H-France Review Vol. 22 (June 2022), No. 108

J. P. Daughton, *In the Forest of No Joy: The Congo-Océan Railroad and the Tragedy of French Colonialism.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2021. 384 pages. Maps, illustrations, notes, and index. $30.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780393541014.

Reviewed by Deborah Neill, York University.

The Congo-Océan railway was begun in 1921 and took thirteen years to complete. In that time, it cost 15,000-23,000 African workers their lives, making it, as historian J. P. Daughton states, "one of the deadliest construction projects in history" (p. 8).[1] Central to this powerful book is the question of how a nation priding itself on humanist values and a commitment to progressive modernity could have been responsible for the "widespread misery and catastrophic loss of life" on the 512-kilometer line connecting the coastal settlement at Pointe-Noire to the capital city of Brazzaville (p. 12). A related question is why things did not significantly improve for workers even after the poor conditions, violence, and deprivations were exposed by internal investigations and public exposure by activists and journalists.

Relying on a wide range of governmental, institutional, and company archives accessed in France, the Republic of Congo, Switzerland, and the United States, Daughton provides a comprehensive and accessible account of the brutalities of the Congo-Océan build. This is a story that, he argues, has been "nearly entirely forgotten" outside of central Africa (p. 8). His work is situated within a growing historiography on colonial violence in French Equatorial Africa, including explorations of the Voulet-Chanoine mission of 1898-1899 and the Gaud-Toqué scandal of 1905, as well as on the longer history of French brutality during the period of concessionary rule.[2] This book is a strong contribution to a historical consensus that the violence of colonialism was not, as contemporaries sometimes tried to paint it, the result of rogue villains or "bad actors" within an otherwise beneficial system. Rather, the abuses were to a large extent the logical outcome of French colonialism.

In the first two chapters, Daughton explores the genesis of the project, which was rooted in French desires to exert greater political control and to facilitate the colony's extraction industries in the interior. This region was already traumatized by the long history of slave trading and the violence of the concession-era rubber trade, and in the 1920s, French officials boasted that the project reflected a new era of cooperation and humanitarian engagement with local peoples. As a partnership between the colonial government and the Société de construction des Batignolles, the project was also touted as an ideal match between the state and a technologically advanced and efficient private company. But at the time of its launch in 1921, Governor-General Augagneur still had no complete route plans or blueprints, and the company lacked heavy

machinery, which meant it would have to rely almost entirely on manual labour. This lack of preparation "was emblematic of the hubris that would drive the construction through to completion" (p. 53).

The state needed to find thousands of workers and, in chapter three, Daughton explores the violence of the initial recruitment drives. He begins with the story of Georges Pacha, a World War I veteran and former concession recruiter whose crimes were eventually exposed to the French public by André Gide. As a colonial administrator nominally in charge of a massive region in northern Middle Congo, Pacha was unable to persuade Africans, particularly given France's tenuous hold on the region, to sign up for the work. Given only "minimal direction" from his superiors, Pacha was also strongly pressured to meet recruitment quotas (p. 83). He embarked on a campaign of terror that included forcible roundups, kidnapping, group punishments, torture, and murder. While Gide portrayed Pacha as uniquely sadistic, Daughton demonstrates that ruthless methods were sanctioned by many state and company officials. One agent complained in the late 1920s that "it would be good to give up recruiting by force as we are obliged to do" (p. 100). Daughton makes excellent use of internal government reports, as well as first-hand African testimonies collected by contemporary inspectors, to expose the consistent brutality of recruiting methods. In chapter four, he continues to rely on these excellent sources to recount the daily, lived experiences of recruits. Survivors provided shocking details such as being forced to endure humiliating medical exams, being chained together for transport, being forced onto unhygienic river boats, and being provided with few or no provisions. Many arrived at job sites already suffering from malnutrition and illness.

Things got far worse at the job sites, particularly in the densely forested mountain range of the Mayombe. This "utterly inhospitable place" was dubbed "the forest without joy" by contemporary writer Marcel Sauvage (pp. 116-117). In chapter five, Daughton mines thousands of pages of account ledgers, invoices, and letters, as well as the writings of contemporary critics, to capture the conditions in visceral detail. He describes the long workdays in punishingly hot, humid weather, where laborers were beset by insects and compelled to remove giant trees and to dig, clear, and move tons of dirt. This situation, coupled with appalling housing and sanitation conditions in camps that "could resemble prisons," led to some of the highest mortality rates of the build (p. 124). One 1926 estimate put porter deaths at a third for those in the state's Labor Service and an astounding 83 percent of those directly in the service of the Batignolles. And while Daughton's sources are not as explicit on women's experiences, he also points to evidence that women, recruited to provide cooking and domestic services, endured not only many of the same material and psychological hardships as men, but also the added worries of widespread sexual harassment and assault.

In chapters six to eight, Daughton details both the brutality of European overseers, as well as African resistance. While workers risked reprisals for speaking out, they told investigators of specific acts of cruelty and consistently "voiced moral reproach of nearly every aspect of the project" (p. 154). They also resisted through sabotage, organized walkouts, and flight. By 1927, resistance as well as damning reports from its own Labor Service caused the government to impose some reforms on Batignolles managers, including a small raise in pay for workers. But the company did what it could to thwart investigative efforts on the ground, hiding or deflecting criticism away from the managers who inflicted beatings as a way of forcing compliance. Daughton explores the motivations of company overseers, recognizing that some of the managers--who were not only French but also British, Belgian, Portuguese, Greek, and Italian-

-were aggressive sociopaths, fueled by greed and racism. Even at the time, the state Labour Service Director described a few as "parasites" who sought enrichment above all else (p. 156). But even those who did not resort to violence continued to push the project forward. Some seemed to believe that the eventual benefits would outweigh the immediate hardships, even as they witnessed worker suffering and personally endured material and psychological challenges. The magical thinking of European managers and overseers speaks to the systemic nature of the project's moral failure. "There is something comforting in believing that hateful madmen made empires violent," Daughton argues; but "negligence, denial, and assertions of humanity in pursuit of 'progress' often proved far more cruel." (p. 14).

