

## The Third Republic and Colonialism, 1870–1918

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### Q. What motivated French imperial expansion between 1870 and 1914?

A. French imperial expansion was motivated by several different forces. While they were individual and distinct forces, they often fed off each other in a mutually reinforcing manner.

First was France’s bruised national psyche. In the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, the Germans dealt the French a quick, decisive, and extremely embarrassing defeat in the space of a few weeks. The defeat was such a disaster that it caused the fall of Emperor Napoleon III and plunged France into a state of civil war, culminating with the disaster of the Paris Commune in 1871. As the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth was a period of growing nationalism in Europe, the memory of the 1870 defeat gnawed at French public memory. Blocked in Europe, the nation had to look overseas to Africa, South-east Asia, and Oceania to find national glory. The growing empire thus served as an outlet for pent-up nationalist sentiment in France.

Three other specific factors increased the colonial search for national glory: (1) Bismarck’s manipulations; (2) the career goals of French officers; and (3) the growth of the popular press. First, on the level of high politics, the Chancellor of Germany, Otto von Bismarck, in an effort to keep France from seeking revenge against his newly united German Empire, encouraged the French to look overseas for national glory. The French bought into his plans. Second, embarrassed after their 1870 performance and eager for glory on the battlefield and promotion, many of the French officers sent to the colonies were keen to increase French holdings as a means of boosting their own careers. Thus, large portions of West Africa were annexed by men on the spot, often without orders from Paris. The same occurred in South-East Asia, where the admirals in charge of Saigon and southern Vietnam engaged in their own plans, again without Parisian authorization, and delivered the rest of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos into French hands. Frequently, the central government in Paris accepted these annexations as a *fait accompli*. On rare occasions, such as in Tonkin in the early 1870s, did Paris order an area to be evacuated.

The third piece in the puzzle was the growth of the popular press. Due to the dramatic expansion of literacy between 1871 and 1900 (thanks to the Third Republic’s education reforms under Jules Ferry), France became a nation of readers. Tales of heroic French officers fighting ‘natives’ in exotic locales made good press and sold papers. As this was the time of important developments in communications technology (such as transatlantic telegraph lines and the ability to include detailed printed images in the daily papers), news of battles in West Africa or northern Vietnam could make it to the front page of Parisian and national dailies in the space of a few days. The new French reading public ate up this news. As a result, French national pride in the empire grew, thanks to this form of jingoism and propaganda.

Specific French economic interests also had a stake in imperial expansion. The Lyons silk merchants, for example, encouraged the push into southern Vietnam in the 1850s and northern Vietnam several decades later in order to gain access to south China's silk-producing centres in Yunnan. French shipping companies in Marseilles and Bordeaux had an interest in an increase in overseas trade, transport, and shipping, as well as building the empire's fleet. After lands were annexed, French investors poured millions of francs into development projects such as railways and port construction. These *rentiers*, or upper middle-class investors, gained an important stake in the empire as a source of revenue. Settlers also moved to the colonies to build various types of plantations.

Finally, we must note that the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was a period of imperial frenzy for all the major European powers and for the United States of America. Great Britain built an empire so big that the sun never set on it. The Dutch solidified their control of the East Indies. Russia expanded into East Asia. After 1898 the USA annexed Hawai'i, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam and established an informal empire in Cuba. Germany, against Bismarck's better advice, took possession of large tracts of land in southern Africa and a few small islands in the South Pacific such as Western Samoa. Even King Leopold, monarch of little Belgium, took control of a massive colony in the Congo. French imperialists viewed their European counterparts with a suspicious eye. Seeing the race for colonies as a zero-sum game, France came to the conclusion that it had to take a colony or risk losing it to a rival. This attitude created an irrational competition among the European states, resulting in events such as the 'scramble for Africa', where the entire continent came under European control in little more than a decade.

