
H-France Review Vol. 6 (May 2006), No. 53

Amaury Lorin, *Paul Doumer, gouverneur général de l'Indochine (1897-1902): le tremplin colonial*. Paris: l'Harmattan, 2004. 248 pp. Maps, notes, bibliography, and index. 21.20 € (pb.). ISBN 2-7475-6954-3.

Review by Michael G. Vann, California State University, Sacramento.

On February 23rd, 2005, in a move that many historians found surprising if not shocking, the French parliament passed a law requiring the positive aspects of French colonialism be taught along with more critical assessments of the nation's imperialist past. The law, which essentially requires teachers to be "fair and balanced," and admittedly does not impact historians working on the other side of the Rhine, Channel, or Atlantic, raises some perplexing moral issues for scholars of the French colonial world. How are we to integrate the positive aspects of some of the darker moments in French colonial history? What was the positive side of the slave trade? What was the positive side of the French pacification of Algeria in the 1830s and 1840s? What was the positive side of the military conquest of West Africa? What was the positive side of urban racial segregation? What was the positive side of denying millions of Asians, Africans, Arabs, Berbers and Polynesians access to the political legacy of the French Revolution, the right to national self-determination, or any meaningful control over their own land, resources, and social order? What was the positive side of forced labor, state monopolies, and taxation without representation? What was the positive side of the colonial state's role in opium production, distribution, and sales? What was the positive side of the massacre at Sétif, the shelling of Haiphong, and the brutal post-war repression in Madagascar? What was the positive side of the torture of Algerians suspected fighting for their independence? In short, how do we come up with a positive side to what many regard as the darkest aspects of France's national history? Amaury Lorin's *Paul Doumer, gouverneur général de l'Indochine (1897-1902): le tremplin colonial* offers one possibility: ignore or quickly dismiss the darker aspects and focus on the positive.

Perhaps this criticism is unfair. In his introduction, Lorin states that his goal is not to "study Franco-Vietnamese contact in the period of 1897-1902," but to write a history of Doumer's five-year tenure as the head of the Indochinese federation of colonies (p. 30). Indeed, this slim volume is extracted from his larger *thèse de doctorate*, a biography of Doumer still in progress at the time of the book's publication. Yet is this a possible task? Can one really write a political history of a colonial administrator and not take the brutal, violent, and exploitative nature of the colonial context into account? Lorin's work would have us believe so. The rather straightforward narrative quickly details Paul Doumer's early life and political career and then plunges into the heart of the work: a study of Doumer's various policy initiatives in French Indochina. The book concludes with a defensive discussion of the various political disputes Doumer's authoritarian and independent rule provoked in Paris and Saigon. As Doumer is the subject, there are no Vietnamese voices in the work and there is no serious and meaningful analysis of Doumer's impact upon the people of Vietnam. Lorin has met the limited goals stated in his introduction. However, by focusing entirely on the white colonial administrator, the work is at best unsatisfying and at worst morally lacking. This reviewer wonders whether any serious historian would attempt to write a similar political biography on the administrator of German occupied Paris. Clearly the political context of colonial conquest and occupation must be factored into any discussing of the chief of French Indochina. Failure to take the cold, hard realities of the colonial encounter into account runs the risk of white washing the history in question.

The book lacks any real theoretical framework. Lorin gives us a study of colonialism from above; a quick argument for the importance of Governor-General Paul Doumer's tenure in the formation of Indochine,

and by extension Vietnam. Writing in an older tradition of political and administrative history, Lorin argues that Doumer made Indochine française. In this model of the world, powerful state systems act upon seemingly passive societies. Doumer, as head of the colonial administration, changed the lives of the millions of inhabitants of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Such a perspective, of course, echoes centuries of French political thought, which since Louis XIV's absolutist state and the centralizing drive of the revolution and subsequent generations of republicans, that sees the state as possessing a near monopoly on legitimate political agency. Lorin describes the triumph of the interventionist state, deployed in the colonies under the allegedly progressive (but in the end shamefully hypocritical) banner of *la mission civilisatrice*. He does not engage any work on the critical study of race and empire in French history. For the most part, Lorin's primary research is solid, showing a good command of the relevant sections of the colonial archives. Yet his work remains in the mode of empiricism, offering little analysis of what he found in the archives. He also makes extensive use certain secondary sources. At times there is an over-reliance on the work of Charles Fourniau, Pierre Brocheux, and Charles Meyer. The work does not consider more some of the recent and influential studies of the French empire, especially those published in English.

