Ambiguous Modernity: 
Representations of French Colonial 
Railways in the Third Republic

Natalia Starostina 
Young Harris College

Figure 1: "Pont Faidherbe sur le Sénégal," from the author's collection.

French railway companies have played an important role in transforming overseas colonies since the late nineteenth century. Railways occupied an essential place in economic and military initiatives in the French empire; their construction was an important part in the reorganization and redefinition of colonial space. The construction of railways demanded the effort of thousands, including workers and engineers, politicians and entrepreneurs. New routes facilitated connections among cities and villages and made possible tighter control over the colonies.
The images of bridges, viaducts, and other masterpieces of modern technology spread knowledge about the progress of the French "civilizing mission" and the importance of technology and science in the transformation of colonies. Publications, photos, and images of new railways shaped the representations of the French imperial project as ultimately a successful endeavor. Such images exposed the viewer to the seemingly dramatic impact of railways on colonial landscapes, everyday life, and the colonial economy. Many articles in the French press praised the construction of French railways as an excellent example of the positive impact of French imperialism. At the same time, there was a certain ambiguity in representing such railway projects. One of the paradoxes of French imperialism was an ongoing fascination with plans for railway development, although these schemes were difficult to realize. The building of the Pont Faidherbe in Senegal became one of the railway projects that seemed to attest to the success of the French "civilizing mission." The imagery of the bridge, which looked very impressive on photos and postcards, could deceive the viewer. The performance of the railways in Senegal was far from perfect.

The Trans-saharien was one such railway project. The Trans-Saharan was supposed to link the French West and North Africa and tie together the domains of the French empire. The preliminary studies for the construction of the Trans-Saharan began in the 1870s; it became popular in the interwar decades and was actively promoted in the Vichy period. The official rhetoric highlighted the Trans-Saharan as not only an essential way to improve the integrity of the French empire, but also as a way to boost the spirit of the French nation.

This article will analyze the representations of two railway projects, the Trans-Saharan and the Pont Faidherbe, and will highlight a considerable gap between their representations as symbols of the successful French "civilizing mission" and the deceitfulness of such portrayal. The images of the marvels of technology seemed to demonstrate the effortless penetration of French civilization into the colonies. In the case of the Pont
Faidherbe, the celebratory speeches during its inauguration and beautiful images of the bridge hid the sad realities of the railway in Senegal. In the case of the Trans-Saharan railway, its construction of the railway was supposed to transform the region drastically and make it the leading producer of cotton and other valuable agricultural goods. In reality, however, only a small portion of the railway was ever constructed, and its impact on Africa was trivial. This article will also raise questions about the importance of imagery and the visual in representing the French Empire. Recent historiography has addressed imperial railway history and travel in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The cultural aspects of transportation history reveal the changing character of travel since the late nineteenth century as the rise of tourism significantly transformed the experience and narratives of travel.

I am very grateful to Professors Donna Ryan (Gallaudet University) and April Shelford (American University) for their editorial help; the patience and guidance of Professor Ryan in editing this article were invaluable. I am also grateful for the very helpful suggestions of Professor Carol Harrison (University of South Carolina), who was the commentator at the WSFH panel where the essay was first presented. Also appreciated are the intellectual support, encouragement, and friendship of Professors Kathryn Amdur (Emory University), Ron Roach, Lee March, and Thomas Stearns (Young Harris College), as well as Matthew Matteson and the author’s family.


interest among French geographers and scholars.³ Robert Lee and David Del Testa have been studying the French railways in Indochina and their impact on the colony.⁴ I have been investigating the representations of colonial railways in Indochina and their importance for shaping the colonial discourse during the Third Republic.⁵ Photographs played an important part in defining public knowledge about the colonies: images illustrated and justified unequal power relations between white settlers and indigenous people and, therefore, the very existence of the empire.⁶ Since the late 1880s, official reports began to incorporate more and more photographs, and these images firmly corroborated French imperial claims made in such reports.⁷ Photographs promoted the notion of success of a


⁷ Ibid., 22.
colonial project. Roland Barthes, moreover, suggested that the caption of a photograph contained a ready conclusion and interpretation which the viewer accepted. Photographs contained an implicit political and social agenda.

