

Shades of Whiteness: *Petits-Blancs* and the Politics of Military Allocations Distribution in World War I Colonial Cochinchina

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Abstract *During World War I male French citizens in Cochinchina whom the colonial government had drafted to fight in Europe left their families behind in the colony. Through a complicated subsidies process, the government offered financial assistance to families impoverished by the draftee's departure and the concomitant loss of income. Far from being a monolithic category, the colony's poor white applicants, also known as *petits-blancs*, received varying government subsidies, depending on their family configurations. This article argues that the military allocations council's judgments correlate with the *petits-blancs* applicants' relationships to indigenous people and their adherence to traditional gender roles. To guard white prestige, the colonial government effectively penalized *petits-blancs* applicants who deviated from behavior associated with whiteness.*

In 1917 a mobilized soldier named Pierre L.—a resident of Cochinchina, a French colony in southern Vietnam—received an allocation of 45.0 piastres per month, or 1.5 piastres per day, with which to support his family while he was on duty in Europe.¹ Military allocations were part of a colonial program to support families suffering economic hardship after their male heads of household had been drafted to fight in Europe.² As wives assumed the leadership role of their homes, the families suffered financially. Because Pierre L. was a French citizen, his family was eligible for this program. His wife, T. Thi Hay, appealed to the military allocations council for an increase in her subsidy, which she

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¹ Although cost-of-living statistics are not available for World War I Saigon, statistics for Hanoi make possible a rough comparison. In 1913, for example, 100 piastres bought a white Frenchman 1.9 pounds of beef; 94 piastres, 1.2 pounds of sugar. See table 14, “Nombres-indices du coût de la vie pour les Européens à Hanoï, de 1910 à 1922 pour 100 pendant la période 1910–1914,” in *Gouvernement Général de l’Indochine Française, Direction des Affaires Economiques, Recueil de statistiques relatives aux années 1913 à 1922*, vol. 1 of *Annuaire statistique de l’Indochine* (Hanoi, 1927), 196; and table 15, “Nombres-indices du coût de la vie pour les Indigènes à Hanoï, de 1910 à 1922 pour 100 pendant la période 1910–1914,” *ibid.*, 197.

² Because Cochinchina was a colony, it received greater financial resources and social programs than Tonkin, Annam, Laos, and Cambodia, which were protectorates.

could not survive on. She wanted a sum equivalent to what other families of white Frenchmen received. But the council rejected her request for “a daily allocation of three piastres, which is only granted to European wives.”³ It declined to “allocate more than 45 piastres per month to this military man . . . whose wife is *indigène*.”⁴

The story of Pierre L.’s family, and others like his, falls within a larger history of World War I-era racial and gender management in the colony. The war disrupted the colonial social structure and brought about important changes in the domestic lives of families in Cochinchina that held French citizenship. The drafting of male French citizens into the French military had two significant consequences for their families. First, women were left in charge of the family unit. Second, without the soldiers’ prewar salaries, many families spiraled into poverty. Already living in strained circumstances, they became dependent on financial assistance from the colonial government for their very survival.⁵

The story of Pierre L.’s family reveals the priorities and prejudices of Cochinchina’s military allocations council vis-à-vis its *petits-blancs*, or poor white, applicants.⁶ With limited resources, the council could offer funding only to some families. Who qualified for subsidies and in what amounts reveal complicated ideas about intimacy with colonized people, marital status, and gender norms. Far from being a

³ GouCoch to Outrey, Oct. 12, 1917, Ho Chi Minh City (hereafter HCMC), Vietnam National Archives (hereafter VNNA) II, Files of the Governor of Cochinchina (hereafter GouCoch), 1A.5/015.

⁴ Files of Pierre L., Minutes of the Commission in Charge of Examining the Demands for Allocation in Favor of the Reservists and Mobilized Soldiers, Thirty-fifth Meeting, unknown date (presumably 1917 or 1918), HCMC, VNNA II, Files of the GouCoch, 1A.5/234(1).

⁵ For studies on the World War I draft of the colonized people in Indochina, see Kimloan Hill, “Strangers in a Foreign Land: Vietnamese Soldiers and Workers in France during World War I,” in *Viet Nam: Borderless Histories*, ed. Anthony Reid and Nhung Tuyet Tran (Madison, WI, 2006), 256–89; Hill, “A Westward Journey, an Enlightened Path: Vietnamese Linh Tho, 1915–1930” (PhD diss., University of Oregon, 2001); and Maurice Reeves and Eric Deroo, *Les Linh Tap: Histoire des militaires indochinois au service de la France (1859–1960)* (Paris, 1999). For studies on the World War I draft of colonized peoples in the French empire, see Chantal Antier, “Le recrutement dans l’empire colonial français, 1914–1918,” *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporain*, no. 230 (2008): 23–36; Richard S. Fogarty, *Race and War in France: Colonial Subjects in the French Army, 1914–1918* (Baltimore, MD, 2008); and Tyler Stovall, “Love, Labor, and Race: Colonial Men and White Women in France during the Great War,” in *French Civilization and Its Discontents: Nationalism, Colonialism, Race* (Lanham, MD, 2003), 297–322.

⁶ The decree of November 23, 1913, concerning military allocations was rendered applicable to the colonies by the Ministry of Colonies on February 12, 1914. See “Décret rendant applicables dans les colonies et pays de Protectorat diverses lois qui ont modifié la loi du 21 mars 1905 sur le recrutement de l’armée ainsi que le règlement d’administration publique du 9 août 1913, concernant les allocations pour soutien de famille aux militaires de l’armée active et ses réserves (promulgué le 12 février 1914),” *Journal officiel de l’Indochine française* 26, no. 25 (1914): 258. The military allocations files include information on French citizens of all ethnicities and regions, including *petits-blancs*, Vietnamese, Indians, and Africans. For more information on these applicants, see Jennifer Boittin, Christina Firpo, and Emily Musil, “Hierarchies of Race and Gender in the French Colonial Empire, 1914–1946,” *Historical Reflections/Reflexions historiques* 37 (forthcoming).

monolithic category, *petits-blancs* applicants received varying government subsidies, depending on their family configurations. This article argues that the military allocations council's varying judgments correlate with the *petits-blancs* applicants' relationships to indigenous people and their adherence to traditional gender roles. The result was a hierarchy privileging white monoracial married couples and their families. Deviations from this model included white French soldiers married to indigenous women, and French soldiers who were themselves part indigenous.⁷ Also marginalized were white Frenchmen in unmarried, cohabiting relationships and white women who lived independently. By effectively penalizing *petits-blancs* applicants who deviated from behavior associated with whiteness, the council furthered its goal of guarding white prestige in the colony.

