
H-France Review Vol. 6 (April 2006), No. 47

Kim Munholland, *Rock of Contention: Free French and Americans at War in New Caledonia, 1940-1945*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005. xii + 251 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$80.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 1-57181-682-8.

Review by Robert Aldrich, University of Sydney.

New Caledonia, in 1940, was a ramshackle, relatively neglected, and militarily indefensible colony in the South Pacific backwater of the French overseas empire. About 29,000 of the total population of 57,000 consisted of indigenous Melanesians who, by the hierarchies of the time, were considered primitive people who had survived from the Stone Age. After they acquired New Caledonia in 1853, the French took over nine-tenths of the land on the mainland (though leaving Melanesians, or Kanak, in possession of the Loyalty Islands, which also became part of the colony). France took possession largely in order to establish a convict colony, and prisoners were transported to the islands from the 1860s until the mid-1890s; so, too, were rebels from Algeria and Communards from Paris in the early 1870s, although most of the veterans of the Commune gained amnesty and returned to France in the following decade. By the 1940s, a number of free migrants had also settled in New Caledonia, though probably a majority of the 17,000 Caldoches descended from the transported convicts. The remainder of the population were 11,000 contract labourers, mostly from the Dutch East Indies and French Indochina. The major economic activity was the production of nickel, and New Caledonia had one of the world's largest supplies of the strategic metal, much of which was sold to Japan in the inter-war years.

The Second World War, the defeat of France, and the beginning of the Pacific war worked an enormous transformation in New Caledonia. The colony was one of the first (and initially, only) colonies to "rally" to the Free French instead of remaining under the control of the Vichy regime, a change explained to a degree by the reliance on near-by Australian and New Zealand sources of provisions. The Australian navy accompanied Henri Sautot, the French Resident in the Anglo-French condominium of the New Hebrides (north of New Caledonia), to the New Caledonian capital of Nouméa, where he took power in the name of General de Gaulle. The bombing of Pearl Harbor opened the Pacific theatre, and New Caledonia was set to assume immense strategic importance, especially as Japan pursued its expansion through Southeast Asia and Melanesia and threatened to take over a colony that could provide it with land, nickel, good ports and a strategic base for possible attacks on Australia and New Zealand. In a rapid move, approved by de Gaulle in London, the United States moved troops into New Caledonia, establishing a gigantic military base—some 100,000 G.I.s passed through New Caledonia during the war—that proved vital in the Coral Sea campaign.

Kim Munholland's *Rock of Contention* provides an authoritative and riveting history of the war years in New Caledonia, this out-of-the-way *caillou* (as it was often called) that became such an important base in the Pacific war but also a site of contention among various Gaullist individuals and factions (including local autonomists who resented the high-handed administration of governors sent from Paris) and, inevitably, between the French administration and the American high command. Munholland argues convincingly that this conflict between the Americans and French was a signal *mésentente* between the United States and France, a crucible for personal, ideological and political discord between the two allies. The New Caledonian *mésentente*, he implies, initiated a series of later quarrels on issues of colonial and international politics that, in recent years, has flared up again with regards to the American invasion of Iraq.

Munholland's book, in chronological fashion and with a strong narrative based on meticulous and comprehensive use of archival documentation, looks at these issues: the *franco-français* internecine contests in New Caledonia, the Franco-American relationship in the wartime Pacific, and—in a less detailed fashion—the Franco-Melanesian colonial cohabitation that underwent some significant changes because of the war and the American “occupation.”

