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Hubert Bonin, Christophe Bouneau, and Hervé Joly, eds., *Les entreprises et l'outre-mer français pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale*. Pessac: Maison des Sciences de l'Homme d'Aquitaine, 2010. 353 pp. Tables, figures, notes, and index. 26€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-85892-366-3.

Review by Michael Miller, University of Miami.

Only months after Japanese forces had driven European forces out of Southeast Asia and China, and herded the remnants, military and civilian, into internment camps, British and Dutch overseas trading companies were planning their return. Three years later, coming back all but on the heels of Allied forces, their first experience was to encounter the widespread damage to harbors, plantations, archives, and personnel, as well as to ruling infrastructures, that had accompanied the cycle of Japanese conquest and rollback. Elsewhere, outside the ring of occupation, world war occasioned opportunity for profits and expansion, but also the conversion from markets to state commodity control boards and altered political environments. For nearly every overseas enterprise—merchant and banking houses, harvesting companies, or shipping and inland transportation firms—the war signaled rupture, whether in the form of expulsion, redefinition, “Africanization,” or geographical and functional diversification. This is a narrative that can be found in the fairly sizeable number of house histories we have on these companies or one that can be reconstructed from firm archives in private and public collections, like the holdings of the Guildhall in London, now transferred to the London Metropolitan Archives.

But, aside from a few baseline works like Hubert Bonin’s history of the CFAO in West Africa or Marc Meuleau’s history of the Banque de l’Indochine, we know little of the interplay between French colonial business and the Second World War.[1] Several reasons perhaps explain why. One would seem to be the comparatively smaller number of French colonial houses than British or even Dutch. The current work under review is very helpful in identifying leading firms in different parts of the French empire, but the names are not numerous and the same big companies in Indochina or West Africa recur across a number of chapters. Another is sources. The contributors to the current work are to be congratulated for their ingenuity in ferreting out material from colonial or departmental archival collections, but the infrequency with which company archives or house histories appear in their footnotes again indicates the difficulty historians face when trying to incorporate French imperial enterprises into the broader twentieth-century overseas experience.

There is also a certain degree of French exceptionalism as a consequence of the complications introduced by Vichy. French enterprise in Indochina did not experience the same depredations, save in the very last months of the war, as occurred for the holdings of other imperial powers throughout the rest of Southeast Asia. Elsewhere, the history of business and war became entangled in the divided loyalties and outside pressures that followed from French defeat, occupation, collaboration, and resistance. What became of French business overseas during the war has not fit easily into a more general perspective on European colonial enterprise in these years. That much recent work on the French empire has skirted the role of colonial business houses and that only relatively recently has the history of Vichy been imperially extended would also explain the lacuna.

Les entreprises et l'outre mer français is thus a most welcome contribution, even if its format—an edited study comprised of multiple, author-specific contributions—renders its findings more preliminary than subsequent monographic works will ultimately provide. Like most edited works, this volume suffers from a not surprising set of limitations. There is the usual continuum between weak and strong contributions. A number of chapters, while highly informative, rehash earlier larger studies by the same author. There are too many essays (a total of eighteen) for the size of the edition. Too many are consequently too short, with suggestive concluding paragraphs not sufficiently borne out by the body of their material. Some contributors draw connecting lines between wartime and postwar experience, but not all. There is very little in this volume on the National Revolution, or on the history of Vichy in the colonies that Eric Jennings uncovered.^[2] While contributors have unearthed relevant material in state archives, it is still to be wondered whether more can be found in company-generated sources, and it is surprising that, for a study of empire, none of the authors has seen fit to consult the archives of the Messageries Maritimes. Yet none of these qualifications undermines the usefulness of this volume. This is a first step towards a more comprehensive understanding of how war shaped one of the French empire's central institutions and structures of power, and how in turn business history intertwined with colonial history during and after the war. Almost paradoxically, one of the shortcomings of the work, its repetitive recounting of a similar experience, identifies how, amidst the diversity of these eighteen stories, a common history can be discerned.

Bonin's excellent introduction points to seven "principal difficulties" (p. 18), but it is equally possible to see three thematic lines running through the majority of these chapters. The first of these is the straightforward or pragmatic history of how imperial business coped with the shortages and obstructions that plagued them all. Overseas merchant houses from Indochina to Guadeloupe lived upon the export of primary materials in exchange for home-manufactured products. But German restrictions on French seaborne transport, vessel requisitions by both Allied and Axis forces, and the carrying out of a blockade and even naval war of sorts on the part of the British against Vichy substantially reduced the quantity of crops that were lifted or the goods, machinery, spare parts, and fuels, and even food supplies, that arrived from abroad. The fundamental problem of doing business in the wartime French empire was managing with scarcity. This was true of personnel as well. Mobilization in 1940, then again after liberation by Gaullist forces, as well as little (if any) opportunity for home leaves, either whittled away numbers or wore down staff.

Yet *pénurie* tells only half the story. William Gervase Clarence-Smith and Marianne Boucheret both remark on the benefits for Indochina rubber plantations of a boom in demand and prices, fueled by an American accumulation of stocks, even if this lasted only through the early stages of the war. Boucheret goes on to describe how French planters took advantage of their relative security before 1945 to renew and expand production, while effective lobbying secured large state purchases of accumulated inventory. The history of the De Dietrich group, an Alsatian firm seeking offshore shelter from the coming ravages of war and investing in sophisticated railway overhaul and production facilities in Algeria, could scarcely be more dissimilar. Yet, as recounted by Mohammed Salah Boukechour, this fascinating story of war and the plunge into entrepreneurial colonial expansion as a safe haven again discloses how, for all its history of shortage, the Second World War could equally become an occasion for dynamic initiative and modernization.