The military subsidy files, which include data on more than 140 cases of white monoracial and mixed-race marriages, cohabiting relationships, and divorces,⁸ offer a revealing account of the lives of *petits-blancs* and their struggle with the colonial state. In the military allocations process, *petits-blancs* were effectively judged by their proximity to indigenous peoples and cultures. Although French officials were not legally permitted to use race as a distinguishing factor,⁹ they did look for markers of the races of white soldiers' spouses, domestic partners, parents, or grandparents, even in an environment of complex and ambiguous racial categories. Race was indicated in many ways, including name, place of one's birth or one's parents' birth, citizenship status, and self-identification. I will draw examples from various cases of white families to show how the state attempted to fit them into a hierarchy. I will also show how these different categories contested the colonial hierarchy. This article reveals some of the ways that racial and gendered hierarchies affected and were contested by white French citizens.

Race and Gender in World War I–Era France and Its Colonies

The military allocations council's implicit judgments on race and gender in Cochinchina mirror some of the larger race- and gender-related

⁷ As early as 1904 French administrators classified impoverished Eurasians as *petits-blancs*. See Christina Firpo, "'The Durability of the Empire': Race, Empire, and 'Abandoned' Children in Colonial Vietnam, 1870–1956" (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2007).

⁸ Some of these cases include individuals counted more than once due to multiple marriages and divorces. The files also contain a scant number of documents on non-European mixed-race families. This is not a complete collection of the military allocations files; this number represents the files I was permitted to access at VNNA II.

⁹ The law required that the allocations council maintain "the essential principles of equality contained in law." See "Décret rendant applicables dans les colonies et pays de Protectorat diverses lois," 258.

themes in the French empire during World War I. Part of maintaining colonial power was cultivating a white identity and guarding white prestige. White women in particular were subject to scrutiny and regulation to ensure that they upheld the values associated with whiteness and supported the colonial patriarchy.

Under the Third Republic, all French citizens in the *métropole* and its colonies were to be governed “without distinction of race.”¹⁰ This clause upheld one-third of the national motto, “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.” The “Equality” part stemmed from the Enlightenment notion of universalism, which, conspicuously, had encompassed neither women nor people of non-French origin.¹¹ During the Third Republic, however, the notion of equality extended (at least in theory) to race, though not to gender.¹²

In World War I, as in previous periods, race-related decisions made by government officials belied the empire’s color-blind rhetoric. As indigenous soldiers arrived in the *métropole* from the colonies during the war, race became an increasingly significant social marker.¹³ Although racial discrimination—or even a reference to race on a government document—was illegal in the Third Republic, government administrators found subtle ways to classify and discriminate among races.¹⁴ Mary Dewhurst Lewis identifies a cleavage between rhetoric and practice: while French officials in the *métropole* “eschewed explicit race bias as contrary to the republican system, they applied republican standards according to discriminatory criteria; these criteria overlapped with existing racial ideologies, while never being determined by them in a straightforward fashion.”¹⁵

¹⁰ The governor of Cochinchina referred to a government decree of Apr. 13, 1915, on the criterion “without distinction of race” (aucune distinction de race) for awarding subsidies. See “Télégramme officiel,” GouCoch to Governor General of Indochina (hereafter GGI), Sept. 21, 1915, HCMC, VNNA II, Files of the GouCoch, 1A.6/015.

¹¹ For a history of French universalism, see Naomi Schor, “The Crisis of French Universalism,” *Yale French Studies* 100 (2001): 43–64.

¹² For information on the growth of immigration and the race question during the Third Republic, see Elisa Camiscioli, “Producing Citizens, Reproducing the ‘French Race’: Immigration, Demography, and Pronatalism in Early Twentieth-Century France,” *Gender and History* 13 (2001): 593–621; Camiscioli, “Reproducing the ‘French Race’: Immigration and Pronatalism in Early-Twentieth-Century France,” in *Bodies in Contact: Rethinking Colonial Encounters in World History*, ed. Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton (Durham, NC, 2005), 219–33; Camiscioli, *Reproducing the French Race: Immigration, Intimacy, and Embodiment in the Early Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC, 2009); and Richard S. Fogarty, “Race and Sex, Fear and Loathing in France during the Great War,” *Historical Reflections* 34 (2008): 50–72.

¹³ Tyler Stovall and Sue Peabody, “Introduction: Race, France, Histories,” in *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France*, ed. Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall (Durham, NC, 2003), 1–7; Herrick Chapman and Laura L. Frader, “Introduction: Race in France,” in *Race in France: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Politics of Difference*, ed. Herrick Chapman and Laura L. Frader (New York, 2004), 1–5.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Laurent Dubois, “Republican Anti-racism and Racism: A Caribbean Genealogy,” in Chapman and Frader, *Race in France*, 23–35.