The political function of the blueprints of colonial railways, which proliferated in the French press beginning in the 1880s, was similar to the function of the photographs. Railway blueprints powerfully redefined perceptions of the colonies in the imagination of the French. On blueprints, the long lines of railroads crossing Africa justified the necessity to spend millions and millions of francs on these construction projects. It is ironic that such railway lines were almost never completed in Africa according to initial designs and target dates. While the blueprints and photographs of railways were essential to the prestige of the French empire, the railways themselves sometimes played an insignificant role in improving the colonial economy.

---


The Pont Faidherbe and the "Civilizing Mission" in Senegal

The importance of imagery in shaping the representation of the "civilizing mission" is apparent in the history of Senegalese railways and their jewel, the Pont Faidherbe in Saint-Louis. The Pont Faidherbe was an important element of the newly constructed "peanut railroad," that is, the railway between Saint-Louis and Dakar. In late 1897, the Minister of Colonies André Lebon visited French West Africa on the occasion of the inauguration of the new bridge.\textsuperscript{11} (In the late 1890s, few events could inspire such a highly placed official to take a voyage to the distant colony.) Spanning 511 meters across the Senegal River, the bridge catches the eye and powerfully redefines the local landscape. Many times reproduced on postcards, the bridge itself becomes a symbol of the "French civilizing mission" (Figure 1).\textsuperscript{12} The name of the bridge encapsulates an important episode in the history of the French empire because Louis Leon Cesar Faidherbe, a French governor-general, played a central role in the colonization of the region.

The visit of Lebon coincided with an elaborate program of festivities devoted to the inauguration of the Pont Faidherbe. Every time the minister passed through railway stations of the "peanut railroad," Lebon took part in ceremonies demonstrating the loyalty of the indigenous population to France. In Tivaouane, Lebon observed with delight cheerful native residents who welcomed the minister with enthusiastic cries of "Long live the minister!" and "Long live the Republic!" After meeting the mayor of Tivaouane on the town station platform, Lebon then reviewed a parade of troops from the local French garrison. On


\textsuperscript{12} Pam, \textit{Images et colonies}. This is a CD-ROM collection of more than 1,000 postcards, mostly unpublished, from the Archives of Senegal. The bridge appears on postcards 123, 128, 306, 972, and 1457, that is "Pont Faidherbe," "Course de pirogues sur le fleuve Sénégal," "Le Pont Faidherbe," "Perspective du Pont Faidherbe," and "Entrée du Pont Faidherbe."
the train, the minister relished a dinner with other passengers and then continued his voyage in a luxurious compartment. Lebon arrived in Saint-Louis the day before the inauguration; on its eve, the view of the city decorated by illumination pleased him. At the square in front of the train station, the mayor of Saint-Louis delivered an eloquent speech, and the ceremony of the inauguration had begun. Then, accompanied by warm cheers, Lebon proceeded to the bridge and a cortège of civilians and military followed him. The minister and other guests took seats on the platform, built in the vicinity of the bridge and elegantly decorated. The audience gave the guests rapturous ovations. The indigenous people, as one reporter observed, had never seen such a frenzy of excitement and rejoiced in the celebration.

