ABSTRACT  This article highlights a moment in the history of French West Africa when violence was both ubiquitous and forbidden. During the interwar period, French reformers pushed for the elimination of the routine use of violence by colonial administrators. The intervention of activist journalists and human rights groups put pressure on colonial policy makers to finally bring administrative practice in line with imperial rhetoric. Local administrators, however, felt that such meddling interfered with their ability to govern effectively. A case of torture and murder by French functionaries in the Ivory Coast village of Ougiédoumé shows how struggles over antiviolence reform played out from the ground up.

KEYWORDS  colonialism, French West Africa, interwar, violence, administration

On the night of April 12, 1933, four gardes de cercle—African employees charged with carrying out the orders of the French administration—disembarked from their canoes in the village of Ougiédoumé in Ivory Coast. Their mission was to find two local notables who had been accused of insubordination, Anona Diéhouo and Obissi Ibo, and bring them to the district officer. The gardes, who were unarmed, found Ibo and ordered him to accompany them to the district headquarters. Ibo resisted, but they managed to wrestle him onto his belly. They were attempting to tie him up when dozens of young men from the village, alerted by the cries of Ibo and his wife, swarmed out of their huts wielding sticks and machetes, singing war songs. The gardes were then joined by one of their colleagues who had been stationed at the village chief’s hut to prevent just such unrest, increasing their small force to five. Even so, they were vastly outnumbered and were soon overwhelmed. Three of the gardes managed to escape to their boat, but two others were less fortunate. They were struck down by the machetes and dragged to the village chief’s courtyard. There, as they lay gravely wounded, the men and women of Ougiédoumé danced around them, spit on them, threw dirt and excrement in their wounds, and urinated on them. By the time French administrators arrived on the scene the following
morning, the village was nearly deserted. The two gardes lay on the ground, half naked, in a cloud of stinging flies. One was unconscious but would eventually recover. The other, whose name was Gobi Koné, died within hours.1

If this murder was horrific, the French response was perhaps more so. On the morning of April 13, the district officer of Grand-Bassam, Toussaint Casanova, organized a manhunt for the villagers who had fled into the bush.2 Over the next few days the fugitives were apprehended and returned to Oguiédoumé, where they were interrogated and imprisoned. The prisoners were chained, beaten, and threatened with death, sometimes enduring entire days without food or water. Women were stripped and struck on the genitals by gardes.3 One man was force-fed red peppers.4 Hearing “public rumors” of the mistreatment of subjects, Lieutenant-Governor Joseph-François (also known as Dieudonné) Reste, chief of the colony of Ivory Coast, ordered an inquiry into Casanova’s actions, prompting a spirited counterattack from Casanova.5 While the two administrators exchanged accusations of insubordination and incompetence, Oudié Kouadio, Anona Assia, Bessou Mongra, and Anona Diéhou died of their wounds.6

Violent incidents like the one at Oguiédoumé were remarkably common in French colonial Africa. Quotidian physical violence committed by civilian agents of the state played an essential role in colonial administration, but it has often been overshadowed by larger-scale and more politically salient forms of violence. Scholars have focused on the extreme violence perpetrated by European armies during the wars of conquest and national liberation that bookended the colonial period, which was often characterized by tactics of terror and torture.7 Others have highlighted the insidious economic or symbolic violence that

1. Archives Nationales du Sénégal (hereafter ANS), 5C/120: Cheron to Reste, June 9, 1933; Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer (hereafter CAOM), AOF 5G/13: Méjean to Casanova, May 13, 1933; ANS, 5C/78: Procès-verbal d’Anona Diéhou, Apr. 19, 1933; ANS, 5C/78: Procès-verbal d’Afoma Touré, Apr. 26, 1933.
4. CAOM, AOF 5G/13: Procès-verbal de Pascal Anouma, May 23, 1933.
5. ANS, 5C/120: Cheron to Reste, June 9, 1933; CAOM, 61COL567: Le Lieutenant-Gouverneur to M. le Gouverneur Général de l’AOF, May 22, 1933; ANS, 5C/78: Méjean to Casanova, Apr. 14, 1933; CAOM, AOF 5G/13: L’Inspecteur des Affaires Administratives to M. le Gouverneur, May 2, 1933; ANS, 5C/78: Procès-verbal d’Obissi Ibo. In his interrogation, probably conducted under torture or the threat of torture, Ibo claimed that he had suffered his wounds not when colonial employees abused him but when his own son accidentally hit him, which contradicts testimony obtained under more believable circumstances. ANS, 5C/78: Procès-verbal d’Obissi Ibo.
6. ANS, 5C/120: Rapport médical sur le décent Oudie Kouadio, undated; ANS, 5C/120: Interview with “Kouamé,” May 16, 1933; ANS, 5C/120: Cheron to Reste, June 9, 1933.
7. Some examples include Elkins, Imperial Reckoning; Hull, Absolute Destruction; Brower, Desert Named Peace; Lazreg, Torture and the Twilight of Empire; Branche, La torture et l’armée; Cole, “Massacres and Their Historians”; and Neep, Occupying Syria.
perpetuated the power dynamics of imperialism. Yet the routine somatic violence committed by civilian administrators and their African adjuncts sustained the colonial state not only during exceptional moments such as conquests or uprisings but also during periods of ostensibly normalized and rational administration. Restoring everyday violence to its vital role in colonial governance in interwar French West Africa (Afrique-Occidentale Française; AOF) raises important questions about the characteristics of the French colonial state.

Scholars do not dispute the fundamentally violent nature of colonialism in Africa, but what that meant for the nature of the state is less clear. Crawford Young has characterized the colonial state in Africa as *bula matari*, the crusher of rocks, whose hegemony pervaded all elements of colonial society. Jeffrey Herbst, on the other hand, has argued that the use of violence indicates that colonial states failed to construct the institutions necessary to exercise sovereignty effectively, implying weakness rather than strength. This institutional weakness limited the kinds of state activities colonial administrations were capable of, and Frederick Cooper has observed that “coercive power was more effective at staging raids and terrorizing resisters than at routinizing authority throughout a territory.” In AOF the state consisted of a numerically skeletal and socially superficial administration, lacking robust institutions integrated with society, and administrators had few means of controlling populations. Brute force was often the only tool at hand for ensuring the obedience of subjects, and functionaries resorted to it readily. Violence was not just tolerated but necessary to maintain the dominance of a weak colonial state.

During the interwar years the routine use of violence in the colonies came under increased scrutiny. Some French journalists, rights activists, and lawmakers took a reformist stance toward colonialism that, while generally remaining procolonial, envisioned a more modern and humane empire. This new humanist position saw violence as a harm to be eliminated rather than an unfortunate side effect of the civilizing process. Criticism and increased visibility prompted some senior administrators, out of self-interest if not always moral sentiment, to make gestures toward a more conscientious colonialism. This new administrative attitude was exemplified in Minister of the Colonies Albert...

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8. Some wide-ranging examples are Farmer, “Anthropology of Structural Violence”; Thomas, Violence, Military Encounters, and Colonialism, xviii; Thomas, Violence and Colonial Order; Daughton, “ILO Expertise,” 93; Kalman, French Colonial Fascism, 10–12; and Burrell, States of Marriage, 10–11.
12. For the reformist attitudes of the interwar years, see Wilder, French Imperial Nation-State; Cooper, “Colonial Humanism”; Liauzu, Histoire de l’anticolonialisme; Thomas, French Empire between the Wars; and Chafer and Sackur, French Colonial Empire.
Sarraut’s policy of *mise en valeur*, which emphasized the economic and cultural development of the colonies for the benefit of the colonized as well as the colonizers.\(^{13}\) This ideological development took the form of a hierarchical conflict within the French colonial state as local administrators retained a heavy-handed approach to colonial governance informed more by the practical exigencies of administration than by reformist concerns. The tension between the routine use of violence and the political imperative of nonviolence marked a turning point in how French administrators thought about colonial governance.

