Introduction: Colonial Violence

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Few scholars today question the binary relationship between imperialism and violence, and French historians are no exception. In recent years, a multitude of studies have appeared concerning the violence inherent in the conquest of the nineteenth-century Gallic empire, the maintenance and defense of the colonial system, and the decolonization process—massacres and torture during the Algerian War, for example. Such works often reflect Etienne Balibar's definition of "structural violence": an essential component of a repressive system, maintaining unequal social relations while defending "the interests, power positions, and forms of social domination."[1] This hegemony took various guises at different times throughout the history of French imperialism, operating in tandem with assaults on the *indigènes* (the term adopted by the authorities for natives). It could involve surveillance and intelligence gathering, security forces, and judicial-penal institutions employed to harass and control the colonized. Yet it also resulted from the forced pacification of native peoples (Alice Conklin refers to this policy as an "act of state-sanctioned violence") and the imposition of the *indigénat*—the loose collection of rules that granted extraordinary police and disciplinary powers to the colonial administration, along with the imposition of forced labor and taxation.[2] The ultimate defense of this system, and indeed its brutal apogee, emerged during the wars of decolonization, in which tens of thousands of the colonized were killed in Algeria and Indochina, while countless others were subjected to torture and incarceration.

French colonial historians have been extraordinarily effective in conveying the brutality and coercion explicitly linked to the construction and subsistence of the imperial project. However, as Frantz Fanon famously observed, the violence inherent in the organization and dissemination of empire involves more than simple juridical mechanisms of enforcement or acute actions directed by agents of the colonial regime. It equally comprises the eradication of indigenous society and culture, economic restrictions, and even proscriptions concerning dress and housing: a daily affirmation of the superiority of whiteness and the values, habits, and ideas of the colonizer.[3] Thus many historians (including those who study the structural violence

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of the French colonial regime and its agencies) increasingly probe multiple forms of social violence in the imperial context. This often involves combining examinations of physical violence or state-directed coercive measures with what Pierre Bourdieu termed "symbolic violence": the social practices of exclusion, along with the quotidian construction of a dominant discourse and the inculcation of inferiority promulgated by the education system, religious institutions, and the population at large.[4] Although not engaged in physical violence or coercion per se, these institutions and individuals forcefully imposed French cultural norms and practices, while attempting to eradicate indigenous customs and habits. Hence Nicola Cooper notes "the correlation between violence and development. … Military power and forcible subjugation have been replaced by peaceful battles to be fought in the name of civilization and development."[5] Social and cultural violence variously appeared in colonial urbanism, novels and newspapers, education and hygiene programs, and ethnography, as well as the popular prejudice displayed on a daily basis in the imperial town and countryside. Neither did colonial violence, either structural or symbolic, cease in the postcolonial world. State terror and popular xenophobia did not confine themselves to the age of empire or the struggles for decolonization, but emerged in the *métropole* with terrifying results for migrants of all stripes in the postcolonial era.

This issue of *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques* examines these diverse strands of colonial violence, attempting to broaden the traditional understanding of its origins, diffusion and strategy. Contributors confront its various manifestations from an array of methodological, temporal, and geographical perspectives. Its parameters are broadly defined, moving beyond (but not excluding) acts perpetrated solely by governments and their auxiliaries (armed forces, police, etc.), or independence movements and their opponents (the FLN or OAS in Algeria, for example). This is immediately apparent in the opening piece by Jeremy Rich, which examines the connection between French colonial violence and questions of gender and sexuality in 1880s Gabon. Rich details accusations and counter-accusations of forced confinement, assault, and sexual exploitation levied by two men in Cape Lopez: Customs Officer Alexis d'Alexis and Faucher, a minor official. Simultaneously a study of colonial life and an investigation into the establishment of behavioral norms in the colonial context, his work re-examines the relationship between violence, conceptions of masculinity, and inter-racial (homo)sexuality in Gabon. He further exposes an imperial double-standard, presenting substantial evidence that behavior which was monitored and policed in larger possessions was ignored in Gabon, a small territory with insufficient administrative resources, and consequently unable to respond to the all-too frequent abuse of natives at the hands of Europeans. Thus despite a judicial investigation into charges of homosexuality and assault, neither d'Alexis nor Faucher faced sanction, and Rich persuasively concludes that "opportunities for sexual encounters and acting in violent ways were rife in French expansion and central Africa."

