
H-France Review Vol. 2 (September 2002), No. 87

Nicola Cooper, *France in Indochina: Colonial Encounters*. Oxford and New York: Berg, 2001. ix + 240 pp. Map, illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$19.50 U.S. (pb). ISBN 1-85973-481-2.

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Until very recently historians of France on both sides of the Atlantic have neglected the subject of colonialism. In part this has been due to an obsession with the unresolved legacies of 1789 and to France's collective amnesia regarding things colonial after the traumatic experiences of the Algerian War. Of course, there have been exceptions, but few scholars have sought to interweave French colonial and metropolitan history, leaving colonial history to military historians, area studies specialists, and popular historians of nostalgia. It is as if crossing the seas in the pursuit of France's history automatically distances one from the core of the field and banishes one's work to the periphery, making it over-seas history. As a related corollary, in comparison with British and American scholarship, research on the role of race in France remains only in its infancy. Considering that France produced some of the founders of modern racism, including Gobineau and Renan, and some of the most prominent theorists of anti-colonialism, notably Fanon and Césaire, the scarcity of scholarly work on colonialism and race in French history is quite puzzling.

However, in the past decade there has been a series of scholarly works which aims to remedy this problem, producing a renaissance in French colonial historiography. The increased activity in the colonial archives of Aix-en-Provence, the growing number of papers and panels on colonial topics presented at major professional conferences, and the publication of new monographs on the French empire stand as evidence. Nicola Cooper's *France in Indochina: Colonial Encounters* is a strong contribution to this *nouvelle vague* of French colonial history. Not only does Cooper provide a fresh perspective on the processes of colonization, she seeks to integrate the critical study of race into our broader understanding of French national history. Her goal is not to replicate the misleading model of France and her colonies or of over-seas history, but rather to build a history of imperial France. This slim but rich volume on the French possessions in Southeast Asia urges the development of a new narrative that integrates the history of the colonial empire with the history of the hexagon. Gone is the artificial divide between things colonial and things French. In its place Cooper tells a story which highlights the inter-connections between France and Indochina.

Cooper's book makes a number of significant contributions to French historiography. On the first page of the introduction, she notes that the history of the French empire has been neglected, adding that within the French colonial world little attention has been paid to French Indochina. This ensemble of colonies comprised of Vietnam (artificially divided into Cochinchine, Annam, and Tonkin), Cambodia, and Laos, though representing a considerable colonial investment for France, has rarely been the principal focus of academic studies (p. 1). What scholarship there is on the subject largely concerns the history leading up to the outbreak of the American War. This teleological perspective has been a detriment to our understanding of the nature of French rule in Southeast Asia, leading to the survival of various colonial myths. Cooper sets her sights on the mythology of French colonialism, shooting down the gallant image of the conquest, the supposedly benevolent nature of the colonial administration, and the heroic legend of the end of empire. In this regard, her critical study of the colonial encounter is an

important antidote to the misleading and self-congratulatory nature of military history and colonial nostalgia. With *France in Indochina* Cooper attempts to fill several voids in the literature. As a contribution to francophone post-colonial studies, her work is a step toward building a history of imperial France: the colonial period in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos and the cultural history of race and of colonialism. However, like any single study that takes on so many tasks, this relatively slim volume is only a qualified success in all that it wants to accomplish. Furthermore, her theory driven arguments, use of literary analysis in lieu of archival research, and her fervent post-colonial studies perspective may not persuade many historians. Despite the importance and validity of her arguments, her methodology will leave political, economic, social and even cultural historians dissatisfied.

Much to her credit, Cooper lays out her rather complex argument in a very clear and orderly style. After the introduction, where she states her central points and positions herself in terms of theory and terminology, she divides the book into three distinct sections, each containing an introduction, several short article length chapters, and a concise conclusion. While this gives an overall structure to book, it is clear that this is a tactic designed to link seemingly diverse parts into a whole. Some may find the end result of her synthesis does not hold together as tightly as one would hope. Nonetheless, she guides the reader through her theoretically informed analysis, something not common enough in post-colonial studies.