The media played a central role in formulating and popularizing a new humanist approach toward empire. If a shift in political and moral values was one ingredient of antiviolence reform, another factor was a change in how information circulated through imperial space. The interwar years saw a marked increase in the volume of investigative and activist journalism condemning the excesses of colonialism, removing control of information from isolated administrators and the insular colonial bureaucracy and introducing it into the public sphere. The atmosphere of public interest generated sources about daily colonial violence that had heretofore gone more or less unnoted. Journalists and human rights organizations reported colonial abuses to a European audience in an attempt to shame administrations into addressing some of the more brutal effects of rule.\(^{14}\) Colonial administrations, in turn, produced investigation reports and circulars condemning violence in an attempt to hold their administrators accountable, while subjects took advantage of new opportunities to address petitions and complaints to a more responsive administration.\(^{15}\) The outsized attention paid to the events at Oguié doumé was in large part due to the efforts of a communist agitator named Zimmerman who printed a newspaper, the *Trait-d’Union*, in the Ivorian town of Grand-Bassam. His work made Oguié doumé a topic of heated debate in French left-wing and human rights circles, in the National Assembly, and throughout the colonial hierarchy in both France and West Africa.\(^{16}\) Media reporting brought the empire home to the metropole, putting events in far-flung corners of the globe at the center of French political and social discourse.\(^{17}\)

While the interest in the suffering of colonial subjects produced a flurry of activity, reform looked much different on the ground than in Paris or Dakar.

\(^{13}\) See Sarraut, *La mise en valeur*.
\(^{14}\) Daughton, "Behind the Imperial Curtain"; Thomas, *French Empire between the Wars*, 155–58.
\(^{15}\) For examples of the numerous petitions, complaints, and investigations relating to administrative violence, see CAOM, AOF 5G/49; CAOM, 61COL530; CAOM, 61COL540; CAOM, 61COL603; and CAOM, AOF 17G/76.
\(^{16}\) For an analysis of how the political meanings attributed to daily violence are contested, see Cole, "Anti-Semitism and the Colonial Situation."
\(^{17}\) On colonial scandals, see Dirks, *Scandal of Empire*. 

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Despite the rhetoric of modernity and rationality, colonial rule was undergirded by the penal code called the *indigéнат* that empowered administrators to rule by decree. The *indigéнат* gave administrators an arsenal of tools to ensure obedience, the harshest of which was the imprisonment of subjects for up to fifteen days without due process. As Gregory Mann has pointed out, the *indigéнат* supported a state based on arbitrary coercion rather than the rule of law while allowing administrators to use talk of reform as “rhetorical cover” for their continued reliance on violence. In the aftermath of the events at Oguïédoumé, the administration pursued criminal charges against both African and European participants. While twenty-nine of the villagers were sentenced to jail, a combination of lenient sentencing and amnesty provisions allowed the Europeans implicated in the violence not only to avoid criminal sanctions but also to continue working in the administration. A code meant to give administrators arbitrary power over subjects coupled with a legal system designed to protect them from criminal prosecution left the colonial state with no way to enforce nonviolence, even when it wanted to.

This article highlights a particular moment in the history of the French Empire when violence was both ubiquitous and forbidden. The foundational discrepancy between a civilizing ideology and the harmful effects of colonialism had been held in suspense, and the indefinite avoidance or delay of its resolution was itself part of imperial discourse and practice. Such rhetoric allowed the French to root ostensibly modern political authority in arbitrary violence. But the intervention of reformist journalists and human rights groups during the interwar period put pressure on colonial administrators to finally bring practice into line with ideology. If Daniel Neep is correct in arguing that violence need not necessarily be opposed to modern, rational governance, the conditions under which the two can or cannot coexist are themselves products of historical debate. The case of Oguïédoumé gives insight into how such questions about what a modern empire was, and what it should be, played out on the ground.

The more self-aware sources that entered the archive during this period—sources that confronted rather than obscured the shameful aspects of colonialism—provide historians with glimpses into what Benjamin Claude Brower has called a “hidden second plot, marked by syncopation, displacement,

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18. Mann, *From Empires to NGOs*, 45.
19. This approach follows Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler’s call to put “contradiction at the center of the colonial state’s operative mode” (*Tensions of Empire*, 20).
20. Chakrabarty sees the issue of avoiding the fulfillment of liberal promises in the colonies as a problem of temporality, “not yet” as opposed to “now” (* Provincializing Europe*, 8); for the civilizing mission, see Conklin, *Mission to Civilize*.
and the echoes of other dramas.\textsuperscript{22} The drama of Oguiédoumé reveals geographic and social spaces over which the French claimed but could not exercise sovereignty, leaving room for interwoven and oblique narratives that challenged the colonial logic by their very existence.\textsuperscript{23} It is precisely these alternative social and political configurations, these dynamic societies at the heart of the French state but outside its control, that administrators feared. The threat and use of physical violence lay behind French efforts to reduce the complexity of colonial society into a simplistic binary of domination and submission, undergirding both discursive and material strategies for establishing difference.\textsuperscript{24} In the final analysis, the relationship of colonizer and colonized was not only legal, racial, or cultural but also physical.

Violent incidents between the French administration and its subjects were often excluded from the historical record because they were seen as having no history. They were attributed to the irrational impulses of primitive peoples or simply folded into the routine operation of the colonial state. The scandal of Oguiédoumé would have shared the fate of what are doubtless hundreds of similar forgotten events had it not been for a relatively conscientious senior administrator under pressure to reduce violence and a crusading communist reporter waging a quixotic battle against the abuses of capitalism. The resulting sources may be self-interested, but they are certainly copious and detailed, and they mark a moment when the French administration was forced to grapple with the implications of a modern imperial state rooted in physical force. Using the administration’s investigative reports, oral testimony collected from African and European participants, and articles published in activist newspapers in Africa and France, it is possible to reconstruct the story behind the violence.

\textbf{Chief of the Night}

The story of the conflict at Oguiédoumé began with a failed uprising in 1917. During a period of widespread revolt in AOF, the chief of Oguiédoumé, Obissi Ibo, led a minor insurrection against French authority, which was quickly put down with the help of a powerful African notable named Julien Don. The

\textsuperscript{22} Brower, \textit{Desert Named Peace}, 93.
\textsuperscript{23} Timothy Mitchell has pointed out that the history of violence against small communities can often be distorted by those producing the sources: “The original act of violence is therefore easily lost, and writing about it becomes an almost impossible effort to reconstruct events out of fragments and recover the voices of the missing” (\textit{Rule of Experts}, 153). While keeping in mind that the history of small-scale violence is especially vulnerable to assimilation into the grand narratives of the powerful, the traces they leave in the historical record can still provide hints about lived colonial experience.
\textsuperscript{24} For a discussion of this binary in the context of conquest and pacification, see Brower, \textit{Desert Named Peace}, 14–19.
French administration replaced Ibo as village chief with his ally and adviser Anona Diéhouo, while Don was presented with an honorific rifle for his trouble.\textsuperscript{25} The French considered the issue closed, but the rivalry between Ibo and Don came into play fourteen years later over the building of a road.\textsuperscript{26}

In 1931 Julien Don organized the construction of a road between his hometown of Akoré and the town of Alépé some twenty kilometers away. All the villages in the district, including Oguiédoumé, consented to contribute workers. As the construction progressed, a wealthy notable of Oguiédoumé, M’Bédé Obrou, asked for and received permission from Don to temporarily reassign the villagers working on the road to his fisheries. Obrou, who was perhaps the richest of Oguiédoumé’s 425 inhabitants, owned the village’s only two motorboats and controlled much of the fishing industry. After the fishing was completed, none of the workers returned to work on the road. Don held Obrou responsible and in retaliation forbade him to use the dock of Akoré for his boats and imposed a toll on any inhabitant of Oguiédoumé who used the new road. These measures had their effect on Obrou, who gave Don two thousand francs in restitution for the lost labor. But Obrou could not get the rest of the village, and specifically village chief Anona Diéhouo, to support Don’s project. Don removed Diéhouo as chief and replaced him with Obrou, whom he could count on for support.\textsuperscript{27} Though this change failed to secure the backing of Oguiédoumé for Don, it did divide the village into two opposing factions. A group of young, ambitious men with an eye to new economic opportunities supported Obrou, and by extension Don, while most of the village stayed loyal to Diéhouo. There were thus two rival chiefs in Oguiédoumé: Obrou, who had the official sanction of the colonial state, and Diéhouo, known by supporters as the “chief of the night,” whose power flourished where French eyes could not see.\textsuperscript{28}

Meanwhile, Don continued to rise in the French administration. In late 1931 he was made canton chief, a powerful position for an African.\textsuperscript{29} Don’s new position may have given him the influence to propose a radical solution to the problem of insubordination in Oguiédoumé. Early in 1933 he came up with a plan to relocate the entire village to the edge of the Alépé road. Don undoubtedly thought that he could exert control more easily from closer proximity.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{25} CAOM, AOF 5G/13: Julien Don to M. le Gouverneur-Général de l’AOF, May 17, 1933; CAOM, AOF 5G/13: Inspecteur des Affaires Administratives to Lieutenant-Gouverneur de la Côte d’Ivoire, Apr. 16, 1933.