This omnipresence of colonial violence is echoed by Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison, who examines the role of language and socialization in building and preserving a racial hierarchy within the French empire. Using novels, contemporary non-fiction, and memoirs, he attempts to ascertain "comment le régime autoritaire et raciste établi en outré-mer engendre des sensibilités et des comportements spécifiques qui le soutiennent aussi puisque la violence de son fonctionnement, et celle des colons sont perçues comme normales." This includes the debasement and dehumanization of the *indigènes* and the institutionalization of racism, he argues, key components in the colonial project. Thus each gesture or act on the part of authorities and the general population reinforces what Grandmaison calls "the illusion of domination," literally resulting in the segregation of the local population, confined to different neighborhoods, train carriages, and shops. This symbolic violence inculcated a system of binary oppositions—inferiority/subservience, civilized/indigenous—that resulted in wage slavery and political powerlessness.

The establishment and reinforcement of colonial dualism is also present in Michael Vann's discussion of picture postcards depicting the execution of Indochinese rebels in late nineteenth/early twentieth century Hanoi. Vann describes a variety of plots against the authorities, led variously by pirates, servants, and soldiers in the French colonial army, each ending with the execution of the ringleaders, a process captured by photographers and sold to the public in both France and Indochina. The attackers struck at the heart of imperial power, he relates, in certain cases killing and wounding a substantial number of Europeans. Documenting each step of their execution, the postcards thus served a dual purpose. On one hand, they became "a system of recording, articulating, and reinforcing colonial hierarchies," satisfying the need to reaffirm the superiority of the colonizer and the imperial monopoly of physical force in Indochina in light of rebellion and bombings, and thus preserving the privileged status of the white European. Yet they also taught metropolitan consumers about the "colonial order of things" and the critical role played by violence in this process.

The latter became crucial by the time of the Great War, because as Ruth Ginio relates in her discussion of African troops in the French armed forces, the construction of a "savage and violent" stereotype for non-European colonial soldiers was vigorously contested from 1914 onwards. Ginio discusses the oscillation by military authorities and the French public between the belief that the African regulars were child-like and naturally docile, or instead products of a brutal continent. Such arguments were particularly heated after the high command approved the use of non-European troops in the force that occupied the German Rhineland in 1919. Ginio analyzes the parameters of the debate in relation to the validity of the *Mission civilisatrice,* the maintenance of colonial otherness, and interracial relations between African soldiers and European female civilians. She concludes with an examination of colonial brigades in the Indochinese war, during which African troops were accused of both perpetrating brutal assaults against the local popula-

tion and murdering French officers. Little had changed; non-Europeans in the French armed forces continued to suffer symbolic violence, despite the fact that, according to Ginio, "French ambivalence towards this image [of violent brutes] reflects to a great extent their ambivalence about the colonial project in general."

Yet the ambivalence was not simply confined to the metropolitan French population. As Martin Thomas notes in his study of the interwar North African Gendarmerie, vulnerable and chronically underfunded security personnel were often equally conflicted concerning the colonial mission. Thomas's article examines the relation between imperial intelligence gathering and security, proposing that the Gendarmerie suffered from an innate contradiction: they were used to effectuate crowd control and fight crime, dispensing colonial violence, yet depended upon intelligence from a variety of local sources to prevent such things. Thomas notes the condition of the troops—poorly housed and trained, rarely fluent in Arabic, and undermanned in various locales—and the effect of such deficiencies upon prioritization and planning, the success or failure of gendarme actions, and the appearance of political and anti-indigenous activities. Such factors foreshadowed the post-1945 move towards torture and assault, from the Sétif massacre to the Battle of Algiers, leaving Thomas to conclude that "when taken together with the failure in Algeria and Morocco especially to integrate North Africans into the Gendarmerie ranks, it is perhaps unsurprising that the force remained remote, unrepresentative, habitually racist, and ineffective at monitoring indigenous opinion."