Her first section is entitled "Constructing Indochina." These five chapters discuss the establishment of the French colonial system or at least its ideal in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. The first three chapters cover the conquest, development, and administration of Indochina. She argues that Indochina was something that had to be created, both by the positive acts of building and naming and by the negative acts of silencing and erasing. With no small amount of irony she explores the colonial discursive process that systematically denied indigenous cultural achievements, local diversity, and regional connections while promoting the French colonial ideal of the civilizing mission. The first chapter critiques the hagiography of the French conquerors. Using various representations of the conquest and the pacification (primarily of Vietnam), she details how the official voice of French action in Southeast Asia (often the product of propagandists and boosters in Paris) presented itself as heroic, legitimate, and generous. The second chapter extends the myth-making process into the administration of these conquered nations. Here France chose to put forth the image that it was operating from an ethical and moral vision based upon generosity, benevolence, [and] protection (p.31). Cooper argues that the policy of *mise en valeur* was not limited to material and economic development such as road building and railway construction, but contained a crucial moral and cultural aspect. The third chapter, Making Indochina French, shows how the colonial state used both urbanist and educational policies to gallicize the new and artificial politico-administrative entity of Indochina. Cooper holds that disciplinary building policies controlled the native population and erased rival indigenous and pan-Asian sources of identity (p.44). She finds similar sinister desires behind a colonial school system that served the political purpose of averting dissent, promoting loyalty to the French Republic, and thus assuaging potential rebellion (p. 53).

The last two chapters continue her analysis of the creation of the colonial system, but shift the setting to the *métropole*. Her chapter on the much-discussed 1931 colonial exhibition held in Paris covers the well-documented ways in which the empire was sold to the home population. The following chapter, "Rebellion and Uprising in Indochina: Responses from France," is much more innovative and original. Here she critiques French journalists and travel writers, such as Louis Roubaud, Andrée Viollis, and Félicien Challaye, who voiced alarm over the growing anti-colonial movement in Vietnam. Cooper argues that these voices did not condemn the colonial system *per se*, but claimed that French efforts in Southeast Asia had unfortunately gone astray. Rather than advocate an end to the French domination of these nations, these critics hoped that proper reform would return French rule to its just and benevolent nature. In short, part one, which makes up for about half of the book, presents a history of the formation of French Indochina as a discursive ideal.

What part one builds, is undermined in part two, "Disturbing the Colonial Order." The first chapter, "Utopia or Dystopia? Colonial Disillusionment," explores the frustrations and anxieties of French colonials in Indochina. Relying upon the well-known fiction of Marguerite Duras, André Malraux, Jean Ajalbert, and Pierre Loti, Cooper argues that the reality of life in Indochina did not fit with the image circulated in the administration's colonial discourse. Rather than being hardy, courageous, virile, and enterprising—an intrepid *broussard* or a talented engineer or businessman—the settler is revealed to be something else, much weaker and more shameful (p. 117). With a hostile *indigène* population taxing the white man's patience, a brutal climate sapping the strength of the Europeans' bodies, and even the forest threatening to overwhelm the civilizing work of the French, the colony becomes not a utopian space but a dystopic reality of exile and disillusionment (p. 121). The next short chapter explores some of the problems of gender within the colonial order of things. After identifying the paradoxical image of France as *la mère-patrie*, she focuses on the tension between life in the exotic colonies as an erotic adventure and the attempt to establish a bourgeois settler community based around the French family. The last chapter, Boundary Anxieties, covers an even wider range of subjects. Cooper holds that a variety of forces threatened the thin white line of difference between colonizer and colonized. She holds that the colonial state used urban planning and public hygiene policies to define and defend their racial identity. However, little could be done to stop the sexual relations between white men and Vietnamese and Cambodian women. These encounters produced fears of white men going native and a supposed moral (and physical) decadence and degeneration amongst the French population. With the exception of her discussions of urbanism and medicine, again she utilizes literary sources (primarily well-known colonial novels) to make her points.