Lebon delivered a speech in which he praised the efforts of the French administrators and engineers. In the beginning, the minister had characterized the bridge as "the magnificent monument of national industry," the monument that immortalized the efforts of Faidherbe. The minister from Paris described the ceremony as a vivid demonstration for those who knew "why so much energy, military and civil, so much heroism, evident and implicit, are invested into French West Africa." As he stated, colonial politics gave "an incessant lesson of virility, initiative, and self-sacrifice." Lebon emphasized that French colonization benefited the indigenous people unlike the policies of French rivals and enemies. In his portrayal, the new bridge symbolized the arrival of "the new race" in Africa. In the course of his visit, Lebon promised to finance more overseas railways; he also raised the hope that the railway between Kayes and Bamako in Senegal would be finished in ten years. The minister's journey gave new life to the discussion of the Trans-

13 "M. Lebon in Sénégal," La Politique coloniale, 6ème année, no. 827, 13 octobre 1897, and no. 833, 20 octobre 1897; "Le voyage de M. André Lebon," La Politique coloniale, no. 834, 21 octobre 1897. The inaugural speech of Lebon was published in La Politique coloniale on 20 October.


15 Ibid.
Saharan railway, a great project that shaped the French public imagination at the fin-de-siècle.

Despite the pathos of these celebratory speeches, the contemporary state of the Senegalese railways could hardly allow one to envision the colonial railways as the agents of the "civilizing mission" in Africa. The Senegalese railway performed so poorly that it became a grotesque of the "civilizing mission" and modern transport. During the first years of its existence, segments of the railway from Dakar to Saint-Louis, which incorporated the Pont Faidherbe, regularly disappeared during the season of hibernation and tropical rains.\footnote{Several scholars have investigated the history of "the peanut railroad." See Margaret McLane, "The Senegal-Niger Railway, 1880–1904: A Case Study in Imperialism" (Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1969); Germaine Ganier, "Lat Dyor et le chemin de fer de l'arachide, 1876–1886," \textit{Bulletin de l'IFAN}. XXVII, nos. 1–2 (1965): 223–81; Vincent Monteil, "Lat Dior du Kayor et l'islamization des Wolofs," in \textit{Esquisses senegelaises} (Dakar, 1966): 71–113; and Paul Edward Pheffer, "Railroads and Aspects of Social Change in Senegal, 1878–1933" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1975).} After the inauguration of the "peanut railroad" in the summer of 1883, the line stopped operating until November because rain obliterated the tracks.\footnote{On the inauguration, see Pheffer, "Railroads and Aspects of Social Change in Senegal, 1878–1933," 102, 135–40.} Because contractors rushed to finish the railway, they installed tracks on the slopes and rains washed out the roadbeds. Due to incessant problems with the track in the winters of 1883, 1884, and 1885, the first years of the existence of the "peanut railroad" produced a phantom, much celebrated in the press and shaping the imperial imagination, that did not physically exist at any particular moment in time.\footnote{Ibid., 138.} Moreover, the very infrastructure of the new railway tended to disappear because termites were devouring the wooden components of
train ties. In addition, the construction of the railway terminal in Saint-Louis proved to be a great disruption to everyday life.\textsuperscript{19}

The construction of the "peanut railroad" was the story of slapdash work, which local government officials nevertheless constantly approved. There were assumptions that the indigenous population would utilize the railway, that there was enough labor to build it, and that the local kings would not resist the plans of the railway company. None of these expectations was correct.\textsuperscript{20} The Company of Batignolles, which executed the project, was violating basic technological rules. Despite promises to import proper material, it used local soil which was badly suited to construction. In the most outrageous instances, when the substandard quality of the tracks would necessarily result in derailments, the authorities still sanctioned sections of the railway. The government officials who supposedly demanded the highest standards of quality approved the work of the contractors and rushed to open sectors of the railway that would disappear in the first tropical storm. Yet the French public remained unaware of these problems.

It was the spectacular images of the Pont Faidherbe on postcards that shaped the French perception of Senegalese railways. Showing the bridge Faidherbe, one such postcard dramatically juxtaposes it with the indigenous people in dugout pirogues.\textsuperscript{21} The picture portrays the encounter between French imperialism and native culture as the meeting of progress and primitivism. A contrast between the bridge, the eloquent sign of Western civilization, and pirogues, which a French viewer was

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 132–34. The motley crowd of French, Italian, and Moroccan workers building the railway often incited conflicts with the indigenous population and used violence to settle their disagreements.

