

French Colonialism

France had the second largest empire in the world after Britain, but one with very different origins and purposes. Over more than four centuries, the French empire explained itself in many different ways through many different colonial regimes. Beginning in the early modern period, a vast mercantile empire based on furs and fish in North America and on sugar cultivated by the enslaved in the Caribbean rose and fell. At intervals thereafter, the French seemed to have an empire simply as an attribute of a Great Power, generally in competition with Britain. Relatively few French people ever moved to the empire, even to the settler colony of Algeria. Under the Third Republic, the French construed a “civilizing mission,” melding selectively applied principles of democracy and colonial capitalism. Two world wars and two anticolonial wars broke French imperial power as it had previously existed, yet numberless traces of the French empire lived on, both in the former colonies and in today’s French Republic. This narrative history recounts the unique course of the French empire, exploring how it made sense to the people who ruled it, lived under it, and fought against it.

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French Colonialism

From the Ancien Régime to the Present

Leonard V. Smith

Oberlin College



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To the Students of History 282

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Preface and Acknowledgments

In what nostalgia might describe as the simpler world in which I received my excellent graduate education in the 1980s, “French history” meant the history of European France – full stop. To be sure, doctoral students in my day understood that France at one time had possessed a vast overseas empire, and even that bits and pieces of that empire, oddly enough, remained French today. We certainly understood that a war to retain one colonial domain, Algeria, had brought down the French Fourth Republic in 1958. But many young Ph.Ds. specializing in French history back then finished their degrees with an uncertain knowledge of the basic geography of the French empire. Caribbean history, African history, Southeast Asian history, South Pacific history, and Middle Eastern history were specialized vectors of area studies. The history of the “French empire” was mostly a region-based history of the pre-independence of former French colonies.

One salutary effect of the decline of national history in the study of Europe has been a renewed interest in colonialism, as a crucial if often brutal point of intersection between European states and the world. Historians have long found themselves tempted to write the history of empires as extensions of those states, generally of their baser instincts. Given how many regimes ruled France from the Ancien Régime to the present, with accompanying shifts in colonial policy, some explanation here of the history of the metropole is inevitable. Gary Wilder’s term “imperial nation-state” reminds us that empires and states construct each other.¹ But the term does not tell us everything we need to know about the subject of this book. France, like the other European imperial powers, was an empire before it was a nation-state – if we take the latter term to indicate unitary governance across a demarcated geographic space.

¹ Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

What follows is not French national history with the empire attached. It is the history of a political configuration not reducible to the metropole that organized power and violence on a world stage across a vast expanse of time. J. P. Daughton once told me he considered writing a history of the French empire to be like writing the history of herding cats, because it operated in so many different registers in so many times and places. Fortunately, I am a cat person, and embraced the task here of putting together a narrative history of French colonial rule. But I do not claim to treat all colonial domains equally or believe that doing so would make for a better book.

I wrote this book with a particular pedagogical purpose. It has a decidedly “political” focus, in that it emphasizes practices and institutions of imperial rule. Resistance to that rule, of course, shaped those practices. But some readers may be struck by the focus on “high politics” – at the expense of social, gender, or cultural history, or for that matter the history of race. No one can understand imperial power without using race and gender as analytical categories. But by design, cultural movements I spend a good bit of time on in the classroom, such as Orientalism and *Négritude*, receive only passing mention here. This book is short enough, and I hope lively enough, that instructors can use it as a foundational narrative that students can read on their own. Instructors can thus spend precious class time on those aspects of French colonialism most likely to encourage interaction and discussion.

Further, this book emphasizes explanation over either incrimination or defense of the French imperial enterprise. To explain, the saying goes, is not to justify. Simply put, I try here to explain how the French empire made sense in the heads of those who ruled it, lived under it, and fought against it. The brutality of colonial rule is certainly explored here, not so much from a position of moral outrage (however justified) but as a register of political discourse. The moral and ethical issues at stake are glaring enough that students and other readers ought to be able to engage them on their own.

This book owes a great deal to scholars who have done so much to frame the issues examined here. In keeping with the practices of the *New Approaches to European History Series*, I have kept footnotes to a minimum. But the preface is a good place to acknowledge the contributions of pioneers such as Alice Conklin, who taught me to take republican ideology seriously in the empire. The late Tyler Stovall taught me how to think about French universalism in the empire more broadly. Todd Sheppard showed me how the empire had a “French” history at all, whatever the ethical or moral lessons of that history. Eric Jennings taught me how to look for continuities across seemingly endless varieties

of French colonial rule. Frederick Cooper helped me understand the arcane and fascinating legalities of decolonization, particularly in West Africa. Patricia Lorcin showed her fellow graduate students at Columbia in the 1980s just how wrong we were for wondering if French race discourse in Algeria was a somewhat obscure dissertation topic. For more than three decades, Douglas Porch has shown me how much the history of war and warfare matters. Matthew Connelly helped me understand how discursive power in the War of Algerian Independence could constitute real power. This book could not have been written without the work of all these fine historians. Responsibility for any shortcomings in interpreting that work, of course, lies with me.