¹⁵ Mary Dewhurst Lewis, “The Strangeness of Foreigners: Policing Migration and Nation in Interwar Marseille,” in Chapman and Frader, *Race in France*, 78. For an interesting discussion

The discontinuity between Third Republican racial rhetoric and racial practice was particularly significant in the colonies. According to Julia Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda, national values appear to have changed to adapt to the specific environment of the colony or changed when reapplied to the *métropole*.¹⁶ Alice L. Conklin writes that the rhetoric of the Third Republican civilizing mission was never realized in the colonies.¹⁷ According to Gary Wilder, the contradiction between rhetoric and practice was endemic to the *métropole* as well as the colonies: it was symptomatic of the “imperial nation-state.” That the colonial governments never “improved” the colonies as broad Third Republican rhetoric promised “should be a point of departure, not arrival.”¹⁸

Racist practices in the colonies inevitably privileged whites and created a racial hierarchy.¹⁹ Whiteness, as Michael G. Vann shows in the case of fin de siècle Indochina, was defined by class as well as by cultural differences between white and indigenous lifestyles.²⁰ Vann argues that violence against nonwhites in colonial Indochina helped build white identity and prestige. This whiteness was carefully guarded within cities through barriers and fortifications.²¹ In his study of colonial North African cinema, David Henry Slavin contends that whiteness became a defining category among white citizens of the empire to the point that class differences were overlooked.²² The military allocations process in Cochinchina shows how the colonial government sought to protect whiteness by effectively punishing *petits-blancs* who strayed from the ideal of a traditional, monoracial French family.

of what it means to be French and what it means for France to be antiracist, see Steven Ungar, “Introduction: Questioning Identity,” in *Identity Papers: Contested Nationhood in Twentieth-Century France*, ed. Steven Ungar and Tom Conley (Minneapolis, MN, 1996), 1–15. For a thorough history of scientific racial categorizations, see Claude Blanckaert, “Of Monstrous Métis? Hybridity, Fear of Miscegenation, and Patriotism from Buffon to Paul Broca,” in Peabody and Stovall, *Color of Liberty*, 42–70; and William H. Schneider, *Quantity and Quality: The Quest for Biological Regeneration in Twentieth-Century France* (Cambridge, 1990).

¹⁶ Julia Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda, “Introduction,” in *Domesticating the Empire: Race, Gender, and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism*, ed. Julia Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda (Charlottesville, VA, 1998), 1–20.

¹⁷ Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1930* (Stanford, CA, 1997).

¹⁸ Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago, 2005), 77.

¹⁹ Michael G. Vann, “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Variation and Difference in French Racism in Colonial Indochine,” in Peabody and Stovall, *Color of Liberty*, 187.

²⁰ Michael G. Vann, “Building Colonial Whiteness on the Red River: Race, Power, and Urbanism in Paul Doumer’s Hanoi, 1897–1902,” *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques* 33 (2007): 280.

²¹ Michael G. Vann, “White Blood on Rue Hue: The Murder of ‘le Négrier’ Bazin,” *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History* 34 (2006): 247–62; Vann, “Of Rats, Rice, and Race: The Great Hanoi Rat Massacre, an Episode in French Colonial History,” *French Colonial History Society* 1 (2003): 191–204.

²² Slavin writes of the “blind spots” that developed among poor whites as they located their identity in race and gender rather than in their impoverishment (*Colonial Cinema and Imperial France, 1919–1939: White Blind Spots, Male Fantasies, Settler Myths* [Baltimore, MD, 2001]).

While whites were potentially eligible for special benefits from colonial governments throughout the empire, they were also subject to a certain level of scrutiny. Seeking to maintain white prestige, colonial officials managed whites' cultural practices, living standards, and sexuality. As Ann Laura Stoler argues, the civilizing mission was aimed not only at the indigenous population but also at Europeans in the colonies.²³ The military allocations process in Cochinchina was but one example of a colonial government not just providing special benefits to whites but regulating the behaviors of its citizens in the service of white prestige.

Part of maintaining this prestige was ensuring that white women in the colonies adhered to certain cultural norms.²⁴ As many historians have observed, the relationships among race, class, and gender are crucial in studying colonies.²⁵ "The very idea as well as the building of empires themselves," Philippa Levine writes, "cannot be understood without employing a gendered perspective."²⁶ Colonial officials expected white women to follow prescribed gender norms, including those associated with marriage and domesticity, and discouraged them from consorting with indigenous men, following indigenous practices, or otherwise engaging in behaviors perceived as unseemly or subversive.²⁷ The Cochinchina military allocations council responded harshly to white women who did.

Ethnic Diversity in Cochinchina

Petits-blancs in Cochinchina lived in the most diverse area of colonial Indochina. At the end of World War I, Cochinchina's population of 3.8 million was 85 percent Vietnamese, 7.80 percent Cambodians, 4.10 percent Chinese and 0.02 percent Chinese-Vietnamese métis, 0.43

²³ Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, NC, 1995), 101–9.

²⁴ Barbara Bush, "Gender and Empire: The Twentieth Century," in *Gender and Empire*, ed. Philippa Levine (Oxford, 2004), 77–111.

²⁵ Jane Haggis, "Gendering Colonialism or Colonizing Gender? Recent Women's Studies Approaches to White Women in the History of British Colonialism," *Women's Studies International Forum* 13 (1990): 105–15. See also Janet R. Horne, "In Pursuit of Greater France: Visions of Empire among Musée Social Reformers, 1894–1931," in Clancy-Smith and Gouda, *Domesticating the Empire*, 22.

²⁶ Philippa Levine, "Introduction: Why Gender Empire?" in Levine, *Gender and Empire*, 1.

²⁷ Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley, CA, 2002), 51; Bush, "Gender and Empire: The Twentieth Century." It is important, however, to note that white women were "ambiguously complicit both as colonizers and colonized, privileged and restricted, acted upon and acting" (Ann McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* [New York, 1995], 6). See also Nupur Chaudri and Margret Strobel, "Introduction," in *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, ed. Nupur Chaudri and Margret Strobel (Bloomington, IN, 1992), 5–15.

percent Indonesians, 0.26 percent French, 0.04 percent Eurasians, 0.19 percent “Malay,” and 0.10 percent Indians.²⁸ Saigon, the capital of Cochinchina, had been established in Khmer and Cham territory in 1698 by overseas Chinese soldiers who were loyal to the former Ming dynasty yet pledged allegiance to the Vietnamese Nguyen family, which ruled the southern region. The city became more diverse during the French colonial period, with the introduction of Europeans and other members of the French colonial empire, including Indians, Africans, and Martinicans. By the end of World War I, Saigon’s population of eighty-three thousand was 61.04 percent Vietnamese, 27.83 percent Chinese, 7.44 percent French, 0.52 percent other Europeans, 1.11 percent Indians, 0.39 percent “Malay,” and 0.25 percent Cambodians.²⁹

Saigon’s diversity can be traced to its economic success. From 1860 through World War I, the French colonial government planned to make Saigon the economic capital not only of Cochinchina but of Indochina as a whole. As an economic and industrial capital, the city attracted a wealth of foreign companies and immigrants, among them French, other Europeans, Chinese, and Indians,³⁰ through a network of French colonies—including Martinique, Guadeloupe, Senegal, and French India—that had already granted them French citizenship.