\textsuperscript{26} ANS, 5C/120: Cheron to Reste, June 9, 1933.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{28} ANS, 5C/120: Interview with Se Guiégui, Apr. 24, 1933; CAOM, AOF 5G/13: Inspecteur des Affaires Administratives to Lieutenant-Gouverneur de la Côte-d’Ivoire, Apr. 16, 1933.

\textsuperscript{29} ANS, 5C/120: Cheron to Reste, June 9, 1933.

\textsuperscript{30} ANS, 5C/120: Reste to Casanova, Apr. 28, 1933.
ordered Obrou to ask for authorization to move the village, offering as justification a highly exaggerated death rate and falsely attributing it to unsanitary conditions.\textsuperscript{31} This was a pretext to gain French support for moving the village, and it worked. Casanova granted permission to relocate the village to the new site.\textsuperscript{32} The usual hierarchy, where policy is assumed to be formulated in a general way at the top and implemented at the local level, was reversed.

Moving Oguiédoumé would increase Don’s authority over the villagers. In fact, the geographic accessibility of the village was the most important issue at stake in the power struggle between Don and the notables of Oguiédoumé.\textsuperscript{33} In its original location, Oguiédoumé must indeed have been difficult to control. It was located away from any roads and was conveniently accessible only by canoe, since the tiny harbor was too shallow for bigger boats.\textsuperscript{34} Diéhouo rallied his allies in opposition to the move, telling them that they would be forced to “work too hard” to build their houses and keep them in good order, to make palm oil, and to maintain and clean the road. It was better to stay in “tranquil isolation” in their current location where people rarely visited.\textsuperscript{35} Conversely, Don had experienced firsthand the difficulties of controlling an inaccessible population in his failure to recruit workers for the construction of his road. The proposed site for the new village alongside the Alépé road was a mere five hundred meters from Don’s house.\textsuperscript{36}

One of Diéhouo’s allies, the deposed chief Obissi Ibo, was especially vocal in his opposition to the relocation, claiming that the village “fetishes” opposed the proposed move.\textsuperscript{37} Obrou requested support from the district administration, which posted the doomed garde Gobi Koné in Oguiédoumé to keep the peace. Ibo and his accomplices were not intimidated and continued to interfere with construction. Frustrated, Julien Don complained to Casanova, who summoned Ibo to the administrative headquarters at Grand-Bassam and asked him to quit making trouble. Ibo took no notice of this warning, or of a second one,

\textsuperscript{31} ANS, 5C/120: Casanova to Reste, May 21, 1933; ANS, 5C/78: Le Chef du Service de Santé to M. le Gouverneur de la Côte-d’Ivoire, May 28, 1933. Obrou claimed that over sixty people had died due to unsanitary conditions, while a French physician later claimed that only sixteen people had died of whooping cough, an affliction unrelated to sanitary conditions.
\textsuperscript{32} ANS, 5C/120: Casanova to Reste, May 21, 1933. For an account of the role of village relocation in Ivory Coast, see Weiskel, \textit{French Colonial Rule}, 21–26.
\textsuperscript{33} This recalls James Scott’s idea of “legibility” as a requirement for the control of populations (\textit{Seeing like a State}).
\textsuperscript{34} ANS, 5C/78: Procès-verbal d’Ankon Ahiman, Apr. 20, 1933; ANS, 5C/78: Le Chef du Service de Santé to M. le Gouverneur de la Côte-d’Ivoire, May 28, 1933.
\textsuperscript{35} ANS, 5C/120: Interview with Oguie N’Dougué, Apr. 20, 1933; ANS, 5C/120: Interview with Ankon Ahima, Apr. 24, 1933.
\textsuperscript{36} ANS, 5C/120: Reste to Casanova, Apr. 28, 1933.
\textsuperscript{37} CAOM, AOF 5G/13: Inspecteur des Affaires Administratives to Lieutenant-Gouverneur de la Côte-d’Ivoire, Apr. 16, 1933.
and finally Casanova sentenced him on March 23 to fifteen days in prison, the maximum penalty allowed under the indigénat. According to Mann, "What Was the Indigénat?"; ANS, 5C/120: Cheron to Reste, June 9, 1933.

38. Mann, "What Was the Indigénat?"; ANS, 5C/120: Cheron to Reste, June 9, 1933.

39. ANS, 5C/79: Procès-verbal de Celestin Kanga, May 5, 1933; ANS, 5C/79: Procès-verbal d’Obrou Sé, May 6, 1933; ANS, 5C/78: Procès-verbal d’Ogou Abié, May 8, 1933. In Casanova’s counterinvestigation, some of the interviewees claimed that Diéhouo and Ibo deceived them about the purpose of the collection, saying that the money would be used to support the "music" of the village. This testimony may have been obtained under torture and is convenient to Casanova’s cause, so it should be treated skeptically.

40. ANS, 5C/120: Dauriat to Reste, May 21, 1933; ANS, 5C/79: Le Village d’Oguiédomé du to Reste, undated.


With Ibo behind bars and the local administration firmly supporting Don and Obrou, Ibo’s ally Diéhouo decided to go over Casanova’s head to appeal directly to Lieutenant-Governor Reste, the top administrator in Ivory Coast. Diéhouo and several other men of Oguiédomé went to the town of Moossou, where they approached Celestin Kanga, assistant to a chief in a neighboring canton. Ibo had previously given Kanga three hundred francs and two bottles of gin in exchange for the promise of a letter detailing their grievances for the “great white commandant,” Lieutenant-Governor Reste, in Bingerville. Kanga asked for an additional two thousand francs, which he said were required by the French for their intervention (Kanga would later admit to “acting like an imbecile” and spending this money on gin). The money was collected from the inhabitants of Oguiédomé and given to Kanga, who had an accountant from Dahomey write a petition on behalf of the villagers. The petition complained that the chief of Oguiédomé, Obrou, “makes us miserable with his evil and persecutory actions,” adding diplomatically that “these things should never occur in a country that has a French government.” It pointed out that Obrou was supported by Don and Casanova, implicating them in the unjust and arbitrary actions against the villagers. The scene was being set for a confrontation between Don, Obrou, and Casanova, who supported moving the village, on one side, and Ibo, Diéhouo, and Reste, on the other.

Several days later Casanova formally summoned Diéhouo to repeat his instructions to stop hindering the construction of the new village. Instead of reporting to Casanova in Grand-Bassam, Diéhouo tore up his orders. Armed with Kanga’s letter, he decided to present himself with a delegation to the office of Lieutenant-Governor Reste in Bingerville on April 1. Diéhouo believed that the letter would surely buy the lieutenant-governor’s influence in the matter of moving the village, and indeed Reste’s office seemed sympathetic. After this visit Reste’s secretary telephoned Casanova to inform him that he should not punish...
Diéhouo for disobeying his summons, since he had seen the lieutenant-governor instead. Casanova, one assumes, was not pleased at the circumvention of his authority. Despite the instructions from the lieutenant-governor’s office, he insisted that Diéhouo, and Ibo, having been released from prison on April 7, see him in person.