The closeness and remoteness of French and English, inevitably, leads to choices here that might seem arbitrary. Most of the time, I adopt common English usage, such as Algiers rather than Alger, Pondicherry rather than Pondichéry or today's Puducherry, or New Caledonia rather than Nouvelle Calédonie. But Guyane just seemed to make more sense than French Guiana. Ivorians seem to prefer Côte d'Ivoire to Ivory Coast. I drop diacritical marks with persons known throughout the Anglophone world such as Napoleon, but preserve them for other important figures, such as Aimé Césaire or Ahmed Sékou Touré. Vietnamese diacritical marks are so complex that I have omitted them altogether, to keep the text as simple as possible. I use colonial names in their colonial contexts – Tourane rather than Da Nang and Bône rather than Annaba. I tend not to translate French expressions that seem self-evident, such as “République une et indivisible” or “Arabophile.” But I provide the French original in footnotes when any translation seems particularly ambiguous. Colonial language trades in ambiguity, to say the least. This book uses the terms “colonialism” and “imperialism” interchangeably.

In life and scholarship, I have always looked for silver linings in some very menacing clouds. One such silver lining narrowly preceded the cloud – a trip to the Mekong and Red River deltas and the Central Highlands of Vietnam in January 2020, supported by the Luce Initiative in Asian Studies and the Environment at Oberlin College. In significant ways, the coronavirus pandemic that followed shortly thereafter made this book possible. Much of it was written during the spring semester of 2021, when Oberlin turned its academic calendar inside out to “de-densify” the campus, a pandemic neologism if ever there was one. A near lockdown in a northeast Ohio winter, it turns out, can focus the mind wonderfully.

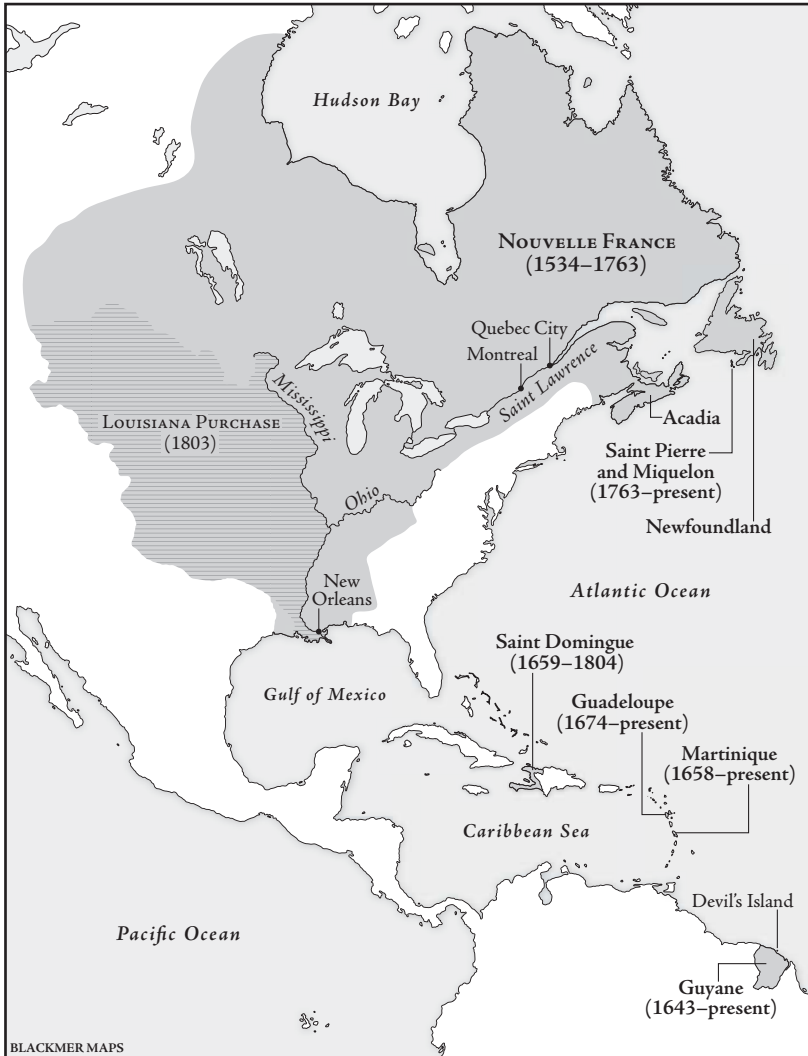
Through it all, I enjoyed the invaluable help of the staff at the Mary Church Terrell Library at Oberlin. I also enjoyed the companionship in isolation of my beloved wife, Ann Sherif. Because of her, I was never

