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*Clio’s Scroll*, the Berkeley Undergraduate History Journal, is published twice yearly by students of the Department of History at the University of California, Berkeley. The journal aims to provide undergraduates with the opportunity to publish historical works and to train staff members in the editorial process of an academic journal. *Clio’s Scroll* is produced by financial support from the Townsend Center for the Humanities, the Associated Students of the University of California (ASUC), and the Department of History. *Clio’s Scroll* is not an official publication of the ASUC or UC Berkeley. The views expressed herein are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the journal, the editors, the university, or sponsors.
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
GERAINT HUGHES is a senior History and Classics double major, hoping to either go into International Relations or become a history professor (fingers crossed). His favorite area of study is the Roman Empire (Ancient Greece being a close second), with a dash of modern geopolitics on the side—although he will voraciously read anything on any time or place. When not buried in schoolwork, he can be found buried in sci-fi/fantasy novels, playing board games, or looking for good places to eat throughout the Bay. He dislikes Modernist architecture and alternative history novels, and is neutral towards the Oxford Comma.

MANAGING EDITOR
SOPHIA BROWN-HEIDENREICH is a third-year history major from Berlin, Germany. Her research interests include late-19th century United States foreign policy and transatlantic history. In her free time, she enjoys watching movies, traveling and going on runs through the Berkeley hills.

EDITORS
DANE ANDERSON is a third-year History major with minors in Latin and English. He is interested in intellectual history, with particular emphasis on the Scottish Enlightenment and British Romanticism. Other interests include the history of republicanism, the history of progress and theories of civil society. He plans to complete his thesis on the Scottish Enlightenment theorist Adam Ferguson. Outside of his studies, Dane likes to cook, to exercise and to read the comic fiction of P.G. Wodehouse.

PATRICK BOLDEA is a senior from the foothills of East Tennessee majoring in economics and history with a focus on modern Europe. He likes pub trivia, his dog, memes, and Hulu.

PARKER J. BOVÉE is a sophomore from Sacramento, California majoring in History. Coming from a family with two other History majors, he has always been deeply interested in understanding the past. Parker hopes to focus his undergraduate work and beyond on the American West in exploring differing notions of American identity along ethnic and economic lines. Aside from worrying too much about exams, he is regularly disappointed by his hometown Sacramento Kings, overjoyed by Liverpool FC, and captivated by a wide array of music.
MIRANDA JIANG is a sophomore majoring in History and considering a double major in Comparative Literature. She is interested in the history of gender and sexuality, and representations of race in literature in the United States and Western Europe. She is currently a research apprentice at Berkeley’s Oral History Center, where she is working on a project about Chinese Americans who lived in the Bay Area during World War II. She is also conducting research on women in University of California history as an administrative assistant to the 150 Years of Women at Berkeley History Project in 2020. She is aiming for a PhD in history. Outside of class, she practices carillon and piano, writes fiction and a bit of poetry, attends nearby plays, and corresponds with her French penpals.

KATIE JONCKHEER is a junior studying History, and is considering a minor in Public Policy. She is interested United States legal history and foreign policy, and World War II. When not writing papers, she enjoys watching cooking shows, playing with her dog, and hiking.

MICHAEL LIU is a junior from San Marino, California, pursuing a major in history. His focus lies in the study of 20th century America, the Soviet Union, and East Asia. He aims to pursue a career in law. Outside of class, he enjoys playing golf and watching sports.

TARA MADHAV is a junior studying political science and history, and is aiming to pursue a JD-PhD degree. Her research interests include the history of segregation in America (with a particular focus on education and housing), comparative agrarian history and minority-government relations. Her personal interests include investigative journalism, romantic comedies, alternative pop (if that is a thing), and learning about new people and places.

LILLIAN MORGANTHALER is a sophomore from Menlo Park, California studying history and intending to double major in classics. Although she hopes to explore a wide range of historical topics, she has always been especially interested in the history of ancient religion and mythology—particularly surrounding the morals of societies, explanations for natural phenomena, and the construction of gender roles. In her spare time, Lilly enjoys reading novels (and the occasional biography), baking bread, and watching historical dramas.
SAFFRON SENER is a third-year student at UC Berkeley majoring in History and minoring in Art History and Creative Writing. She concentrates on Early American Colonial history and U.S. history preceding the Civil War. Her favorite subject is the Salem Witch Trials. Outside of class, she makes zines, rollerskates, bakes, and tries not to drown in readings. Currently, she is studying abroad at King’s College London!

ISABEL SHIAO is a sophomore majoring in History, with a concentration in authoritarianism, and minoring in Conservation and Resource Studies. In her spare time, she enjoys cooking, exploring new areas, and watching Bojack Horseman.

