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Martin Thomas, *The French Empire between the Wars. Imperialism, Politics and Society*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005. xvii + 408. Maps, tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$74.95 US (cl). ISBN 0-7190-6518-7.

Review by Owen White, University of Delaware.

By 1919, what had been the Champagne front was already alive with the sounds of reconstruction. Such was the activity, in the words of Robert Delavignette, a wounded veteran at the age of twenty-one, that “One would have thought oneself at the founding of some America were it not for that apocalyptic scrap-iron and those plantations of wooden crosses.” Delavignette’s father had begun to rebuild his shattered factory, surrounded by “Piedmontese cement-workers, Annamite and Berber laborers, and German prisoners of war.” The younger Delavignette, however, chose to leave this cosmopolitan scene behind, preferring instead to go “chasing the vision of a new world” in the French empire. He would soon find himself overseeing construction in a rather different setting, in the colony of Niger in West Africa.[1]

Delavignette was not the only one to look hopefully toward the empire as the Great War came to a close. Buoyed by the sacrifices that colonial populations had been enjoined to render France during the war, prominent imperial theorists earnestly drew up plans to develop the empire in a more systematic way, with the aim of realizing both its material and human potential. Through this “civilizing effort,” wrote the Colonial Minister Albert Sarraut in a famous text from 1923, France was “shaping the face of a new humanity.”[2] Such schemes, however, did not amount to much in practice. Reflecting at the conclusion of a second devastating war on the period that had followed the first one, Delavignette observed that, in material terms, “the mother country could not or did not know how to give the colonies the help they expected.” As for developing human potential, France “did not go further than to continue traditional prejudices which stated that the Vietnamese were inscrutable and the Senegalese were overgrown children.”[3] If independence movements, again in Delavignette’s words, “shot up like volcanic lava” after the Second World War, the fissures through which these movements emerged were not hard to locate in the preceding decades.[4]

Martin Thomas’ admirable book surveys the vicissitudes of French imperialism between the wars, and helps us to measure more precisely the depth of “the roots of decolonization” (p. 10). We know to which conflicts Thomas’ title refers, of course, although it might be noted that in doing so we are implicitly following a metropole-centered chronology. Ask a veteran Vietnamese nationalist to talk about the French empire between the wars and he might reasonably reply “*which* wars?” I do not intend this comment as a particular criticism, however, since this is anything but a blinkered, metropole-focused account. Instead, Thomas displays breathtaking geographical and thematic range, exposing the reader to as wide a variety of manifestations of French imperial power as any book published in the field. Certainly, we hear about familiar elements of the narrative of French imperialism in the 1920s and 1930s, like the 1931 *exposition coloniale* in Paris. But we also learn of struggling Cambodian silk workers during the Depression, problems with tax collection in the Cameroon mandate, and labor unrest in Pondicherry; while little-studied anti-French uprisings like the Kongo Wara, originating in what is now the Central African Republic, are juxtaposed with much better known, roughly contemporaneous outbreaks of anti-colonial activity in Morocco and Vietnam. Thomas thus forces the reader mentally to travel in many directions at once: not just from metropole to colony and back again, but between

different French possessions. The effect of this is often very stimulating, and shows the value of thinking about the French empire as a single, if sprawling, entity.

One of the most impressive aspects of the book is the attention Thomas pays to topics that have fallen from fashion in recent years. Recent culturally-oriented histories of empire have tended not to show much interest in economic questions, to such an extent that colonial economics might now be said to represent the proverbial “elephant in the room” of French colonial studies. Perhaps Thomas’ book will help to reverse this trend. Not only does he detail the effects of the Depression on the empire, but he also offers some helpful insights into the slow-dripping intrusion of French rule into colonial subjects’ lives in the form of taxation. Much remains to be done on the economic and social effects of colonial taxation, but it is much to Thomas’ credit that he asserts its importance so clearly. Similarly, while historians have recently devoted significant attention to colonial towns, Thomas does not fail to take us into the countryside in which, despite the urbanization that was a feature of this period, the vast majority of imperial subjects continued to earn their living through agriculture.

Understandably, in view of the scale of the book, in many instances Thomas is forced to play the hand he is dealt by the available secondary literature, which is not uniformly strong; a section on missionary activity after World War One, for example, reflects the deficiencies in historical research on that topic. Yet, in many areas, Thomas has shored up the secondary literature with fresh archival research of his own, making notably good use of the private papers of key figures like Albert Sarraut and Marius Moutet (whose unsuccessful efforts at imperial reform under the Popular Front receive substantial attention), and rounding off the book with an original, archive-based analysis of imperial defense strategy (if indeed it merits that description) leading up to the outbreak of World War Two.

