

H-France Review Vol. 7 (April 2007), No. 45

Ruth Ginio, *French Colonialism Unmasked: The Vichy Years in French West Africa*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2006. 268 pp. Bibliographical references and index. \$65.00 (hb.). ISBN-13 978-0-8032-2212-0.

Review by Benjamin Claude Brower, Texas A&M University.

Research of the last decade has made it clear that the history of metropolitan France cannot be fully grasped without engaging France's colonies. Nor can the history of the countries colonized by France be sufficiently understood without considering the metropole. Ruth Ginio's first book makes these necessary connections by examining the period of Vichy rule in the territories of French West Africa (1940–43). Her approach reveals that the Vichy period marked continuity in French colonial rule. This continuity, Ginio writes, was "manifested both in the administrators, most of whom remained in power, and in the policy and goals of the regime" (p. 31). Thus, Vichy rule in French West Africa was undertaken by the "old guard" (there were few changes in personnel after 1940), but there is little hint of the New Order that Robert Paxton found in the metropole. The racism and oppression that typified Vichy rule in France were already the rule of the day in French West Africa well before the war and would continue in its wake.

Ginio's book, derived from a thesis written for the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, draws the bulk of its archival material from the *Centre d'archives d'Outre-Mer* at Aix-en-Provence. There is also important material from national archives at Dakar, Paris, and London. Added to this are oral interviews Ginio conducted with a group of ten Senegalese men who lived in Dakar during the Second World War. Representing the opinion of French West Africa's *évolués*, these interviews offer important insights into how Vichy rule was encountered locally.

Clearly, the French colonies occupied an important place in Vichy ideology. Like DeGaulle and the "*vaste empire*," as he referred to it in his 18 June 1940 appeal, Pétain saw the overseas departments and colonies as part of a greater France, a symbol that the country was still a significant power despite defeat at the hands of Nazi Germany. Moreover, Ginio shows that Vichy's enthusiasm for empire was also motivated by the social and cultural agenda of the National Revolution. The conservative regime's hopes to restore the authentic, rural, and religious in France found inspiration in colonies like French West Africa, where Vichy leaders claimed to see fully traditional societies free of individualism and class conflict. Here too Ginio demonstrates continuity with currents of thought existing before 1940. In particular, Vichy leaders drew inspiration from the work of colonial administrators like Robert Delavignette, a person who, although very far from the right wing, lent form to Vichy's thinking about the colonies through works like *Les paysans noirs* (1931) which celebrated traditional values still alive in Africa like respect for customs, land, and ancestors--the same sort of values that Vichy hoped might regenerate France.

For Ginio, Vichy's policies in West Africa definitively lifted the mask of universalism with which the Republic had concealed the purposes of its colonial ambitions. Vichy's embrace of empire suffered from none of the "difficulties and dilemmas" (p. 20) that had haunted the repressive policies pursued by republican administrators in the name of liberty, equality, and fraternity. By contrast, Ginio argues, the authoritarian politics of Vichy harmonized well with long-standing colonial practices. Looking at its education policy and support for veterans' groups, Ginio concludes that the only concern for those implementing Vichy's counter-revolution in west Africa was not to carry its anti-republican rhetoric too

far lest local people grasp the full importance of the *guerre franco-française*.

Untroubled by republican ideals, racism intensified after 1940. While conservative ideologues might express ambivalences about French cultural superiority and the loss of values in the metropole, Vichy colonial administrators were self-assured about their racial superiority. The writings of René Maunier and Jean Paillard prove particularly emblematic of the hardened racist climate and of Vichy's antipathy towards the Republic's professed universalism. Both refused the possibility of assimilation—the idea that education and acculturation might bring certain colonial subjects closer to French civilization and make them candidates for expanded rights. As Ginio shows, the approach after 1940 was simply to legitimate de facto discriminatory policies. For Maunier, this included the category of *mitoyen*, a blatantly racist half-citizenship for “good” colonial subjects (p. 99). One wishes here that Ginio had widened the scope of her inquiry to look at the attitudes of the wider body of the European community in French West Africa, as well as those of colonial administrators and officials. Ginio does provide a few suggestive asides noting that European planters “felt especially loyal to the new regime” (p. 77) and “settlers were ardent supporters of Pétain” (p. 82), and she explains that Vichy's forced recruitment of African labor endeared white farmers to the new regime. I would have liked to have learned more about the planters and other settlers that made up the colony's small European community, however, in order to better gauge their support for Vichy. In the end, we are left to wonder if Europeans in French West Africa held the same sort of intellectual affinities for Vichy (and fascism more generally) as they did in other French colonies. Were there figures like the Algerianist writer Louis Bertrand who wrote from Nuremberg in 1935, “Why don't we have anything like this back home?” [1]

For their part, many Africans expressed their initial attraction for Vichy, but soon cooled upon grasping the new regime's “dogmatic and Hitlerian” racism (p. 111). This prompted leaders like Galandou Diouf, Senegal's representative in the National Assembly, to denounce Vichy's colonial rule in premonitory terms. In a poignant letter mailed just prior to his death in 1941, now classed at Aix-en-Provence, Diouf noted that, when asked to “work and die for France, the Negroes are considered good Frenchmen and good brothers. But when it comes to granting them some of the advantages enjoyed by some of their white brothers, we are good-for-nothing dirty Negroes” (p. 113).

In the final section of her book, Ginio examines the impact of Vichy rule on the long-term history of west Africa, including its effect on post-war independence movements. Under Vichy, Ginio writes, “the masks of French republican colonialism had all fallen away...” (p. 115) and this brought disappointment and intensified criticism in the post-war era. The Vichy example provided critics with a tool to attack the colonial rule of the Fourth Republic by linking it to the discredited regime of Pétain. Groups like the *Amicale des condamnés, internes et victimes de Vichy du Sénégal et de la Mauritanie* pointed to the negative example of Vichy in their push for reforms. The heavy-handedness that had once sustained French rule in west Africa became politically perilous after 1944 when “every act of repression immediately led to an embarrassing comparison with Vichy racism” (p. 178).

In the end, administrators representing the Fourth Republic were unable to convince important segments of West African society that Vichy was simply a parenthesis. Unlike metropolitan France, which quickly fell under the spell of national reconciliation and came to see Vichy as an aberration, people in French West Africa saw Vichy as an undisguised version of the same injustices found throughout the history of French rule.

Ginio's work represents an important part of larger efforts to reconceptualize fields of research by linking the history of European fascism with African decolonization. Her history of Vichy's colonial administration in French West Africa, its policies and personnel, demonstrates the insights to be gained from working across traditional fields and it points the way toward analogous future research. Moreover, this book, well-researched and thoughtfully argued, appears at an especially important moment, in the wake of heated debates taking place about the memory of France's colonial history. A

new round of memory wars has opened in France and, in a field that has become consumed by polemics, Ginio makes an important contribution by grounding some of the most contentious points in archival research and by drawing her arguments with nuance.

NOTES

[1] Louis Bertrand, *Hitler: A View of the 1935 Reichsparteitag by a Member of the Académie Française*, trans. Dan Desjardins (Bloomington, Ind.: Author House, 2005), p. 17.

Benjamin Claude Brower Texas A&M University bc6@neo.tamu.edu

Copyright © 2007 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Review Vol. 7 (April 2007), No. 45

ISSN 1553-9172