



2021

Jennifer E. Sessions. *By Sword and Plow: France and the Conquest of Algeria*, Thomas Deltombe, Manuel Domergue, and Jacob Tatsitsa. *Kamerun! Une guerre cachée de la Françafrique (1948-1971)*, Thomas Deltombe, Manuel Domergue, and Jacob Tatsitsa. *La guerre du Cameroun: l'invention de la Françafrique 1948-1971*

Ieland Conley Barrows
Voorhees College, lbarrows@voorhees.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Barrows, Ieland Conley (2021) "Jennifer E. Sessions. *By Sword and Plow: France and the Conquest of Algeria*, Thomas Deltombe, Manuel Domergue, and Jacob Tatsitsa. *Kamerun! Une guerre cachée de la Françafrique (1948-1971)*, Thomas Deltombe, Manuel Domergue, and Jacob Tatsitsa. *La guerre du Cameroun: l'invention de la Françafrique 1948-1971*," *Comparative Civilizations Review*. Vol. 85 : No. 85 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol85/iss85/15>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Civilizations Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Jennifer E. Sessions. *By Sword and Plow: France and the Conquest of Algeria*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2011.

Thomas Deltombe, Manuel Domergue, and Jacob Tatsitsa. *Kamerun! Une guerre cachée de la Françafrique (1948-1971)*. Paris: La Découverte, 2011.

Thomas Deltombe, Manuel Domergue, and Jacob Tatsitsa. *La guerre du Cameroun: l'invention de la Françafrique 1948-1971*. Paris: La Découverte, 2016.

Reviewed by Leland Conley Barrows

The legacy of the colonial period continues to weigh on France. Recently, President Emmanuel Macron called for the creation of a “Memories and Truth Commission” to lay to rest the lingering questions, bitterness, and controversies surrounding the French occupation of Algeria, the independence war, and the country’s accession to independence. Questions regarding the brutality of French colonial conquests and colonial rule in tropical Africa are also being raised. Immigration from Algeria and other formerly French territories is provoking controversy as is also the fact that France has the largest Muslim population of any European country. Many French citizens, particularly those of strictly Gallo-Roman origin, are uneasy about the increasing diversity of the French population, owing to the Algerian and colonial heritage of France.

The three books under review are responses to this malaise and to continued interest in un- or partly answered questions about French involvement with Algeria, the origins of which go back to 1830, and with Cameroon, the largest part of which came to France as spoils of World War I.

Jennifer Sessions, an associate professor of history at the University of Virginia, analyzes the causes and the consequences for France of the decision taken by the Bourbon Restoration government in 1830 to invade the Regency of Algiers and the further decision taken by the July Monarchy, fruit of the July 1830 Revolution, to keep and consolidate the conquest and to develop Algeria (the name being adopted in 1839) as a French settler colony. For Sessions, these decisions, particularly that of the July Monarchy to settle the interior, had major long-term repercussions in France and became the lynchpin for France’s second colonial empire.

The demise of this second empire, or rather the transformation of some of it into neo-colonial client states that the authors designate collectively as “*Françafrique*,” is what interests and outrages the three cooperating authors of *Kamerun* and *La guerre du Cameroun*. For them, the devolution of Cameroon to independence is a particularly flagrant example of the type of phony decolonization that they deplore.

Thomas Delcombe, the lead author, is a French investigative journalist. Manuel Domergue, also a French journalist, is an active community organizer engaged in the struggle to end homelessness in France. Jacob Tatsitsa, a Cameroonian historian and political scientist, is a specialist in African anti- and post-colonial insurgencies. The two books cover the same subject, the first one, published in 2011, in much greater detail than the second one, published in 2016.

Kamerun is an exhaustive study of the post-World War II independence movement in Cameroon that was spearheaded by the *Union des Populations du Cameroun* (UPC). According to the authors, the movement was banned, hijacked, and defeated through a concerted and successful French political and military effort to transform the soon to be independent United Nations Trust Territory into a neo-colonial client-state. *La Guerre du Cameroun* is a synthesis that to some extent updates *Kamerun* and notably includes an endorsing preface by the dean of Cameroonian historians, Achille Mbembe. He praises the authors for exposing the dishonesty and the negative effects of French neo-colonialism in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly Cameroon.

Altogether, the books focus on the beginning and the end (or perhaps, one should say, the transformation in some cases) of France's empire in Africa. But, as Deltombe, Domergue, and Tatsita are careful to point out, neither Algeria nor Cameroon was ever a French colony in the strict, legal sense.