The Military Allocations Law

The French metropolitan government most likely anticipated the economic problems that the draft would cause for military families. Per the French decree of November 23, 1913, on military allocation, promulgated in Indochina on February 12, 1914, the colonial government in Cochinchina offered assistance to the families of French citizens who had been in the military reserves and then mobilized for war.³¹

As reserve units from Cochinchina were drafted, soldiers or their families sent applications for subsidies to the Cochinchina government. These applicants were required to state their financial status and to prove that it had deteriorated in the absence of the draftee. A colonial council then sent colonial or military police to investigate, at times interviewing neighbors or employers for verification. Those interviewed often pointed out ulterior sources of income and commented

²⁸ It is not clear if the term *Malay* refers to Cham, or to a combination of Javanese workers and Cham. See “Population de la Cochinchine suivant la race, le sexe et l’âge, par province, en 1921,” in Gouvernement Général de l’Indochine Française, *Recueil de statistiques relatives*, 36–37.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Trần Văn Giàu, “Sài Gòn dưới ách thống trị thực dân pháp từ 1859 đến 1945,” in *Địa chí Văn hóa Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, Tập I: Lịch sử*, ed. Trần Văn Giàu et al. (Ho Chi Minh City: NXB Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1998), 326–28.

³¹ “Décret rendant applicables dans les colonies et pays de Protectorat diverses lois,” 258.

on the moral conduct of the soldiers' wives. In special situations the metropolitan government in France would intercede for an applicant. A colonial council that determined whether or not the family in question met the criteria for a military subsidy then examined the case. If the amount of money recommended by the council was insufficient, the applicant could appeal for more. Either the soldier or a family member could request a military subsidy, but the money was usually delivered to the soldier's wife.

Legally, there should have been no bias in the allocations council's treatment of *petits-blancs*, regardless of their relationship to indigenous people and culture. However, despite its stated intention of basing judgment on the economic situation of each family "with benevolent attention and full independence,"³² the council did not necessarily mete out equal allocations. Its notes reveal predetermined bias regarding the amount allotted to the family of a white soldier, depending on whether the family was nontraditional and/or mixed-race. It is possible that this bias reflected a disparity, in the minds of council members, between the costs of living for whites and nonwhites. According to government records, the costs of living for whites and nonwhites were not always equal; nevertheless, it is not clear that *on average* whites incurred greater expenses than nonwhites.³³ Moreover, the official cost-of-living standards were subjective.

The military allocations council did not always render decisions "without distinction of race"; rather, it was influenced by a colony's racial landscape. The military subsidies law was promulgated in Cochinchina within the context of a crisis of whiteness. The council used the subsidies program as a means, however small, of bolstering the income of the colony's *petits-blancs* and thus assuaging official anxiety about a decline in white dominance. This anxiety stemmed in part from a concern that the *petits-blancs* would become a visible presence in the colony, as their visibility was the source of the crisis in white prestige. French administrators cited the Netherlands Indies, a colony since the 1600s, which over the generations had accrued a sizable population of *petits-blancs*. Such a population, Indochina administrators feared, would threaten white prestige in France's colony.³⁴ They also feared that the growing number of interracial relationships in Cochinchina would, as in the case of the Netherlands Indies, produce a surfeit of Eurasian

³² "Arrêt de 15 avril 1915," "Télégramme officiel," GouCoch Gourbeil to GGI, Oct. 21, 1915, HCMC, VNNA II, Files of the GouCoch, IA.6/015.

³³ See n. 1.

³⁴ "Rapport sur le paupérisme à Java," Oct. 3, 1903, Aix-en-Provence, Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer (hereafter CAOM), Fonds GGI 54225.

children destined for poverty and apt to be mistaken for whites, further contributing (in the public's eye) to the class of *petits-blancs*.³⁵

The files of the military allocations council also reveal a gender bias in the treatment of *petits-blancs*. The council members took an interest not only in the financial status of a draftee's wife but also in her presumed moral status. As temporary heads of households, wives not only received subsidies but were considered their families' cultural reproducers. Thus they were responsible for maintaining the appropriate standards of living for their racial groups.

***Petits-Blancs* Soldiers with White Partners**

The military allocations files include data on sixty-six *petits-blancs* soldiers with white partners. These cases include forty French-French marriages, two French-foreign European marriages, twelve French-French divorces, seven French-French cohabiting relationships, and two cases where the marital status of the soldier was unclear.³⁶ The allocations council noted, moreover, cases of prolonged cohabitation with children.

The *petits-blancs* soldiers who were married to or partnered with white women received the highest allocations among the represented *petits-blancs* demographic groups and, as a result, enjoyed a comparatively elevated class status.³⁷ For applicants who were approved, married white French women regularly received 3.00 piastres per day plus expenses for their children, more than twice the amount allocated to Indian and Vietnamese women. Meanwhile, divorced white French women received 1.25 piastres per day plus expenses for their children, whereas divorced nonwhite women were rejected from the allocations process altogether.

Decisions to award larger military allocations to monoracial *petits-blancs* families proved consistent with a larger trend among Indochina's colonial officials to maintain white prestige. As Stoler shows, colonial governments took measures to maintain class distinctions between Europeans and indigenous peoples. During the war the supply of goods from Europe fell, increasing demand and price in Cochinchina, and many of the colony's *petits-blancs* could no longer afford even the

³⁵ See Firpo, "The Durability of the Empire."

³⁶ There were also two marriages between men from Germany and Hungary and French women, and one concubine relationship between a Swiss man and a Canadian woman. See Files on R., HCMC, VNNA II, Files of the GouCoch, 1A.5/217. Marital status was not always apparent. Many families were counted twice if they included members who were divorced or had married more than once.

³⁷ GouCoch to Outrey, Oct. 12, 1917, HCMC, VNNA II, Files of the GouCoch, 1A.5/015.

humblest trappings of a European lifestyle.³⁸ The allocations program became a means of ensuring that monoracial *petits-blancs* families did not become a source of humiliation for the colonial government.

