GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

No one has ever doubted the profound effects of the Second World War upon European imperialism. But they have often been studied primarily in political, diplomatic and military terms, an approach which tends to highlight specific events and turning points. Moreover, there has frequently been a gulf between global and regional studies and a time lag in scholarly approaches to the various empires, particularly those of the British and the French. Only comparatively recently has there been a more profound appreciation of the underlying economic and social transformations which were necessarily rooted in the years between the two great wars of the twentieth century, but which were powerfully affected by the intensive demands, disruptions and regional destabilisations of the Second World War period.

This book constitutes a major contribution to this debate. Firmly based on primary research in France and Britain, it offers the first comprehensive account of the turbulent events in the French empire in the 1940s, a time when francophone imperial territories became the setting for strife between the competing claims of the Vichy government and de Gaulle's Free French movement, and various pragmatic positions in between. It explores the manner in which the empire constitutes, in complex and destructive ways, one of the launch pads for the liberation of France, a focal point for the conflicts between and among the Axis powers and the Western Allies, and a setting for the working out of a wide variety of ideological ambitions. The resulting economic and social strains produced much suffering for indigenous peoples, fertile ground for the emergence of many forms of resistance movement.

The scope and depth of Martin Thomas's work enable him not only to range across the French empire from the Caribbean and North America to Africa, the Middle East, the Indian Ocean and Indo-China, but also to deal with the economic and the social dimensions of these processes as much as the political and military. In addition to capturing the idiom and often extreme conservatism of French imperial politics, he demonstrates a profound sympathy for the aspirations, only dimly understood by the French, of colonised peoples. This book will contribute greatly to the study of the impact of the Second World War on greater France and its enforced decolonisation. It should also act as a foundation for further studies of elite and popular reactions to empire in twentieth-century France, as well as the processes of social change and identity formation which disrupted the characteristic French imperial ambitions to assimilation and association.

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