



Kim Munholland, *Rock of Contention: Free French and Americans at War in New Caledonia, 1940-1945*, New York: Berghahn, 2005

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“South Pacific Tensions”

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Americans love to disparage the French, and vice-versa. Even in the northern climes of Wisconsin one can always elicit a laugh from farmers with a joke about the self-important but also self-defeating heirs to Napoleon. Similarly, urbane Parisians and petit villagers of France reach great eloquence in their denunciations of America’s unrefined “hyper-power.”

Where did this mutual animosity come from? How can close strategic allies feel so antagonistic toward one another? What is the relationship between these feelings and day-to-day policy?

Kim Munholland’s thoughtful and well-research book addresses these questions. He artfully diverts readers from their common attention to European affairs, and Charles de Gaulle in particular, to the fate of France’s colony in the Pacific, New Caledonia, during the Second World War. Munholland argues that the contradiction between Free French desires to hold control over New Caledonia, and U.S. desires to use the island as a strategic hub for fighting the Japanese contributed to the formation of a “*mésentente*.” Both American and Free French leaders wanted to defeat Germany and Japan. They cooperated extensively for this purpose, but they also continued to contest one another for influence in various parts of the world. Borrowing from Milton Viorst, Munholland calls the United States and Free France “hostile allies.”[1] He writes that: “New Caledonia became a metaphor for the stormy and uneasy alliance that developed between Americans and the Free French during the war at every point of contact” (3).

In eight tight chapters, Munholland walks the reader through the development of relations between the U.S. and Free France around New Caledonia from the months before Pearl Harbor until V-J Day. He describes how the island grew in symbolic and military importance during the course of the war, especially after American forces arrived in 1942. At a time when the U.S. government continued to work with Vichy France, New Caledonia was an essential marker of

Free French authority and importance. A succession of Gaullist island administrators emphasized this point: “New Caledonia was the most important of the Free-French holdings in the Pacific and a bastion of French presence in the area... Firm and centralized Free-French authority had to be clearly established as the world conflict entered a new and decisive phase in the Pacific” (73).

American officials, in contrast, grew progressively more annoyed with Free French limitations on their military uses of the island for attacks against Japanese holdings in the region. In 1942 the U.S. moved the headquarters of the Commander of Allied Forces in the South Pacific to New Caledonia. Free French officials immediately complained that the growing American presence was undermining their authority and the French “way of life” on the island. U.S. Admiral William Halsey responded in characteristic fashion, quoted by Munholland. “Our principle difficulty,” Halsey argued, “lies in the non-cooperative ‘business as usual’ attitude of the French. They are jealous of their prerogatives and anxious to preserve, war or no war, French traditions and customs” (122-23). In 1943 Senator Richard Russell went so far as to propose that the United States take New Caledonia from the Free French, in return for nullifying France’s World War I debts to the U.S., and in compensation for American Lend-Lease aid (165). De Gaulle and his ministers, not surprisingly, were angered and insulted by Russell’s posturing.

Munholland is balanced in his criticism of both sides in this “*mésentente*.” Halsey displayed “an American attitude that was condescending and paternalistic” (122). The Free French evinced “an extreme sensitivity,” that de Gaulle and other officials extended into a reflexive “anti-Americanism” (122, 231). These tensions did not subside with the end of the Second World War. President Franklin Roosevelt sincerely opposed French colonialism, but he supported the maintenance of French control in New Caledonia for the sake of stabilizing the postwar French state as a whole. He and many other observers feared that a rapid loss of empire would further undermine French morale and anti-communist steadfastness. Roosevelt, de Gaulle, and their successors needed one another during and after the Second World War, but they continued to distrust one another deeply. This was a serious alliance, formed in the shadow of strong animosities.