To this end he sent Julien Don and four gardes to Oguiédomoné on April 12 to deliver a summons to both men. By the time they arrived at Oguiédomoné, situated at the edge of a lagoon and easily accessible only by water, night was falling fast. Don instructed his men to enter the village without weapons while he waited in his boat. When the gardes attempted to arrest Ibo, they found the villagers armed and ready to fight. The garde Gobi Koné, who joined his colleagues from his post in the village, fell almost immediately. Three of the gardes managed to escape to the boats, where they traveled with Don to the town of Akoré to pick up around 150 reinforcements. On their return, they found the village under the control of Ibo and Diéhouo’s men, who had driven Don and Obrou’s supporters away and then massed at the tiny harbor to prevent access. Diéhouo allegedly refused even to allow Don’s men to evacuate the wounded gardes, taunting: “If you are men, come and do battle with us. Even if a white man came, he could not enter Oguiédomoné.” Finding the village impregnable, Don went to Grand-Bassam, where he alerted Casanova of what had happened.

The morning after the incident, the village was abandoned. Many of the villagers who did not hide in the bush or in neighboring villages fled instead to Bingerville, where they went straight to the lieutenant-governor’s office and attempted to put themselves under his protection. This group included Diéhouo and Ibo, the leaders of the faction opposing the relocation. Thinking that they had secured the protection of “the great white commandant” Reste with twenty-three hundred francs and a letter, they found that they had overestimated their influence with the lieutenant-governor and had misjudged his relationship with Casanova. They must have been unpleasantly surprised when they were arrested and sent back to Casanova’s jurisdiction in Grand-Bassam and, for Diéhouo and three others, to their deaths.

The Administration in Crisis

In response to the murder of Gobi Koné, the French administration abandoned all semblance of procedure and restraint. Casanova mobilized a posse of men

42. ANS, 5C/120: Reste to Casanova, Apr. 28, 1933.
43. ANS, 5C/120: Interview with Julien Don, Apr. 19, 1933.
44. ANS, 5C/120: Cheron to Reste, June 9, 1933.
45. ANS, 5C/120: Reste to Brevié, June 16, 1933; ANS, 5C/120: Cheron to Reste, June 9, 1933.
from nearby villages and seminomadic groups (mostly Baoulé and Bété) in a massive manhunt for the people who had fled into the bush, an ad hoc measure that indicated a departure from standard practice. He telephoned and telegraphed neighboring districts to put his colleagues on the alert to capture and return fugitives.46 Once the suspects were in custody, they were tortured to obtain confessions. While this violence was most likely inflicted by African employees of the administration, two of Casanova’s French subordinates, Méjean and Roehm-Beretta, as well as canton chief Julien Don, were almost certainly present for some or all of the torture. Casanova himself may or may not have been present, but it is reasonable to assume that he knew what was going on, especially since his subordinates informed him of injuries sustained by the prisoners. As inept as Casanova was at administering his own district, he was very efficient at rounding up and torturing fugitives. The ability and willingness of Casanova to resort to such violent and exceptional measures suggest that the formal normative structure of the French administration, based theoretically in governance according to hierarchy and regulations, did not match realities on the ground.

When Lieutenant-Governor Reste suspected that Casanova’s administration was torturing prisoners, he undertook to establish the truth and reassert his authority. He initiated an extended inquiry conducted by the (theoretically) independent colonial inspection service. He personally toured the village to speak with participants in the events and ascertain the facts. He relentlessly pursued administrative and judicial sanctions against Casanova and his subordinates.47 His extraordinary efforts indicate that he was deeply invested in confronting a problem that he could have ignored or deflected.

Though torture in West Africa never attained the systematic and ritualistic character of torture during the Indochinese or Algerian wars, there is ample evidence that it was a routine part of the colonial experience.48 Incidents ranged from casual beatings to more imaginative and premeditated methods. Administrators, even in the rare cases when they were punished, almost never received more than a slap on the wrist.49 In a context in which violence and torture were routinely ignored or justified, Reste’s aggressive action against Casanova requires explanation. His enthusiastic response can be attributed to a concern

46. ANS, 5C/120: Dauriat to Commandant de Cercle des Lagunes, Apr. 26, 1933.
48. For the culture of torture in the French military, see Lazreg, Torture and the Twilight of Empire; Branche, La torture et l’armée; and Rejali, Torture and Democracy.
49. For examples of administrative torture in West Africa during the interwar period, see CAOM, AOF 5G/49; CAOM, 61COL530; CAOM, 61COL540; CAOM, 61COL603; and CAOM, AOF: 17G/76.
with maintaining hierarchy and obedience within the colonial administration, as well as the influence of humanist ideas highly critical of abuses of power in the colonies.

The reformist atmosphere of the interwar years exacerbated a tension inherent in the colonial administrative hierarchy between local administrators, colloquially known as “kings of the bush,” and their superiors. French attempts to map the theoretical framework of a unified and coherent state onto a complex reality with which it did not fit created a dissonance in which there was ample space for actors to operate outside their nominal roles. Senior administrators were anxious about the autonomy of their subordinates, while all administrators were anxious about the autonomy of their subjects. The exposure of such inherent tensions made it difficult for the French to smooth over the inconsistencies of their system to maintain the illusion of coherence and control.

Rather than presenting a united front in relation to their subjects, Reste and Casanova accused each other of having been the unwitting agents of African actors. In a letter to Casanova, Reste blamed the violence on “the stubbornness of a local administration, which, unconsciously, became the instrument of Julien Don.” He added that, if the plan to move the village had been carried out, the villagers would have become “nothing more or less than the slaves of Julien Don.” Casanova reversed the charge, claiming that it was the lieutenant-governor who had been tricked into supporting Ibo and Diéhouo: “It was always a matter of one group of inhabitants who were free to stay in Oguiédomé and who wanted to prevent the others from changing villages by any means. Incidentally, this group of inhabitants gained their objective because all the villagers were forced, per your orders, to return to Oguiédomé.”

Both administrators understood their actions not in terms of village politics but from the vantage point of the colonial hierarchy. For Casanova, his support or lack thereof for the relocation of the village was a minor point. He had no reason to favor one location over the other and probably genuinely thought that he was acquiescing to the villagers’ own desires in authorizing the move. After all, the village chief Obrou had approached Casanova for permission to move the village, and he maintained that it was up to each individual to decide whether to stay or go. It was only when Ibo and Diéhouo began to interfere with

50. For one example of the use of this common phrase, see Deschamps, Roi de la brousse.
51. For an important analysis of how colonial states could not penetrate and control large segments of indigenous society, see Bayly, Empire and Information.
52. ANS, 5C/120: Reste to Casanova, Apr. 28, 1933.
54. ANS, 5C/120: Casanova to Reste, May 21, 1933.
the building of the new village, and later disregarded his summonses, that he took action against these acts of insubordination.\textsuperscript{55}

The events of April 12 must have come as a shock to Casanova. Why would most of a village attack unarmed guards sent to carry out a simple summons? He found his explanation in the breakdown of the administrative chain of command. Casanova complained that, after having been received and welcomed under “extraordinary conditions” by the lieutenant-governor’s office, the villagers considered themselves free of the authority of the district officer and felt that they could do “anything at all” to his emissaries.\textsuperscript{56} In Casanova’s view, this subversion of administrative discipline, encouraged by Lieutenant-Governor Reste, had led to the murder. He accused Reste of siding with criminals: “As for me, it is above all to the victims, to the poor gardes de cercle, that I give my pity. They accomplished their duty, they went without arms, without provocation; one of them died in honorable service, the others were gravely wounded. . . . It is these atrocious crimes which are at the center of the Oguiéédoumé affair. . . . Your opinion seems different.”\textsuperscript{57}

