

Christian Futter, Die Verwaltung von Ungleichheit. Staatsbürgerschaft in Französisch-Indochina, 1940-1950, Bielefeld (transcript) 2025, 300 S. (Global- und Kolonialgeschichte, 24), ISBN 978-3-8376-7505-4, EUR 49,00.

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Die Verwaltung von Ungleichheit is Christian Futter's first book and the published version of the PhD thesis he defended in 2023. In the wake of existing research into the French colonies during the Second World War¹, Christian Futter focuses on the government of Jean Decoux, who was appointed governor general of Indochina in June 1940 by Marshal Philippe Pétain, and on the subsequent trials and sentencing that occurred in the years following the war (1946-1950).

French Indochina, indeed, makes up for an interesting case study when it comes to war governments: although it was at the time a colonial possession of France, it was maintained in economic and military isolation by the war. It was also Vichy France's main stronghold in South-East Asia, as France's possessions in India, French Oceania and New Caledonia quickly pledged allegiance to the French Resistance. Indochina was finally a place of direct interactions between the French and the Japanese armies and administrations. The proximity and potential inference of Japanese forces led Jean Decoux to develop a pragmatic approach to ruling Indochina. Christian Futter convincingly shows that he tried to navigate the contradiction between neutralizing the Gaullists and protecting them as French citizens against the Japanese administration. Decoux also aimed at finding a balance between endorsing the Axis' values and policies to prevent a Japanese invasion and limiting Japanese influence upon French citizens and subjects.

Jean Decoux led an authoritative government that prompted public institutions and media to promote Vichy France's political and moral agenda, and used administrative internment, sometimes drawing on false pretexts, to dispose of political opponents without recourse to legal proceedings. Yet, he and the public servants that served under him were all cleared between 1946 and 1950. This book provides explanations to this surprising turn of events: Decoux explained his decisions by arguing that his authoritarian turn was motivated by »raison d'État« more



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¹ See Eric Thomas Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics*, Stanford 2001; Jacques Cantier, *L'Empire colonial sous Vichy*, Paris 2004. Regarding Indochina specifically, see Sébastien Verney, *L'Indochine sous Vichy: entre révolution nationale, collaboration et identités nationales, 1940-1945*, Paris 2012.

than by personal allegiance with Pétain. In the context of the beginning of Indochina's war for independence, the Haute Cour de justice was particularly open to endorsing arguments that gave priority to maintaining French presence in South-East Asia. The point presented by Jean Decoux's defence as to the difficult and tense situation he had to manage also echoed contemporary preoccupations regarding Indochina. Acknowledging Jean Decoux as someone who fought to preserve a French government independent from Japanese influence and to maintain unity amongst the French people thus met the Fourth Republic's interests at that time. Christian Futter proceeds to show that the legal treatment of the French citizens who were tried after the war for their conduct by the Cour de justice de l'Indochine followed a similar pattern. This colonial logic was enhanced by the fact that the Cour de justice de l'Indochine was entirely made up of French citizens who had lived and spent the war in Indochina.

In addition, the book's argument is centred on how war-time influences trajectories based on citizenship. To this purpose, Christian Futter follows the trajectories of French citizens put on trial after the war. In the first months following the Armistice of 22 June 1940, he argues that French citizenship allowed for significant transnational mobility, making way for the French Resistance to foster networks across multiple territories in South-East Asia (namely Hong-Kong, Singapore, India, Indochina and the Pacific area). French citizenship also implied a link with the Indochinese territory, as French citizens located in areas occupied by the Japanese began to be deported to Jean Decoux's Indochina. In Indochina, Christian Futter identifies an implicit hierarchy between French citizens and citizens from the Allied Nations and shows the role of the Swiss representation in defending the latter. Some French citizens also exploited this status to secure a privileged position, by becoming preferred intermediaries for trading information or doing business with the Japanese in Indochina. After the Japanese coup d'État in March 1945, Christian Futter observes a restructuration of hierarchies. Indochinese colonial subjects obtained high positions in the new administration. Yet, the example of Le Thanh Long, who became administrator of the province of Baria despite being a French citizen (186–189), demonstrates that there are other factors to consider in addition to citizenship. There are several similar examples that suggest the complexity of the relationship between citizenship and ethnicity in a colonial setting, a link that the author unfortunately doesn't explore.

Christian Futter arguably made great use of the archives from the Cour de justice de l'Indochine. However, and as he points out himself, this source only involves French citizens. We can question the theoretical compass of a study on the concept of citizenship that doesn't fully take into consideration the complexity induced by the colonial setting. For example, the author concludes that a struggle specific to French citizens in 1940 was to be torn between two opposing regimes; however, this dilemma was also familiar to colonial subjects. This case study could have provided



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material to explore a colonial experience of French citizenship, but instead chooses to stick to sources that undermine the weight of colonial subjects. Hence, while the reader is aware that this book is centred on French citizens, they do not walk out of it with a clear understanding of how citizenship and juridical status shaped the socio-economic structure of French Indochina.

One of this book's main interests lies in the liminary methodological chapter. Christian Futter rightly points out that there is often a lack of clarity surrounding the use of digital humanities in historical research. The author used an algorithm that established correspondences between the names found in different sources. The goal was to link individuals between them (taking into account multiple spellings of the same name), as well as to institutions and to events. This method is an interesting tool for tracing transnational trajectories systematically, which has proved difficult for historians. There is also a heuristic value to it: it allows to quantify the weight of individuals or organizations in a network. This explains why this approach is particularly suited for global microhistory, which this book is an example of.

A database freely accessible on the Internet provides insights into first-hand sources used in this PhD.² While contributing to the transparency of historical work, this Open Access policy definitely provides new perspectives for the social and transnational history of South-East Asia in the twentieth century. It allows for possibilities to use and enrich the database, either with new sources or by focusing on other actors, whether that is European citizens, women, or even colonial subjects.



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² <https://dpc.ei-basel.hasdai.org/>