DUNCAN WANLESS is a junior studying Spanish Literature and History. He concentrates mostly on the history of Mexico and Latin America, though he also has an abiding passion for the history of Christianity. His senior thesis centers on the town of Yanga, Veracruz (the site of the first successful maroon revolt in the Americas) and its 20th-century memorializations of slavery. After graduation, he intends to teach high school in his hometown of Fresno, where he can enjoy the best raisins and summer stone fruit in the world. In his free time in Berkeley he enjoys reading William Saroyan and grocery shopping at Berkeley Bowl in hopes of someday running into Samin Nosrat.

PETER ZHANG is a second-year History major. He is interested in Ming-dynasty Chinese history and modern British history, and is currently trying to connect these two different fields in his studies. His research topics are imperialism, bureaucracy, war and anything else he comes across. A former school journalist, a current SLC writing tutor, and a Clio’s Scroll editor, he is passionate about all kinds of writing (but poetry is his favorite). Aside from drowning in the infinite amount of readings, essays and the occasional computer code, he loves to dig out fun places to visit in the Bay Area, looking for fancy restaurants, and spending a lot of time on Football Manager.

LEO ZLIMEN is a junior majoring in History, Near Eastern Civilizations, and Arabic. His studies focus on modernity in the early twentieth century, Islamic civilization, and the late Ottoman Empire. For fun, Leo enjoys playing basketball and volleyball and watching the NBA.
Dear Readers,

The image that graces the front of this edition of Clio’s Scroll is the Pre-Raphaelite painting *A Tale from the Decameron*, by John William Waterhouse. The *Decameron*, an early Renaissance novel by Boccaccio, tells the story of a group of Florentine youth who escaped the Black Death by heading into the countryside, passing the time with tales of chivalry, cleverness, and courtly love. In a similar vein, we at *Clio’s Scroll* hope you enjoy the articles in this issue, chosen—if not for chivalry or love—originality, erudition, and learning.

We are about to graduate into crisis, one that has claimed so many, even some in our community, and threatens our future health and livelihood. But it is not entirely hopeless for us practitioners of history. It will be up to us, our generation, to interpret and structure the crises that have rocked us, to make sense of them and place them within the all-encompassing narrative of history. This is our responsibility, and it is what Kylie Bazinet, Liam Cronan, and Grace Vu have so ably demonstrated with their work. Kylie writes on the political contexts for Iceland’s mythmaking in “The Death of Iceland and the Aesir”, Liam takes on the framing of Shay’s Rebellion in “Invasions of the Commonwealth”, and Grace tackles the rise of political ideology in Vietnam’s colonial newspapers. We look forward to seeing their accomplishments in the future.

The Editorial Board of *Clio’s Scroll* would like to thank the Townsend Center for the Humanities and the Associated Students at the University of California (ASUC) for their generous funding that makes this publication and editorial process possible. As always, the Editors are indebted to Berkeley’s Department of History for its endless support, guidance, and encouragement. In particular we are dedicated to Leah Flanagan, the undergraduate history adviser, for all her counsel; and our faculty adviser, Prof. Ethan Katz, for his invaluable experience. Of course, none of this would have been possible without the hard work and dedication of our editors! Take time to read their bios and to congratulate Sophia Brown-Heidenreich, the new Editor-in-Chief of *Clio’s Scroll* for 2020-2021!

Sincerely,

The Editors
Contributors

KYLIE BAZINET graduated from UC Berkeley in December of 2019 with a bachelor’s degree in History and a minor in Scandinavian Studies. With an emphasis on social and cultural history, her research interests include Viking Age and Medieval Scandinavia and Iceland, European religion and folklore, the history of literature, and the history of death and funerary practices. She wishes to thank Professors Jonas Wellendorf and Waldo E. Martin, and graduate student Rue Taylor, for their superb guidance, support, and optimism throughout the research and writing process of her senior thesis.

LIAM CRONAN is a senior at Tufts University majoring in History with a minor in Economics. He is especially interested in colonial America, the American Revolution, seventeenth and eighteenth-century New England, and early American economic history, but also has interests in modern European history, the Industrial Revolution, legal history, and classical studies. Liam is on the board of the Tufts History Society, serving as President, and is an editor for the Tufts Historical Review.