As stated above, the outline of Lorin's work is very clear and straightforward. The first section, "A Governor Everywhere, an Administrator Nowhere," contains seven chapters that detail Doumer's work in organizing the Indochinese federation of colonies into a meaningful and efficient system that could pay for itself with various taxes. These chapters, with the exception of the slim second chapter that regurgitate various orientalist and exoticist images of Southeast Asia, traces Doumer's initiatives in streamlining the state bureaucracy, setting up a profitable system of taxes and monopolies, railway building, and the establishment of scientific institutions such as l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient. In his narrative, Lorin frequently uses subjective adjectives such as "energetic" to describe Doumer (p. 63). While he acknowledges that danger of falling into the trap of the "cult of personality," his descriptions of Doumer's policies border on hagiography (30). One chapter, entitled "A mission with a clear objective: pull Indochina out of its torpor, straighten out its precarious finances, and restore respected authority," paints a rather admiring portrait of Doumer (p. 57).

The second, and much stronger, section of the book contains five chapters that rather defensively detail the reception of Doumer's work. Here Lorin describes the various conflicts that his policies created. Doumer found that his authoritarian bent caused conflicts with the colonial bureaucracy, the military, the Chamber of Deputies, the interests of colonial settlers in Saigon, and the Quai d'Orsay. Obviously, such a sweeping bundle of reforms was bound to ruffle some feathers. Of particular note is the ire that Doumer provoked from Charles-Marie Le Myre de Vilers, the Deputy of Cochinchine and voice of the French commercial community in Saigon. Here we get a taste of some of the diversity of colonial interests in the empire (pp. 174-6). Even more useful is the analysis of Doumer's independent, aggressive, and annexationist policy towards Yunnan. In this section we learn that Doumer actively pushed for French expansion into South China and even made unauthorized forays on horseback into the region (pp. 127-40). While these various disputes complete out understanding of Doumer's impact in the colonies, Lorin again fails to offer much in the way of critical analysis. Thanks to their detail, these chapters are very useful, but they are not insightful.

Overall, Lorin paints a Napoleonic portrait, where all agency lies in the great colonial administrator. We read that Doumer centralized the colonies, Doumer established the monopolies, Doumer created French style cities and railways, and Doumer made the colony profitable. Lorin's only analysis is that this was all for the betterment of Indochina. In addition to the lack of agency amongst the colonized people, there is no discussion of the impact of these reforms on the people of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. On the contrary, Lorin's rosy assessment of Doumer's project talks of economic self-sufficiency and administrative centralization but does not offer serious analysis of the nature of the state monopolies on salt, rice wine, and opium or the imposition of taxes to be paid by non-white colonial

subjects in a system that benefited the white colonial overlords. Nor does he consider the brutal impact of Doumerian urban policies, the economic disturbances Doumer's decisions created in rural Tonkin, or the systematic use of physical violence in the colonial construction industry and the immense loss of life on the Hanoi to Yunnan railway. His concluding remarks, free of any critical assessment of empire, note in a congratulatory manner that Paul Doumer helped France to consolidate its imperial position. As a whole, Lorin offers not simply an endorsement of one colonial administrator but rather a celebration of Imperial France. In this regard it is useful. Too many of us have read so many works critical of empire and the racial power-relationships of the colonial encounter, that it is easy to forget that there exists a body of literature, currently produced, that views imperial France as a positive moment in history. Perhaps this is an unfair criticism. We must remember that this is a subsection of his larger study of the political career of Doumer, and that Lorin's interest is in Doumer and not colonial history. However, the image of a political biography of the head of Nazi occupied Paris comes to mind. Historical context is important.

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ISSN 1553-9172