Indeed, the war had brought severe poverty to the monoracial families of *petits-blancs* soldiers. The family of Eugène Louis B., for instance, had no furniture, presumably because they had had to sell it for living expenses; Eugène's wife was forced to live in a hotel, presumably after selling the family's living quarters, and to send her children from her first marriage to Sainte-Enfance, a Catholic orphanage.³⁹ Henri B.'s family was in such dire straits that they had to sell their shop, liquidate their assets, and return to Marseille.⁴⁰ Needy white families requested either a passage for the wives and children to join the husbands and fathers in France or—more often—a military allocation. Among those applying for allocations, some sought money to send to their parents in Indochina or France, while others needed support for partners and/or children.

Although it privileged monoracial *petits-blancs* families as a rule, the allocations council subjected this group to rigorous scrutiny before sending it money with which to maintain its lifestyle. *Petits-blancs* thought to undermine the colony's project of white prestige were denied allocations. A colonial council then sent local police to interview neighbors about the moral qualities of applicants and their families. The application of one B., for example, was rejected because he could not document his marriage to his white French partner and, moreover, because he was a convict.⁴¹

Petits-Blancs with Asian Partners

The military allocations files on the families of *petits-blancs* with Asian partners, who were Vietnamese, Khmer, or Chinese or from another ethnic minority in Cochinchina, also reveal a bias against these families. On the one hand, they were the families of white French men who, according to the colonial mind-set, should have been rewarded for their service to France and afforded, like the families of white men married to white women, privileges for their whiteness. On the other hand, the nontraditional racial nature of these families made colonial offi-

³⁸ Ann Laura Stoler, "Rethinking Colonial Categories: European Communities and the Boundaries of Rule," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31 (1989): 151–52.

³⁹ Mayor of Saigon to GouCoch, May 6, 1915, HCMC, VNNA II, Vietnam, Files of the GouCoch, 1A.5/212(1); files on Eugène Louis B., HCMC, VNNA II, Files of the GouCoch, 1A.5/216.

⁴⁰ Henri B. to Mayor of Saigon, illegible date, May 1915, HCMC, VNNA II, Files of the GouCoch, 1A.5/212(1).

⁴¹ Note, Central Police of the First District of Saigon, July 28, 1917, HCMC, VNNA II, Files of the GouCoch, 1A.6/015.

cially anxious, for *petits-blancs* with Asian wives or partners were socially beneath *petits-blancs* with white partners.

The military allocations council's decisions regarding mixed-race *petits-blancs* families amounted to implicit control over these families and the white men who married or lived with Asian women. Judith Surkis notes that controlling male sexuality was an important part of maintaining social order in the Third Republic *métropole*.⁴² Such control was also exercised in the colonies; as Stoler writes, "Control over sexuality and reproduction was at the core of defining colonial privilege and its boundaries."⁴³

In addition to their nontraditional racial makeup, *petits-blancs*-Asian applicant families often had a nontraditional structure.⁴⁴ The military allocations council files offer information on twenty-three marriages, twenty French-métis marriages, and thirty cases of French-Vietnamese cohabiting relationships in which the fathers recognized their children.⁴⁵ Some fathers recognized their children only as they left for war, perhaps to ensure the children's eligibility for military subsidies.⁴⁶ The files also include two instances of French men who married their friends' widows, a common practice in colonized Cochinchina to ensure that a decedent's family was taken care of.⁴⁷ The soldier B., for example, married the widow of his friend A. and adopted A.'s children, at which point A.'s family became eligible for B.'s military benefits.⁴⁸

The unorthodox lifestyles of and the multicultural environment created by mixed-race families threatened, however, to undermine *la mission civilisatrice*. When men mobilized for war in Europe, their Vietnamese wives took control of the households, and colonial administrators feared that the mixed-race children would be corrupted by their

⁴² Judith Surkis, *Sexing the Citizen: Morality and Masculinity in France, 1870–1920* (Ithaca, NY, 2006), 4–5.

⁴³ Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, 39.

⁴⁴ The military allocations files for mixed-race families cover eighty-four families that were French-Vietnamese, Indian-Vietnamese, Martinican-Vietnamese, Euro-Indian, Eurasian-Eurasian, Eurasian-French, Eurasian-Vietnamese, and Eurasian-Indian. In almost all of the cases, the woman was Vietnamese or Eurasian: the exceptions were couples consisting of an Indian husband and a European wife, a family that included a French woman and her Vietnamese domestic partner, and a European woman with a Eurasian husband.

⁴⁵ Under colonial law, the biracial children of unmarried couples needed to be "recognized," or legally claimed, by their white French fathers to qualify for subsidies. While some of the colony's biracial children were recognized at birth, many others went unrecognized until they were much older. Fathers sometimes waited until their children had reached adolescence to decide whether or not they were worthy of recognition.

⁴⁶ Thousands of other mixed-race children were left unrecognized and assimilated into Vietnamese society. For more information on abandoned Eurasian children, see Firpo, "The Durability of the Empire."

⁴⁷ R. to GouCoch, May 3, 1915, HCMC, VNNA II, Files of the GouCoch, IA.5/212(1).

⁴⁸ Chamber of Deputies to GouCoch, May 17, 1916, HCMC, VNNA II, Files of the GouCoch, IA.6/015.

mothers' culture.⁴⁹ In two cases in which *petits-blancs*-Asian families were denied allocations, these families had been found to embrace an indigenous lifestyle. The soldier R. had a Vietnamese domestic partner and four children, but their request was rejected, despite their extreme poverty, because R.'s "situation does not find itself modified in the least by the European war, and . . . his family, which lives *à l'indigène*, doesn't cost him much."⁵⁰ In the second case, the Vietnamese wife of a Mr. B. asked for an increase in allocations to help pay for her hospital bills but was rejected because, while staying with her parents, she had lived "*à l'indigène*."⁵¹

The allocations council's attitude toward the "Vietnamization" of families is congruent with French ideas on cultural development. At the end of the nineteenth century, French social reformers argued that one's environment was a major determinant of one's development.⁵² That these mixed-race relationships failed to produce white children was likewise considered problematic. In this era of natalism and *la mission civilisatrice*, the very existence of mixed-race families challenged the fabric of traditional French families, which the colonial government sought to produce and maintain through the allocations program.