\textsuperscript{20} See especially the chapter "Construction of the Dakar-St. Louis," Pheffer, "Railroads and Aspects of Social Change in Senegal, 1878–1933," 89–156. Interestingly enough, even the very idea of the railroad was inspired by a false preconception about the existence of the Kong mountains, which allegedly divided the rich eastern part of Senegal from the southern coast. Ibid., 60.

\textsuperscript{21} The postcard is reproduced in Pam, ed., Images et colonies, postcard 128, "Courses de Pirogues sur le fleuve Senegal. Rassamblment."
likely to consider the symbol of African backwardness, underscores French superiority over the colonies. On the postcard, the bridge appears to play the role of a barrier between two different cultures: it encloses the movement of the pirogues on the river. While emphasizing the modernizing effort of the French colonial administration, images on the postcards also sought to reinforce the concept of the French state as a patriarchal authority that created a balance between innovation and tradition. For French contemporaries, the image of the bridge, the memories of the visit of Lebon to Senegal, and the inauguration of the bridge became a celebration of French technology. The poor performance of the "peanut railway," a very expensive bungle, remained off-camera. The images of the Pont Faidherbe attested to the materialization of another phantom of the French "civilizing mission," another step toward reordering the perceptions of the French colony and representing the French empire through images.

The positive impact of the railways on the economy of Senegal was not easy to measure. What is unquestionable is that, according to Pheffer, the blueprints of the Senegalese railway soon became a valuable currency to advance a career in the administration. Engineers, in particular, benefited from drawing up these projects: " . . . in imposing the railroad on the colony, they were projecting their dreams . . ." The same was true for the French elite: colonial railway construction served to project dreams of domination and conquest onto Africa and redefine the identity of the colonial elite as the harbingers of modernity.

Such an elevated notion of Europeans became a defining characteristic of many speeches delivered during the

---

22 According to Michael Adas, some British officials hoped that high caste Brahmins would mingle with people of lower castes during a train voyage. Therefore, the railways were envisioned as a means to undermine the caste barriers in India. See Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 225–26.

inaugurations of colonial railways. For instance, two years before the completion of the Pont Faidherbe in Senegal, the inauguration of a four-hundred-meter bridge across the Mahina River in Sudan allowed the engineers to claim a broad social role. A celebratory speech described the technological achievement as a heroic deed and highlighted a discourse on colonial railways in increasing French influence in Africa. Its author, the Lieutenant Governor of French Sudan Louis Edgard de Trentinian, said that "in less than fifty years European railways revolutionized and transformed nations; in the colonies, they accomplished a marvelous task." They also ensured "French domination over this part of the world." When penetrating the continent where militant tribes lived, the construction of railways symbolized "the benefits of liberal nineteenth-century civilization" and entailed the "fast conquest" of people and the emancipation of the natives from "the darkness of barbarism." According to Trentinian, colonial railways were a necessary precondition for the very existence of colonies and a pledge for their future prosperity because the new means of communication would make the continent a popular tourist destination. The railways would integrate daughter states into France; colonies would become "nouvelles Frances." The inauguration had inspired a bold vision of a future French Sudan that would stretch from Senegal to Niger. This rhetoric underscored the central role of technology in the imperial project and steered public attention away from numerous problems and difficulties of transforming colonies by the not-so-magic power of technology. French newspapers were likely to print celebratory articles about the inauguration of new railway lines;

24 "Le chemin de fer du Soudan," BCAF VI, no. 11 (1896): 332–38. The construction of the Mahina bridge occurred in the heart of the African continent approximately one thousand kilometers from the Atlantic coast, making construction difficult. The bridge was completed on 24 June 1894.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 337.
however, everyday petty realities about the poor functioning of railways very rarely penetrated public awareness. Festivities inaugurating new railways seemed to provide an answer to all the difficult questions which very expensive projects sponsored by French taxpayers could pose. It seems only logical that during one of the darkest moments in national history—Vichy—colonial railway construction emerged again to boost the self-esteem of the defeated nation.