French rule in Algeria began as a military conquest and occupation directed by and responsible to the French War Ministry. After 1870, Algeria, administered by officials responsible to the French Ministry of the Interior, became, at least in theory, an integral part of France (albeit with a very large Muslim population denied, for the most part, the rights of French citizens). It was the very Frenchness of Algeria that made its independence war (1954-1962) so protracted and violent. At least initially, many French people viewed this war as a civil war or a war of secession more than a colonial uprising, while viewing the accession of Cameroon to independence as an example of normal political devolution.

The "basic proposition" of Sessions' volume "is that the roots of French Algeria lay in contests over political legitimacy sparked by the Atlantic revolutions of the eighteenth century." She is referring to the diversity of the heritages and the interpretations of the French Revolution, the Napoleonic era, the Bourbon Restoration, the 1830 Revolution, the July Monarchy, the Revolution of 1848, and the Second Republic, followed by the establishment of Louis Napoleon's Second Empire and the Third Republic. She argues that the French invasion of the Ottoman Regency of Algiers in July 1830, often viewed as a peripheral event in French history, was a seminal event in the re-establishment of France as an imperial power.

The further decision to retain Algiers and to occupy the interior “stood at a critical crossroads both between the ‘first’ and ‘second’ French empires and between continental and overseas empire.” For Sessions, “the French nation-state in *all* of its political guises was never not also an empire.”

Sessions focuses on the actions of the July Monarchy (1830-1848) which witnessed the successful French occupation of the northern interior of Algeria and the irrevocable decision to make Algeria a settler colony — but without any decisions to fully displace or to eliminate the native Algerians. She divides her account into two thematic parts, the first, titled “By the Sword,” the second, “By the Plow,” both reflecting the overall title of her book, which is in fact an adapted English translation of the title of a collection of writings and speeches by Marshal Robert-Thomas Bugeaud (1784-1849), the most famous of the French conquering proconsuls in Algeria, compiled and published by General Paul Azan in 1948: *Par l’Epée et la charrue: écrits et discours de Bugeaud*.

Although Part I, “By the Sword,” is ostensibly about warfare, it delves into the links between the political decision taken by Charles X’s final government to invade the Regency and the outbreak of the Revolution of 1830, the reasons for which the July Monarchy pursued the conquest, and the many facets of the outcome. In 1830, the partisans of the Bourbon Restoration hoped that a military victory would shore up the increasingly unpopular regime of King Charles X, but when he abdicated, the liberals who placed Louis-Philippe on the throne recast the French invasion as the removal of an oriental despot, Hussein Dey, paralleling the removal of Charles X. The new king, Louis-Philippe, espoused the retention of Algeria and French military expansion into the interior on the conviction that successful military action would assist in the legitimation of his rule and the Orleanist Dynasty. The king encouraged his five sons to assume military roles in Algeria, linking their successes and the successes of the so-called *Armée d’Afrique* with the previous successes of Napoleon’s *Grande Armée*, the latter task facilitated by the reality that many of the senior officers in the French army at the time were veterans of the Napoleonic Wars, notably Marshal Jean-de-Dieu Soult and Marshal Bugeaud.

In these ways did Louis-Philippe and his supporters link the success and the survival of the Orleanist Dynasty to success in Algeria but also to the growing popularity of the Napoleonic heritage, of which to some extent the Algerian conquest was projected as a continuation. Louis-Philippe’s administration refurbished the Versailles Palace, making it into a permanent exposition of French military history, and repatriated Napoleon’s remains to the *Hôtel des Invalides*. The king engaged several painters, notably Horace Vernet, to produce a number of tableaux depicting the glories of the *Armée d’Afrique*. The fifty-five figures scattered throughout Sessions’ text include reproductions of various forms of artwork that reflect the Algerian conquest. Museum exhibitions and the wide distribution of lithographic images of Algeria reinforced the cultural impact of the French conquest and settlement of Algeria.

In Part II, “By the Plow,” Sessions dissects the question of settlement situating it “within the bloody pantheon of ‘settler genocides,’” even though the French army and civil administration in Algeria had no intention to exterminate the native Algerians, however harsh the French conquest might have been. Although Marshal Bugeaud’s methods of warfare designed to subjugate a semi-nomadic population were brutal, he always hoped to be able to mingle Algerian and French peasants on the land.