GRACE VU graduated from UC Berkeley in 2019 and received her BA in History and Sociology with a minor in Ethnic Studies. Her research interests include Vietnamese history, specifically the colonial era, political sociology, and sociological theory. She would like to thank Professor Kellner for his invaluable guidance during the research and writing process.
The Death of Iceland and the Aesir

The Prose Edda as Nationalist Propaganda

Kylie Bazinet

Fig. 1. Map of Iceland in relation to Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. From the Encyclopedia Britannica. [https://www.britannica.com/place/Scandinavia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Scandinavia)
Introduction

The society of medieval Iceland constructed itself around a series of myths. From the settlement period in the ninth century, these myths began when early Icelandic settlers sought refuge on the small island, fleeing Norway and the tyrant King Harald Fair-Hair. Iceland was intended to be a haven of independence built in opposition to Norway, where disenfranchised chieftains found the opportunity to gain land and honor without swearing fealty to a king who desired to take it away. From these disenfranchised chieftains came the Icelandic Commonwealth, a period of Icelandic history in which Iceland reveled in its independence: it was ruled by no monarchy, had no central political figure, and was not the territory of any other country. Instead, Iceland was at first a country of chieftains: content, powerful landowners who ruled their farmsteads as though they were kingdoms. These chieftains met yearly at the annual law assembly known as the Althing, a parliamentary system that was the extent of Iceland’s centralized political structure. Icelandic family sagas written during the medieval period express a sense of reverence for these chieftains and the freedom they experienced as Icelanders. For nearly four centuries, Iceland existed as such, a polity of independent chieftains living in the largely uninhabitable and thus sparsely populated island on the fringes of continental society. All that was to change, however, in the thirteenth century.

By the thirteenth century, Iceland was still a society ruled by chieftains, but unlike the Iceland of the past, the power of individual chieftains was on the rise. The thirteenth century, also known as the Age of the Sturlungs, saw the rise of centralized power in the hands of six chieftains. As the power of these families increased, tensions between the most powerful of them grew in tandem. A hostile environment emerged atop the political power struggles of these families, and the final century of the Icelandic Commonwealth was marked with frequent civil unrest. Cultural dissolution that began with the conversion to Christianity in the year 1000 threatened to destroy the Icelandic Commonwealth—and with it Icelandic independence—from the inside. Despite Iceland’s foundation atop the principles of chieftainships and a desire to stray from centralized monarchy, the
allure of centralized power was strong; ties of kinship central to the functioning of Icelandic society were abandoned as the lust to control Iceland increased.

At the same time, the Norwegian ruling class exploited these tensions between Icelanders for their own gain. Resentful of their historical relationship with Iceland, the Norwegian monarchy, specifically King Hakon Hakonarson and Jarl Skuli, \(^1\) ingratiated themselves into the lives of elite Icelanders and rendered the power-hungry chieftains dependent on Norwegian support and money. These once-independent chieftains gradually became Norwegian subjects. \(^2\) Icelandic independence was in decline, a stark contrast to the nationalism and drive to preserve independence present at the country’s inception. In the face of political upheaval at home and foreign imposition abroad, Iceland needed to define and defend itself and its autonomy. Unfortunately, the intellectual elite who had the power to retain this belonged to the same warring families who were threatening to aid in its ultimate demise.

Yet, there was one chieftain—a member of the powerful Sturlung family who also became Iceland’s most powerful independent chieftain—who refused to abandon his Icelandic nationalism completely. Snorri Sturluson was an accomplished Icelandic chieftain, poet, and author, and by 1222 had proven himself to be medieval Iceland’s most influential figure, despite being the Norwegian king’s vassal. During his vibrant and politically active life, the highly educated Snorri authored one of the most important medieval texts: the *Prose Edda*. At times referred to as simply the *Edda*, this text contains within its four sections a series of myths that construct the mythological cosmos of pre-Christian Scandinavian society.

While each myth contained therein is important in its own right, two in particular are striking in their content and originality: those of the death of the god Baldr; and Ragnarok, the Old Norse apocalypse. Snorri’s retelling of these myths, which is central to his understanding

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1 Jarl is a title equivalent to the English “earl.”

of the Old Norse mythological cosmos, strays from all other known mythological sources, both contemporary and classic. Scholarship on the *Prose Edda* has maintained that these deviations from source material found within Snorri’s work are the results of Christian influence on Icelandic thinking—the sacrificial death of Baldr and the apocalyptic Ragnarok have much in common with Christian tradition. However, by analyzing these myths against the social and political context of Iceland from the settlement period to the thirteenth century and paying specific attention to the Icelandic desire for independence from Norway, these myths can be read as having a deeper, more politically charged meaning.