The Rhetoric of the Mediterranean-Niger Railway during Vichy

A scramble for Africa and a competition among France, Britain, and Germany for new colonies generated a number of new railway projects in Africa. While the construction of railways in West Africa began in the late 1880s, the French parliament voted in favor of expanding railway construction that resulted in the allocation of finances for the French Congo, Madagascar, French Sudan, and so forth. In drawing up such grand designs, French politicians and engineers were inspired by the construction of the Transsiberian railway. They closely followed the construction of railways in non-French colonies as well; for instance, there was an apparent anxiety over a Belgian project to build a railway in the Congo.

The Trans-Saharan railway project originated in 1879; Monsieur A. Duponchel, an engineer of Ponts et Chaussées, was its creator. As the French journalist R. Chenevier suggested,

the French were already seduced by the vision of a "dream railway."

Soon after, Charles de Freycinet, the politician under whose leadership France constructed a dense network of railways, sent an exploratory expedition to Africa to investigate the possibility of constructing the Trans-Saharan. Lieutenant Colonel Paul Flatters became the head of this expedition. However, on 7 February 1881, the members of the expedition were massacred, a tragedy that had a very negative impact on public opinion. For the next thirty years, the Trans-Saharan railway remained only a vision. La Société d'Études du Transafricain, created in 1912, revived an interest in this project. In the interwar decades, the project reemerged; numerous brochures were printed and many speeches were given to promote the railway across the Sahara Desert. Édouard de Warren, the deputy from the department of Meurthe et-Moselle and president of the Sub-Commission of the Trans-Saharan in the Parliament, gave this idea widespread publicity. French and Algerian Chambers of Commerce also supported the venture. The Société actively promoted this endeavor and as a result, on 7 July 1928, the Minister of Public Works approved a law to create a new organization in charge of the railway connecting North

---


34 Many documents and brochures were published on the subject of the Trans-Saharan in the 1920s. See, for example, A. Fock, _Le chemin de fer transsaharien: Tracé. Construction. Exploitation_ (Paris: Société d'Éditions Géographiques, Maritimes et Coloniales, 1929); Ministère des travaux publics, _Organisme d'études du chemin de fer transsaharien. Carte d'ensemble des tracés en réduction_ (Paris: Service géographique de l'armée, 1929); B. Delabeye, _Il faut faire le Transsaharien d'urgence: C'est le seul vrai remède au chômage et à la crise économique_ (Moulins: Impr. Fernand Bosset, ca. 1933); B. Delabeye, _Le transsaharien et l'avenir de la viticulture_ (Moulins: Impr. Fernand Bosset, ca. 1933).
and Western Africa (Organisme d'Études d'un chemin de fer Trans-Saharien) under the leadership of Monsieur Maître-Devallon, a chief engineer of Ponts et Chaussées.

In the 1930s, after conducting many studies, the Organisme placed in circulation an elaborate report for key figures in the French transportation system. The report by Maître-Devallon highlighted the advantages of the Trans-Saharan and presented many arguments in favor of the project. French officials indeed gave the report close attention: for instance, the Association des Grands Ports Français discussed this document during a meeting on 3 March 1939, which more than fifty people attended. During the debates, one of the participants argued that the railway connecting western and northern Africa was of great importance for French strategic interests and military security. The debates highlighted the most attractive aspects of the plan: the railway promised to bring agricultural prosperity to the region. The railway would make possible the cultivation of cotton, and the profits from its sale would reimburse quickly the costs of railway construction. The French would also build an irrigation system using the Niger River and would transform the area into a most prosperous region. (By 1929, the first hydroelectric dams had already been constructed on the river.) During this meeting, a question was raised about how to ensure the necessary quantity of water for locomotives; the answer was to introduce a new type of modern locomotive, the diesel-electric locomotive.

