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## **Promoting the Colonial Idea: Propaganda and Visions of Empire in France**

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**Reviewer:**

William Clarence-Smith

The clear and stimulating introduction to this set of essays applies the concept of 'popular imperialism', developed for modern British history by John MacKenzie and his school, to the French case. There is no attempt to argue for a mass movement behind French colonial expansion, for which there is indeed precious little evidence, but Chafer and Sackur react vigorously against the idea that colonialism was an affair restricted to a small cabal within the French elite. They invite their readers to see imperialism as a constituent element of a 'new patriotism'. The empire was among a mix of factors that came to define France for many of its citizens, mainly on the right of the political spectrum in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Overall, the role of colonies was to bolster a belief that France was a great power, in spite of demographic stagnation and a decline in the country's relative economic standing in the world. This view of a 'greater France' coexisted quite happily with astonishing degree of ignorance about the colonies, and a general lack of interest as to what went on there.

Chafer and Sackur also bring out the differences with Britain, and make some further comparisons with other colonial empires, notably that of Germany. Militarism and racism were part of the French ideological package, but republicanism replaced monarchism, even though the authors note that French colonialists generally strove to be moderate on the divisive question of the form of government. Republicanism, rooted

in the myth of the French Revolution, helped to drive an assimilationist rhetoric that differed drastically from that of the British, even if the reality on the ground proved to be quite similar. Another difference was that some French people initially believed that imperialism distracted attention and resources from revenge, after the humiliating defeat at German hands in 1870. However, this faded away once colonial troops came to the rescue of France in the First World War.

There remain some major and puzzling omissions from this introductory survey. French republicanism may well have been moderate in a colonial context, but, even if pragmatic considerations dictated that minor chiefs should be left in place, republicanism did contribute greatly to the removal of the maharajas, shaykhs, emirs, paramount-chiefs and other monarchical figures, so beloved of British officials. Unintentionally, this French dislike of the hereditary principle smoothed the path to national unity for many African countries after independence. The authors also fail to discuss arguments that French racism owed more to Lamarck than to Darwin, and thus allowed for a greater degree of 'upward racial mobility'. Chafer and Sackur note the role of the colonial project in healing rifts between republicans and monarchists, which came close to destroying the Third Republic in its first decades, but they say nothing about the even more divisive issue of clericalism and anti-clericalism. Indeed, anti-clericalism does not make it to the index, even though France was durably split into Catholic and dechristianised zones by the French Revolution, along fault lines that still count in French politics. In a colonial context, anti-clericalism spilled over into venomous conflicts in the mission field. At the same time, 'missionary martyrs' helped the Catholic Church to rehabilitate its image at home, together with news of its contributions to health, education and other social services in the empire.

Perhaps the most surprising element in the introduction is the failure to pursue comparatively Linda Colley's idea that colonialism produced a British identity out of England, Scotland, Wales, and, much more fitfully, Ireland. Colley's thesis is mentioned but not developed, even though Odile Goerg, one of the contributors to the volume, describes attempts to manipulate imperialist motifs to 'cement' Alsace back into France after 1918. The notion that the crucible of national unity was the French Revolution has probably been exaggerated, while the role of imperial expansion and defensive colonial wars has been underestimated. Agitation for autonomy, or even independence, tended to develop during the retreat from empire, as Bretons, Basques, Catalans, Occitanians, Provençaux, Franco-Provençaux, Corsicans, Alsatians and Flemings all became restive. Furthermore, this pattern can be discerned all over Europe, perhaps most obviously in Spain. Basques, including those from the French side of the border masquerading as Spanish subjects, participated eagerly and successfully in garnering the spoils of Castile's overseas expansion, but began to demand their own state after the collapse of empire. All over Europe, the movement away from dreams of imperial self-sufficiency has been marked by the powerful resurgence of nations deprived of states. The dramatic collapse of the Soviet empire is only the latest example of this trend. The slow convergence towards a federal Europe has further raised the hopes of such movements, as shown in the recent political crises in France over Corsican autonomy.

Editors always face a hard task in coercing their contributors into following their editorial line, and the scarcity of references in the introduction to the chapters that ensue is perhaps a manifestation of this perennial problem. Most contributors address the theme of whether empire shaped a 'new patriotism' somewhat tangentially, with a tendency to follow other agendas in the historiography of French imperialism. Indeed, some contributors romp through already well-known material, without really pausing to consider how this shaped attitudes in France. Examples of this are Pascal Venier on the colonial propaganda of Gallieni and Lyautey, Véronique Dimier on indirect rule, Jonathan Derrick on the politics of anti-colonialism in France, and Catherine Atlan and Jean-Hervé Jézéquel on the careers of prominent Africans working within the French colonial system.

Odile Goerg's fine chapter is perhaps most true to the volume's main thrust, exploring how imperialists sought to draw the provinces into the service of a 'greater France'. Looking at provincial geographical societies, colonial exhibitions, missionary propaganda, and the stationing of colonial troops in the metropolis, Goerg weaves an interesting story of the strengths and weaknesses of this project to cast *la France profonde* into an imperial mould. She frankly admits that the problem is how to gauge the impact of all these activities, but suggests that high visitor numbers to 'African villages' at least suggest interest in the

exotic nature of empire. Her main focus is on Alsace. She notes the significance of emigration to Algeria after 1870, and dwells on efforts after 1918 to counter earlier propaganda events centred on the German colonies. However, she does not really delve enough into the persistent ambiguities of the relationship between this province, profoundly Germanic in cultural terms, and those whom Alsatians call, somewhat disparagingly, 'the French of the interior'.