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lonely. Given the vastness of this subject, I had innumerable questions generously answered by colleagues. Zeinab Abul-Magd helped me distinguish varieties of Arabic, Danielle Terrazas Williams varieties of Spanish, Renee Romano the politics of historical justice, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau some of the complexities of Rwanda, Rishad Choudhury the proper nomenclature for the Indian subcontinent, Alice Conklin the terminology of legal and social status. Eric Jennings's breadth of knowledge and his support as a colleague provided critical help at several junctures. Kate Blackmer worked her magic, once again, for the maps. Her cartography was supported by the research fund for the Frederick B. Artz chair, probably the greatest honor of my academic career.

At Cambridge University Press, Michael Watson encouraged me to submit this project to the *New Approaches to European History* series. Liz Friend-Smith has provided so much help, and so much patience, in my bringing it to completion. Laura Simmons and Santhamurthy Ramamoorthy deserve my heartfelt thanks for seeing this book through production. I could complete my role in production under splendid conditions, as a Fernand Braudel Senior Fellow at the European University Institute in Florence in the spring of 2023.

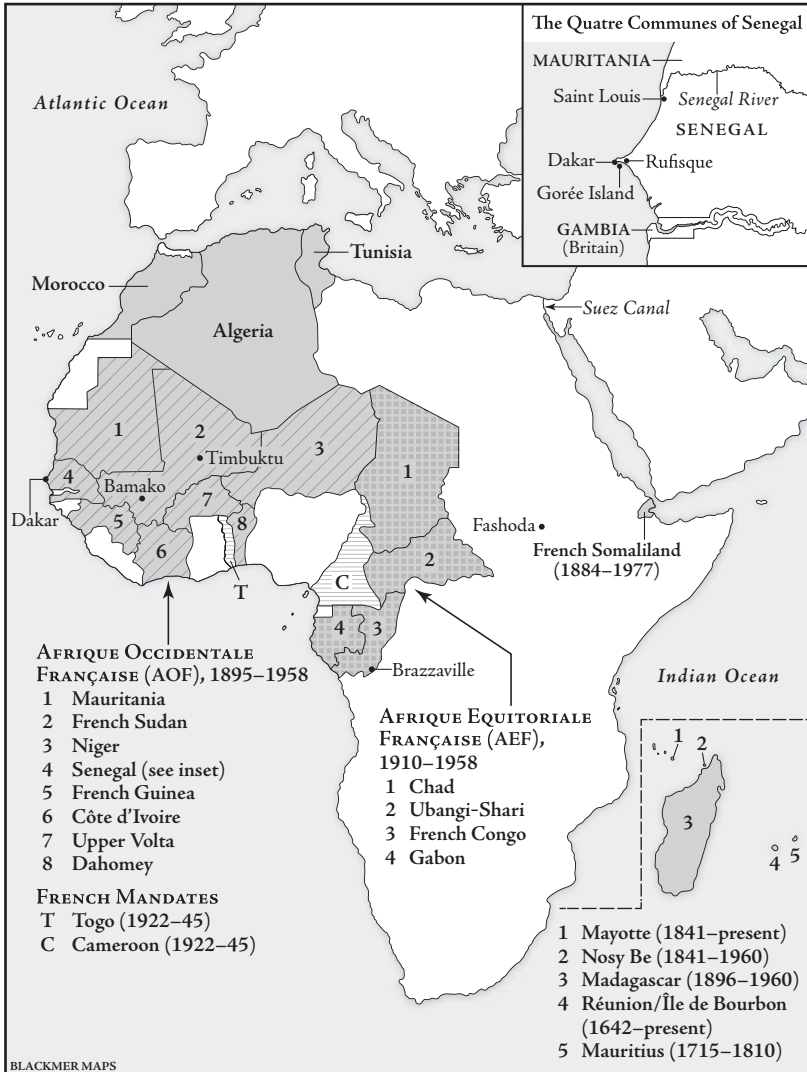
This book had its origin in the Oberlin classroom, where I began teaching an upper-level colloquium on French imperialism in 2003. A Curriculum Development Fellowship in 2017 helped me develop History 282, the lecture course on which I based this book. I will never be able to thank enough all the students so eager to learn the history of French colonialism alongside me. After more than three decades teaching them, I can still be astonished by the commitment, intelligence, and good nature of Oberlin students. They remain what they were when I first got to know them as an Oberlin student myself in the late 1970s – some of the most interesting people I have ever met.