The promises of the new railway were breathtaking. The Trans-Saharan would transform the Sudan into a thriving oasis or into what Egypt was for the British and had been for the Roman Empire. In the middle of the African continent, the agricultural paradise of prosperity and abundance was to flourish; according to such utopian prospects, the benefits of the new railway would be fantastic. The railway would provide a

---

35 Centre d'Archives Historiques de la SNCF, Le Mans [hereafter CA-SNCF], 505 LM 630/4. 9662 (1938–1939).
36 Ibid.
fast and easy connection with the Sudan, a country otherwise isolated from the Mediterranean Sea. The new railway would put the resources of the Sudan within easy reach of the French, otherwise leaving its resources inaccessible to them. This grandiose design promised to make the Sudan the supplier of cotton and other desirable crops. Several million hectares of land would be utilized and would create agricultural prosperity. The number of cattle would be tripled. The production of rice would boom. Millet, cotton, rice, maize, cotton, groundnut, sisal, tobacco, henna, manioc, hemp, indigo, bananas, and other crops would thrive.\textsuperscript{37} The imagination of the progenitors of this project envisioned no boundaries. In the 1930s, in a world badly hit by the Depression, fearful of brutal dictatorships, and in a state of profound uncertainty about its present and future, the Trans-Saharan was the key to paradise. But France would have to pay a hefty bill to build paradise.

So high was the cost of the project that the Minister of Finances disapproved it. Interestingly enough, in 1932, many of his colleagues, including the Minister of Public Works, were ready to approve the project. The cost of the railway construction was 660,000 francs for one kilometer (the estimated cost included trains and supporting equipment); the length of the Trans-Saharan was over two thousand kilometers.\textsuperscript{38} The entire affair stalled. Between 1932 and 1939, numerous additional projects were drawn up, yet none received financing and passed into law and it was only during Vichy that the plan was authorized.

In Vichy France, the construction of the Trans-Saharan or \textit{Méditerranée-Niger} as it was now called became one of the regime's pet projects.\textsuperscript{39} The Law of 22 March 1941 authorized the construction of the railway Méditerranée-Niger starting from Bouafra and continuing through Béchar, Kenadsa, Beni-Abbès,

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} Bejui, \textit{Les chemins de fer de la France d'outre-mer}, vol. 2, 240.
and Adrar. In Tassit, the railway split and reached its final destinations, Segou and Niamey. The railway was, therefore, to connect Bouarfa with Tassit in Niger and fulfill the blueprints from the 1929 Maître-Devallon report. This project was begun to boost the morale of a nation that had been defeated and it became a project of "National Renewal." The railway line between the Mediterranean and Niger was described as "a grave necessity," which was "already late being built." The integrity of the French possessions in Africa was endangered by the fact that 2,500 kilometers of the Sahara Desert divided the two domains of the French empire. After deliberation, a decision was made to construct the shortest and least expensive railway. The blueprint showed 1,500 kilometers of railway that were to be built through the Sahara Desert; overall, 3,500 kilometers of railway line were to be constructed in Africa. The length of the proposed track in Africa was, therefore, seven times more than the railway line between Paris and Lyon. Construction was described as relatively "easy"; the only challenge was the need to use ties made of steel or reinforced concrete. On the blueprints, diesel motors and electrification would allow trains on the new line to cross 1,200 kilometers of the Sahara without making a stop.

Even though the resources of the SNCF (Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer) were very limited, the project received much publicity. A number of articles appeared in the French press, including an eight-page piece in L'Illustration. The article "La Méditerranée-Niger" gave details of the project to the railway workers in Renseignements Hebdomadaires SNCF, a

---

40 Now known as Béchar, the city was called Colomb-Béchar in this period.
42 CA-SNCF, "La Méditerranée-Niger," Renseignements Hebdomadaires SNCF, recueil de notes officielles, professionnelles et sociales à l'usage du personnel, no. 25, 6 février 1942, 21–23.
43 R. Chenevier, "Le Transsaharien."
weekly bulletin designed to inform French railway workers about vitally important developments in the SNCF. Jean Berthelot, the Secretary of State for Communications, visited Africa to open the first section of this railway. The Third Republic might have fallen, but the pompous launching of colonial railways continued. On 8 February 1941, the construction of the first 160 kilometers of the section between Bouarfa and Kenadsa began.