Munholland’s focus on New Caledonia adds many new perspectives to a somewhat familiar story. He shows that the “*mésentente*” had roots in the geopolitics of the South Pacific, as well as the interpersonal relations between de Gaulle, Roosevelt, and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. The origins of hostility, according to this account, go back before the United States entered the war, and they are not contrasted only with the emerging Anglo-American “special relationship.” Rising U.S.-Japanese hostilities before 1941 complicated both American and French interests in the region.

This book also follows a strong methodological trend toward internationalizing the study of diplomatic and political relations. Munholland examines French and American diplomacy from the periphery looking in, rather than the center looking out. This approach highlights the power not only of national leaders, but also of local agents and representatives. The French governors and American admirals in the South Pacific, operating with limited guidance, often made the crucial decisions that set the course for broader relations between the two societies. This is an important update on the classical work by Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher on British imperialism: the “official mind” strategizes for empire, but local officials make empire.[2] An

international approach, as employed by Munholland, allows the reader to follow the complex levels of agency and feedback that structured policies. Roosevelt and de Gaulle articulated policy, but they alone did not make it.

Munholland also gives the residents of New Caledonia important agency in his narrative. Their preferences for the Free French over Vichy, for example, were crucial in allowing de Gaulle to maintain control over this island. Social unrest among islanders also created pressures for Free French and American officials to revise their policies and representation. The residents of the island were not mere pawns in the hands of the great powers, according to Munholland. They actively shaped the implementation of policy.

Munholland's source base allows him to tell a compelling international history of this kind. Although he had access to few materials from New Caledonia itself, he draws extensively on archival holdings in France, the United States, Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand. He is able to compare these materials and track the different perceptions formed in response to events around New Caledonia. Munholland relies on a mastery of diplomatic records, which he reads carefully and creatively to tell a broad story. He shows how valuable multinational diplomatic documents are for capturing not only negotiations, but also evolving perceptions and ideas.

This excellent book has one central problem. It presumes, but does not show that the experience in New Caledonia shaped broader relations between the United States and France. To some extent, this seems obvious from the parallels between the "mésentente" that Munholland describes, and the recurring Franco-American controversies during the Cold War. Nonetheless, the history of relations between the United States and France during and after the Second World War is somewhat more complex. Mark Bradley, for example, has shown that Franklin Roosevelt believed the French were appropriate "trustees" for Indochina; he was less begrudging in his support for French colonialism in this region than Munholland would have us believe in the South Pacific.[3] Mark Lawrence has expanded on this point, explaining that France and the U.S. were not really "hostile allies," but mutually supporting imperial powers in Indochina.[4] Irwin Wall and Matthew Connelly examine Franco-American relations around Algeria. They point to tensions, like other authors, but they elaborate on the complex mix of racism, "civilizational" thought, and anti-communism that severely complicated the policies of the great powers.[5]

This is not a claim that Munholland should have written a different book. His probing and persuasive account of events in New Caledonia is valuable in itself. My concern is with his basic argument about representativeness and influence. Is New Caledonia really a "metaphor" for Franco-American relations during and after World War II? The disparities between Munholland's account and those of authors working in other regions makes me suspicious. We should not, however, assume that every region is *sui generis* either. What the international history of relations between France and the United States requires is a more analytical assessment of how the different regions interrelated in the making of a "mésentente," or whatever we want to label it. International history is, in this sense, necessarily interregional history.

My northern Wisconsin neighbors have an interregional view of France in mind when they snicker at its nationalist pretensions and foreign policies. Similarly, French writers envision a threatening and imperial Goliath when they attack American “hyper-power.” Munholland effectively shows that the history of New Caledonia during the Second World War contributed to these mutual perceptions. An explanation for how the contentious experience of this small island became generalized – even in Wisconsin! – awaits a similarly rigorous historian.

NOTES

[1] Milton Viorst, *Hostile Allies: FDR and Charles de Gaulle* (New York: Macmillan, 1965).

[2] Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher with Alice Denny, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism* (London: Macmillan, 1961).

[3] Mark Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

[4] Mark Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

[5] Irwin M. Wall, *France, the United States, and the Algerian War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

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