The conflict among Frenchmen assumed comic opera proportions on the New Caledonian stage. Popular among Caldoches, Sautot aroused de Gaulle's suspicion because of his folksy style and his friendliness with the Americans and Australians. De Gaulle dispatched a loyal ally to investigate, and this representative only stirred up conflict, so de Gaulle sent another emissary, with the title of High Commissioner (and thus, in principle, superiority to Governor Sautot). Admiral Thierry d'Argenlieu, a World War I officer who had become a Carmelite monk before coming out of the cloister to join the Free French, was cold-minded, xenophobic and determined to staunch any Caldoche hopes for self-government or any American incursions on French sovereignty. Sautot was recalled, and a succession of governors was installed—New Caledonia had six governors between 1940 and 1944—though each fell when de Gaulle or d'Argenlieu lost confidence. The Caldoches, meanwhile, lost patience with d'Argenlieu, especially after he exiled several Caldoche politicians who favoured greater autonomy and a group of settlers subsequently staged a riot in Nouméa and took d'Argenlieu captive for a few hours. D'Argenlieu was then transferred to Tahiti, where he also made a mess of things—as he would later do in Indochina—and the governors of New Caledonia struggled to assert their authority over the Americans.

The Americans, under the command of General Patch and then Admiral Halsey, overwhelmed New Caledonia with their men and machines. The presence of tens of thousands of soldiers and their *matériel*, the demands they made on local accommodation, the largesse of American dollars and the military exigencies they imposed all grated on the French. De Gaulle and his comrades in London reacted angrily to what they saw as the bossiness of American officers and to what they feared was Washington's aim of taking over the French colony at the end of the war. The French governors, in the American perspective, placed obstacles in their way, even to the point that an American official thought that one governor ought to be charged with abetting the enemy. The French, on their side, sometimes said that the Americans posed more of a threat to New Caledonia than did the Japanese. In fact, as Munholland justly points out, two priorities clashed: the American determination to take whatever measures necessary to win the war in the Pacific, the French determination to keep control over New Caledonia and to retain sovereignty over their overseas empire. According to Munholland, “Here was a basic source for the Franco/American *mésentente* in which the American concern was with the war effort while the French seemed entirely focused upon specifically French political problems” (p. 107).

The French, humiliated by the defeat in Europe and also by the American “occupation” in New Caledonia, came close to being paranoid about the Americans, getting upset by such petty issues as English-language road signs erected by the troops. D'Argenlieu even called upon de Gaulle to enlist Churchill's support against what the Frenchman called the “imperialistic wave of the United States in the Pacific” (p. 103). Little credit was given to the US Army for the defence of the island, and one governor, in a public address before his departure, peevishly refused to acknowledge the American victory on Guadalcanal or other successes in repulsing the Japanese. The overwhelming nature of the American presence, and occasional clashes with local people (including a number of fist-fights and incidents of rape), not surprisingly inflamed the French sentiments.

However, Munholland unearths evidence that their fears were not groundless. President Roosevelt was indeed opposed to colonialism and had vague plans for many of the colonies (not just those of France) to be placed under some sort of international trusteeship at the end of the war. After a tour of the region,

Senator Richard Russell recommended to the White House that France be forced to cede New Caledonia to the United States in payment of war and Lend-Lease debts. American officers in Nouméa hardly hid their desire to dispense with the obstreperous French officials whom they thought were hindering rather than helping their military efforts, and they briefly considered the imposition of American martial law on the island. Most Americans were sceptical about France's ability to resume any major international role after the end of the war and for many years to come. Though Munholland says that there is no evidence of an American plan to take over New Caledonia, even these reports and rumours fuelled the anti-American feelings of de Gaulle, d'Argenlieu and the procession of governors who had to cohabit with the American commanders in New Caledonia.