Several recurring motifs emerge from this *tour du monde*. One gains a clear sense, for example, that the French (sometimes egged on by settlers, as in Algeria) ended up with the enemies they deserved, by coming down hard on opposition that later would come to seem moderate. In this regard, Thomas suggests that the Vietnamese nationalist party, the VNQDD, so effectively squashed after the Yen Bay uprising in 1930, might have been a more desirable opposition movement than the Indochinese Communist Party (p. 238). On the subject of Communists, the ideological gymnastics of the French Communist Party stand out here. One of the most ardent French communist opponents of the empire in the 1920s was Jacques Doriot, yet by the time he had completed his conversion to fascism (and imperialism) in the 1930s, the PCF had long since ceased to be a reliable comrade to fellow Communists in places like Vietnam, or to colonized peoples more generally. Thomas mordantly suggests that when the PCF was outlawed in 1939 some of its leaders may finally have begun to understand the reality of “arbitrary arrest and indefinite imprisonment,” (p. 306) both routine features of colonial justice. Perhaps the PCF practiced its own version of what Thomas calls the “strategic neglect” (p. 315) that left the empire so ill prepared to defend itself in World War Two. But the men of 1940 certainly had no excuse for a lack of awareness of empire. Among civilians, André Maginot, Paul Reynaud, and Pierre Laval had all at some point passed through the revolving door that led to the colonial minister’s office, while Thomas’ account shows how enthusiastically Marshal Pétain and Generals Gamelin and Weygand had helped to suppress uprisings in Morocco, Syria, and Lebanon. The empire had, of course, long been significant to soldiers, a point that Thomas might have brought out more fully in view of its salience to the later wars of decolonization, yet he is right to note the irony of France’s desperate quest to re-establish its power in Indochina after World War Two, having “tacitly accepted its loss” in 1939 (p. 316).

Some of Thomas’ interpretations are likely to provoke disagreement. In view of the recent historiographical interest shown in manifestations of empire in France, for example, some will balk at the assertion that the public remained essentially uninterested in colonial matters. To me, this remains a tenable if not wholly convincing argument, though I do take issue with some of the other broad

statements here. For example, the claim that “At its core, colonialism was a system of racial oppression” (p. 5) seems unnecessarily specific when the author is so good at showing what else colonialism was, such as a system for extracting resources. Other interpretations also struck me as somewhat unsatisfying. A section on colonial education fell into the trap of simultaneously decrying the quality of the education on offer and the low numbers receiving it—rather like the Woody Allen joke in which one woman at a restaurant comments on how bad the food is, and another agrees, “Yes, and the portions are so small.” Unfortunately, too, the book contains quite a number of errors and, since those I picked up related mostly to my own region of expertise, the slips may be more extensive than I am able to judge. I found a number of names spelled incorrectly, two towns wrongly located, and a set of statistics that did not add up, among several other errors of fact or interpretation of varying degrees of importance. Given the breadth of Thomas’ reading one can understand how such errors appeared, and none of them are serious enough in themselves to undermine the project as a whole. However, I did come to feel that the book would have benefited from a longer period of fact-checking. One hopes against hope that Manchester University Press will consider a second edition.

In the end, I am not sure that Thomas ever quite succeeds in answering his own question as to whether “‘the inter-war empire’ [is] of any use as an analytical tool” (p. 347). To say that “in much of the inter-war empire, French colonialism was barely tolerated” (p. 5) is doubtless true, yet it would be hard to make a case for saying it is any truer for the empire before World War One, let alone after 1945. Sometimes, too, interpretations concerning the French empire seem less persuasive when set alongside the experience of other European imperial powers. For example, “French reluctance to contemplate any fundamental redistribution of colonial power within colonial states” (p. 347) may, as Thomas suggests, have contributed to difficulties by 1939. But British attempts to redistribute power through such measures as the 1935 Government of India Act did not noticeably diminish the difficulties they were having in a key part of their empire. In the end it is hard to avoid the conclusion that difficulties were likely to work themselves to the surface however the French chose to configure the colonial power structure.

Rather than ending with a criticism, however, it would be much better to conclude that part of the value of this book is that it allows one to contemplate such questions with a much fuller understanding of the circumstances in which the French colonial empire operated. I would not hesitate to recommend *The French Empire between the Wars* to anyone wishing to grasp the reach of French imperialism and the variance between ideology and practice in an era when imperial crises occurred ever more frequently and in ways that were ever more threatening to the empire’s integrity. The book serves as a fine “prequel” to the author’s book about France and World War Two,^[5] and given that Thomas has also written articles about the decolonization era one wonders if a trilogy is in the works.

NOTES

[1] Robert Delavignette, *Freedom and Authority in French West Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), 9.

[2] Albert Sarraut, “France’s Dual Mandate,” in John D. Hargreaves, ed., *France and West Africa: An Anthology of Historical Documents* (London: MacMillan, 1969), 228.

[3] William B. Cohen, ed., *Robert Delavignette on the French Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 59.

[4] Cohen, *Robert Delavignette on the French Empire*, 133.

[5] Martin Thomas, *The French Empire at War, 1940-45* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1998).

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