Sessions presents the difficulties and the contradictions of French settlement policies. She evokes the debates among French military and civilian leaders and prominent businessmen as to who should settle Algeria and how settlement should be managed. Would it be subsidized? Would Algeria be opened to the poor and destitute of the French cities, to former revolutionaries, to political prisoners, or be reserved for “respectable” people, those who could bring some capital with them or at least have marketable skills? Many approaches and experiments were attempted. Although most of them failed, one way or another, European settlers, less than half of them French, trickled into Algeria.

Most would-be settlers wished to settle in the towns and attempt to open small businesses — to prey on the French troops — or so it was claimed. Algeria attracted wealthy expatriates who attempted to purchase or otherwise obtain large tracts of land so as to resell them at a profit — speculators. The violent nature of the conquest, particularly after Bugeaud took command, raised questions of security that intimidated potential settlers.

In so many ways, the Algerian experience, rather than being peripheral to French politics, culture, society, and national image, took on a very central position. It would continue to have an effect on French colonial and domestic policy until the end of formal colonialism and the beginnings of post-colonialism, including the accession of Cameroon to independence.

For the three authors writing about Cameroon, this country became the laboratory in which colonial irreconcilables, often using visceral anti-communism as justification, developed a form of neo-colonialism by which France could grant the appearance of independence to its sub-Saharan African colonies while still maintaining control over the local economies, the common currency, the energy and mining sectors, defense, and the continued presence of French expatriates. In Cameroon these efforts were particularly successful even though they came at a price.

Of the two books, *Kamerun* is the more informative.

While concentrating on French Cameroon, and specifically on the rise and fall of the *Union des Populations du Cameroun* (UPC) and its founders, particularly Secretary-General Ruben Um Nyobè, it introduces the reader to the larger processes of post-World War II colonial devolution in what were then French West and Equatorial Africa and to a panoply of African and French actors. The text runs the gamut from serious political analysis and shocking revelations regarding mass killings and torture by French and African troops to amusing, sometimes ironic, anecdotes about the principal characters. The authors have produced a serious academic text which is a pleasure to read.

The founders and principal leaders of the UPC, Ruben Um Nyobè, Félix-Roland Moumié, Ernest Ouandié, and Abel Kingué, emerged from efforts to create labor unions authorized by the French authorities as of August 1944. They were inspired by the promised liberalization of the colonial regime, a major outcome of the Brazzaville Conference of 1944 that had concluded seven months earlier, and the outcomes of the two constituent assemblies organized in France (1945-1946) that offered representation to colonial subjects, now more-or-less citizens, in the French parliament. A result of the latter was the authorization to organize political parties in the colonies, thus the founding in October 1946 of the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* (RDA), a multi-territorial party and then in Cameroun the UPC in October 1948. The founders and the early leaders of the latter were well aware that the status of the Cameroons as United Nations Trust Territories conveyed the promise of eventual self-rule— independence from France and Great Britain.

The French defeat in Indo-China and the increasing intensity of the Algerian war led to the negotiated independence of Morocco and Tunisia in 1956 and stimulated various French politicians and officials, dismayed by the worsening Algerian situation, to elaborate a formula by which to keep the sub-Saharan African colonies within the French orbit — apparently not too difficult because the elites in the various territories were less nationally conscious than those, for example, in Tunisia and Morocco, and more willing to cooperate in the interests of economic development with their French rulers, now, at least in theory, their fellow citizens. Also, the populations in most cases belonged to different ethnic groups whose leaders could be played one against the other. So, France appeared to be granting autonomy and then independence while still keeping control from the sidelines.

Cameroon, according to the authors, became a laboratory for these developments; however the founders of the UPC perceived the French intentions and opposed them, peacefully at first and then violently. Their call for racial equality in Cameroon, an end to forced labor, decent salaries and working conditions in French-owned enterprises including plantations, full participation in honestly administered elections for delegates to the territorial assembly and deputies to the French parliament, and Cameroonization of the administration were irritants for the French administration.

What most angered and frightened the French administrators was the UPC's call for the reunification of the country to be given its German name, Kamerun, and immediate and full political independence, after which the freely elected Cameroonian leaders would negotiate the future relations of Cameroon with France. Equally frightening to the French was the fact that those founders of the UPC who had roots in the labor movement had been advised and instructed by two French communists who had organized Marxist study groups in Yaoundé and Douala.