The American presence could not but bring great changes, at least temporarily, to New Caledonia. "One might have said the Martians had landed" (p. 91), Munholland quotes one Kanak student as remarking. The population of Nouméa soared, especially as the Americans put up Quonset huts, built an airport and constructed a "mini-Pentagon" at a beachside suburb. G.I.'s spent dollars lavishly for food, drink and other entertainments--eighty-six bars opened in Nouméa during the war, and by 1944, the Trade Winds bar alone sold 18,000 beers and 5,100 hamburgers a day; every day, too, two hundred men patronised The Pink House, Nouméa's main brothel. (Munholland has several fascinating pages on prostitution, the American request that the French provide extra bordellos, and the French retort that the Americans ought to import their own prostitutes.) Many Melanesians were astounded at the sight of African American troops in positions of responsibility (despite the segregation practiced by the U.S. Army). Many Kanak, and Asians, found employment with the Americans, and were even paid for their work--Kanak had been required by the French to donate free labour for public works projects. Although only a quarter of the Melanesians had held paid jobs before the war, during the American years two-thirds had such an experience. Similarly, many of the Caldoches benefited from the American presence and the opportunities it provided; the Spanish-born head of the local Communist Party (and a Republican in the Spanish Civil War) sold bootleg liquor to U.S. soldiers for what they claimed were exorbitant prices.

Munholland does not dwell on the long-term effects on New Caledonia of these changes, except for the abolition of indentured Asian labour. Some scholars, such as the anthropologist Jean Guiart, minimise the post-war repercussions, but it is hardly coincidental that the emergence of New Caledonian political movements (and ultimately of specifically Kanak nationalism) was connected with the impact of the war. Even in the 1980s, when New Caledonia verged on civil war between pro-independence Kanak and anti-independent Caldoches, I remember seeing reminders of the American legacy in the US flags painted on walls--provocative signs for some Caldoches that New Caledonia would be better off under U.S. administration rather than independent under Kanak domination. By that time, Australia had replaced the United States as the object of French colonialist anger, though ironically (as Munholland points out), the Australians in the 1940s ardently defended French sovereignty in the South Pacific because of their own fears of American hegemony in the region.

Munholland's volume provides a detailed investigation of the war years, the *politique politicienne* of the French, and the Franco-American relationship, looking at issues both in the colonial periphery and in the negotiations of officials in government circles in Washington and de Gaulle's headquarters in London. His method is that of a traditional diplomatic and international historian. He concentrates on political issues rather than the military strategy of the Americans in the Pacific; there is much information on social issues, though they are not the author's primary focus. His judgment about the different priorities, and the often ill-behaved actions, of both the French and Americans is scrupulous in its fairness. General readers may need a bit of introduction--not until chapter four does Munholland provide some of the basic "facts" about New Caledonia. He does not really introduce the bizarre "condominium" of the New Hebrides, an outpost in which Britain and France shared power but without either having sovereignty--a strange state of affairs in which two flags flew, two currencies circulated and two law codes were administered, and which lasted until the independence of Vanuatu in 1980. He

sticks rigorously to his topic, and does not discuss the American presence on Bora-Bora (in French Polynesia) or on Wallis island in the central Pacific, though one wonders about comparative aspects of their wartime histories.

This book deserves wider attention than just among historians of the South Pacific or of the American military. Research on the French empire and the Second World War has seen the publication of several excellent recent volumes by Martin Thomas and Eric Jennings (and a collection co-edited by Jennings) that look at the role of the empire in the war and the “national revolution” that Vichy implemented in the colonies that remained under its control.^[1] The war, in many ways, was a turning point for the empire, though decolonisation was strongly rejected and resisted as Paris re-established its mastery after the Liberation. Each colony shows a microcosm of Franco-French disputes, of uncongenial relations between the Allies and of the inevitable confrontation between the French and the “natives” whose lives, in different ways around the imperial globe, changed because of the war. Munholland’s excellent study explores these issues, and also provides essential background to the post-war future of the French forced retreat from empire and its difficult engagement with its American ally.

NOTES

[1] Martin Thomas, *The French Empire at War, 1940-45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), *Vichy in the Tropics: Pétain’s National Revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe, and Indochina, 1940-1944* (Berkeley: University of California, 2001); and Jacques Cantier and Eric Jennings, eds., *L’empire colonial sous Vichy* (Odile Jacob, Paris, 2004).

Robert Aldrich
University of Sydney
robert.aldrich@arts.usyd.edu.au

Copyright © 2006 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