Reste’s opinion was indeed different. Casanova was motivated primarily by the maintenance of administrative power by any means, but Reste was influenced by a new reforming impulse reverberating throughout the empire that prioritized the elimination of colonial violence, especially when committed by administrators. The new imperative to eliminate the use of force in colonial governance originated in France and made its way down the chain of command by way of circulars directing administrators to crack down on what was seen as an “unprecedented number” of violent incidents committed in the name of the state.\textsuperscript{58} In a circular from 1930 ordering his administrators to refrain from using violence against subjects, AOF governor-general Jules Carde outlined the substantial shift he envisioned: “The authority of the European leadership rests henceforth, except in extraordinary circumstances, not on the prestige of arms

\begin{footnotes}
\item[55] Ibid.
\item[56] CAOM, AOF 5G/13: Note en réponse à la lettre du 16 juin 1933 de M. Casanova, undated. These “extraordinary conditions” seem to have been that the governor received “14 of them in his own office, on the second floor of the palace, which has never been seen in all indigenous memory.”
\item[57] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
but on the qualities of a paternal administration.” 59 Throughout the 1930s senior administrators increasingly frustrated with the persistence of violent tactics despite repeated prohibitions used ever-harder language to condemn violence, emphasizing that administrators found guilty of abuses would suffer criminal and administrative sanctions. 60

Reste was under the influence of the new antiviolence discourse, but the weak link between local and central administration ensured that Casanova was not; hence his confusion at Reste’s unexpected departure from the convention of turning a blind eye to the violent tactics of colonial governance. His sense of bewilderment and betrayal was genuine: “I no longer found myself facing a superior wanting to establish in all sincerity the responsibility of each person, but facing an adversary, I would say even an enemy resolved to make me pay dearly for the audacity of having reminded him of something embarrassing.” 61

For district officers like Casanova, there was a perception that only functionaries intimately involved with indigenous populations understood the art of colonial governance. Local administrators saw central and metropolitan officials as out of touch with the realities on the ground, and their efforts at control and reform as hindrances to effective administration. One champion of this view was the colonial theoretician Robert Delavignette, who served in several West African colonies before becoming director of the Ecole Nationale de la France d’Outre-Mer in Paris in 1937, where he emphasized local knowledge and practical experience in the training of new colonial cadres. For Delavignette, only the district officers possessed the sensitivity to local conditions required for the “real” work of colonialism. He dismissed the “so-called higher administration, which has lost all human feeling in a pedantry of regulations.” 62 Colonies, then, functioned not as a hierarchy in which local administrators executed the vision of their superiors but as decentralized despotisms, “a kind of federation of districts, which their officers rule as masters according to their whim.” 63

It is this dysfunctional, even antagonistic, relationship between district, colony, and ultimately the AOF federation and France that was at the root of the breakdown in communication between Casanova and Reste. It also provided an

61. CAOM, AOF 5G/13: Note en réponse à la lettre du 16 juin 1933 de M. l’Administrateur Casanova, undated.
opening for the inhabitants of Oguiédom to turn the administration against itself. The very weakness of the connection between district and colony that Delavignette celebrates enabled the two factions in Oguiédom to mobilize two administrators in the service of opposing local interests.

The villagers of Oguiédom took advantage of the heightened tension between reformist rhetoric and practical exigencies during the interwar period. The priorities of governance were different at the levels of the colony and the district. Casanova’s main concern after the murder was the reestablishment of authority over his subjects. Violence, from his point of view, was simply a tool to reassert order over a situation that had gotten out of control. Reste, on the other hand, was under pressure of a different sort. As the lieutenant-governor of the colony, he was in closer contact with the governor-general of AOF in Dakar and with metropolitan officials. He was thus susceptible to European notions of nonviolence that Casanova could simply ignore. An empire based in humanist republican principles might have made sense in Paris or in the governor’s residence, but it translated uneasily to conditions on the ground.

It is clear from the continued use of force that local administrators like Casanova were not impressed either by liberal arguments or by personal threats. The presence of antiviolence circulars in the archives obscures the fact that much of the business of administration in the colonies was informal and left few material traces. Paperwork—the rules regulating its production, its dissemination, and its content, as well as its materiality—pushed certain ways of reporting that were more conducive to satisfying the technical and political requirements of the colonial state than to performing the actual work of governing. While administrators were required to submit regular reports to their superiors, these were often so sparse as to be virtually useless for providing actionable information, as Reste discovered when Casanova failed to report the mounting tensions in Oguiédom in the weeks preceding the violence. Delavignette illustrated the contempt of local administrators for paperwork in colonial administration with an anecdote about an official who “stuck departmental circulars in his trouser pockets before he had read them so as to have them handy when he had a free moment, but in the evening threw his trousers, soaked in the sweat of a day’s work, into the dirty-linen basket, and the circulars with them.”

Reste continually reminded Casanova of the senior administration’s many warnings against using violence, making specific reference to Minister of the Colonies Sarraut’s circular condemning the use of force following a scandal in which ten subjects died of asphyxiation in the West African colony of Soudan (what is now

64. For a discussion of paperwork, see Kafka, Demon of Writing.
65. Delavignette, Freedom and Authority, 7–8.
Given Casanova’s disregard for these circulars, one imagines that he was simply too busy to read them before they ended up sweat-soaked in his laundry heap.

Casanova’s indifference to instructions exposes the limitations of formal communication in colonial administration. Because procedural and practical requirements did not always coincide, rumor and hearsay were essential elements of colonial information networks. Colonial states relied heavily on informal channels and on local interpreters and intermediaries to assure the circulation of information and the functioning of the administration. The reliance on information networks outside administrative control left the state vulnerable to individuals who knew how to manipulate communication for their own benefit, above all those such as Julien Don with the linguistic and cultural fluency to navigate both European and African society. Local administrators like Casanova could also benefit from the thin lines of official communication to control what their superiors knew, enabling them to maintain their autonomy.

Rumor played a key role in exposing administrative violence since the perpetrators were unlikely to put their crimes into writing. A disturbing case that took place in the remote Nigerien outpost of N’Guigmi, in which several young military administrators tortured two Africans accused of slave trading by hanging them over an open fire, was discovered only because an officer’s wife mentioned the incident at a dinner party. Administrators were aware of and anxious about their lack of control over the flow of information. In the context of horrific violence against colonial subjects, Lieutenant-Governor Reste’s most emphatic complaint against Casanova was that he kept him in the dark about the volatile situation in his district both before and after the murder of April 12. He emphasized that he had heard about the murder of the garde Gobi Koné not through official channels but through “public rumor” on the wharf of the town of Port-Bouët. Similarly, he initiated the investigation into the administrators’ misconduct after hearing rumors of torture. He argued that it was impossible for Casanova not to have known the facts of his subordinates’ mistreatment of prisoners, since “everyone in Bassam knew them,” and reproached him for transmitting autopsy reports concluding that two victims, Assia and Diéhouo, had died of natural causes, when “it was common knowledge that these two

66. ANS, 5C/120: Reste to Casanova, May 6, 1933.
67. For a study of rumor in a subject population, see White, Speaking with Vampires; for a study of the relationship between colonial and indigenous information networks, see Bayly, Empire and Information.
68. Lawrance, Osborn, and Roberts, Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks.
69. For documents relating to the investigation into the incident at N’Guigmi, see CAOM, AOF 11G/41.
70. CAOM, 6tCOL567: Le Lieutenant-Gouverneur de la Côte-d’Ivoire to M. le Gouverneur-Général de l’AOF, May 22, 1933.
natives had been beaten.”71 Reste ordered the bodies exhumed and reexamined. The second autopsies established the cause of death in both cases as physical trauma, contradicting the autopsies ordered by Casanova and indicating that the original doctor had been complicit in the cover-up.72

Casanova criticized Reste’s reliance on rumor by retreating into official procedure: “It is not my job to pay attention to public rumor. . . . I accomplished my duty by asking the Chief Physician of Bassam to determine the causes of death; the technical work of this practitioner has nothing to do with me.”73 The sheer improbability that several men had died of natural causes while in custody suggests that Casanova and the physician could reasonably expect the autopsies to be accepted as mere administrative formalities and that no questions would be asked. For Casanova and other administrators, the production and filing of official paperwork created an alternate truth that was supposed to be accepted uncritically even in the face of overwhelming evidence articulated in other ways, such as rumor or complaints. That it was not must have come as a nasty surprise.

