

Adrian Muckle. *Specters of Violence in a Colonial Context: New Caledonia, 1917.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012. xiv + 255 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8248-3509-5.

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Violence and Memory: The Events of 1917

Traditional accounts of early twentieth-century colonial conflicts tend to be neglected amid narratives of the origins, implementation, and aftermath of the two world wars. This is particularly true of accounts of the First World War, in which the great powers of Europe are seen as the only meaningful participants. The struggles that took place outside of Europe during this period have been generally examined as corollaries to the European “main event;” in this context, colonial violence is seen as a mere projection of European battlefields by the belligerents into their respective empires. However, more recent scholarship has begun to address the way in which the European conflict impacted and in many cases exacerbated pre-existing colonial discord, both between colonizer and colonized and among the colonized themselves. Adrian Muckle’s *Specters of Violence in a Colonial Context: New Caledonia, 1917* is an excellent example of such a study.

Rather than simply recounting the story of the First World War in a particular French colony, Muckle places the violence that took place in New Caledonia in 1917 within the long-term narrative of that colony’s history of anti-imperial agitation, particularly in light of the Kanak independence movements of the 1980s. Muckle frames his monograph as a critique of past accounts that have, due largely to its short duration and low casualties, downplayed the conflict’s importance as incidental to the contemporaneous war in Europe. Specifically, Muckle’s primary concern is to deconstruct the meaning of the “events of 1917” as they have been represented by schol-

ars in the ensuing decades, and examines the use of violence as a means of imperial exploitation and control. Muckle argues that these events deserve to be examined on their own terms, rather than as a footnote about the First World War in the French colonies. Furthermore, by crafting his own history of the events of this critical year, Muckle critically examines the conflict itself, as well as how the memory of the conflict has been evoked ever since.

Muckle acknowledges the difficulty of telling this story in light of the disproportionate contribution of New Caledonia to the French war effort, and perhaps more importantly how the memory of this involvement continues to play a role in the desire of much of today’s resident population to remain a part of France. At best, the violent events of 1917 have come to be known merely as “the last of the Kanak revolts”; Muckle instead examines the ingrained nature of violence in the everyday colonial administration as a response to the perception of a “permanent” level of colonial dissent (p. 4). Violence was utilized by the French as a means of pacification and “containing” Kanak violence and maintaining entrenched power relations, but only once the “savages” threatened French settlers; so long as the Kanak limited their violent impulses to themselves, the administration did not intervene.

The everyday violence of the colonial administration came to a head with the outbreak of the First World War. With more than a thousand French settlers departing for

European battlefields, the settlers that remained became concerned about their ability to enforce the colonial status quo. This insecurity coincided with indigenous unrest, both actual and perceived. For example, once the Kanak themselves began to be heavily recruited, settler talk about a possible revolt reached its crescendo. Alongside the records of the French of New Caledonia, Muckle also makes use of those of the Kanak themselves; for example, he observes how even the voluntary recruitment of local *tirailleurs* (native auxiliaries) became conflated with the “repressive and violent nature of colonial rule” (p. 43). Memories of past colonial violence, combined with the overall climate of fear created by mobilization efforts, served to incite further acts of violence, culminating in the revolt of 1917. It was this “specter” of violence, both past and recent, that resulted in the specific events of 1917.

Muckle embraces subaltern explanations for this conflict, placing it within its colonial context and taking seriously ingrained colonial power relations; rather than a mere “by-product” of the First World War, the violence that erupted in New Caledonia in 1917 arose organically out of “local conditions and everyday practices of colonial rule” (pp. 57, 195). Finally, Muckle also describes what has come to be seen as “standard” colonial constructions of indigenous peoples, particularly in response to local violence. For example, even as they actively recruited Kanak auxiliaries to help put down the revolt, the

French actively downplayed Kanak agency and ability.

Muckle makes use of both official colonial documents and personal correspondence; in particular, he utilizes New Caledonia’s archives, which the agreements of the 1980s and 1990s have made much more accessible. Contemporary letters written by teachers and missionaries living in the area augment the detailed colonial and judicial records of the 1917 uprising and the ensuing 1919 trial of the Kanak rebels. In his examination of the memory of 1917 as both “a symbol of the ongoing struggle and a reminder of the cost of past resistance,” Muckle also examines more recent accounts in the French and colonial media (p. 177). He pays particular attention to how general histories and encyclopedias have in many ways shaped the historiography of the 1917 revolt.

Muckle concludes that the maintenance of colonial power relations depended almost exclusively upon violence. In contrast to the generally selective violence deployed by the Kanak, the French administration used violence as a tool of first resort. Furthermore, such violence was often indiscriminate, disproportionate, and unnecessary, and served only to exacerbate and further entrench the cruel nature of the colonial system. Muckle tells the reader in his introduction that one of the book’s main concerns is an exploration of the relationship between violence, warfare, and colonial power relations; in this his work is largely successful.

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