense? Or were the attacks ordered by Ho himself? Shipway offers all of these as possibilities, curiously reducing the likelihood of a planned Vietnamese attack on the French far below what most other scholars have believed and asserted.

Shipway here leaves us to our own devices, but conspiracy theorists are buttressed by the inexplicable delay of Ho Chi Minh's congratulations, sent to Blum on December 15, but which did not arrive in Paris until December 20, the day after the incidents. Blum, in ignorance of the full dimensions of what had occurred, sent a courteous reply to Ho combined with an offer of a cease-fire and resumption of negotiations. On

December 23 he sent Moutet, accompanied by Leclerc, to Indochina, ostensibly to see Ho. But in the meantime, learning of the events in Hanoi, Blum fell back on a familiar refrain: order must be restored prior to any negotiations. Moutet, once in Hanoi and shown the evidence of the carnage and "brutality" of the Viet Minh, renounced seeing Ho, observing that "before any negotiations it is necessary that there be a military outcome". The consequence of this policy was seven years of war, Dien Bien Phu, and the Geneva agreements of 1954, which ended the French role in Vietnam. None of which prevented the French from replaying the whole *chanson* again in Algeria.

This leads me to my final point. Shipway has done a brilliant job of dissecting the currents of thought in Paris and Saigon and tracing their consequences in terms of policy. One cannot talk of *longue durée* of the Annales school in the twentieth century, but he does put his story in the context of the conjuncture, decolonization, and then does a masterful job of resurrecting the importance of narrative and *histoire événementielle*. But in portraying a struggle for power between the colonial bureaucracy and Saigon against the backdrop of a Gaullist-like analysis of paralysis of the political system in Paris, it seems to me he exaggerates the existing differences and over-emphasizes the possible policy outcomes. All French politicians of the era, including the Communists, whose vision of the recast French empire was a version of the Soviet Union with its fourteen "independent" Soviet republics, shared in what historians have aptly called the colonial "myth" or consensus. The choice of d'Argenlieu was de Gaulle's, and Gaullism, contrary to the myth which the General's contemporary admirers are today busily constructing, was no advocate of the emancipation of colonial peoples. De Gaulle did not indict the system because it lacked "a" policy but because it was too weak for his taste in applying "his" policy of repression. The same was true of de Gaulle and the regime again in the crisis over Algeria. The Fourth Republic did not lack a policy, despite ministerial instability and the same blatant bureaucratic insubordination which existed during the crisis in Indochina. If politicians in Paris accepted and "covered" for actions carried out independently by military and colonial officials in the colonies, it was because a consensus in the government existed in support of those policies, and was backed in turn by French public opinion which concurred in associating the loss of France's colonies with national decline. Moreover, during the Algerian crisis, many of these acts of so-called insubordination were actually covered beforehand by one or another minister acting without authorization of the cabinet as a whole. I suspect the same may have been true in the case of Indochina. Premier Paul Ramadier, who succeeded Blum, blandly accepted d'Argenlieu's resignation in March 1947, offered because the prime minister would not abandon the hope of dealing eventually with Ho Chi Minh. How easy it was! Why then did no one cashier d'Argenlieu earlier? However fearful his reputed Gaullism, there is no documented evidence of any capability of

d'Argenlieu or the army carrying out a coup d'état in Paris, as was later to be the case during the war in Algeria.

If I have gone on so long, it is out of enthusiasm for the story Shipway has to tell and the skilful way he tells it. This book is extremely well written, and I found reading it almost effortless, something I can say about all too few monographs that come across my desk. The manner in which the author weaves together the diverse strands of policy-making, combining domestic politics, bureaucratic considerations, and the situation on the ground in Saigon and Hanoi must stand as a model of the way war origins should and must be presented. It is many years since historian Arno Mayer told us to pay attention to the internal origins of war. Shipway has done so with fine results. I believe, however, that the author has exaggerated the different policy options possible in Paris. And lurking in the background, marring somewhat an otherwise fine story, is our historical ignorance of the internal politics of the Viet Minh. Did Ho Chi Minh face similar problems of bureaucratic insubordination? Was he feuding with General Giap? Was he the moderate he is so often portrayed to be? Shipway does not make sufficient use of the existing works on Vietnamese communism. A study of these questions is needed to complement and complete the French side of the story which Shipway has so finely told. But I recommend this book to anyone interested in the origins of what may one day be considered the second thirty- years war of our "short" century.

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