The allocations council used the subsidies process to pass judgment on, and thus regulate the cultural environment of, applicants whose mixed-race families did not conform to the official understanding of a traditional French family. The colonial goal was to maintain a population that subscribed more or less exclusively to French culture. Thus white French soldiers, ordinarily considered ideal members of colonial society, were subjected to discrimination if they happened to be married to nonwhite women. Those who followed French cultural practices were awarded subsidies; those who followed indigenous ones were not.

Vietnamese wives and white wives of *petits-blancs* Frenchmen were treated very differently. In some cases, the military councils dismissed Vietnamese wives as "concubines" even though their marriages were recognized by the state.⁵³ While white wives were allotted 3.0 piastres per day, Vietnamese wives received just 1.5 piastres per day; white chil-

⁴⁹ See Firpo, "The Durability of the Empire."

⁵⁰ This soldier R. is not the same man as the soldier R. referred to in n. 47. Mayor of Saigon to GouCoch, May 3, 1916, HCMC, VNNA II, Files of the GouCoch, 1A.6/015.

⁵¹ Minutes of the Commission in Charge of Examining the Demands for Allocation in Favor of Reservists' Families, Twenty-eighth Meeting, May 11, 1917, Files on B. HCMC, VNNA II, Files of the GouCoch, 1A.5/234(1).

⁵² Paul Rabinow, *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* (Chicago, 1989), 11.

⁵³ Minutes of the Commission in Charge of Examining the Demands for Allocation in Favor of Reservists' Families, Forty-first Meeting, Apr. 26, 1918, Bodin files, HCMC, VNNA II, Files of the GouCoch, 1A.5/234(1).

dren received at least 1.0 piastre per day, while eligible Eurasian children received only 0.5 piastre per day.⁵⁴

A comparison of colonial and metropolitan approaches to mixed-race relationships underlines the intensity of the colony's desire to maintain rigid racial boundaries. In the colony, where whites were few, mixed-race families were regarded as a threat to the racial order. By providing a modicum of support to these families, the council in effect punished Frenchmen who transgressed racial boundaries. The metropolitan government, which existed in an environment where whites were the majority and thus where whiteness was not threatened, was less preoccupied with race. At least once the metropolitan government intervened in the affairs of the allocations council to support the biracial families of Cochinchina's white French men and to ensure that the Vietnamese wives of white French soldiers were cared for.⁵⁵

In their vetting of *petits-blancs*-Asian families, the allocations council sought to privilege married couples over unmarried cohabiting couples, of which it was especially suspicious. It rejected the request of the soldier R.'s partner, for instance, because "she is only [his] concubine . . . , although she claims to be something else; she is young, without children, and can work for a living."⁵⁶ Nothing in the files shows that she made false claims to be his wife; moreover, the allocations council never directed *white* French domestic partners to work for a living. In some cases, like that of Ignatio M., a couple had had a long concubinage and married only on the eve of the soldier's departure, perhaps to ensure that they would receive the military subsidies.⁵⁷ Administrators noted whether a soldier had married his domestic partner immediately before departure and insinuated their disapproval, sometimes questioning the legitimacy of the relationship.⁵⁸

Petits-Blancs Métis Soldiers

The documents of the military allocations council include files on twenty-one Vietnamese-métis marriages and one French-métis marriage. The métis adults covered in the files were all French citizens, through either the legal marriage of their parents, recognition by their

⁵⁴ Circulaire, French Republic, Dec. 27, 1917, HCMC, VNNA II, Files of the GouCoch, 1A.5/015.

⁵⁵ Chamber of Deputies to GouCoch, May 17, 1916, HCMC, VNNA II, Files of the GouCoch, 1A.6/015.

⁵⁶ Mayor of Saigon to GouCoch, May 19, 1917, HCMC, VNNA II, Files of the GouCoch, 1A.6/015.

⁵⁷ Note on Ignatio M., National Police, Oct. 27, 1917, HCMC, VNNA II, Files of the GouCoch, 1A.5/217.

⁵⁸ Colonial Police Force, June 28, 1918, HCMC, VNNA II, Files of the GouCoch, 1A.6/026.

French fathers, or state intervention. Such recognition, along with relatively light skin and a French cultural background derived from the French parent or the orphanage in which they had been raised, afforded the colony's métis adults inclusion in the *petits-blancs* category.⁵⁹ This inclusion was implied by the colonial government's fear that métis would contribute to the *petits-blancs* underclass, thereby undermining white prestige. In considering *petits-blancs* métis, the allocations council effectively penalized them for their connection to the indigenous population.

The subjective nature of the allocations council's assessments betrays a subtle prejudice against *petits-blancs* métis. For example, Emmanuel De La C.'s request for subsidies was rejected on moral grounds, because he was deemed "lazy."⁶⁰ The documents also reflect a bias favoring the métis soldiers' white French partners over the soldiers themselves. Olympe B., a métis soldier married to a French woman, was required to pay her forty piastres per month after their divorce—the only case in the military allocations files of a man forced to pay alimony to his former spouse.⁶¹

Petits-blancs métis soldiers who applied for military subsidies sometimes challenged the council for not treating them and their family as equal to white French soldiers. The allocations files indicate that in so doing, they invoked the Third Republic's ideal of universal citizenship. Some complained that the money they did receive could not sustain their families.⁶² The soldier Alphonse N. asked that the council raise the subsidy given to his Vietnamese wife and two children from 2.0 piastres to 2.5 piastres per day (still well below what a divorced or separated French woman was given), because the latter sum was what

⁵⁹ For a broader discussion of the racial classification of nonrecognized Eurasian children, see Firpo, "The Durability of the Empire." For more information on the history of Eurasians, see Christina Firpo, "Crisis of Whiteness and Empire in Colonial Indochina: The Removal of Eurasian Children from the Vietnamese Milieu, 1890–1956," *Journal of Social History* 43 (2010): 587–613; Emmanuelle Saada, *Les enfants de la colonie: Les métis de l'Empire français entre sujétion et citoyenneté* (Paris, 2007); and David Pomfret, "Raising Eurasia: Race, Class, and Age in French and British Colonies," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51 (2009): 314–43. For information on the social treatment of Eurasians in Indochina, see Gilles de Gantès, "Les métis franco-indochinois à l'époque coloniale: A l'interface des dominants et des dominés ou à leur marge?" in *Actes du colloque L'esprit économique impérial*, ed. Hubert Bonin (Paris, 2008), 735–52; Pierre Guillaume, "Les métis en Indochine," *Annales de démographie historique* (1995): 185–95; Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*; and Ann Laura Stoler, "Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in Twentieth-Century Colonial Cultures," *American Ethnologist* 16 (1989): 634–60.

