A Mission To Civilize: The Republican Idea Of Empire In France And West Africa, 1895-1930

Alice L Conklin

This French imperialist self-concept forms the focus of Alice Conklin’s Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1930. Conklin, a historian at the University of Rochester, argues persuasively that the zealous republican ideology animating France’s Third Republic in the late nineteenth century also defined its West African empire. To develop and support this thesis, Conklin examines official rhetoric and decision making in French West Africa as manifested in the directives and policy initiatives of the colonial governors-general over a thirty-five-year period. The office of governor-general, the source of most of Conklin’s documentation, was a peculiar feature of the French approach to colonial administration. In France, this idea was followed by a campaign to popularize ideas about Africans’ lack of civilization through educational and media materials (13-14). Practically, this was carried out in the colonies through increasing infrastructure, public health campaigns, education, and political reform (38-39; 73-74). Conklin, Alice L. A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford UP, 1997. Print. D. Lugard, The Rise of Our East African Empire, (Edinburgh, 1893), I.585-587, II.69-75. Gann, Lewis H., and Peter Duignan. Introduction.
In probing the republican dimension of French colonization in West Africa, this book also sheds new light on the evolution of the Third Republic between 1895 and 1930. One of the author’s principal arguments is that the idea of a civilized mission underwent dramatic changes, due to ideological, political, and economic transformations occurring simultaneously in France and its colonies. For example, revolts in West Africa as well as a more conservative climate in the metropole after World War I produced in the governors general a new respect for feudal chiefs, whom the French once despised.