No French study of the war years would be complete without a consideration of collaboration and resistance. But in the French empire, the war played out along multiple political fronts: collaboration with the Nazis; allegiances to Vichy or de Gaulle; Allied pressures and engagements, some of these British, others American; and a second dimension to occupation and collaboration in the East where the fiction of sovereignty abutted Japanese supremacy. There was no simple *déroutement* of events, and one of this volume's principal contributions, as well as a second common thread, is its revelation of the complexity of

choices and outcomes that occurred depending on firm history, territory, circumstances, and personal allegiances. Chantal Metzger reminds us at the start that, despite a strong German imperial lobby, Hitler was far too preoccupied with *Lebensraum* to the East to force demands upon a maritime empire his troops did not occupy. Marcel Boldorf insists that superior access to information and the absence of German forces in either the empire or Marseille (down to late 1942) allowed Vichy to stall or thwart large German requisitions of colonial produce. But what became of the French merchant marine, or of phosphate traffic across the Mediterranean, would suggest that Vichy's stalling could succeed only so long as Axis pressure was muted and that, when put to the test, Vichy surrendered, a pattern that Boldorf also seems to acknowledge.

More interesting, however, is how the history of choices was everywhere tilted by circumstance and, nearly as often, laced with permutations or the timely pursuit of material interests. On the one hand, as Bonin points out, multinational companies like the CFAO or Suez, with prewar, territorial, and market links to the British, were well positioned to sustain contacts with the Allies following June 1940 and to emerge from the war with reputations unscathed. On the other hand, Clarence-Smith's account of Socfin's journey through the war tells a more complicated tale. A huge cultivator of rubber and palm oil in Southeast Asia, Socfin, too, was a multinational company, part Belgian, part French, with strong marketing connections to the big U.S. market. It therefore was positioned to go either way and this indeed occurred following the German offensive in 1940. A number of those who remained in the seats of power in occupied Paris and Brussels were closely tied into Vichy and some compromised themselves with the Germans. But Robert Hallet (the Hallet family were the Belgian owners in Socfin) escaped to London, then New York, where he did what he could to align Socfin production in unoccupied colonies with Allied war needs. In Indochina, Socfin, down to December 1941, sold its rubber to Japan, but also the U.S., and two Socfin figures, François de Langlade, who had run company operations in Malaya in the late 1930s and had rallied *de la première heure* to de Gaulle, and the future novelist Pierre Boule, who sided with Langlade against Vichy and Japan, equally counterbalanced Socfin's links with its occupiers.

At war's end, therefore, it too had "moral" cover, although its history was far more symptomatic of how personal choices or geographical positioning determined sides chosen in the war, and how difficult it could be to total up postwar balance sheets for companies with global investments and customers. Annie Lacroix-Riz's contribution on the synarchy between, as she describes it in her essay's title, "Blitzkrieg et Pax Americana," where arch collaboration mutated—but only after the clock was ticking very loudly—into Atlanticism, provides a third, cynical take on these years. And Collette Dubois's recounting of the trials of French businessmen in Djibouti, caught between Italians, British, Gaullists, and Vichy, fairly sympathetic to the last, but horrified by Vichy's all-or-nothing destructionist plans and prepared to obstruct these, as well as pragmatic in their open-ended vision of options throughout, complicates all efforts to identify black and white assessments of collaboration or resistance.

Finally, Julian Pellet and Sébastien Durand describe the crippling impact of war closures, restrictions, and shortages on Bordeaux's colonial commodity import traffic, from which the port never fully recovered, while Claude Malon identifies a comparable enduring impact on Le Havre, at least for its cotton trade with Francophone Africa. In the longer scheme of relative decline, one that André Vigarié so powerfully charted for the latter harbor, the commercial history of war and empire emerges as a significant contributor.[3] On a different, but related tack, Marie-Christine Touchelay shows how Guadeloupe planters took advantage of the war to solidify their power position on the island, but how, in turn, their reactionary commercial and social practices made them a lightning rod for Guadeloupean protest and opposition and the symbol of the unbearable of colonial rule as the island was to veer towards departmentalization. A third thematic line to emerge from this collection becomes, then, the history of war and enterprise as a history of change, where business practice under the conditions of global conflict altered the shape of the future in diverse ways. Undoubtedly more can still be made of the articles Bonin, Bourneau and Joly have

assembled as I have had opportunity to discuss only a part in this review. As fragmentary and preliminary as its collective picture might be, this volume offers stimulating and suggestive ways to recall that the history of the French empire in the Second World War is also the history of French overseas business.

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NOTES

[1] Hubert Bonin, *C.F.A.O. Cent ans de compétition* (Paris: Economica, 1987); Marc Meuleau, *Des pionniers en Extrême-Orient. Histoire de la Banque de l'Indochine, 1875-1975* (Paris: Fayard, 1990).

[2] Eric Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics: Pétain's National Revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe, and Indochina, 1940-1944* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

[3] André Vigarié, *Les grands ports de commerce de la Seine au Rhin, leur évolution devant l'industrialisation des arrière-pays* (Paris: S.A.B.R.I., 1964).

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