Map 1 The French Empire in the New World (Mercator projection)



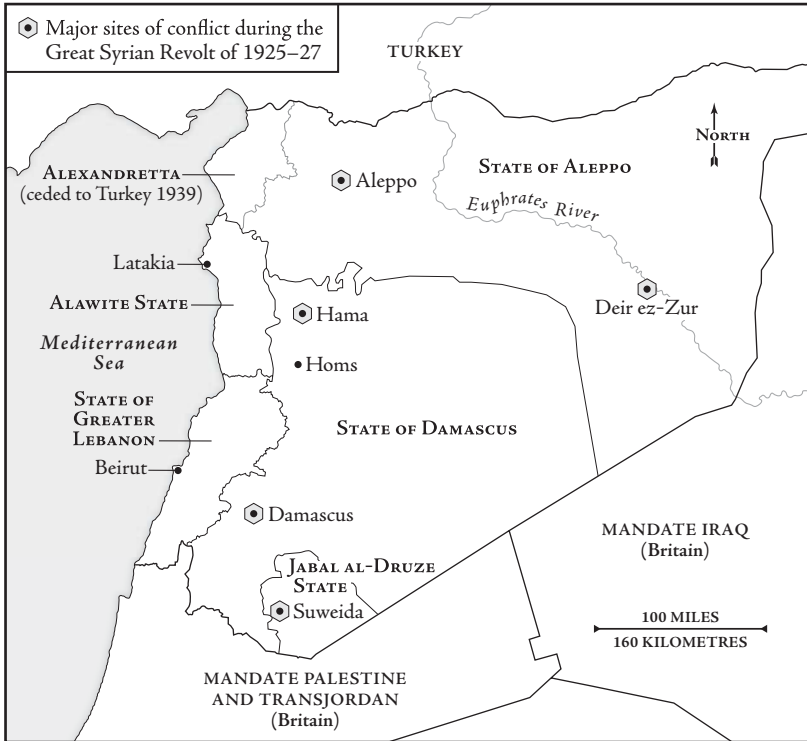
Map 2 French Algeria, 1830–1962



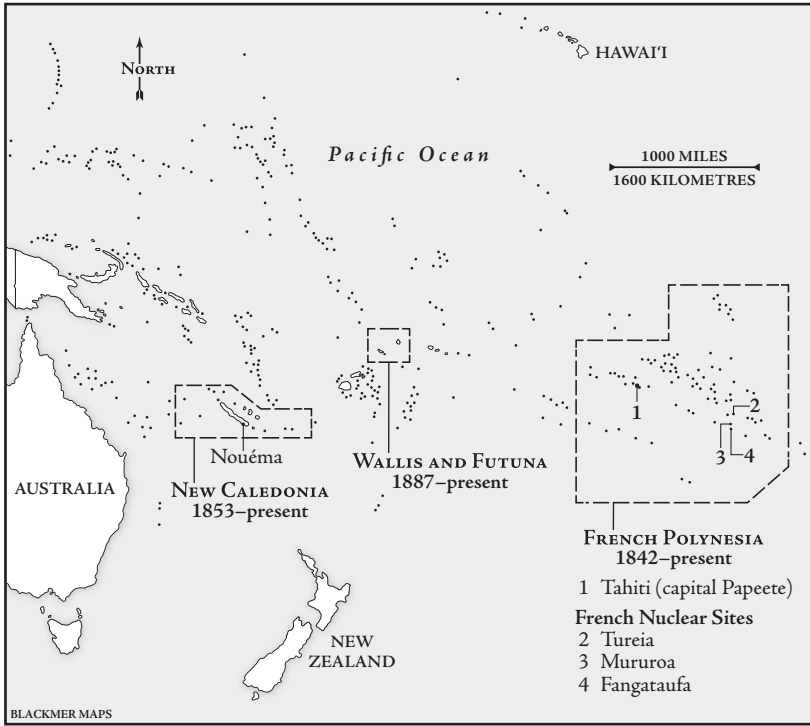
Map 3 The French Empire in Africa (Mercator projection)



Map 4 The French Indochinese Union, 1887–1954



Map 5 French Mandate Syria and Lebanon, 1923–41



Map 6 French Territories in the South Pacific