The book's final part is provocatively entitled "End of Empire?" Cooper questions whether the disastrous defeat at Dien Bien Phu and the independence of the Geneva Accords really meant the demise of France's colonial relationship with Indochina. Since the book makes no secret of its post-colonial theoretical and political stance, it should come as no surprise to find that she believes that formal political decolonization has not meant an end to France's imperial attitude towards sovereign Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Three short chapters develop this thesis.

The opening chapter, "Dien Bien Phu," holds that there was a profound metropolitan indifference to the Vietnamese struggle for national independence (p. 181). Cooper argues that amidst such ambivalence, inattention, and confusion atavistic imperial discourses were deployed to explain the situation in a brave and heroic light (here the passive voice is appropriate because it remains unclear who is behind this propaganda initiative). Statements by high-ranking officers and the covers of *Paris Match* (her main source of evidence) linked the battle to both the gallantry of earlier colonial campaigns and, as the battle turned against the French, to the heroic memory of the Great War. Her discussion of Dien Bien Phu as a tropical, jungle, or Tonkinese Verdun is extremely insightful (p. 183). She also notes that while the French forces were overwhelmingly men of color from various French colonies, the press presented the loyal soldier as a heroic white male. In a scramble to give meaning to the situation, spin doctors from the military and the press resorted to outdated aristocratic values of the conquest. Yet, as Cooper argues, all that was solid melted into air. According to her study of the May and June covers of *Paris Match*, the real hero of the battle turned out to be no hero at all but rather a heroine, Geneviève de Galard. For Cooper, this indicates that the colonial discourse had broken down to the point where one could not be certain of gender roles, even in the male dominated domain of the battlefield.

The next brief chapter, "From *indigène* to *immigré*," briefly touches upon the arrival of post-colonial immigrants (primarily Vietnamese) in France. She holds that their construction as a model minority was simply a reiteration of earlier colonial stereotypes, noting that their use as a foil against North Africans allowed reactionaries to divide immigrant communities into *les bons* et *les mauvais*. Curiously Cooper makes much of the Vietnamese Boat People Crisis of 1979 and its use by French anti-Communists, but does not mention the Cambodian genocide. Considering that Pol Pot and other Khmer Rouge leaders

were Paris-educated radicals, this is an odd omission for a text so concerned with imperial France's post-colonial legacy.

The final chapter of this study explores the various manifestations of colonial nostalgia in contemporary French popular culture. After noting such diverse cultural manifestations of post-colonialism as the neo-colonial policies of *francophonie*, the development of the former colonies as tourist destinations, and the utterly forgettable new wave band Indochine, Cooper devotes the rest of the chapter to an analysis of two films, Régis Warnier's *Indochine* and Pierre Schoendoerffer's *Dien Bien Phu* (p. 203). Very similar to the argument put forth by Panivong Norindr in *Phantasmatic Indochina*, [1] Cooper's critical appraisal of these two films highlights the ways in which they reveal the extent to which the myths and images of both French colonialism and Indochina which prevailed during the period of colonial rule still have currency today (p. 205). She condemns the deployment of colonial nostalgia in creating a romanticized image of Indochina. Rather than a critique France's relationship with her former empire, Cooper finds that these films provide proof of the longevity and vitality of the colonial discourse she analyzes in the first part of her book. As her reading of *Indochine* is rather forced and not entirely convincing it requires some extended discussion, providing a convenient starting point for this review's criticism.

Accusing the filmmakers of overly sentimental and romantic selective memory, Cooper holds that the directors made films that represent the idealization of a moment in the past, a distorted and sentimentalized vision of a lost era (p. 206). Such a critique is the product of the author's own selective reading of the film. Like Norindr before her, Cooper chooses to conveniently downplay or simply ignore aspects of the film that run counter to her thesis. While she condemns the film as a "neo-colonist project" with a "deeply paternalistic and authoritative narrative device [that] should leave the spectator in no doubt as to the film's ideological stance" (pp. 209-10), she does not mention the numerous scenes of colonial injustices that undermine the idea of the colony as a romanticized paradise. In one of the opening scenes of *Indochine*, for example, Catherine Deneuve's character brutally whips a laborer on her rubber plantation, hardly an idealized view of the past.

