

**Christina Elizabeth Firpo.** *The Uprooted: Race, Children, and Imperialism in French Indochina, 1890-1980.* Southeast Asia: Politics, Meaning, and Memory Series. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016. 288 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8248-4757-9.



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**Published on** H-War (January, 2017)

**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Christina Elizabeth Firpo's *The Uprooted* examines the case of the *métis*, the children born to indigenous mothers in French Indochina who were fathered by European men. These children created interesting dynamics within the colonial society in Indochina, particularly if they were not acknowledged by their fathers. Such an acknowledgment carried with it an automatic guarantee of French citizenship, but those who were abandoned, as the majority were, had no such legal status. However, because the European population of the colonies was dwarfed by that of the native population, colonial leaders felt that creating some form of special status for the *métis* might help to offset the population disparity. To create that status, these abandoned children needed to be educated within the French language and cultural norms, in the hopes of creating a loyal group that would assume a semi-elite status within the colonies. Often, this required taking the children away from their mothers, frequently without consent, and either placing them in tightly controlled

schools in Indochina or removing them to France for their formative years.

Firpo's work follows that of other scholars who have examined the behavior of colonial and occupying forces toward native populations. In particular, the study of this phenomenon in the United States, Canada, and Australia has demonstrated similar behavior on the part of European-descended elites toward indigenous populations and their offspring. As in each of those cases, Firpo also finds an abject patronizing altruism at work—the French political leaders who pushed to create special opportunities for the *métis* did so in large part because they believed the European racial heritage gave them special intellectual gifts. Those gifts needed to be harnessed, controlled, and channeled into a socially beneficial direction, or they might be used to support a rebellion against colonial order. Not surprisingly, it was large-scale aid societies that did the most work, and some might argue, the most damage, in addressing the unique situation of the *métis*.

Over time, the treatment of the *métis* changed, often in response to the geopolitical challenges faced by the French government. For example, in the aftermath of World War I, when France faced a “missing generation” of young men due to the massive losses suffered in the war, there was a push to give *métis* the full rights of French citizens and bring them to France as a form of demographic enhancement, as if the transfer of a few thousand abandoned boys could offset the loss of more than 1.5 million on the battlefield. During the Great Depression, the push was instead to train the *métis* for advanced agricultural labor in the hopes of increasing the productivity of the colonial plantations. After World War II, the emphasis shifted to providing professional education opportunities for the *métis*, as French political leaders believed they could form an elite professional class of lawyers, doctors, and teachers that would heavily influence the new postwar colonial environment. When the French Indochina colony finally fell to the independence movement led by Ho Chi Minh, the *métis* remained as a symbol of the colonial era, and many were shunned by the new elites rising within Vietnamese society.

As the French colonial empire in Southeast Asia collapsed, the European inhabitants largely fled to France, where they were welcomed as citizens even though many had lived their entire lives in the Asian colonies. French aid societies attempted to “rescue” the *métis* from their mothers and remove them to orphanages in Saigon, where they learned about the French language and culture while awaiting transportation to France. Most of these children had their names changed to common French names, a particularly cruel method of ensuring that their movements would be untraceable by their Vietnamese families. Interestingly, Firpo had to also change the names of her subjects, to protect their privacy and avoid the possibility of retaliation against them by French or Vietnamese society. This well-reasoned decision, and more importantly, its necessity,

demonstrates that the *métis* have not ceased to be a controversial subject, even four decades after the unification of Vietnam.

Overall, Firpo presents a well-written and compelling argument about the dynamics at play in French colonial society. She breaks new ground by examining the Indochina situation but follows in the footsteps of scholars who have made similar arguments in other regions. She does an exceptional job of differentiating the distinct aspects of the French experience with those of other regions experiencing similar intercultural conflicts but also demonstrates that the French colonial impulse did not markedly differ from the approach pursued by the British, the Dutch, and other European colonizers.

This work is of particular utility to scholars of the civilian experience in wartime. French Indochina faced a series of devastating conflicts during the period Firpo studies, and in each case, the *métis* found themselves in the unenviable position of reminding the combatants on all sides of the differences between the French rulers and the indigenous population. This work should also be examined by anyone interested in the civilian aspects of decolonization. Academics specializing in the military history of Indochina, especially the French Indochina War, should examine this work to remind themselves of one of the less-noticed aspects of colonial conflict.

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**Citation:** Paul Springer. Review of Firpo, Christina Elizabeth. *The Uprooted: Race, Children, and Imperialism in French Indochina, 1890-1980*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. January, 2017.

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