Snorri wrote the *Prose Edda* circa 1220, against the political backdrop of threats to Icelandic autonomy by Norway, as well as intense social and political turmoil within Iceland itself. Written by a man embroiled in Icelandic and Norwegian politics, it is impossible to separate Snorri’s political and literary personas. Reading the *Prose Edda* as a product of the thirteenth century instead of the pre-Christian era, however, suggests that these personas are one in the same. By treating Snorri’s *Edda* as a literary work firmly grounded in, and thus influenced by, the historical context of the thirteenth century, it ceases to be a purely antiquarian document and becomes an intricate piece of political propaganda. The death of Baldr represents the spark that ignited Icelandic in-fighting, while Ragnarok can be understood as a grim and apocalyptic warning against submission to Norwegian rulers. Inspired by the history of Icelandic-Norwegian strife, the culture of Icelandic mythmaking, and the civil strife threatening to destroy Iceland from the inside, these myths mourn the death of Icelandic independence and attempt to immortalize Icelandic nationalism by finding pride in the one thing that Norway had abandoned: its pagan past.

**The Prose Edda**

At the time of the *Edda*’s composition, Iceland had been officially Christianized for 220 years, having converted at the Althing in the year 1000. Christianization, the erection of churches, and the implementation of centers of Christian learning throughout Iceland led to an increase in
Icelandic literacy. This facilitated Iceland’s literary boom in the thirteenth century, during which Icelanders developed and explored their history through literature, and established an Icelandic identity. This exploration and acceptance of their history allowed for the rediscovery of mythological material within a Christianized Icelandic context. Devoid of pre-Christian religious ritual and meaning, these myths became reminders of and connections to a shared Icelandic past, the acceptance of which set them apart from thoroughly Christianized countries such as Norway. This explosion of literary culture saw not only the creation of the *Prose Edda*, but also a variety of Icelandic literary genres including, perhaps most importantly, the Icelandic family sagas.\(^3\)

Despite the variety of these thirteenth-century literary documents, none are so comprehensive or detailed in their mythological components as the *Prose Edda*.

With its coherent literary narrative and overall cohesive structure, the *Prose Edda* is the most important collection of Old Norse mythology for modern scholars, as it presents Old Norse mythological material in a structured and direct manner that its few fragmentary contemporary sources do not. Separated into four sections, the main corpus of Old Norse myths is contained within the second and third sections, *Gylfaginning* and *Skaldskaparmal*, respectively. *Gylfaginning* describes the mythic past, present, and future, telling the story of the Norse mythological cosmos as one born from chaos and doomed to chaos, beginning and ending with familial murder. *Skaldskaparmal* deals with the mythic present as it pertains to the traditional Old Norse style of skaldic poetry—a poetic form that, reliant on mythological knowledge, was on the decline in the face of Christianity. *Skaldskaparmal*, and by association the entirety of the *Prose Edda*, is a

\(^3\) Icelandic family sagas are a genre unique to Iceland. They feature Icelanders from the settlement period through the Viking Age, with their subjects usually not straying temporally far past Iceland’s Christianization. Icelandic family sagas were used to create a distinct Icelandic history by recording, commemorating, and mythologizing its earliest settlers and most fantastical inhabitants. Icelandic separation from Norway is a prominent theme throughout these texts. Due to a lack of historical records from the time period they discuss, Icelandic family sagas are among the only texts with perceived historical value in regard to the pre-Christian era.
handbook for a dying art, and one that could only be saved by a dying religion.

*Skaldskaparmal* directly translates as *The Language of Poetry*. Its narrative structure takes the loose form of a conversation between Bragi, the god of poetry, and Aegir, the god of the sea. The section contains various myths, beginning with Odin’s capture and dispersion of the mead of poetry—a beverage that when drunk provides poetic ability. While the myths contained within this section are integral to understanding the mythic cosmos of Old Norse mythology, the importance of *Skaldskaparmal* rests primarily in the author’s explanations of skaldic poetry. This traditional poetic form is highly complex and was brought to Iceland from Norway in the ninth century. Skaldic poetry is constructed using a series of *kennings*: poetic phrases and metaphors that are used in lieu of single words or other phrases. Through the narrative voice of Bragi, Snorri states that his intention behind *Skaldskaparmal* is to provide an explanation of traditional poetics to “young poets who desire to learn the language of poetry and to furnish themselves with a wide vocabulary using traditional terms; or else they desire to be able to understand what is expressed obscurely... . These stories are not to be consigned to oblivion or demonstrated to be false, so as to deprive poetry of ancient kennings which major poets have been happy to use.”