UPC membership expanded particularly in the southern Christian and animist parts of Cameroon. Although the UPC was non-tribal, the Douala, the Bassa, and the Bamileke ethnicities predominated. After riots broke out in the principal southern Cameroonian towns in May 1955, the French High Commissioner, Roland Pré, dissolved the UPC, forcing it to go underground.

In the meantime, the French authorities in France and in Cameroon succeeded in creating a third force of moderates, *interlocuteurs valables* (a term coined by French prime minister Guy Mollet during the Algerian war), including defectors from the UPC willing to cooperate with the French authorities to move Cameroon towards autonomy and eventual independence but in close association with France. The Cameroonian bureaucracy was steadily Cameroonized but with many shadow French advisors on hand. A small number of Cameroonian students, like the future president, Paul Biya, were sent to France for higher education. The *loi cadre* (framework law) of 1956 sponsored by Gaston Defferre, the Socialist Minister of Overseas France, provided for increased autonomy and greater powers for local parliaments in the emerging West and Equatorial African states. These reforms were applied in Cameroon; however, the UPC was banned from participating in elections for the Territorial Assembly scheduled for the end of 1956.

Banned and then persecuted, the leaders of the UPC opted for armed resistance to the French regime, which also entailed armed opposition to Cameroonian leaders and politicians, including their supporters who cooperated with the French. Thus the resulting insurgency took on aspects of a Cameroonian civil war — armed inter-tribal conflicts — as French officials presented the insurgency to the outside world.

While French forces, including African troops, undertook harsh anti-guerilla measures in Sanaga-Maritime, the area between Yaoundé and Douala, and then similar measures in Mungo and Bamileke to the West, the French administration quietly devolved formal authority to an elected legislative assembly headed by a Cameroonian Prime Minister supervised by a French High Commissioner all while French diplomats assured the United Nations Trusteeship Council that all was well and that Cameroon was making steady progress towards independence.

Cameroon became an “autonomous state” on 1 January 1959 under the leadership of Ahmadou Ahidjo, a Peul from the predominantly Muslim North, and then legally independent on 1 January 1960 with Ahidjo as President. The French-directed struggle against the UPC and its National Liberation Army of Cameroon established in May 1959 continued and intensified.

The authors detail the French counter-insurgency efforts directed by French officers who had had experience with this type of warfare in Indo-China and Algeria, emphasizing the arbitrariness and the cruelty of their methods, the use of torture, deliberate massacres, the forced relocation and concentration of populations, all resulting in thousands of Cameroonian casualties. The authors also describe the dishonest political machinations of the French authorities and their Cameroonian partners, particularly the rigging of elections. Ahidjo, they write, backed by French military and civilian advisors, established a particularly harsh dictatorship and in 1966 made his political party, the *Union Nationale Camerounaise*, the sole legal party in the country.

The fighting in Cameroon, which reached its greatest intensity in 1960 and 1961, gradually subsided, first in Sanaga Maritime, and then in Mungo and Bamileke. In November 1960, the French secret services arranged to have the President-in-Exile of the UPC, Félix Moumié, poisoned to death in a restaurant in Geneva. Cameroonian forces captured the remaining founding father of the UPC, Ernest Ouandié, in 1971 as he was preparing to leave the country. After a show-case trial, he was publicly executed. In the meantime, Ahmadou Ahidjo and his party strengthened their hold on the country. Ahidjo was reelected every time he ran for office until replaced as president by his prime minister, Paul Biya, in 1982.

These three volumes will be of great interest to readers wishing understand the contradictory origins and early course of French rule in Algeria and how the end game of French rule in a small part of the former empire evolved as an anticipated post-colonial rescue effort.

Jennifer Sessions lays to rest any idea that the French conquest and occupation of Algeria was peripheral to the main currents of French history and cultural development. Her book confirms that French efforts to subjugate the native Algerians and to settle Algeria were successful. Although Thomas Delcombe, Manuel Domergue, and Jacob Tatsitsa deplore what the French accomplished in Cameroun, they have nevertheless described what can only be qualified as a French neo-colonial success story.

To the outside world, Cameroun today presents an image of political stability, despite periodic moments of unrest, particularly in the Anglophone western part of the country.

The country is still very much within the French orbit, and Paul Biya, Ahmadou Ahidjo's successor since 1982, remains in power, but he is 88 years old with no clear successor. What will happen in Cameroon after he is gone?