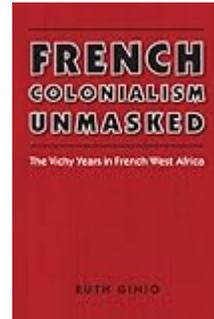




Ruth Ginio. *French Colonialism Unmasked: The Vichy Years in French West Africa.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006. xviii + 243 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-2212-0; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8032-1746-1.



Reviewed by Richard Fogarty (Department of History, University at Albany, State University of New York)

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True France

Ruth Ginio's examination of the three years of Vichy rule in the federation of French West Africa (FWA) opens with the memory of Bara Diouf, who described the sadness among many African residents of the capital in Dakar when they heard about the defeat of France in June 1940. This emotion, he explained, grew out of "a myth of an admired republican France toward which we all felt great esteem" (p. xiii). Ginio's book addresses how Vichy's naked displays of the racism and discrimination inherent in all colonial regimes—but often hidden or obscured during the Third Republic; fatally undermined that myth, as well as the esteem it inspired.

The book is divided into four parts. The two chapters of part 1 provide background information about FWA up to 1940, including the tentative reforms of the Popular Front era in the middle of the 1930s that made the intensification of discrimination under Vichy that much more glaring. In this section, Ginio highlights the central place of the colonial empire in the new regime's efforts to regain France's respect and status in the wake of humiliation and surrender.

Part 2 examines how Vichy officials attempted to

carry out their metropolitan National Revolution in FWA. In three chapters addressing implementation of policies in, respectively, the political, social, and economic spheres, Ginio shows how these policies were often a blend of continuity and change: continuity in that they often represented an intensified pursuit of priorities outlined under the Third Republic, and change in that the new regime also sought to emphasize its own distinctive approach to colonial administration. The renewed impetus given to planning for the construction of the trans-Saharan railway (fated, nonetheless, never to be completed) was a good example. Vichy propaganda advertised that its commitment to the project demonstrated that "La France continue," even in the wake of defeat and regime change in the metropole, and penetration and economic stimulus via the construction of railways was, of course, an important element in the orthodox republican civilizing mission (p. 16). However, Vichy officials also saw the project as an opportunity to show "the great difference between a regime that talked and a regime that acted to demonstrate the greatness of France despite its defeat" (p. 71).

Overall, Ginio situates the experience of FWA during this period firmly in the historiographical tradition established by Robert Paxton in his seminal *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944* (1972), refusing to see Philippe Petain's regime as a "parenthesis" or aberration in the normal course of French history, while, at the same time, paying careful attention to the novel features of the new order. If many of the administrative personnel in FWA found it easy to make the transformation from republican officials to Vichy officials, it was because the principles of the National Revolution were a better fit for the task of imperial rule. In short, the authoritarian rule and emphasis on hierarchy and obedience, embodied in the Vichy slogan "Travail, Famille, Patrie," was a better, more consistent, and more useful approach to governing colonial subjects than official veneration of the republican trinity of "Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite." But, Ginio is also careful to draw a distinction between the National Revolution in the metropole and in FWA. The example of educational policies shows that there were similarities, to be sure, yet the rejection of "individualism" in education in the metropole was not only conveniently in line with prewar educational practice in the colonies, but also was predicated in West Africa on the assumption that black Africans were uniquely unsuited to more advanced instruction because of their racial inferiority (pp. 47-48).

The third part of *French Colonialism Unmasked* turns to interactions between the colonial administration and different sections of West African society. It is here that we can see what was most distinctive about these three years in FWA, where we can see most clearly, as many Africans did then, the mask of republican colonialism fall away. Both change and continuity were still present, but Vichy's firm rejection of anything resembling racial equality or political and social assimilation exposed the immutable colonial hierarchy and dominance that the earlier regime's official embrace of republican ideals had at least partially veiled. Examining policies toward more assimilated Africans—holders of French citizenship (mainly the so called *originaires* of the four urban communes of Dakar, Rufisque, Gorée, and Saint Louis), Western-educated *volués*, and Christians—and then toward more "traditional" segments of West African society—"chiefs," Muslims, and soldiers and veterans of the French army (*tirailleurs sénégalais*)—Ginio finds several areas of continuity with the prewar administration. But, while the Third Republic had at least paid lip service to the ideal of assimilation, of raising Africans up to a level of technological, cultural, and perhaps even social and political equality, "the Vichy colo-

nial administration did not see itself as in any way obligated to the discourse of republican assimilation" (p. 110).