The emphasis on preserving traditional knowledge suggests that the myths Snorri documents throughout the *Prose Edda* should be seen as accurate representations of pre-Christian material. For him to unfaithfully document the mythology referenced in known pre-Christian poetry would be to risk condemning swaths of it to obscurity and oblivion, thus going against his stated intentions. However, Snorri’s intentions were not as purely antiquarian as they appear, as he was unafraid to mold the mythological material to suit his own specific—and highly political—purposes.

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4 For example, the phrase “sea-Sleipnir” is a kenning for a ship, Sleipnir being Odin’s horse. Simplified, this kenning may be “sea-horse” or “horse of the sea,” i.e. an object that gives swift passage (horse) over the sea.

A skaldic poet himself, Snorri wrote *Skaldskaparmal*, and the *Prose Edda* as a whole, in an effort to both display and defend his knowledge of traditional poetry. By the thirteenth century, all skaldic poets of distinction were Icelandic,

making Icelanders the last people with the ability to preserve the traditional and dying art form. Snorri in particular viewed himself as the guardian of the precious cultural knowledge that Norway had abandoned. Through the writing of *Skaldskaparmal*, Snorri utilized his country’s connection to skaldic poetry to emphasize Icelandic superiority through the domination of what Kevin J. Wanner terms “cultural capital.”

As Norway’s monarchical power encroached upon Iceland in the thirteenth century, Icelandic independence began to wane. Iceland’s dependence upon other countries became increasingly apparent, as the small island country relied heavily upon trade with other nations to survive. This lack of resource independence put Iceland at a disadvantage in regard to economic capital, thereby making it appear weak and leaving it vulnerable to subjugation and exploitation at the hands of Norway.

Well before the official dissolution of the Icelandic Commonwealth in 1264, Norway, both politically and conceptually, dominated Icelandic existence. *Skaldskaparmal* is an effort to counter this dominance by taking control of a cultural phenomenon that Norway had long since rejected. By attempting to both save skaldic poetry and establish Icelandic cultural superiority through literature, Snorri demonstrated his ability to use literature to engage with his contemporary situation to serve non-literary goals. *Skaldskaparmal* is evidence of Snorri’s belief in Icelandic intellectual superiority—a concept which develops into subtle and precise anti-Norwegian propaganda throughout the course of the *Edda*.

**The Death of Baldr and Ragnarok**

While *Skaldskaparmal* is important to understand Snorri’s desire to accrue cultural capital both at home and abroad and to insinuate

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7 Wanner, 11.
Icelandic superiority, it is *Gylfaginning* that contains the two myths that are crucial to understanding the cultural history of medieval Iceland: the death of Baldr and the apocalyptic Ragnarok. These myths occur within what can be termed the mythic past and mythic future sections of *Gylfaginning* respectively, with the understanding that Baldr has died in the mythic past, but that Ragnarok, while prophesied and intimately connected to Baldr’s death, has yet to happen. The myth of Baldr’s death is the catalyst for Ragnarok, for in a story similar to that of the Christian tradition, the end of the world cannot occur without first witnessing the death of the most beautiful and just of the gods. Baldr, whose sole mythological purpose is to die, lives in a mythical hall strikingly similar to the Christian heaven, into which “no unclean thing is permitted.”8 Much like his Christian counterpart Jesus, Baldr “is the wisest of the *Aesir*9 and the most beautifully spoken and the most merciful.”10 Nevertheless, it is Baldr’s great failing that while he speaks wisdom and universal truth, the world within which he exists is so imperfect “that none of his decisions can be fulfilled.”11 He is perfection incarnate, and, as is clear through the narrative’s glowing praise, beloved by both the mythological deities and Snorri himself.

Tragically, Baldr is plagued by nightmares in which he foresees his unavoidable death. Fearing for the safety of her son, the goddess Frigg travels the world taking oaths of peace from all creatures, but in her haste disregards the small mistletoe, a being whom she deems “too young . . . to demand an oath from.”12 Upon Frigg’s oath-taking, the ever-masculine Aesir adopt the pastime of hurling objects at the newly invincible Baldr and rejoicing when he emerges from their barrage unharmed. Only two Aesir refuse to take part in this masculine merriment: Hod, Baldr’s blind brother, and Loki, the mischievous Aesir referred to in the *Edda* as “the Aesir’s calumniator and the originator of

