H-France Review Vol. 25 (October 2025), No. 80

Yan Slobodkin, *The Starving Empire: A History of Famine in France's Colonies*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2023. 312 pp. Maps, notes, bibliography, and index. $49.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-1501772368.

Review by Madeline Woker, Princeton University.

In the last section of *The Wretched of the Earth* devoted to "Colonial War and Mental Disorders," Frantz Fanon perceptively analyses the effects of famine and hunger on the behavior of the colonized. "Under a colonial regime," he writes, "man's relationship with the physical world and history is connected to food" and in such a world, "to live simply means not to die."[1] Neglect and cold-blooded political tactics continue to starve and kill, making Fanon's powerful assertion just as relevant today as when it was first written in the early 1960s. And it is with this incisive quote that Yan Slobodkin's opens his new history of famine in France's colonies, *The Starving Empire*. This ambitious book, whose chronological span covers the mid-nineteenth century to the 1940s, makes several key contributions. First, it tells the story of how French colonizers mostly failed to provide care and famine relief to the populations they colonized, focusing mainly on colonial Vietnam and the Sahel. The book shows how answers to the question posed in the introduction, "Who is Responsible for Famine?", generated multiple and conflicting answers over time, all determined by what the author identifies as "administrative incapacity" (p. 155). Beyond French and French colonial history, the book also provides an alternative story of the origins of modern humanitarianism which, Slobodkin writes, "is the residue that was left over when formal political ties binding empire fell away, a form of imperialism without sovereignty" (p. 217). We have become used to reading histories of its (British) imperial origins, but this book offers an instructive and far less familiar story.

The Starving Empire begins in Algeria in the late 1860s and ends in Vietnam during the Second World War. It highlights roughly three crucial periods in the history of famine in France's colonies. The first, from the late nineteenth century to the First World War, a period characterized by neglect and fatalism when "French colonial administrators saw famines as tragedies to be relieved by charity" (p. 196) and when the suffering of starving colonial subjects was mostly ignored and blamed on colonial subjects' lack of "foresight" (p. 6). The First World War and its aftermath marked a breaking point. In the interwar period, especially during the 1930s, colonizers began to accept "famine prevention as a political obligation" (p. 196), although they never had the means to make good on this responsibility. After the Second World War, famine relief became much more directly related to the preservation of colonial sovereignty in

places like Vietnam, where the French were fighting for political and territorial relevance in a new geopolitical context.

The first phase of this story is one of neglect and powerlessness. In Algeria in the late 1860s, colonizers mostly ignored signs of distress or, if they did pay attention, famine was often a pretext for Europeans to engage in their own internal battles. In late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Vietnam, the French cared just a little more, but the same blind belief in the power of market forces prevailed. In 1913 Niger, during a famine that caused nearly one million deaths, suffering was rendered invisible too, buried between the lines of upbeat *rapports d'ensemble* that Slobodkin rightly urges us to read with a critical eye. "The famine entered these reports," he tells us, "insofar as it affected topics of interest including commerce, agriculture, taxes, or security" (p. 75).

The astonishing fact about the first part of the book, astutely titled "Studies in Neglect," is the lack of institutional memory and the propensity of colonial administrators to constantly reinvent the wheel. What strikes the reader too is the colonizers' inability to draw clear links between subsistence crises and the material processes of dispossession inherent to colonialism, notably violent conquest, taxation, and forced labor. As the author shows, officials were often blinded by their own racism, and paralyzed by an enduring obsession with the principle of colonial financial self-sufficiency which established a climate of strict and cruel austerity throughout the French colonial world.[2] As a historian of French colonial public finance, I could not but notice the recurring references to concerns about costs and paltry budgets.

In the interwar period, a new care imperative began to make its appearance in scientific circles and the upper echelons of the colonial administrative hierarchy. This moment saw the emergence of nutrition science, which was nevertheless intimately tied to economic and productivity imperatives. Chapter five on Niger in 1931 clearly shows how this "gap between norms and realities" did "itself become a historical force" (p. 124). By the time colonial officials finally began to take a closer look at the situation in West Africa, the "place of famine in French colonial thinking had changed" (p. 125). Chapter five is particularly effective, notably because it gives pride of place to colonial inspection reports, a crucial source for historians of French colonial history. Yet despite this new injunction to "take responsibility," local administrators remained incapable of "mak[ing] the connection between famine and the material impact of French colonialism" (p.136). Good intentions and reformist efforts continued to clash against the impervious wall of imperial austerity. However, as the author notes, the reformist spirit of the Popular Front and work of the Guernut Commission, officially known as the Commission of Inquiry into the Overseas Territories, established in 1937 to investigate living conditions in the colonies, might have helped to accomplish at least one thing: to "unveil the full cost of an empire oriented toward the well-being of subjects" (p. 194).

In the 1930s, famine relief also became much more closely tied to "security" (p. 157) and anti-communist struggle. This was particularly true in Vietnam during the Nghệ Tĩnh soviets episode of 1930-1931, a social movement of unprecedented scale spearheaded by the recently formed Indochinese Communist party (ICP), during which thousands of demonstrators stormed official buildings and established peasant communes. In the 1940s, the politicization of famine took on a new turn with the Great Famine of 1944-1945, which "not only contributed to the material

conditions of the Vietnamese revolution" but was also "at the center of the struggle over the right to rule during World War II and the lead-up to the First Indochina War" (p. 196) as the French fought hard to "perform a simulated sovereignty through the rhetoric of famine relief" (p. 214). As Martin Thomas noted about Algeria at approximately the same time, "chronic food shortage lends itself to intense politicization whenever state action--or inaction--is identified as the cause of the social crises to which famine gives rise."[3]

This is a history of French colonial policy written at the scale of empire. There are both benefits and costs to this approach. One benefit, of course, is that *The Starving Empire* gives the reader a much more comprehensive understanding of French colonial efforts and failures at famine relief across Asia and Africa. One drawback, however, is that local, non-European voices can become somewhat muted. When external scrutiny is mentioned, it is often that of French whistleblowers, the likes of Denise Moran or Andrée Viollis. Yet recent works produced by scholars sitting at the intersection of French colonial history and Area Studies clearly point to much more hybrid colonial public spheres and modes of intervention. Calls for accountability come from the colonized too: what did these groups have to say about the inadequacies of French colonial famine relief policy? In chapter seven, the author tells us how the Việt Minh instrumentalized the Great Famine, but could similar observations have been made about earlier periods? In other words, how was famine relief debated in colonial public spheres? To what extent did local actors act on their own during subsistence crises? These are important questions; however, they do not diminish the importance of this original and engaging contribution to the field, which deserves a wide readership and could usefully be translated into French.

NOTES

[1] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2023), p. 232.

[2] For more on the financial autonomy principle and austerity in the French colonial empire, see Madeline Woker, "The cost of thrift: The politics of 'financial autonomy' in the French colonial empire, 1900-1914" in Gurminder K. Bhambra and Julia Mc Clure, (eds.), *Imperial Inequalities: The politics of economic governance across European empires* (Manchester University Press, 2022), pp. 37-56. On austerity in colonial settings, see also Emma Park, *Austerity, Sovereignty, and Expertise in Kenya* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2024).

[3] Martin Thomas, "Colonial Minds and Colonial Violence: The Sétif Uprising and the Savage Economics of Colonialism" in Martin Thomas (ed.), *The French Colonial Mind, Volume 2: Violence, military encounters and colonialism* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), p. 143.

Madeline Woker
Princeton University
madeline.woker@princeton.edu

Copyright © 2025 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