Much has been written about the consequences of such thinking, and historians of French Algeria have recently broadened discussions of post-1945 violence to include the massacres in Sétif and Guelma. Yet as Benjamin Stora demonstrates in his contribution concerning the 20 August 1955 mass murder in the Nord-Constantinois, much scholarly work remains. Stora refers to the events as "une sorte de deuxième 1 novembre," a critical moment in the inception of the war of independence. French troops and civilians combined to crush an ALN/FLN uprising, killing 10,000 Algerians and subsequently terrorizing the region's population for two weeks. Thus well before the Algerian War, terror and execution became the norm during official searches and interrogations of "suspects." Yet Stora's interest lies not in simply detailing the events, but rather in examining the interplay between colonial violence and memory, history and denial. Neither academics nor journalists have acknowledged the events of 20 August, he notes, while the archives are incomplete, the contemporary press tendered few reports of substance concerning the massacre, and oral testimonies are mainly the work of *Pied-Noirs,* recounting the whitewashed European version of events. Stora thus calls upon both French and Algerian authors (the latter, too, have been surprisingly silent) to recognize the impact and tragedy of 20 August 1955.

Of course, the surveillance and repression of the colonized did not cease with the end of empire. In her study of postcolonial violence and the Afri-

can immigrant community in 1960s France, Gillian Glaes describes the continuation of imperialism by other means: the perpetuation of invasive practices directed at newcomers from former colonies, the continued rejection of assimilation, and symbolic violence harnessed by the state in the service of postcolonial domination. Glaes outlines attempts by the metropolitan government and security services to track the movements and ethnic background of each newcomer, engaging in a variety of practices to control African immigrants, from forced relocation to banning political organizations deemed subversive. Regardless of their actual legal status—many continued to provide cheap labor for French industry—they were deemed terminally un-French, and Glaes describes the numerous strategies and mechanisms initiated to resolve the *problème noir.* Unsurprisingly, by the 1970s the African community in France became highly politicized, chafing at the inability of the French government to accept postcolonial reality.

Taken together, these articles contribute to a redefinition of colonial violence, investigating the methods used by the imperial system to defend and perpetuate its interests, while maintaining the privileged position of whiteness in the colonies and the postcolonial *métropole*. The authors move beyond a simple examination of the architecture of repression, incorporating a variety of new directions for research: the impact of gender and sexuality, the authority of texts, images, and public opinion as repositories of colonial violence, and the construction of memories of coercion and massacre. Others offer new interpretations of structural elements and their relationship to violent outcomes, whether colonial policing and security forces, French visions of African soldiers, or postcolonial surveillance and censorship. Moreover, this collective effort is not a mere scholarly exercise. As recently as 23 February 2005, a law introduced into the National Assembly concerning restitution for former colonial subjects referenced the "positive role" played by France within its former empire. Although later recanted by President Jacques Chirac, the statement clearly reflects the persistence of denial concerning the violent and oppressive nature of the French empire.[6] This volume forcefully rebuts such negations.

Notes

1. Etienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene* (London, 2002), 24–30.
2. Alice Conklin, "Colonialism and Human Rights, A Contradiction in Terms? The Case of France and West Africa, 1895–1914," *The American Historical Review* 103 (1998): 419.
3. Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre* (Paris, 1961), 9–12.
4. Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* (Stanford, 2001), 23, 34–35, 83, and *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, 1991), 239–43. Although they may be linked to, or even funded by the state, such institutions are not exclusively the products of Michel Foucault's "policy of coercions" or "mechanics of power" engaged in the process of social transformation from above, as noted in *Discipline*

and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (New York, 1977), 138–41. For they also reflect what Benjamin Brower terms the "multiple logic of violence" in the colonies, that "violence is not a singular phenomenon and assumes many forms," even blurring the binary division of colonizer-colonized at certain times. In Benjamin Claude Brower, *A Desert Named Peace: The Violence of France's Empire in the Algerian Sahara, 1844–1902* (New York, 2009), 6.

5. Nicola Cooper, *France in Indochina: Colonial Encounters* (Oxford, 2001), 33.
6. For a discussion of the statement and its consequences, see Michael Kelly's introduction to a 2006 special issue regarding "Writers, Intellectuals, and the Colonial Experience" of *French Cultural Studies* 17 (2006): 131–35.