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8 Sturluson, 23.
9 The *Aesir* are one of the two races of Old Norse gods, the *Vanir* being the second. *Aesir* may be used as a stand-in to refer to Old Norse gods as a whole.
10 Sturluson, 23.
11 Sturluson, 23.
12 Sturluson, 48.
deceits and the disgrace of all gods and men.”¹³ Led both by his status as an outsider as well as his innate malignity, Loki disguises himself as a woman and convinces Frigg to reveal the one object that can harm Baldr. Loki immediately finds and pricks the offending sprig and out of it crafts a dart. This mistletoe dart is given to Hod, who is persuaded to throw it in order to increase his masculine honor, blind and on the outskirts though he may be. Guided by Loki, Hod shoots and “the missile flew through [Baldr] and he fell dead to the ground . . . this was the unluckiest deed ever done among gods and men.”¹⁴ This act of violence perpetrated by Loki, the blood-brother of Odin, and carried out by Baldr’s brother Hod, creates an inter-community severance not unlike that of Iceland during the thirteenth century, and brings about the end of the Old Norse mythological cosmos as it was known: Ragnarok.

This violation of societal ethics destabilizes the world of the Aesir. In an attempt at self-preservation, the gods try to offset the taboo of Baldr’s murder through punishment: Hod is killed for his crimes by a son of Odin, and Loki is symbolically outlawed—captured and tied to a rock by the intestines of his son, he is subject to torture as a venomous snake drips poison onto his forehead. Nevertheless, their attempts are in vain, and Ragnarok begins with a mighty winter known as fimbul-winter, which is preceded by a series of three winters “during which there will be great battles throughout the world. Then brothers will kill each other out of greed and no one will show mercy to father or son in killing or breaking the taboos of kinship.”¹⁵ The social bonds that have previously held society together, particularly Icelandic society, will thus be destroyed. In this continuation of the broken kinship between Hod and Baldr, the world will come to an end. Odin is killed by the wolf Fenrir, and Thor by the world serpent Jormungandr, each of which are Loki’s monstrous offspring. Loki himself is shaken free of his bonds by a devastating earthquake and leads the forces of the frostgiants against those whom he formally held ties of kinship with. Loki

¹³ Sturluson, 26.
¹⁴ Sturluson, 49.
¹⁵ Sturluson, 51.
The Death of Iceland and the Aesir

The death of Baldr, watchman of the Aesir. Over time, each of the first generation of gods, those around whom the Old Norse mythological cosmos is organized, will die, leaving nothing behind. Despite the utter destruction of Ragnarok, the myth ends with the emergence of a new and more perfect world, alluding to a belief that death is necessary to inspire creation. After a brief interlude the Earth is reborn lush and fertile, an empty agricultural paradise filled with thriving crops that require no sowing. The second generation of gods emerges into this new world, those children of the old gods who secretly survived the demise of their fathers. Among them are Baldr, having escaped from the underworld Hel, and in this new and pure world he is reunited and reconciled with Hod. Together, this second generation will “talk and discuss the mysteries and speak of the things that happened in the former times.” Idealized though this new world may be, its discussions of the past hint at a nostalgia for what once was and what can never be again.

The Myths in Other Sources

The death of Baldr and Ragnarok sequences exist outside of the Prose Edda in a variety of sources, most of which predate the Edda and were used as references for Snorri’s writings. These sources include both literary documents and a handful of pictorial runic inscriptions that have been found carved into stone and metal throughout Scandinavia. The most important of these sources, however, are literary, and are found in the compendium of eddic poetry known as

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16 Sturluson, 56.
17 While there are none in Iceland, approximately 3,000 Norse rune stones (called so as they are inscribed with the pre-Latin alphabet of Viking Age Scandinavians) are scattered throughout Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Many of these rune stones are memorials to the dead; however, some stones such as the Ledberg stone in Ostergotland and the Hunnestad Monument in Scania are believed to feature various scenes from the myths of Baldr’s death and Ragnarok respectively.
18 Eddic poetry is a poetic style far less complex than the aforementioned skaldic poetry. Its structure is less convoluted and its language more direct; eddic poetry lacks the distinctive kennings that are used in skaldic verse.
the *Poetic Edda*, a text discovered in the thirteenth-century Icelandic manuscript the *Codex Regius*, inside which the *Prose Edda* is also contained. The *Poetic Edda* contains seven poems referencing either the death of Baldr, Ragnarok, or both. Although transcribed in the thirteenth century, there is little doubt as to the pre-Christian origins of these poems and the mythic information they contain. Therefore, while Snorri’s *Edda* is understood as presenting the standardized conception of the Old Norse mythological cosmos, the poems of the *Poetic Edda* can be seen as closer to the source of the “true” mythological material as it existed during the Viking Age. A comparison between these sources and the *Prose Edda* illuminates key differences in Snorri’s text—areas which, upon further investigation, were born out of a thirteenth-century context as opposed to an antiquarian ideology.

