

Seeking imperialism's embrace national identity, decolonization, and assimilation in the French Caribbean

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Abstrak

Martinique and Guadeloupe voted to become overseas departments of France, or DOMs, in 1946, eschewing the trend toward national independence movements during the post-World War II years. For Antilleans, this was the natural culmination of a centuries-long quest for equality with France and a means of overcoming the entrenched political and economic power of the white minority on the islands, the *békés*. Disappointment with departmentalization set in quickly, however, as the promised equality was slow in coming and Antillean contributions to the war went unrecognized. Champions of departmentalization such as Aime Césaire argued that the race-blind Republic was far from universal and egalitarian. The French government struggled to stem unrest in a growing population in the Antilles through economic development, tourism, and immigration to the metropole where labor was in short supply. Antilleans fought against racial and gender stereotypes imposed on them by European French and sought to both stem the tide of white metropolitan workers arriving in the Antilles and make better lives for their families in France. Although departmentalization has been criticized as a weak alternative to national independence, the vote was overwhelmingly popular among Antilleans at the time, and such disappointment reflects more on the broken promises of assimilation rather than the misguided nature of the vote itself.