Ginio is right to point out that Vichy did not just adopt and continue a prewar bent toward the alternative colonial ideology of association, which emphasized a larger and more permanent gulf between the colonizer and the colonized. Under the Third Republic, even association had always been mixed with assimilationist impulses, given prevailing psychological and political imperatives of maintaining an ostensible commitment to the republican ideals of equality and universalism. Vichy decisively rejected assimilation outright, unsurprisingly emphasizing racial difference and hierarchy. And, it was this emphasis on race that revealed to Africans the essential nature of the colonial relationship. As Ginio puts it, "The real change experienced by the African educated elite in the Vichy period was an outbreak of a previously latent racism" (p. 111). Here was the real "unmasking": under Vichy, there was no longer even a pretense of assimilation. The changing attitudes of Galandou Diouf, the Senegalese politician, offered a striking example of this disillusionment. He died in 1941 convinced not just that Vichy had betrayed the assimilationist and egalitarian principles in which he had believed, but also that French people had never, even under the Third Republic, been sincere in their commitment to the ideal of equality.

In short, Vichy "gave racism a legitimacy it did not have previously," and this fundamentally and permanently altered the relationship between West Africans and their French colonial masters (p. 186). In the fourth part of her book, Ginio places the Vichy years in FWA in wider perspective, both by comparing the experiences in West Africa to those in other colonies of the French Empire and by exploring the ways Vichy rule in FWA altered the postwar political climate in the colony itself. In assessing the wartime period, Ginio goes beyond the obvious impact of the destruction of the Second World War on the stability of colonial rule and eventual decolonization to uncover specific ways in which Vichy's policies, and the way they were carried out, shaped a postwar context in which African challenges to colonial rule were more imaginable. African politicians did not regard Vichy as an aberration, but as the climax of a racism that was an inseparable part of, and constitutive of, colonialism. These Africans challenged the postwar French administration to prove that a revived republican France would be different, exploiting the gaps between republic ideals and Vichy policies in an attempt to gain rights. During the process of negotiation and change that eventually led

to decolonization in West Africa, African politicians often used the shameful example of Vichy as an instrument to squeeze concessions from a “true” republican France that embraced its liberal revolutionary heritage.

Ginio is careful, however, as were many Africans, to note the ultimately ambiguous legacy of the Vichy years. It was not, in fact, always clear which was the mask covering the authentic and proper relationship between colonizers and the colonized: the republican facade or the Vichy disguise. If Vichy policy could serve as the impetus to reforms that would attempt to bring this relationship more into line with republican ideals, the illiberalism of prewar policies made it easier for Vichy officials to implement their own, more clearly racially defined practices. In the end, “the new regime actually conceived of the empire as terrain on which its ideas and values had already been implemented for years” (p. 187). When Africans fully realized this, the days of French colonial rule in FWA were clearly numbered.

Finally, in her conclusion, Ginio shows that if Vichy paved the way for decolonization in FWA, the authoritarian tendencies always present in French imperialism may also have paved the way for the establishment of the anti-parliamentary and illiberal regime in France in 1940. Here, the author makes effective use of Aime Césaire’s and Hannah Arendt’s insights into the correspondence between Europeans’ behavior overseas and their later descent into the cataclysm of totalitarianism and destruction in the 1930s and 1940s.

