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Yan Slobodkin, *The Starving Empire: A History of Famine in France's Colonies*. Publisher: Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2023. 312 pp. ISBN: 9781501772351, and ISBN: 150177235X.

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Famines in the British Empire, in places like Ireland and India, have long structured scholars' understanding of colonial subsistence failures. In his new book, "The Starving Empire: A History of Famine in France's Colonies," Yan Slobodkin uncovers what he calls a "French way of famine" (p. 4). Slobodkin asks, "What kind of problem was famine?" and "Who was responsible for it?" (p. 3). He shows that between 1867 and 1945, France went from believing that famine in colonial spaces was inevitable, caused by backward and improvident races, to taking responsibility for famine as a vital aspect of sovereignty. Interwar period changes in nutrition science and international norms required France to focus on the welfare of colonial populations. Although France took increasing responsibility for famine, they ultimately failed to prevent or respond to it adequately. Slobodkin brilliantly combines stories from disparate places to analyze France's approach to famine in its empire. His shifts from local narratives to broad empire-wide analysis are one of the strengths of the book. Slobodkin connects stories about famine in Algeria, Indochina, and Sahelian Africa. By bringing these places together, Slobodkin makes broader claims about the development of imperial and transnational care. Ultimately, Slobodkin is successful in linking stories about mass starvation in France's colonies to a broader history of international humanitarianism.

Slobodkin starts his narrative in 1867 in Algeria. The French considered widespread starvation and suffering among the indigenous population in Algeria to be a natural consequence of "backward races." The French used the famine to think about French society. Indeed, indigenous Algerians fade from view in French narratives about the period. Different interest groups in Algeria used the 1867 famine to criticize the state, Napoleon III, and military rule. Catholic groups who took a leading role in organizing charity excluded indigenous Algerians from a "national

and religious economy of care" (p. 23). According to Slobodkin, famine helped "inaugurate a colonialism rooted in economic liberalism that placed responsibility for subsistence on free markets, provident individuals, and charitable goodwill" (p. 40). From Algeria, Slobodkin moved to French Indochina. In Indochina, as in Algeria, French officials saw famine as the result of improvident races and harsh environments. However, unlike Algeria, Indochina had a long history of a centralized Vietnamese state. This state had a tradition of famine prevention and was expected to be benevolent. The French thus had to deal with existing expectations about the government's role in famine response. Nevertheless, in Indochina, the French still withdrew from responsibility. They made plans for famine prevention and response but never followed through. Ultimately, they passed the responsibility for famine onto an aristocratic Mandarin class and the Vietnamese state.

In Niger, in the African Sahel, there was neither a large French settler population as in Algeria nor a strong precolonial centralized state, as in Indochina. For this reason, the 1913 famine in Niger passed largely unnoticed by metropolitan France. Slobodkin argues that French administrators in Niger "considered their role to be reactive and voluntary" (p.7). In Niger, "sentiment...substitute(ed) for relief" and obscured the role of the colonial state in both the causes and remedies of famine (p. 90). Slobodkin shows how colonial taxes and the requisitions of labor and resources for World War I contributed to famine in Niger. In Niger in 1913, the French failed both to stop famine or to provide any relief for its victims. After providing these three narratives of famine in disparate places in the French empire, the fourth chapter of the book covers the Interwar period, which Slobodkin highlights as a turning point in the history of famine. During the Interwar period, new "developments in nutrition science and internationalism changed expectations for famine relief and prevention" (p.123). "Backward races" and harsh environments, things once thought to inevitably lead to famine, could now be controlled by science. According to Slobodkin, "nutritionists offered a model of society and biochemistry as a single system linked by the production, distribution, consumption, and metabolism of food" (p.9). Europeans gained confidence in the ability of international organizations to transform society" (p.123). Nevertheless, they lacked the data and knowledge to put ideas into practice.

In 1931, a smaller famine than the 1913 famine occurred in Niger. However, unlike in 1913, the French now took responsibility for the wellbeing of their subjects. Subsistence failures in Niger were now a failure of French governance. Colonial administrators were chastised for their failure to prevent famine and death, but French actions changed little. Gender too also played a role in the famine as French

administrators ignored the visible starvation of women and children, arguing it was the natural shedding of unproductive individuals from African society. According to Slobodkin, the two famines told "a story of stasis" (p. 154). The aftermath of the famine in Niger spurred change. Slobodkin argues that technical experts and political reformers began to think about "the role of science, technocracy, and humanitarianism in colonial governance" (p.156). The famine in Niger, however, was not the only famine in 1931. Slobodkin contends that another crisis in "central Indochina introduced another dimension to the problem of hunger—security" (p. 157). The Nghe Tinh uprising in Indochina brought to the fore the "discrepancy between the new standard of well-being and the persistence of misery" (p. 161). Those responsible for the uprising criticized France's lack of famine prevention and positioned themselves as better able to care for the nation's well-being. After World War II, famine would be at the center of French sovereignty claims in Indochina. In Indochina, for the French, famine "became the battleground on which they contested the right to govern" (p.12). Slobodkin shows how famine in 1945, in Indochina marked a shift from imperial responsibility for subsistence to one "rooted in nation-states and global humanitarianism" (p.12). In Indochina, France contested the right to govern with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), and with international actors. Even when France no longer had any physical presence on the ground, they drew up plans and proposals to curb famine and relieve the population. While they had to rely on allied countries' help to do the physical labor of famine relief, they refused to let other nations take credit. Likewise, nationalists in Indochina argued for their right to rule by providing welfare. In other words, decolonization became about who could best provide for subsistence.

Slobodkin's book is overall a superb look at how famine relief became the responsibility of sovereign nations, but also international organizations. Nevertheless, I have one minor issue with an otherwise outstanding book. While in Indochina, Slobodkin explains the history of centralized Vietnamese governance and Confucian ideas about the role of the state in famine prevention and relief, in Sahelian Africa we only get tidbits of information about a former system of granary reserves and tithes. In Niger, granary reserves supplied through tithes apparently existed alongside French-mandated granaries (p. 193). One wonders what Muslim or other religious forms of care existed in the Sahel and in Algeria before French colonialism. Nonetheless, Slobodkin's book makes important links between famine, empire, and contemporary humanitarianism. Slobodkin shows us that "the concepts that society relies on to ensure well-being and liberation contain within them the history of empire..." and "encourages a reckoning with who is subject to famines and who is not, whose death is normal and whose is not, who is cared for and who

is not" (226). It is an important and provocative reminder of the deeply intertwined nature of empire and modern international systems of care.

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