The most compelling poem of the *Poetic Edda*, and the one which Snorri utilized the most for his own work, is titled “Voluspa,” or the “Seeress’s Prophecy.” This poem tells of the prophecy of a dead seeress, whom Odin resurrects from the dead in order to gain from her otherworldly wisdom. Baldr is here referred to as “the bloody god” and, in accord with Snorri’s *Edda*, the seeress claims that he died by means of a mistletoe dart thrown by Hod. Strikingly, nowhere in this text is Hod said to be blind, nor is Loki mentioned in connection with Baldr’s death. The blame for the murder lies solely on Hod, with Loki’s role in the mythological universe relegated to his bound imprisonment before Ragnarok and his later leading of giant troops against the Aesir. In fact, none of the seven poetic myths of the *Poetic Edda* contain any

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19 Upon its discovery in the seventeenth century, this text was originally referred to as the *Elder Edda* and was believed to have been the text which Snorri used as reference for his *Edda*. Later research concluded, however, that the text was likely to have been written contemporaneous to the *Edda*, with the two sharing a common source. In light of the new information, the text was renamed the *Poetic Edda*.

20 This deduction is based on the belief that eddic poems began and persisted as an oral tradition beginning at least in the Viking Age. References to mythological material contained in the *Poetic Edda* is furthermore referenced elsewhere, such as Viking Age rune stones and various other dated documents.

reference to Loki’s involvement in the murder of Baldr. He is the chaotic progenitor of evil with a significant role to play during the events of Ragnarok, and even features in his own poem, but otherwise is mysteriously absent from the proceedings in which he plays a key role in Snorri’s *Edda*. The account of Ragnarok as given in “Voluspa” aligns closely to Snorri’s, with the differences between the two explained by Snorri’s utilization of other materials to expand upon details provided in “Voluspa.” “Voluspa” touches upon the chaotic upheaval of the mythological cosmos brought about by the divisions between the gods and their foes, and ends as Snorri’s does: with the rebirth of the world and the reconciliation of Hod and Baldr. In light of these similarities, Hod’s blindness and Loki’s involvement in Baldr’s murder being absent from “Voluspa” and other *Poetic Edda* poems is striking, as it suggests that these attributes are not original mythic components. Instead they are Snorri’s unique thirteenth-century additions, and evidence that Snorri actively altered the mythological material he was attempting to preserve.

In addition to pre-Christian sources, there is one document contemporaneous with the *Edda* that retells the myth of Baldr’s death: the *Gesta Danorum*, written by Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus. Saxo’s view of the gods, and Baldr in particular, is vastly different from that of Snorri. While Snorri nostalgically represented the gods and refused to demonize them, Saxo wrote with the intent to vilify. Saxo’s Baldr is impudent, rude, and cowardly, driven by insatiable lust—a far cry from embodying the perfection by which he is defined in Snorri’s *Edda*. He is obsessed with Nanna, the daughter of the Danish King Gervar, which sparks a feud between him and his foster-brother Hod, whom Saxo calls “Hother.” Baldr’s proposals are rejected by Nanna, and as a result, Baldr grows increasingly persistent. Hod, also in love with Nanna, knows that he cannot propose until Baldr is dead. Hod thus lays claim to a mythical sword, the only object which can counter

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22“Lokasenna,” or “Loki’s Quarrel,” tells the story of a particularly rowdy dinner party of the gods, during which Loki proceeds to humiliate and insult each of them in turn.
Baldr’s “holy strength impermeable even to steel.”²³ Hod successfully kills Baldr and incurs the wrath of Odin who, as in Snorri’s version, sires a son with the sole purpose of killing Hod in revenge.

The similarities between the two texts are apparent: Baldr and Hod are kin, Baldr is impervious to all but one object, and Hod outright rejects formal bonds of kinship by murdering Baldr. There is no evidence that Saxo and Snorri ever interacted, as Snorri’s foreign exploits were contained to Norway and Saxo died circa 1220—the same year in which the Prose Edda was composed. It can therefore be deduced that these texts are independent of one another, and it can be concluded that the myth of Baldr’s death was widespread throughout Scandinavia. Thus, this myth is likely a feature of “true” pre-Christian Norse mythology. Yet, as with the poems of the Poetic Edda, this text makes no reference to Hod’s blindness nor to Loki’s involvement. In fact, Loki does not appear in this version of the myth whatsoever. Despite the ease with which the devilish Loki might have been demonized by the stolidly Christian Saxo and taken the place of a Christian Devil figure, the charge of murder falls upon the more nondescript Hod. The absence of Hod’s blindness and Loki’s involvement both in the Gesta Danorum and the poems of the Poetic Edda suggest that these mythological aspects do not belong to the original pre-Christian and pre-Icelandic mythic tradition. Instead, they belong to Snorri’s mythic tradition.