⁶⁰ Note, Police of the City of Cho Lon, Apr. 6, 1917, HCMC, VNNA II, Files of the GouCoch, IA.6/015.

⁶¹ Central Police to Mayor of Saigon, Nov. 20, 1915, HCMC, VNNA II, Files of the GouCoch, IA.6/026.

⁶² R. to GouCoch, Nov. 9, 1915, HCMC, VNNA II, Vietnam, Files of the GouCoch, IA.6/015.

he thought had been given “to all other citizens of [his] category,” meaning white Frenchmen whose families actually received 3.0 piastres per day.⁶³

Alphonse N.’s request speaks to the desire of *petits-blancs* métis to enjoy the prerogatives of and status associated with both citizenship and whiteness. This desire was frustrated by the problem of their ambiguous citizenship status and identity. Although the métis soldiers who applied for military subsidies were all French citizens, other métis had not been recognized by their French parent and thus had been denied French citizenship. This fact sometimes led the authorities to generalize that *petits-blancs* métis were not citizens and hence not truly French.⁶⁴ The actions of the military allocations council betray this kind of thinking.

***Petits-Blancs* Women with Ambiguous Marital Status**

Throughout World War I women served as temporary heads of household, departing from their traditional gender roles and wielding much greater influence over the reproduction of culture in the family.⁶⁵ This shift had major implications for the colony, insofar as the family during the Third Republic was the “crucible of society.”⁶⁶ The military allocations files include twelve cases of divorce among *petits-blancs* couples and three cases of couples separated but not divorced. All *petits-blancs* women who applied for military subsidies were associated with white soldiers and hence were not penalized for any race-related transgressions. However, the allocations council’s decisions on how to distribute its limited resources reveal a hierarchy in which women received varying amounts of financial support, or none at all, depending on whether they were married, divorced, or separated.

As long as *petits-blancs* women were clearly married or divorced in the eyes in the military allocations council, there was no dispute about the allocations due. The council paid 3.00 piastres per day to *petits-blancs* women married to white French soldiers; *petits-blancs* women

⁶³ Note on N., 1918, HCMC, VNNA II, Vietnam, Files of the GouCoch, IA.6/026.

⁶⁴ Children who had a father of French citizenship—Eurasian children and naturalized Vietnamese—could access French citizenship only if the father legally recognized his paternity. Otherwise, they were classified as indigenous. See Firpo, “The Durability of the Empire.”

⁶⁵ For more information on the changes in gender roles that resulted from World War I, see François Thébaud, “The Great War and the Triumph of Sexual Division,” in *Towards a Cultural Identity in the Twentieth Century*, vol. 5 of *History of Women in the West*, ed. François Thébaud (Cambridge, MA, 1994), 20–75; Christine Bard, *Les femmes dans la société française au 20e siècle* (Paris, 2001), 20–24; and James McMillan, *Housewife or Harlot: The Place of Women in French Society, 1870–1940* (New York, 1981), 31–32.

⁶⁶ Surkis, *Sexing the Citizen*, 11.

divorced from white soldiers received less than half that. A Marie A., divorced from the soldier B., was awarded 1.25 piastres per day.⁶⁷

It was the *petits-blancs* women separated but not divorced from their husbands whom the military allocations council deemed problematic. The council's judgment was specious at best. For one thing, these women were still married and thus theoretically eligible for the three piastres per day granted to other married *petits-blancs* women. Moreover, they had not initiated their separations but had been abandoned by their husbands well before the subsidies application process. Yet all of these women were denied subsidies.

In the files, council members voiced their suspicion that the women were deliberately withholding information about their separations to dodge questions about their eligibility for full allocations. After all, under French law these women could have divorced their husbands for abandonment;⁶⁸ the government assumed that they had remained married solely out of financial self-interest. Clearly, it was not in their interest either to advertise their separation or to get a divorce. But as married women, they were certainly eligible for three piastres per day.

Two of the cases of separated *petits-blancs* women are fairly straightforward. A Madame G.'s husband had abandoned her four years before her application for assistance, neither divorcing her nor offering her any financial support. She attempted to use the allocations process to obtain subsidies in his name but was rejected.⁶⁹ In the second case, a Monsieur A. abandoned his wife, Marie A., in 1911 for another woman when the couple was visiting Marseille. At some point during World War I, Marie A. initiated divorce proceedings, only to learn that her husband had been mobilized and thus that she was eligible for a subsidy. She halted the divorce proceedings and, in 1916, still married to him, applied for "an allocation, as the wife of a mobilized [soldier]," cleverly suppressing the aborted divorce proceedings in hopes of receiving her

⁶⁷ Files on Madame Marie A., Minutes of the Commission in Charge of Examining the Demands for Allocation in Favor of the Reservists' Families, Thirty-ninth Meeting, Feb. 4, 1918, HCMC, VNNA II, Vietnam, Files of the GouCoch, 1A.5/234(1). See also Samuel Stoljar, "A History of the French Law of Divorce—II," *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family* 4 (1990): 1–26.

⁶⁸ Under Article 231 of the 1884 Loi Nacquet, desertion was one of the *injures graves* that gave grounds for divorce. Though Article 231 did not stipulate a length of desertion, by 1908 the courts were required to grant a divorce after three years of separation. In couples that were married yet separated, the husband still had a duty to support his wife. The wife was also permitted to make contracts independently to maintain her standard of living. Though the law was not always followed, its intent was to ensure French women a means of survival. See Stoljar, "A History of the French Law of Divorce—II"; and Theresa McBride, "Divorce and the Republican Family," in *Gender and the Politics of Social Reform in France, 1870–1914*, ed. Elinor A. Accampo, Rachel G. Fuchs, and Mary Lynn Stewart (Baltimore, MD, 1995), 59–81.