Journalism and Colonial Reform

The conflict in the peripheral village of Oguiédoumé reverberated in the heart of the French Empire, eliciting attention from metropolitan newspapers, rights groups, and lawmakers. The combined efforts of the colonial and metropolitan press, the Chamber of Deputies, and the humanitarian organization Ligue des Droits de l’Homme failed to secure justice, as both the French and African agents of the administration walked away unpunished. But the news of abuses in Paris, the interest expressed from so many sectors of society, and the intensity of conflict within the administration marked a moment of soul-searching in colonial circles.

The case of Oguiédoumé was only one of many causes taken up by the French press and by French politicians and activists.74 But that this routine event, which would not have merited a second glance several years previously, elicited such spirited activity points to a significant shift both in the flow of information throughout the empire and in French attitudes toward colonial suffering. In the interwar years there were more people in the colonies documenting the failures of the colonial project, and there was an audience in France that

71. Ibid.
72. For a discussion of how medicine was used to justify colonial violence, see Kolsky, Colonial Justice, 108–42.
73. CAOM, AOF 5G/13: Mémoire en réponse à la lettre N. 309 G. du 28 avril, May 8, 1933.
74. For the Ligue’s involvement in a serious famine in Niger in 1931, for example, see CAOM, AOF 11G/40: Ligue Française pour la Défense des Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen to M. le Ministre des Colonies, Apr. 9, 1932.
made such public shaming an effective reform tactic.\textsuperscript{75} Reports from the colonies elicited humanitarian concern for the colonized and restructured debates about empire both in France and overseas. Tracing the responses to the violence at Oguiédoumé sheds light on how this process worked.

French administrators in Ivory Coast were particularly anxious about a certain Zimmerman, editor of a left-wing newspaper, the \textit{Trait-d’Union}, based in Grand-Bassam.\textsuperscript{76} The paper specialized in militant anticapitalist critiques of colonial abuses and systematic exploitation, written in an often sensationalist tone. Some favorite topics were the corruption of African colonial employees, the forced-labor system, and the \textit{indigénat} penal code. Zimmerman was deeply involved in the “affair of Oguiédoumé,” about which he wrote a series of articles denouncing the administration. According to his own accounts, his actions extended beyond journalism to more direct involvement. He comforted and advised the victims, visiting them in jail and urging the families of the dead and wounded to sue the administration.\textsuperscript{77} His style combined new modes of documentary colonial journalism with more traditional left-wing agitation.

Zimmerman’s newspaper first mentioned the mounting tension in Oguiédoumé on April 8, four days before the murder of Gobi Koné. The criticism intensified after the murder and continued for months, mocking the interminable confusion of investigations “following all the rules of the crime-solving arts à la Sherlock Holmes.”\textsuperscript{78} Zimmerman was appalled that the administration acted as its own judge and jury, calling the long delay in sending the cases to the courts an abuse of “the powers that the bourgeois revolution is proud to have separated.”\textsuperscript{79} According to Zimmerman, Casanova was certainly guilty of incompetence and ignorance but was nevertheless the administration’s scapegoat.\textsuperscript{80} The real criminals in the case were Casanova’s subordinates, Méjean and Roehm-Beretta, in whose physical presence the villagers were tortured, and above all Reste himself.

Though Zimmerman’s proposed solution of socialist revolution in the colonies was unlikely to pose an imminent threat, Reste was acutely sensitive to the attacks. One accusation he leveled against Casanova was that he had committed a “breach of discipline” by “furnishing the elements for an article in the

\textsuperscript{75} Daughton, “Behind the Imperial Curtain”; Thomas, \textit{French Empire between the Wars}, 155–58.  
\textsuperscript{76} ANS, 5C/120: Reste to Brevié, May 30, 1933.  
\textsuperscript{77} “Le drame d’Oguiédoumé,” \textit{La défense}, Feb. 16, 1934 (copies of \textit{La défense} and \textit{Trait-d’Union} cited in this article are at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France).  
\textsuperscript{78} “Le bilan de 5 enquêtes administratives,” \textit{Trait-d’Union}, June 10, 1933.  
\textsuperscript{79} “Gouverneur Reste répondez!!,” \textit{Trait-d’Union}, June 17, 1933.  
\textsuperscript{80} “Le drame d’Ogoudoumé,” \textit{Trait-d’Union}, Apr. 15, 1933.
communist newspaper *Trait-d’Union,* publicly casting a bad light on the French colonial administration in general and on Reste in particular.  

Reste defended himself against these charges vigorously, claiming that it was “common knowledge” that Casanova and Zimmerman had an excellent relationship.  

The dispute between Zimmerman and Reste shows the interwar relationship between reformist journalists and defensive colonial administrators in microcosm.

The inhabitants of Oguié doumé were also aware of Zimmerman’s writing. But rather than inspire antiauthoritarian sentiment against the French, as Reste feared, the articles infuriated the villagers because they failed to sufficiently emphasize canton chief Julien Don’s role in their oppression. This unexpected response suggests that, even after the appalling behavior of the French functionaries, the villagers still saw Don’s power as the main threat. In a letter to an administrator (which would have had to be dictated to someone who could write), a person or persons claiming to speak for the village of Oguié doumé accused the torturers of having received gifts from Don, implying that they were under his control. The letter demanded that Don be held accountable for the tragedy.

In addition to personally attacking the chief of the colony, Zimmerman’s reporting played into a general anxiety about communist agitation in the colonies during the interwar years.  

Reste wrote, “Everyone knows that the *Trait-d’Union* is a communist newspaper that carries out a violent campaign against [the colony] and incites the natives to revolt.”  

Denouncing his “harmful influence” among the indigenous populations in the wake of the Oguié doumé affair, the administration ordered a “discreet surveillance exercised on the actions and movements of Mr. Zimmerman.”  

Several months later Lieutenant-Governor Reste asked the public prosecutor about the possibility of initiating legal proceedings against Zimmerman for publishing a “revolutionary article . . . of a nature to provoke agitation in the indigenous communities.”  

In the summer of 1933 Zimmerman was brought before the court of Grand-Bassam and sentenced to fines plus court costs for “defamation and injury.” His crimes being covered

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81. ANS, 5C/120: Reste to Brevié, May 22, 1933.
82. CAOM, AOF 5G/13: Note en réponse à la lettre du 16 juin 1933 de M. Casanova, July 17, 1933.
83. ANS, 5C/120: Oguié doumé to Cheron, Apr. 26, 1933.
85. CAOM, AOF 5G/13: Note en réponse à la lettre du 16 juin 1933 de M. Casanova, July 17, 1933.
86. CAOM, AOF 5G/50: Administrateur Commandant le Cercle de Grand-Bassam to M. le Lieutenant-Gouverneur de la Côte-d’Ivoire, Aug. 31, 1933.
87. CAOM, AOF 5G/50: Lieutenant-Gouverneur de la Côte-d’Ivoire to Gouverneur-Général de l’AOF, Dec. 27, 1933.
by an amnesty decree of 1933, he was excused from paying the fines but was held accountable for court costs. Zimmerman refused to pay, allegedly telling the court that “I want to go to jail.” The court obliged, though the gesture was spoiled by friends who intervened and paid the costs in his name. His incarceration lasted all of one hour and fifteen minutes.88 This was long enough to provoke an enthusiastic denunciation of press censorship by the French section of the Comintern-backed group Secours Rouge International, which claimed that the administration’s harassment of Zimmerman was part of an effort to suppress the scandal of Oguiédoumé.89 The local government continued to keep tabs on Zimmerman as late as 1936. By this time he had left the colony for France, but he maintained contacts in Ivory Coast and, according to the administration, functioned as a link between left-wing activists in the colony and “Bolshevik” organizations in the metropole.90

By the end of 1933 the Trait-d’Union had ceased printing (there is some evidence that it was shut down by the administration), but Zimmerman’s campaign was taken up in France by the newspaper La défense, the organ of the Secours Rouge International. La défense was already deeply engaged in activist journalism and featured regular reporting on colonial abuses, including articles about Indochina by the famous investigative journalist André Viollis. By early 1934 articles in the newspaper had denounced the violence at Oguiédoumé as well as the censorship of the Trait-d’Union and Zimmerman’s arrest.91 In February the newspaper welcomed Zimmerman, who had returned to France, as a regular contributor.92 He used his new platform to continue to call for justice in the case of Oguiédoumé.

