



Thomas Martin, Richard Toye. *Arguing about empire: Imperial Rhetoric in Britain and France, 1882-1956*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. 288 S. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-874919-6.

Reviewed by Warren Dockter (Aberystwyth University)

Published on H-Diplo (November, 2017)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

“A Silent, Rankling Grudge”

In the autumn issue of *Nineteenth Century Review* in 1877, W. E. Gladstone wrote an article on legacy of the British Empire and the Eastern Question entitled, “Aggression on Egypt and Freedom in the East.” In addition to supporting notions of self-rule in Egypt, Gladstone warned of the perils of imperial interventions, arguing, “My belief is that the day which witnesses our occupation of Egypt will bid a long farewell to all cordiality of political relations between France and England. There might be no immediate quarrel, no exterior manifestation, but a silent, rankling grudge” (p. 19). These words proved so prophetic that political radical Wilfred Scawen Blunt employed Gladstone’s rhetoric against him in his work *The Secret History of the English Occupation of Egypt* (1907), writing that “this article is so remarkable and so wonderfully prescient of evils he was himself destined to inflict upon Egypt that it deserves quoting” (p. 57). This exchange serves to illustrate the fluid nature of imperial rhetoric and the discursive relationship which formed between the British and French Empires.

Martin Thomas and Richard Toye have written a remarkably ambitious and excellent study which examines the intersections of imperial rhetoric between the French and British Empires during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The book is based on seven case studies that focus on moments of imperial intervention in which both the French and Britain played an equal part, ranging from Tunisia and Egypt in the early 1880s through

to Suez in 1956. This breadth allows the reader to see the evolution of imperial rhetoric in Britain and France while illustrating how policymakers in their respective metropolises became intrinsically linked, forcing them toward “co-imperialism.” This is particularly true regarding the Middle East and North Africa, where the British and French Empires remained in concert from nineteenth century until the realities of full-scale decolonization became apparent in latter half of the twentieth century.

It is precisely by placing these two empires in discourse that allows the reader to explore the chasm between the realities of co-imperialism and the language which was used to obscure, and at times, perpetuate it. This is especially revealing in terms of the role which was played by domestic party politics in both France and Britain and their effect on ideas and projections of imperialist narratives. In the chapter on the Fashoda crisis, the authors masterfully undermine the traditional narrative of British political unity against French encroachment in Africa. Rather than the Liberals and Conservatives being “caught up together in a jingoistic, anti-French spasm” as the language from both parties implies, the “unity of rhetoric” should be seen instead “in the light of political manoeuvre” (p. 65).

The chapter on the Chanak crisis illustrates more high political tension between the British and French in negotiations regarding the fate of Turkey and the rise of Turkish nationalists after the First World War. Here

Gladstone's description of co-imperialism in the eastern Mediterranean as a "silent rankling grudge" is illuminated in Curzon's frustrations with French "double-dealing" and his outrage at having to continue his negotiations despite knowing from intelligence decrypts that "his negotiation partners were not only deal-making with the Turkish nationalists but were secretly arming them as well" (pp. 126-127). And yet, despite their strategic aims being contradictory and at times diametrically opposed, neither imperial power could hold the Middle Eastern territories alone.

These insights are bolstered by the plethora of well-researched archival sources from Britain and France such as the Michel Saint-Denis papers and the Maurice Dejean papers. Moreover, the combined use of British and French press, particularly local newspapers, some of which have been neglected by recent scholarship helps enrich each case study. In expertly utilizing these sources and comparing the narratives they built, the authors elu-

cidate the imperial collective conscious of each power. It is through this comparison, that it is perhaps less remarkable (and more logical) that during the decolonization of the 1950s and 1960s, the imperial rhetoric of both France and Britain moved toward themes of crisis of regime and moral leadership.

This raises another strength of the book and the methodological approach of using case studies. The authors do not claim to be the final word on co-imperial rhetoric. Instead they use this approach to open up the field of study and encourage other historians to explore the legacy of British and French co-imperial rhetoric, particularly as the discourse between the states began to break down owing to decolonialization and the shift of both states from global powers toward membership in the European Union. Ultimately, this stimulating study is both of intrinsic interest to historians of empire but it also opens up further avenues for future research.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

Citation: Warren Dockter. Review of Martin, Thomas; Toye, Richard, *Arguing about empire: Imperial Rhetoric in Britain and France, 1882-1956*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. November, 2017.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=49706>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.