The project was expensive: the minimum construction costs were projected to be approximately thirty-five to forty-five million francs. In 1941, the SNCF was able to provide only 120,000 francs. The difference between the cost of the project and actual sum allocated for the railway construction was appalling. Although it looked attractive on paper, the project ran into numerous difficulties in its execution. One obstacle was the impossibility of using powerful locomotives imported from the United States; following the French collapse, these locomotives remained in the possession of the Allies. Only a fraction of the railway was built, the one between Bouarfa and Oujda. Very limited traffic appeared on one small section on 15 January 1942. In 1944, all construction stopped due to lack of financial support. The Trans-Saharan was never finished, and in 1945 the project received final rejection. It was remarkable that the construction of the Trans-Saharan began in the "dark years" of French history when exceptionally few resources were available. In the midst of the grave situation of Vichy, the railway across the Sahara Desert strikes a very utopian chord. Indeed, right next to the celebratory rhetoric of the new railway, a reader of Renseignements Hebdomadaires SNCF finds articles on how to substitute sugar in a diet, how to plant vegetables, and how to cut down on the use of paper.

45 Le Souef, Première partie, 1–2.
There was an enormous gap between the representations of the railway in French media and the realities of its construction. In his memoirs, Paul Le Soeuf describes his participation in the construction of the railway.\textsuperscript{47} Le Soeuf was in his thirties when he demobilized from the army in August 1940. He secured a job in the Service Matériel et Traction even though, as he confessed, he did not know anything about steam trains. On 2 April 1942, he departed from Oran and began his journey to the heart of the African continent. He perceived the voyage as dangerous: the memories of the massacres that had happened before haunted him. Upon arrival in Béchar, he was introduced to the chief of the base. He described the poor, if not miserable, appearance of the facilities where employees lived in barracks made of dry clay and wood. The "brave" employees of the SNCF, including its engineers, who were used to modern comfort, slept in their offices. Restroom facilities were most primitive.\textsuperscript{48}

Le Soeuf portrays numerous problems when building and operating the railway.\textsuperscript{49} The climate was extremely difficult, and the heat was brutal. Most work was done by bare hands. (In fact, the article in \textit{L'Illustration} revealed the use of manual labor without reliance on machinery.) Disagreements happened among the workers (defined as "éléments si disparates") as described in one official report.\textsuperscript{50} The document reproduced in Le Soeuf's memoir mentions racial tensions at the site as well.\textsuperscript{51} Sand storms were detrimental to working locomotives as sand created additional friction in moving parts.\textsuperscript{52} During the winter, rare but severe snowstorms stalled traffic.\textsuperscript{53} Traveling conditions were

\textsuperscript{47} Le Souef, Première partie, 7.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 8.
\textsuperscript{49} Paul Le Souef, Deuxième partie, 28
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 33.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., an insert between 33 and 34. A letter from Monsieur Lesouef-Mottais, the Chief of the Bureau Traction to Monsieur Mielle, the Chief Engineer, Oujda, mentions that one of the officials armed himself and chased after a person whom he considered an opponent.
\textsuperscript{52} Le Souef, Deuxième partie, 28.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 38.
challenging: bed bugs and lice proliferated in the North African climate and were not just a serious nuisance to passengers, but triggered epidemics of typhus that killed some newcomers. The memoirs of Le Soeuf contain disturbing photos of derailments, including the catastrophe of September and October 1942. In addition, many foreigners, mostly Spaniards, Jews, and deported Communists, were sent to work on the construction of the Trans-Saharan. Peter Gaida portrays the tragic story of the construction of the railway. Workers, many of whom succumbed to diseases, used the term "hell" to describe their experiences. Claims that the construction of the railway was a way to hide and to rescue French human and material resources from the Nazis are unconvincing.