Zimmerman’s relentless campaign had an impact in the world of politics as well as that of the press. Already by May 1933 the news of Oguiédoumé had made its way to the highest levels of metropolitan political life. In a short note to the minister of colonies, a deputy from Martinique asked for information about a “rebellion” in the district of Bassam.93 But after Zimmerman sent a dossier on the case to contacts in Paris in June, the discussion took a more reformist and accusatory tone, prompting a defense from the administration that obfuscated the facts.94 In September the governor-general of AOF assured socialist deputy and future president of the Fourth Republic Vincent Auriol that,

88. CAOM, 61COL567: Le Gouverneur-Général to M. le Ministre des Colonies, Apr. 4, 1934.
89. CAOM, 5G1/13: Secours Rouge International to M. le Ministre des Colonies, Dec. 13, 1933.
93. CAOM, 61COL567: Deputé de la Martinique to Ministre des Colonies, May 31, 1933.
contrary to his concerns, the case was proceeding through normal judicial channels.95 Zimmerman’s newspaper, the Trait-d’Union, had aggressively promoted Auriol for a position in the Conseil Superieur des Colonies in 1932, indicating that the two men had some kind of relationship. In October communist deputy Arthur Ramette submitted a question relating the facts of the case that he had read about in “a Grand-Bassam newspaper” and asked what steps were being taken to bring the perpetrators to justice and prevent future atrocities.96 Ramette was an occasional contributor to La défense, again suggesting a relationship between himself and Zimmerman.97 The case continued to hold the interest of French deputies over a year after the events. In November 1934 communist deputy Lucien Monjauvis asked for details about alleged judicial irregularities, including allegations of torture and cover-ups.98 Monjauvis expressed interest in the case as late as April 1935, when he condemned the results of the judicial process that, according to him, punished Africans as scapegoats while letting the European perpetrators off the hook.99 The case provoked activity among activists and humanitarians as well as in the press. The Secours Rouge International accused the administration of trying to cover up the scandal and demanded that the crimes be brought to light.100 In November 1933 the Ligue des Droits de l’Homme wrote to the minister of the colonies to accuse Lieutenant-Governor Reste of protecting the guilty functionaries and to demand that they be brought to justice, following up several times for information about the progress of the case.101 The interest from these two organizations came from very different ideological stances. The Secours Rouge was communist and anticolonial, while the Ligue was liberal and firmly procolonial, interested more in addressing abuses than in militating against empire itself.102 Both, however, found themselves involved in issues of colonial humanitarianism and rights as administrators and journalists provided an unprecedented flow of information on non-European suffering to Europe.

95. CAOM, AOF 5G/13: Gouverneur-Général to Deputé Auriol, Sept. 1933.
96. Journal officiel de la République française, 1933.
97. Zimmerman mentioned “Comrade Ramette” as a political ally several times in his articles for La défense (e.g., “Justice impériale en Côte-d’Ivoire,” La défense, Feb. 23, 1934).
100. CAOM, 5G/13: Secours Rouge International to M. le Ministre des Colonies, Dec. 13, 1933.
In stark contrast to the fierce infighting apparent in the administration’s internal correspondence, the responses to these public inquiries presented a whitewashed version of the events. They failed to mention the local circumstances and the issue of Casanova’s insubordination and cover-up that takes up so much of the attention of the internal investigations. They treated Reste’s and Casanova’s investigations as equally valid, even though one of the main issues was the illegitimacy of Casanova’s investigation due to the use of torture. Ultimately, the administration attributed the deaths and injuries of the villagers of Oguiédoumé to the “foreign” ethnic groups who helped the administration capture the rebels, partially excusing them by arguing that it would have been impossible to apprehend resistant fugitives without violence. While Reste’s administration fiercely criticized Casanova’s use of paramilitary auxiliaries internally, the public responses to the deputies and the Ligue claimed that the arrests had taken place “according to the rules.”

The administration let itself off the hook by insisting that it was impossible to arrest and charge the true culprits because these seminomadic groups had disappeared and that, in any case, no individual perpetrators could be identified. Emphasizing the violence committed by the auxiliaries allowed the administration to dismiss the accusations of torture against Casanova as hearsay.

Just as Casanova had done to Reste, the administration chided the deputies for forgetting that the true criminals were the villagers who attacked the gardes, implicitly justifying the subsequent violence against them. The administration refused requests to make available to the deputies the documents relating to the administrative and judicial investigations, which would have revealed that torture had in fact occurred. Though AOF Governor-General Jules Brevié and Lieutenant-Governor Reste were adamant about establishing the truth internally, they were perfectly willing to lie to politicians and human rights groups, ironically feeding them Casanova’s version of events that they were trying so hard to refute. It seems that while colonial administrators were willing to confront the more shameful aspects of their system in private, they were anxious to seem infallible to outside observers.

Zimmerman’s reporting and his network of left-wing political contacts brought the story of Oguiédoumé to public attention, but other actors had international resources as well. In one of the more curious interventions in the case, the mother of one of Casanova’s subordinates most directly responsible for

the violence tried to use the family’s distinguished history to get her son exonerated. In several letters addressed to Governor-General Brevié, with whom she seems to have been personally acquainted, Lucie Méjean praised her son’s patriotism and sense of duty. As a daughter of a naval officer and granddaughter of Admiral Jean Bernard Jauréguiberry, who had been governor of Senegal and minister of colonies in the nineteenth century, she had raised her son in the ardent love of France. While Méjean’s letter does not mention that her husband was a former senator, Zimmerman seized on this fact in criticizing the leniency shown to the functionary. Citing information she received from sources “independent of her son”—an unnamed “friend” and contacts among Catholic missionaries in Ivory Coast—she despaired that an indigenous functionary had lost his job without due process (surely referring to Julien Don) and that the area was “racing toward revolt.” Under these circumstances, Mme. Méjean was concerned for her son’s career and asked for an independent investigation. 105 Her son seems to have been truly violent and arrogant. There were reports that during one of his visits to Oguiéduomé he fired shots from his pistol at random, damaging M’Bédé Obrou’s house and endangering children who were playing nearby. Even after he had been cleared, he required his mother’s defense against further accusations of abuse. In the autumn of 1933 Lucie Méjean, complaining that her son was once more being unfairly accused of theft and arbitrary violence in the village of N’Zoghi, demanded that he be given leave and admitted to the Ecole Coloniale. 106 The governor-general took her petition seriously enough to follow up on her son’s situation. 107 After an investigation shrouded in ignorance, contradiction, and jurisdictional confusion, Méjean was cleared in that case as well.

It is tempting to conclude that the new interest of French observers in colonial violence was neutralized by an opaque and nondemocratic colonial bureaucracy that could simply sidestep the issues. Though the administration was in large part able to deflect criticism by lying, the atmosphere of reform and the documentary language in which critiques of empire were articulated affected realities on the ground. Reste was not immune to the new appeals to emotion and affect employed by critics of colonialism. A more humane understanding of empire that focused on colonial suffering and the dignity of subjects was evident in the literary prose of his letters as much as in his zealous campaign against Casanova. 108 The almost poetic style characterized by vivid imagery, hyperbole,

105. CAOM, AOF 5G/13: Lucie Méjean to M. le Gouverneur-Général, June 2, 1933.
106. CAOM, AOF 5G/13: Lucie Méjean, Nov. 2, 1933. For more on these cases, see ANS, 5C/56.
107. CAOM, AOF 5G/13: Note pour M. le Gouverneur-Général, Nov. 4, 1933.
108. Daughton, “Behind the Imperial Curtain,” 527.
and the expression of personal emotion stands in sharp contrast to the dry, technical language of most administrative correspondence. In response to Casanova’s claim that the inhabitants of Oguidoumé were not forced to move their village but did so freely, Reste wrote:

The natives that I met with and interrogated on site maintained exactly the contrary. They never asked to leave their village, which was big, spacious, comfortable, well-situated, and located on very fertile ground. I saw in these fields oil palms, magnificent coconut and cacao trees. How could the natives have expressed of their own will the desire to abandon all that constituted their entire fortune? . . .