### **Q. How important was the French Empire for the Third Republic by 1914?**

A. This is not an easy question to answer. There is still much debate among historians. From an economic perspective, historians have argued that the empire cost more than it generated. However, others have argued that while the French state lost money, individual commercial interests made quite a bit from colonial investments. Thus, while the bottom-line may have not been good for France, specific individuals or groups of investors made money from the empire. Thanks to the nature of the Third Republic and its susceptibility to lobbying, these economic interests could get the French state to act in their interests. Thus, while the empire may not have benefited France overall, those with political and economic power often found ways to make the empire pay for them.

In terms of national prestige, the empire was a source of pride. As mentioned above, the French public bought newspapers and also published books about colonial conquests, adventures, and exploits. The possession of the empire made France a great power, even though its military track record in Europe was not great. Thus, in this way, possessing an empire was central to France's national status.

Unfortunately, the empire created a serious contradiction for the French Third Republic. On the one hand, France was the most progressive state in Europe and its government – the only major republic in Europe – embodied the legacy of the French Revolution; the Universal Rights of Man and a deep respect for political freedom and republican values. On the other, the empire was the product of brutal and aggressive wars of conquest and was maintained by the use of force and the denial of political rights to the colonized people. Thus, we have a certain French paradox: political liberty at home and repression overseas.

**Q. What impact did the First World War have upon the perception of the empire?**

A. The trauma of the First World War made the empire more important than ever for France. Depleted of men and materials by the ordeal of total war, France turned to its colonies in North Africa, West Africa, and South-east Asia for war material, food, labour, and soldiers. Indeed, it was this war that brought the colonies to France. France brought tens of thousands of men to work in its munitions factories and rail yards and to serve on the front lines (due to racist ideas about African barbarism, the Senegalese troops were deemed to be great fighters, but Arabs and Vietnamese also served on the battlefield). It would be going too far to say that the empire saved France, but the contribution of the empire in terms of supplies and labour was essential. In return for long hours at difficult jobs in harsh conditions, these colonial subjects received poor pay and vague promises of reforms in the colonies.

The war experience was also crucial as this was the first time that most French had the opportunity to come into contact with people of colour from the colonies. Sometimes French racial prejudices collapsed when faced with Asians, Africans, and Arabs who did not act according to well-known stereotypes. However, most French did not forge deep and meaningful relationships with men from the colonies and prejudices remained. Thus, Sub-Saharan Africans were seen as brutal and fierce but childish and loyal, Vietnamese and other Asians were seen as quiet and hard-working, and Arabs continued to be viewed with centuries-old suspicions and hostility.

When the war was over, the French state repatriated the colonial labourers and soldiers as quickly as possible lest they compete with demobilized white French citizens for jobs. When they returned home, many Africans and Vietnamese expected to be rewarded for their loyal service to the French flag with some sort of political reforms. Unfortunately, the colonial administrators were hostile to change and few meaningful reforms were enacted. This led to an intensification and modernization of various anti-colonial movements. Saigon stood out as a hot-bed of anti-colonial agitation in the 1920s. The experience in the French factories also introduced Vietnamese labourers to unions, strikes, and socialism: all three of which played an important role in the active colonial politics of the 1920s and 1930s.

For France, the experience of the war showed the importance of having a strong and economically useful empire. Thus, there was a push from individuals such as Albert Sarraut (former head of the Indochinese Federation and Minister of Colonies) for a policy of *mise en valeur* or economic development. Importantly, this post-war development was to be in the interest of France, not the colonial economies. Thus, there was an increase in plantation production of export crops such as rice and rubber.

**Q. How did the Third Republic promote the empire?**

A. Prior to the First World War, the popular press was the great promoter of the empire. After the war, the French government stepped in to educate the French about the colonies. One of the main goals of the government was to encourage the emigration of well-qualified French specialists to the colonies. Engineers and administrators were recruited to enact the policy of *mise en valeur*. While these development projects were designed to promote French material interests, they were justified by the French state as part of France's *mission civilisatrice*, its civilizing

mission. The French state told colonial administrators and settlers that they were developing the backwards civilizations. This was essentially a French version of the 'white man's burden.' This logic generally ignored the fact that the average colonial subject's life was generally made worse by French intervention. In the late 1920s and 1930s, the French state devoted increasing attention to propagandizing the imperial mission of France.

### **Key publications by Michael Vann**

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