

ANDREW ARSAN, *Interlopers of Empire: The Lebanese Diaspora in Colonial French West Africa* (London: Hurst & Co., 2014). Pp. 452. £30.00 cloth. ISBN 9780199333387.

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Andrew Arsan's *Interlopers of Empire* rewards the reader on multiple levels. First, it is an encyclopedic retelling of the history of Lebanese migration to French West Africa in the first half of the twentieth century. Arsan exults in the "cacophony" of the archives to tell this story in its richest detail and historical complexity. He rebuts aspersions cast by French colonial settlers that the Lebanese were dishonest in the rubber business with evidence that they were in fact a hardworking and enterprising lot. Migrants were not the dregs of Lebanese society. As Arsan shows, they left Mount Lebanon and Jabal 'Amil with a bit of cash in their pockets. They migrated to raise their status or to escape the stagnating economy as the local silk industry declined. Some found themselves opening retail shops in Dakar; others bought second-hand trucks and set out before dawn for inland villages, collecting peanuts, kola nuts, and the like. Arsan acknowledges that stories of swindlers and smugglers among the lower ranks of migrants were no doubt partly true. And he recognizes that the upper crust of Levantine brokers and retailers amassed astonishing amounts of wealth. But Arsan also recovers stories of the courtesy and kindness that Lebanese merchants showed their African clients. They treated their customers with more respect than Europeans did, and often called upon a common vocabulary of Muslim piety and greeting (39).

On a second level, *Interlopers of Empire* engages with the historiography on migration. Arsan complicates older models of immigrant communities that simply emphasize social solidarity. Earlier settlers, he shows, exploited and profited from the cheap labor of newcomers by offering them apprenticeships. The apprentices benefited by using practical experience to build their own businesses

in a fluid society. Arsan also complicates images of migrant communities as simply replicas of hometowns. Levantine communities in Africa, he argues, were products of compromise, adaptation, and innovation. While many gathered in communities of shared religious sect or kinship group, not all did. There is evidence of mixing across old social categories. Lebanese migrants were not interested in stasis; they were a people on the move, willing to take risks and to adapt to new conditions in order to make a better life. As interlopers caught between the ruling French and the indigenous Africans, they quietly invented a new, modern, and cosmopolitan culture for themselves.

On a third level, *Interlopers of Empire* is a microhistory of the mechanisms of empire. Arsan takes on macrohistory with inspiration from Carlo Ginzburg, Dipesh Chakrabarty and other post-colonial historians. He rejects structural categorizations of the migrant merchants as either middlemen or parasites of empire, and prefers to explore the many ways that they brought disparate points of empire into contact with one another. He also challenges scholarship that assumes there was a coherent colonial state at the heart of the imperial system. He shows how the migrants were able to “tear at the legal fabric” of the empire and to exploit the affective attachments of lobbyists and officials to circumvent migration quotas and taxes. French West Africa was part of a “congeries of departments” each with its own agenda. Generally speaking, the French foreign ministry vetoed and quashed efforts by colonial ministry officials to restrict Lebanese immigration. While the colonial ministry responded to French settlers’ complaints about competition, the foreign ministry held a broader view of the empire. They considered France as a protector of Lebanese Christians, who were a pillar of their rule in the French mandate of Lebanon. A perk of Lebanese entry into the empire as a mandate in 1920 was to be mobility through imperial space. Arsan’s study here complements arguments Frederick Cooper has made about a kind of imperial citizenship in the 1940s in *Citizenship Between Empire and Nation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

Arsan is especially persuasive in building a case for affective history as a necessary complement to structural histories of empire. He shows how French bureaucrats wrote fondly and sometimes passionately about the Lebanese. And he shows how chains of personal relationships stretched far across the empire, reaching French consulates even in Latin America. All along these chains, migrants drew advice and support as they pursued their fortunes. At the central

node of this network sat Mgr. Fighali, a Maronite vicar in Paris who often intervened on behalf of migrants – both Muslim and Christian (p. 118). Arsan also explores affective ties of Lebanese with their neighbors. He describes the pain migrants felt when treated as objects of rivalry, indifference or contempt by Africans and Europeans. They bristled at their exclusion and sought integration by adopting the middle-class lifestyles of Europeans.

Arsan sees affection operating alongside the more material dynamics of imperial life, labor and finance. His discussion of the distribution of credit reminds this reader of the careful study of 19th-century banking in David Landes' classic *Bankers and Pashas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958). Like rising middle classes around the globe, Lebanese migrants sought an active role in politics – back home. Through French intelligence archives, Arsan traces the flow of cash and telegrams from French West Africa back to Lebanon. But by the 1950s, migrants realized they would never return home. Their numbers in French West Africa by then surpassed 18,000, triple the migrant population preceding World War II.

On a fourth, more theoretical level, Arsan intends *Interlopers of Empire* to disrupt the binaries of colonial rulers and their critics that still haunt postcolonial studies. Contrary to Frantz Fanon's iconic depiction of a black-white polarity of colonial society, Arsan sees blurred boundaries, where liminal populations challenge the neat racial hierarchy constructed by the French. "Even as we trace the insistent pull of this [binary, racial] language, we must admit its analytical shortcomings. For Eastern Mediterranean migrants were not enclosed in a colonial context," Arsan writes, "[t]hey did not remain still, penned within the confines of their middling status as economic and racial intermediaries. . . . Physical restlessness and social mobility worked hand in hand" (8). Likewise, Arsan argues against binary constructs of colonial commerce, wherein the Lebanese practiced "modern" methods in contrast to the "traditional" African merchants. Nor were Lebanese traditionally small shopkeepers contrasting with modern French agribusiness (153). Arsan's book, in this respect, contributes to the work of scholars like Julia Clancy-Smith, whose *Mediterraneans* similarly disrupts the binary view of French colonialism with a study of the broad variety of Levantines (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2011).

Interlopers of Empire, in summary, makes important contributions to our broader understanding of migration and empire in the mid-twentieth century. Arsan throws new light on the efficacies

of space and mobility within the French empire, in an age when gates of migration to the Americas and Europe closed. That the French ministry of foreign affairs kept migration paths open for the Lebanese also adds an important dimension to the history of the Lebanese and Syrian mandates. His book should inspire new studies of the mandatory economy, and the ways in which migration may have compensated for the disappointments of *mise en valeur*.

As a scholar who embraces structural and causal history, I had misgivings when I picked up this volume. But I was seduced by Arsan's thick description and broad scholarly reach. Not only has he consumed postcolonial theory and imperial history, not only has he devoured the imperial archive, but he reads literature, quoting at one point the South African novelist Nadine Gordimer on the "creaking, jerking, jostling, gasping" nature of colonial administration (103). *Interlopers of Empire* restores humanity to a people that had been flattened to stereotype and caricature and it gives pause to those of us who build big narratives on thin bamboo shoots of data.

Arsan's pearls of insight and thoughtful asides make *Interlopers of Empire* a rich and demanding read that will reward specialists and inspire new questions for future research. My one regret is that Arsan could not in this volume fully explore the encounters of Lebanese with the African majority among whom they lived. But this book will likely inspire such a follow up study, and perhaps others that will knit thicker sinews of narrative among the many migrants who crisscrossed the creaky colonial empires of the early twentieth century.