Even though Vichy never completed the Trans-Saharan railway, the publicity campaign for this project became an important part of the rhetoric of "national revival" and "national revolution." The blueprints of the Mediterranean-Niger railway promised to transform the Sudan into a thriving country. E. A. Schefer was the artist responsible for the drawings in L'Illustration and Renseignements Hebdomadaires SNCF. A reader of L'Illustration could see a powerful diesel locomotive crossing the Sahara Desert. The caption under one of the images

54 Ibid., 30–31.
55 Ibid., an insert of seven photos between pages 41–42, and an insert of three photos between 43–44.
56 Peter Gaida, "Camps de travail sous Vichy: Les groupes de travailleurs étrangers: GTE en France et en Afrique du Nord" (Thèse en histoire, Universités Paris-1 et Brême, 2008). Refugees from Central Europe and from Spain after the Civil War were forced to work as a condition of receiving political asylum according to Deladier's immigration laws of the late 1930s. After the collapse of the Third Republic, more than 8,000 foreigners worked in civil labor camps in North Africa. Due to hard working conditions and hunger, many did not survive until the Allied liberation of Africa.
57 Bejui and his co-authors consider the project in this light, that is, as a way to redirect French material and human resources away from the Nazis. The book mentions this interpretation only once in a single sentence without further elaboration or examples. Bejui, Les chemins de fer de la France d'outre-mer, vol. 2, 241.
describes it as "the cargo of the desert," while another drawing depicts the interior of the locomotive of the diesel train. Propelling the train across the desert seems effortless. It is ironic, though, that along with representations of modern technological marvels one can see the photographs of workers building the railway literally with their bare hands. There is, of course, the very impressive map of the Trans-Saharan crossing the Sahara desert. In Renseignements Hebdomadaires SNCF, the images juxtapose the native population, stone walls, local fishermen, and, at the center of the images, the modern diesel locomotive (Figure 2). The presence of the modern locomotive in the middle of the Sahara Desert is a statement of how modern technology was meant to transform the French Empire, a promise that was rarely fulfilled.

Figure 2: Drawings by E. A. Schefer of the Trans-Saharan Railway and Environ for Renseignements Hebdomadaires SNCF.

Conclusion

The publicity campaigns promoting colonial railways played an important role in shaping representations of French imperialism. The construction of the Trans-Saharan railway during the Vichy regime, a project which was never completed,

---

58 R. Chenevier, "Le Transsaharien." Images are signed by E. A. Schefer.
allowed the French state to highlight the rhetoric of "national renewal" and invoke a very attractive if utopian vision of transforming some African colonies into the granary of the French empire. Such projects created and reinforced a set of new and existing mythologies about the French empire. The French saw the blueprints of the Mediterranean-Niger railway on the pages of *L'Illustration* and other publications; indeed, many French felt pride and excitement that France brought "civilization" and modern technology to Africa. The images of the Pont Faidherbe in Senegal—both beautiful and deceptive—conveyed their own cheerful story of the French presence in Senegal. Many French were not aware of the petty realities behind the glorious images. Besides, as Roland Barthes wrote, the importance of text declines in the epoch of modernity because "the image no longer *illuminates* the words; it is now the words which, structurally, are parasitic on the image . . . it is not the image which comes to elucidate or 'realize' the text, but the latter which comes to sublimate, patheticize or rationalize the image."  

The images of French railways represented an attractive facade of the French empire, and, for many ordinary French, the empire itself became a captivating image. This image appeared to be so self evident, so alluring, and so eloquent that it replaced the necessity to learn what actually was happening in the French colonies. The representations of colonial railways contributed to the mythologies of the "French civilizing mission" and influenced the French imagination for many years.

---