In chapter nine, Daughton shows how no one exemplified indifferent cruelty better than Raphäel Antonetti, "a man of limited and often patently racist vision" who succeeded Augagneur in 1924 and would remain Governor for ten years (p. 61). Daughton provides an outstanding exploration of "a bureaucrat's humanitarianism" by showing how Antonetti was a master of obfuscation, with more energy for describing the project in glowing terms than in ensuring the working conditions lived up to the rhetoric. When faced with critiques from Paris, he was "argumentative and exhaustive," blamed others, and overwhelmed readers with long-winded and complicated reports (p. 225). He minimized African suffering and emphasized managerial sacrifices. He also pointed to his many decrees forbidding the use of force--without providing evidence that these decrees were being effectively implemented. When the death rates proved too hard to ignore, he shrugged and said that "humanity forces us, *alas!*, to use severity" (p. 228).

Antonetti was, moreover, helped by a willing, pro-colonial mainstream press. Chapter ten explores how empire boosters drowned out the work of critics such as Albert Londres, who attempted to rouse the French public to action. The International Labor Organization also failed to adequately expose the crimes; its representatives hesitated to embarrass one of the League's primary sponsors, and some maintained that while imperfect, colonialism was still capable of bringing benefits to African societies. This lack of reckoning continued once the project was finished. In chapter eleven, Daughton shows how government officials and the press lauded the railway as an economic engine and a marvel of European engineering, while the labor disasters of the build and ongoing struggles with derailments and collisions were consistently minimized.

There must be many failures--administrative, political, technical, economic, and moral--to explain a tragedy of this length and magnitude. In the final chapter, Daughton reflects on some of the reasons behind the humanitarian disaster created by the build. He first finds answers in the pervasive racism that dulled empathy and encouraged reflexive beliefs in French superiority--the "assumptions of empire penetrated minds and informed sympathies" (p. 304). Daughton also reflects on the concepts of "brutalization," where demoralization, illness, alcoholism, and depression affected the behavior of managers, with devastating consequences for workers. But he finds these answers as insufficient to fully account for the scale of the project's horrors, and he therefore points to a third factor, that of large-scale bureaucratic and administrative mismanagement. Infighting between the government and the company furthered organizational chaos; the company felt pressure to deliver a railway on budget but was underresourced to deliver; the state faced the pressure of meeting the insatiable company demand for more workers; and neither had the ability to house and care for those brought to the site. The message from the top was that it was the deliverables that were the measure of success, not the methods used in achieving the goal.

This book is an important and clear recounting of the failure of the French state to protect the lives of African workers--workers who, at great cost, made the Congo-Océan railroad a reality. The book's contributions go beyond the study of French colonial violence; Daughton's discussion will inspire similar questions about the violence of railway building in other colonial empires, such as pre-1914 German Namibia or in British Africa and India.[3] Daughton's arguments can also be applied beyond colonial empires, speaking to histories of labor abuses in large-scale modernizing projects in a variety of places and systems. More specific details about the capitalists who financed and organized the Congo-Océan railroad might also be a subject for potential future work, including the personal and professional relationships between business owners and French government officials; who stood to profit and in what ways; and how the project was continuously financed over time, even as disasters befell workers and scandals attracted negative attention. In addition, two further promising areas that Daughton touches on, but could be further explored, are the gendered experiences of construction sites, and how the project is remembered and explored by scholars, artists, and descendants of workers living in the region today.

This is an important book, written clearly and with passion and urgency. Particularly commendable is the way Daughton privileges first-hand testimonies and includes and analyses a wide range of powerful contemporary photographs. It is an obvious choice for scholars researching and teaching colonialism, French history and technology courses; but its accessible and well-structured framing will help the book find a much wider audience of readers outside the academy as well--readers interested in the question of why ruthless labour exploitation has, more often than we might want to acknowledge, been the result of grand projects couched in promises of progress and liberal humanitarianism.

NOTES

[1] Daughton notes that this was an estimate reached during a 1930s investigation. Unofficial estimates range from 30,000-60,000 (see p. 8).

[2] Bertrand Taithe, *The Killer Trail: a Colonial Scandal in the Heart of Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Edward Berenson, "The Politics of Atrocity: The Scandal in the French Congo (1905)," *Historia y Politica* 39 (2018): 109-138. While there are many studies on concession-era violence, the foundational work remains Catherine Coquéry-Vidrovitch, *Le Congo au temps des grandes compagnies concessionnaires, 1898-1930* (Paris: Mouton, 1972).

[3] A proposed volume with Manchester University Press, with editors Norman Aselmeyer and Erica Mukherjee, demonstrates increasing scholarly interest in the relationship of railways to empires, including the daily lives and experiences of workers on these projects. See https://www.hsozkult.de/event/id/event-115636 (accessed May 9, 2022).

Deborah Neill
York University
dneill@yorku.ca

Copyright © 2022 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 edistribution/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 republication 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