In a chapter tucked away at the very end of the book, Robert Aldrich provides a fascinating analysis of one particular French view of colonies, revealed in the street names of Paris. Most telling are the names that are left out, rather than those which are included. 'Natives' hardly figure at all, even when they were favourable to French rule. However, Félix Éboué, the Black Guyanese governor of Chad who rallied to General de Gaulle in the dark hours of 1940, is commemorated. More surprisingly, so is his wife. Even more bizarre is the omission of leaders of anti-colonial struggles against France, when some who fought Spanish, British and Turkish imperialism are included. Names of businessmen are almost completely absent, possibly reflecting a certain unease as to the ethical standards of those who made fortunes on the periphery. Some small colonies do not figure, and a map would have been helpful at this point in the discussion. On the whole, the distribution of names suggests an interest in the 'glorious' process of constituting empire, while revealing tactful silence on the shoddy and uninspiring manner in which much of it slipped from French hands. It would be useful to know a great deal more about how decisions to name streets were taken, although this would require much detailed research. Aldrich provides a hint as to the potential of such research by indicating that a group of Caribbean students attempted, unsuccessfully, to delete the name of General Richepanse, sent by Napoleon to Guadeloupe in 1802 to re-establish slavery there.

Gilles de Gantès and Isabelle Merle adhere to the editorial line to some degree, by asking whether the popularity of Indochina and New Caledonia as destinations for migrants proved the efficacy of colonial propaganda. However, they do not go very far in answering this interesting question. Gantès further suggests that settlement cemented French imperial unity, given the prominence of 'sub-imperial' migration from French India and Réunion in an early stage, a point that Merle could have underlined by referring to Réunionais and Vietnamese migration to New Caledonia. Tantalisingly, Gantès shows that the majority of later settlers in Indochina came from the periphery of the 'hexagon', especially Corsicans, but also Bretons, Charentais, Provençaux, natives of the Alps, and Alsatians. Unfortunately, he fails to ask what impact this might have had on French national unity. Moreover, he does not detect the ancient Basque presence in the Philippines as an ingredient in the 'Bordeaux connection' with the Far East. As for Merle, she does not even provide a breakdown of the origins of migrants.

Penny Edwards focuses more on peripheral identity formation, exploring the poorly known Cambodian case, but her chapter also yields some valuable general insights. In particular, she describes the elaboration of the cult of Joan of Arc, canonised by the Vatican in 1920, whose bobbed hair-style was even adopted by some Cambodian women in the inter-war years. For royalists, Catholics, adherents of the Action Française and supporters of the Vichy regime, the 'maid of Orleans' formed a potent counterweight to the Marianne figure dear to republicans. The latter is strikingly depicted on the book's dustjacket, pouring out a cornucopia of wealth to benighted colonial subjects.

Other chapters concentrate on the vexed question of racial and cultural discrimination. Neil MacMaster shows how attempts to counter German propaganda in the First World War led to the provision of Muslim buildings and institution in inter-war Paris, although his references to an 'apartheid' mentality seem inappropriate. Owen White draws on some unusual sources, women's magazines and intercepted letters, to explore the extraordinary welter of conflicting French attitudes towards race, with a welcome stress on women's feelings. Alice Conklin considers campaigns to increase birth rates in France and West Africa, pointing out variations in gender and race terminology. Emmanuelle Sibeud looks at the views on race enunciated by sociologists and missionaries. However, none of the three authors sufficiently draws out the implications for the book as a whole, even though they provide much material that might serve to question the centrality of racism for French identity. William Kidd's trawl through a wide variety of war memorials focuses more on the volume's central concern, but he takes French racism as a given, rather than as something to be explored. Indeed, the vital distinction between race and culture is often blurred in this

collection, in ways that make it more difficult to grasp the specificity of French attitudes, compared to those prevalent in Britain or elsewhere.

Christopher Flood and Hugo Frey round off the volume with a thought-provoking survey of the extreme right's attitudes to empire, which should really have been the concluding chapter. Far right movements in France tended to be anti-imperialist to begin with, because empire distracted France from the 'blue line of the Vosges' and risked polluting the *mère-patrie* with the blood of 'lesser breeds.' After the Second World War, however, theorists of the extreme right moved to a defence of empire, angrily criticising the 'masochistic' rush by centrist and leftists to denigrate French achievements in the colonies. The National Front even abandoned overt racism in favour of a defence of French culture, carefully including 'people of colour' in the ranks of its candidates for elected office. Islam emerged as the main enemy, foreshadowing the current lurch towards islamophobia by more mainstream elements in the industrialised world. Again, this contribution raises problems for the centrality of racism in the constitution of the 'new patriotism'.

Despite some weaknesses in analysis, and some empirical gaps and lack of focus in the substance of the book, this is an important collection, which pushes forward a growing revisionist approach to imperialism. Reduced to its essence, the thesis is that empire was more theatre than substance for the West. Expansion overseas was principally a way to paper over internal cracks in the political and social fabric of industrialised nation states. Any search for gains from the economic exploitation of the periphery was weak, and proved illusory. Indeed, it was internal strength, gained from the Western agricultural and industrial revolutions, that gave colonial lobbies the opportunity to engage in the gigantic, and often bloody, theatrical production that was empire. How much truth there is in this vision remains to be seen. However, it clearly opens new avenues for research in imperial history, a branch of enquiry once described as almost moribund.

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