

H-France Review Vol. 1 (November 2001), No. 40

Martin Thomas, *The French North African Crisis: Colonial Breakdown and Anglo-French Relations, 1945-1962*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000. xv +305 pp. Maps, notes, bibliography, and index. \$59.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-333-71560-8.

Review by Phillip Naylor, Marquette University.

In his well-researched book, Martin Thomas details British governmental positions and policies relating to the French decolonization of North Africa. The book particularly describes how each imperialist power perceived the other. As Thomas effectively explains, this is a paradoxical history of shared and divergent interests which had significant multilateral consequences.

The introduction and first chapter frame the study well. As the Second World War closed, the French wanted to reassert their international image and power—despite their crippling economic condition—and expected blanket British approval for their retrenchment in North Africa. French violent suppression of Algerians in Sétif and Guelma in 1945 and repression of Moroccan and Tunisian nationalists distressed the British, but they believed that French economic and political recovery necessitated the perpetuation of a colonial Maghrib. Nevertheless, Thomas argues persuasively that the British never understood the profundity of the French political and psychological stake in North Africa, especially in Algeria. This failure fanned French fears that the British—with their American patrons—sought to undermine their colonial position. This constant suspicion, along with the chronic instability of French governments, contributed to recurrent problems in the bilateral relationship. Thus, London's prescriptive advice always risked being perceived by Paris as intrusive or blatant interference. Furthermore, Moroccan, Tunisian, and Algerian nationalists often played "Anglo" cards to frustrate and even trump the French.

Of course, the British had their concurrent crises and conflicts to deal with in Greece, Turkey, Palestine, Iran, Malaya, Cyprus, and Egypt. Given the rising expectations of colonized populations, the British and the French confronted similar problems. Thomas recognizes that the French always had the larger, more difficult problems—Indochina compared to the "Malaya Emergency;" Algeria's revolution in contrast to Kenya's Mau Mau insurgency. Sometimes the British unfairly compared their successes to French failures. While Thomas appropriately touches upon these issues, his chief purpose is to present British "perceptions and reactions" (p. 36) to the difficult North African decolonization. It is done effectively with Algeria appropriately receiving most of the attention.

The British quickly understood that the French position in Algeria was very difficult. Jacques Soustelle's assimilationist idea of "integration" was "intrinsically alien to British conceptions of empire"

(p. 99). Despite this imperial policy difference, the British and French shared a converging strategic objective—that of neutralizing the fervent Arab nationalism of Egypt.

Gamal Abdel Nasser's pan-Arabism threatened to fracture Britain's carefully crafted and anti-communist Baghdad Pact of 1955. The subsequent Suez Canal nationalization in July 1956 humiliated Britain before its Middle East clients. France perceived Nasser as the chief provider of political and logistical support to the revolutionary Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) and its Armée de Libération Nationale (ALN). Nasserist ideology also threatened the moderate governments of recently decolonized Morocco and Tunisia. In addition, Britain and France feared communist influence in their shrinking empires in Africa. The French "conflated" pan-Arabism with the communist menace (p. 122). This led to an ephemeral and "fragile Anglo-French unity" (p. 106).

The Suez Canal expedition in November 1956, that included the collusive participation of Israel, failed to seize the vital waterway and topple Nasser from power. It signaled the end of the British and French imperialism. The United States and the Soviet Union compelled a trilateral withdrawal from Egyptian territory. Strategically, Britain turned toward the United States and rapidly repaired the bilateral relationship. France shifted increasingly toward developing strong relations with West Germany. The Algerian War continued, however.

By distancing themselves from the French, the British also conserved the friendship of Arab allies. Nevertheless, France was a NATO ally. The consequence was an ambivalence toward France's decolonizing predicament (p. 131). The British increasingly mirrored American positions toward Algeria. Thomas describes American policy and objectives. Fundamentally, the United States urged a negotiated settlement of the colonial war and warily watched the burgeoning deployment of French troops in North Africa that weakened Europe's defense. In addition, Washington worried over the severely alienated relations between France and its former protectorates—Morocco and Tunisia—regarding Algerian independence. This threatened to undermine the two new nations' pro-West sympathies.[1]

France was particularly upset over NATO's failure to recognize the strategic significance of the Mediterranean—the "southern perimeter." This inferred that France did not have full allied political support. Indeed, the Sakiet affair—the French bombing in February 1958 of a border village suspected of harboring ALN troops—not only violated Tunisian sovereignty, but also led to an embarrassing "Anglo" diplomatic intervention by the Americans and British. This allied action rebuked the Fourth Republic's policy and reinforced the rejection of the French government's strategic perception of North Africa. The allied discrediting of the Fourth Republic contributed to its collapse. In May Charles de Gaulle assumed power in Paris, subsequently replaced the Fourth with the Fifth Republic, and painstakingly directed France toward the decolonization of Algeria.

Thomas describes the internationalization of the war very well. He answers the question if the Algerian struggle was "a Cold War front line" (pp. 158-78) and concludes that to many French minds—especially those in the military—it was. For example, the generals who participated in the failed coup of April 1961 anticipated NATO support (p. 178). By that time, however, the British and the Americans understood that the greater threat of communist expansion in the Maghrib and elsewhere equated with the perpetuation of a French colonial presence in Algeria. Furthermore, the continuing war had serious

strategic ramifications for British and American positions in the United Nations and the emerging Third World.

With de Gaulle in power, the British knew that France would finally have strong leadership. Yet this caused other difficulties for the British and Americans concerning, for example, de Gaulle's insistence on an independent French nuclear deterrent and his irritability over NATO's command structure. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Harold Macmillan admired the concessions de Gaulle achieved by the Evian Accords of March 1962 and believed that the agreements could serve as a model for the British in their expected future decolonizations (p. 206).

Martin Thomas provides an important contribution to the historiography of French and British decolonization. The British perception of their own decolonizing endeavors, taken in the perspective of concurrent French efforts, particularly distinguishes this book. Underlying this history of bilateral crisis and conflict, as well as cooperation and collusion, is that of the difficulty each nation confronted in re-defining and re-imagining its identity as geostrategic and power realities changed.

This is a solid work for academic audiences. Students and scholars will appreciate the depth of research mined in archival and secondary sources. The book is for specialized undergraduate and graduate courses and is highly recommended for scholarly collections.

NOTES

[1] For those readers who wish to explore the American dimension more deeply, see the recently published history by Irwin M. Wall, *France, the United States, and the Algerian War* (Berkeley, Cal.: Univ. of California, 2001).

Phillip Naylor
Marquette University
phillip.naylor@marquette.edu

Copyright © 2001 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172