A brief discussion of several scenes she ignores in *Indochine* calls Cooper's reading into question. The second half of this rather long film focuses not on Deneuve's white settler character but on an elite Vietnamese woman, Camille (Deneuve's character's adopted daughter), as she makes her way across her colonized nation. In a series of scenes as she travels north in search of her lover, she witnesses the abuses, brutality, and exploitation of French rule. In this voyage of discovery the viewer, through Camille's eyes, sees the chaos that French rule created in Vietnam. The film shows Tonkin's massive famines, the outbreaks of various epidemic diseases such as cholera, and the colonial forced labor system complete with whippings and other forms of physical discipline used to build the great French railways. This very unromantic portrait of the lives of Tonkinese peasants under French rule culminates in their decision to leave their ancestral villages and volunteer for labor in the rubber plantations in the south of Vietnam or on the various French possessions in the Pacific Ocean. With graphic detail the film depicts the horrors of the labor recruitment system, including the treatment of the Vietnamese like slaves, the separation of families, and the terroristic murder of an entire family to keep order. These criminal abuses are shocking in and of themselves, but they are woven into the fabric of the film's narrative as Camille and the audience realize that these people will soon staff her family's plantation. Because of her family's association with the French capitalist system, she is complicit in these people's suffering. Camille, seized with horror, rage, and guilt murders a white labor official (perhaps a reference to the 1929 Bazin assassination in the streets of Hanoi?). This portion of the film systematically discredits, dismantles, and destroys the French civilizing mission. Camille's story also points an accusatory finger of guilt at the white colonial lifestyle portrayed so nostalgically in the first portion of the film. Yet in Cooper's analysis, these crucial scenes are described as a learning curve as she travels through her own country and dismissed as mere escapades (p. 210). It is clear that Cooper is choosing to accentuate the colonial stereotypes that support her argument and ignores aspects of the film that run counter to her position.

The concerns that her analysis of *Indochine* raise are closely related to fundamental criticisms of her work as a whole. Many historians will find her use of fictional sources troubling in two ways. First, her chapters frequently contain arguments primarily based upon the analysis of novels produced by French who settled, worked, or passed through colonial Indochina. Second, and more serious, the conclusions she draws from these literary sources are generally not confirmed with other documentation. Cooper seems to have anticipated such criticisms. On the second page of the book she states that she will attempt to straddle that precariously constituted, and perhaps artificially important, divide between history on the one hand and fiction on the other (p. 2). Unfortunately, *France in Indochina* does not effectively straddle this divide. In order to do so, the book would need to use fictional sources in conjunction with the sources of traditional historical scholarship. At crucial points in the text (primarily in the second part of the book) she relies solely upon the literary output of the imaginations of individuals such as Loti, Farrère, Ajalbert, and Daguerches. While at other moments in her work she cites rather well known secondary sources from the colonial period and from recent scholarship, these references are out weighed by her nearly exclusive reliance on fiction.

However, this is not to say that her arguments are not persuasive. On the contrary, this reviewer is in complete agreement with her conclusions regarding the construction of identities and cultural boundaries in Indochina. Rather, the problem lies with Cooper's methodology. It may be particularly frustrating for scholars familiar with the colonial collections in Aix-en-Provence and Hanoi to read this book's footnotes. Cooper's strong and important conclusions drawn from literary analysis would likely be confirmed by archival research and could complement our understanding of France's colonial history. However, she simply does not provide the documentation necessary to meet the standards of historical proof. Again, this is not a criticism of what she wishes to convey, but rather how she does it. While this review evaluates her book in terms of history, other fields such as literature and postcolonial studies may not have the same difficulties with her methodology. Recognizing that disciplinary approaches to historical inquiry might be dissimilar from the standards of our profession, we can learn much from exploring a variety of other modes of analysis. In the interests of interdisciplinary cross-fertilization, this reviewer recommends this book.

NOTES

[1] Panivong Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina: French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film, and Literature* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996).

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