The in-depth study of the Vichy years in FWA in *French Colonialism Unmasked* adds an essential component to the picture of this period developed in a number of other works.[1] Ginio also adds an important perspective on the nature of the Vichy regime in general, while always paying careful attention to the distinctiveness of the colonial environment. A good example of this approach is her well-judged avoidance of importing from the metropolitan context an understanding of reactions to Vichy policies as falling along a spectrum from resistance to collaboration, focusing, instead, on the full range of African responses learned over long experience with oppressive colonial rule. Scholars studying other periods of colonial history have identified this strategy as “accommodation,” and Ginio notes the similarities with behavior vis-a-vis the Vichy colonial administration. Strangely, however, she does not point to Philippe Burrin’s well-known use of “accommodation” as a tool for analyzing and understanding the behavior of many people in metropolitan France under Vichy. A full ex-

ploration of the similarities and differences between “accommodation” in these two contexts might have yielded interesting and fruitful results, but Ginio does not avail herself of the opportunity.[2]

One of the strengths of Ginio’s narrative is her use of oral testimony, garnered from contemporary interviews she conducted with Africans who lived through the Vichy years in FWA, to add a personal dimension to the administrative policies she examines. This is clear, for example, when one of her informants remembers racial segregation at a Dakar beach as dating from the period before Vichy. This helps underline some of the continuities between republican and Vichy policies, though the new regime did find it necessary to post a sign to advertise the policy, betraying a heightened emphasis on racial segregation. Such detail also renders the author’s analysis more vivid. It is not clear, however, whether the use of oral history sources contributes in a really substantive way to our understanding of Africans’ lived experiences under Vichy. Ginio admits that the testimony she has gathered is limited, but these limits are in fact significant enough to prevent drawing any serious conclusions or generalizations about African society and attitudes. The group of ten men, most of them Western-educated and all but one of whom lived in Dakar, is simply too limited a sample size, and there are few places where such testimony seems to point us in a radically different direction than do documentary sources.

Less substantial, but ultimately more bothersome, are numerous errors that appear in the narrative. These include rendering the French province of Bourgogne (twice!) as “Bourgonge,” the French term “destins” as “destines,” “La France coloniale” as “La France colonial,” and “censor” as “censure” (pp. 14, 15, 16, 110). Ginio refers several times to France’s “anciens colonies,” which should be “anciennes colonies” for grammatical reasons, and “vieilles colonies” for accuracy, as the latter term conventionally applies to areas originally incorporated into the French empire before the nineteenth century, several of which were administratively absorbed into the French state as departments in the twentieth century. These are what Ginio wishes to designate by “anciens colonies,” though that term is more accurately applied (in its grammatically correct form) to “former colonies,” areas that used to be part of the French empire but are now mostly independent nations. Finally, the Banania so memorably advertized by the image of a smiling *tirailleur s’Àn’Àgalais* is not a French brand of cornflakes (p. 186), but a hot breakfast drink, a sort of fortified banana-flavored hot chocolate (to be fair, many scholars make

this mistake, probably because it is advertised as containing chocolate, “caramels,” and bananas, and because so few historians have actually tried this mildly repulsive concoction).

These are, of course, minor quibbles that, while annoying, do not detract from Ginio’s overall achievement. She has written a book that will reliably and informatively guide anyone wishing to know more about FWA during the Vichy period.

Notes

[1]. Most notably by Eric Jennings in his *Vichy in the Tropics: Pétain’s National Revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe, and Indochina, 1940-1944* (Stanford: Stan-

ford University Press, 2001). Ginio also situates her book among recent works on other areas of the French empire during the Vichy period, such as Jacques Cantier’s *L’Algérie sous le régime de Vichy* (Paris: Karthala, 2002) and Christine Levisse-Touzé’s *L’Afrique du nord dans la guerre* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1998), as well as Catherine Akpo-Vaché’s work on West Africa, *L’AOF pendant la deuxième guerre mondiale* (Paris: Karthala, 1996).

[2]. See Philippe Burrin, *France under the Germans: Collaboration and Compromise* (New York: New Press, 1998). Ginio cites the original French version of Burrin’s work, but does not appear to have made systematic use of it.

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