On the contrary, the natives were attached to their houses, to their fields, to their crops, to all their buildings, to the lagoon, which is their fishing grounds—an important source of revenue—and finally to their fetishes. This they told me, they affirmed it to me on the very site.

The truth is entirely different. . . . We find ourselves in an intrigue crafted in its entirety by Julien Don. . . .

Julien Don, intoxicated by his power—like many of his colleagues, unfortunately—pursued but one single goal: the augmentation of his authority, and also his fortune. . . .

All it takes is a tour of the site and a little psychology to set things straight. And that is the exact truth.

There was nothing in the new village and you wanted to force them to leave their comfortable houses. They would have been under the control of Don, whose house they would have had to pass to reach the lagoon 1.5km away. My heart was heavy when I entered the abandoned houses of Oguidoumé.109

Such a passage, though striking to read in official government correspondence, would not have been out of place in one of the documentary accounts of colonial horrors written by reform-minded journalists such as Albert Londres. Reste drew heavily on literary techniques common to this form of journalism, depicting an ideal village and a lagoon teeming with fish. He inserted himself into the accounts, both to claim the authority of an eyewitness and to give the report a personal emotional dimension. He was not afraid of accusation and confrontation, at one point expressing his incredulity with a blunt “I don’t believe you!”

Casanova ridiculed these dramatic claims with the dry statements of fact that one would expect from a grounded local administrator: “The appearance of this village is indeed pleasant enough, but it is far from being, as you [Reste] say, one of the most beautiful in the district . . . and is one of its smaller villages.”110

In response to another passage in which Reste claimed that Oguidoumé had been there “forever,” Casanova demurred, “It is not correct . . . to say that

109. ANS, 5C/120: Reste to Casanova, Apr. 28, 1933.
110. ANS, 5C/120: Casanova to Reste, May 21, 1933.
Oguiéduomé has existed ‘forever,’” and offered a brief account of its founding in 1914. Refuting an obviously rhetorical statement with a history lesson was insolent, but it was also meant to exaggerate the distinction between Reste’s emotional reaction and Casanova’s practical style. Casanova made his disdain for such rhetoric explicit: “There was no inhumanity in their situation; thus the emotion and humanitarian sentiments you express in your letter have no foundation.” The difference in tone and rhetorical approach emphasizes the different priorities and perspectives governing the actions of the two administrators.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of the violence at Oguiéduomé, Lieutenant-Governor Reste pursued administrative and judicial sanctions against those he deemed responsible. Reste and the public prosecutor did their best to bring both the Europeans and the Africans responsible for the torture and deaths of the villagers to justice. The prosecutor brought whatever charges he could against Casanova and even appealed the original decision of the court of Bassam to dismiss the case. But the law and the structure of the colonial justice system protected the administrators even as it imposed severe penalties on Africans under indigenous jurisdiction.

In May 1933 the European functionaries Roehm-Beretta and Méjean were transferred from Grand-Bassam, and Casanova and Julien Don were suspended from their administrative functions. In May 1934, over a year after the events, the criminal appeals court in Dakar upheld a ruling of the court at Bassam that the investigation undertaken by Casanova was lawful and that there was no evidence that any Europeans had committed violence. Although over twenty Africans had similar wounds on the buttocks, which implied a “sort of system,” the court concluded that the injuries and deaths sustained by the men and women of Oguiéduomé were the result of their arrests by African auxiliaries, not of torture. Given the nomadic nature of the “foreign groups” that carried out the arrests, it would be impossible to bring any individuals to justice. As for administrative sanctions, the functionaries were covered by an amnesty law of 1933, and no disciplinary actions could be taken against them. Reste did,
however, place a demerit in Méjean’s official dossier, a “very serious” sanction that precluded admittance to the Ecole Coloniale. It may strike contemporary readers as a ludicrously light punishment given the gravity of the crime, but Méjean’s mother was surely distressed at this disruption of her son’s promising colonial career. Casanova, for his part, took a leave of absence in France until he obtained a posting to Guinea in 1935. There he worked as district officer until he retired from the colonial service in 1937 at the age of fifty-seven. In the document granting Casanova’s retirement, the governor-general of AOF wrote, “Old functionary, devoted and honest.”

Only once the court had resolved all the cases under French jurisdiction could the jailed Africans finally be tried. In October 1934 the criminal court of Grand-Bassam sentenced twenty-nine inhabitants of Ouguiédoûmé to prison for rebellion. Ibo, as the surviving leader, was sentenced to three years’ imprisonment and the other twenty-eight to two years’ plus a ten-year banishment. Reste, ever the humanitarian, considered the prison time fair (especially since the bulk of the sentences had already been served) but urged the court to lift the banishments. He defended the perpetrators by arguing that at the moment of their crime they had been overexcited and confused due to the detrimental effects of moving the village, so that “the primitive instinct reappeared all of a sudden.” He argued that the tribunal could not ascertain who precisely was guilty of the murder and had subsequently detained nearly thirty people, not all of whom could be directly responsible. Given this doubt and the good behavior of the prisoners, who had been incarcerated for nearly two years, banishment was unjust. Furthermore, Reste warned that there would be social consequences: “Chasing them from their land would make them embittered, vagabonds, possibly thieves. Their village would fall to ruin; their plantations, already deprived of labor, would be definitively abandoned; women who would have no means of survival or nourishment would be deprived of husbands, and the children of fathers.” It is unclear whether Reste’s request was granted.

Historians of empire have identified World War I as the beginning of a transition in attitudes toward colonialism. During the interwar years reformist activism, nationalist agitation, and liberal guilt all worked to usher in a

117. CAOM, EE/II/2217/1: Bulletin Individuel des Notes, 1937.
119. ANS, 2G34/7: Rapport Politique de la Côte-d’Ivoire, 1934.
120. Ibid.
121. For the impact of World War I on attitudes toward French colonialism in West Africa, see Conklin, Mission to Civilize; Wilder, French Imperial Nation-State; Mann, Native Sons; Cooper, Colonialism in Question; and Lunn, “Kande Kamara Speaks.”
period of renegotiation of the terms of the colonial relationship. Colonialism was increasingly marked by a tension between the state’s acceptance of responsibility for the well-being of subjects and its limited capacity to fulfill its obligations. The ideological debates and conceptual shifts that characterized this period have been well documented, but the perspective from the ground up has received less careful treatment. This article explores how new attention to the suffering of colonized men and women played out on the ground, taking the local perspective as a starting point before expanding outward to connect the particular story to empire-wide trends. Physical violence was understood in different ways at different levels of the colonial situation, and the disconnect reveals the limitations and unintended consequences of top-down reform efforts. Rather than impose coherence and discipline on the colonial administration, antiviolence reform heightened a contradiction inherent in the French imperial state between inhumane methods and humanist ideology. Attempts to reform violence did not end the suffering of colonial subjects; they only contributed to making it more visible.

But the contradictions of the imperial project were far from the minds of the villagers who murdered Gobi Koné or of the French functionaries who tortured and killed the murderers. The pressures they were responding to were the small ones of colonialism at its most intimate. Their arena was the point of contact between local administrators and their subjects, which provided opportunities for Africans and French alike until the authorities exercised the option of violence when they felt control slipping away. The inhabitants of Ougiédoumé exploited tensions and miscommunications within the French administration to gain support for their political ambitions, but they had no answer when Casanova called on his posse of gardes de cercle and African auxiliaries to return them forcefully to their proper place in the tenuous colonial order. From the local perspective, taking humanist rhetoric seriously made the job of colonial administration impossible. As he tried to enforce the principles of nonviolence, Reste unknowingly contributed to the unraveling of the imperial project.

YAN SLOBODKIN is a PhD candidate in history at Stanford University.

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