⁶⁹ Madame G. to Mayor of Saigon, ca. July 1916, HCMC, VNNA II, Files of the GouCoch, 1A.5/215.

three piastres per day.⁷⁰ She implored the colonial government to support her, for she was out of work: “I have no resources, and my situation is so desperate that I cannot even afford my most immediate needs, and I do not have any family members who can come to my aid.”⁷¹ Although she and her husband had been separated for more than three years, she had not asked that the marriage be terminated by the courts. Nonetheless, when the council realized that she had been “virtually separated from her husband since 1911,” it used her deception as grounds to refuse her subsidies.⁷²

In the third case, a Madame R. requested allocations because her French husband’s mobilization had left her and their daughter in a “sad situation.”⁷³ In a follow-up investigation the military allocations council learned that she had taken a new lover. Her husband claimed, moreover, that he and Madame R. were divorced. On learning of her husband’s claims, Madame R. requested another investigation to prove that they were in fact legally a couple. This time the council learned that they were married, albeit separated, but also that she had indeed taken a lover—a German, no less, and thus an enemy citizen.⁷⁴

Her failure to mention either her separation or her German lover appeared fatal to Madame R.’s application.⁷⁵ At this point, she turned to André Touzet, head of the governor-general’s cabinet. In a letter to the governor of Cochinchina, Touzet proved that Madame R. was still married to the draftee and argued that she was therefore eligible for subsidies. He also asserted that she had ended her affair with the German. Touzet requested that the council take a second look at her case, because her situation did “not justify the . . . rejection of military subsidies to a French woman.”⁷⁶

In pursuing the allocations due married women, Mesdames B., A., and R. were not breaking the rules but rather exercising their rights. As Touzet argued, they were married and thus entitled to the same three piastres per day that the other *petits-blancs* soldiers’ wives received.

⁷⁰ Marie A. to GouCoch, Oct. 1916, HCMC, VNNA II, Files of the GouCoch, IA.5/015.

⁷¹ Marie A. to GouCoch, [illegible month] 9, 1916, HCMC, VNNA II, Files of the GouCoch, IA.5/015.

⁷² Marie A. to GouCoch, Oct. 1916, HCMC, VNNA II, Files of the GouCoch, IA.5/015; Note, Central Police of the City of Saigon, Oct. 16, 1916, HCMC, VNNA II, Files of the GouCoch, IA.5/015; Marie A. to GouCoch, Oct. 1, 1916, HCMC, VNNA II, Files of the GouCoch, IA.5/015.

⁷³ Mayor of Saigon to the GouCoch, May 23, 1917, HCMC, VNNA II, Files of the GouCoch, IA.6/015.

⁷⁴ Like the colonial government, the French metropolitan government used the allocations process to regulate white French women who had transgressed family norms or undermined the wartime project of nationalism. As Thébaud shows, in the *métropole* women who cheated on their husbands were regarded as unpatriotic (“Great War”).

⁷⁵ GGI to GouCoch, July 31, 1917, HCMC, VNNA II, Files of the GouCoch, IA.6/015.

⁷⁶ Touzet to GouCoch, July 31, 1917, HCMC, VNNA II, Files of the GouCoch, IA6/015.

Moreover, these women had been abandoned by their husbands; they had not initiated the separations that the council found so objectionable. In seeking financial benefits, they were attempting to transform a negative situation into a positive one. In short, they were seeking to subvert a patriarchal system.

In denying subsidies to the three separated *petits-blancs* women, the all-male military allocations council penalized them for their show of agency. The council's decision to deny them allocations, while accommodating their married and divorced counterparts, may also betray its unease with the ambiguous and nontraditional nature of their marital relationships. After all, these women were free of the manifold obligations of marriage without bearing any of the burdens of divorce. By penalizing them while offering varying amounts of financial support to others, the council revealed the values it placed on different marital configurations. In short, the military allocations process enabled the colonial government to scrutinize and judge women's behaviors as well as the private lives of families.⁷⁷

Conclusion

The draft of French soldiers during World War I left the colony's *petits-blancs* families impoverished and in need of governmental support. In distributing its limited funds among these families, the colonial government created a hierarchy privileging *petits-blancs* families with the traditional French family configuration. Families that deviated from racial and gender norms received smaller subsidies and were thus castigated. In short, the differing allocations of money to families corresponded to the degree to which they maintained or deviated from the model family.

Being impoverished, the colony's *petits-blancs* population threatened the mirage of white prestige. Moreover, far from being a monolithic racial group, this population was perceived by the allocations council as racially heterogeneous. Its various shades of whiteness, however, had more to do with relationships than with biology. In granting lower subsidies to *petits-blancs* married to Asian women as well as to *petits-blancs* of partial Asian ancestry, colonial officials subtly expressed their disapproval of white participation in *métissage* and of departures from the traditional family configuration. The council's discomfort with racial and cultural ambiguity was part and parcel of the empire's interest in protecting white prestige.

⁷⁷ For more information on gender and citizenship, see Kathleen Canning and Sonya O. Rose, "Gender, Citizenship, and Subjectivity: Some Historical and Theoretical Considerations," *Gender and History* 13 (2001): 427–43.

After World War I, anxiety about a decline in white prestige would grow among *colons* in Cochinchina. This anxiety stemmed from other problems plaguing the empire. For one thing, the metropolitan population decline resulting from wartime deaths alarmed French officials, who feared a concomitant loss of military power. They also worried about a decline in imperial authority, given that colonial troops had witnessed so much French vulnerability on the battlefield. Such a decline in imperial authority, exacerbated by local rebellions and a rising Japanese empire, might translate into a decline in white prestige. Clearly, this fear had been present during World War I. However, the military allocations council's relatively subtle means of furthering this goal paled next to the more explicit approach of the 1920s, when maintaining white prestige would become a priority.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Clifford Rosenberg, "Albert Sarraut and Republican Racial Thought," in Chapman and Frader, *Race in France*, 36–53.