Attention must also be given to the mistletoe dart that brings about Baldr’s death, both in “Voluspa” and the Edda. The usage of mistletoe has its origins in “Voluspa,” in which it is called only once by name (Old Norse mistilteinn) and a second time as “a dangerous grief dart.”²⁴ Popular translations of this poem reaching back to the early nineteenth century have all adhered to this concept of the mistletoe dart, and the two primary Old Norse-English dictionaries of Cleasby-Vigfus (1874) and Zoëga (1910) have concretized this translation. However, the physical usage of mistletoe as it is seen in these two

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²⁴ “Voluspa,” 7.
sources is problematic, in that its use as a piercing dart is inconsistent with the physical properties of the plant. Mistletoe is a soft, leafy, and parasitic plant, not a dart-like stick or “shoot of a tree”\textsuperscript{25} as described by Snorri. This misconception suggests authorial unfamiliarity with the plant, a theory adduced by the fact that mistletoe does not grow either in Iceland nor in the northwestern area of Norway where Icelanders emigrated from.\textsuperscript{26} Mistletoe is not used in Saxo’s version, but at times the sword used by Hod is called Mistilteinn—coincidentally the same word for mistletoe as well as the name of a sword that appears in the legendary Saga of Hromund Gripsson. As such, it seems likely that the weaponized mistletoe is an Icelandic misunderstanding of an object intended to be a sword—a misunderstanding that remained uncorrected as a result of Icelandic unfamiliarity with the plant they believed was being referenced. This argument is furthered by scholar John McKinnell, who states that “no one who knew the actual parasitic plant could imagine that one could possibly make a lethal weapon from it, but the Icelandic [composer of “Voluspa”] evidently regards it as a small tree, as does Snorri. This might be taken to imply, since the mistletoe is central to the story, that the tale of the killing of Baldr is of Icelandic origin.”\textsuperscript{27} This claim is not entirely true, as Saxo’s construction of the myth, as well as the myth’s existence on rune stones outside of Iceland, disproves this theory that the myth in its entirety is of Icelandic origin. However, the use of mistletoe as the harbinger of Baldr’s death indicates that by the time “Voluspa” and the \textit{Edda} were transcribed in the thirteenth century, the myths therein had taken on a decidedly Icelandic flair. In doing so, they moved further away from the myths upon which they were based, and had rooted themselves securely in Icelandic cultural conception. By the thirteenth century, these myths that once belonged to the entirety of Scandinavia had become the cultural property of Icelanders, which Snorri capitalized on, deftly using

\textsuperscript{25} Sturluson, 48.
\textsuperscript{27} John McKinnell, \textit{Both One and Many: Essays on Change and Variety in Late Norse Heathenism} (Rome, Il calamo, 1994), 17.
it to warn of and illustrate the impending fall of Icelandic independence.

**Snorri Sturluson**

While textual analysis and comparison are crucial in beginning to understand the cultural-historical importance of the *Edda*’s mythology to the thirteenth century, the life of the author himself adds an additional layer of complexity. As the most prolific and influential medieval Icelandic author and politician, Snorri Sturluson embodied the intellect, creativity, and scheming self-preservation that defines the Age of the Sturlungs. Born in 1179 into the powerful Sturlung family, Snorri became part of a legacy rooted in the cultural mythic-history of Iceland. His family descended from the famed Icelandic poet Egil Skallagrímsson, and Snorri’s father was more than once accused of wanting to emulate Odin. Snorri was fostered by the prominent Jon Loftsson of the more powerful Oddaveryjar family as an act of compensation after Snorri’s father was attacked during a legal dispute. This act of fosterage was a generous compliment and created a bond of kinship between the two families that would prove beneficial to Snorri and his lifelong desire for upward mobility. Snorri was raised and educated in Oddi, the seat of the Oddaveryjar family and “thirteenth-century Iceland’s premier centre of learning and culture.”

Snorri received a comprehensive education in both antiquarian and modern materials, and by the time of Loftsson’s death in 1197, he had proven himself eager to enter the intellectual and political sphere that he had been groomed for.

Immediately after his first marriage, and with the aid of Oddaveryjar wealth, Snorri began to quickly acquire Icelandic titles of power. He first settled in the homestead of Borg at Myrar—the ancestral seat of the family of Egil Skallagrímsson. This homestead belonged first to Egil’s father Kveld-Ulf, one of the original settlers of Iceland, and is attested to in both the Icelandic historical texts and the family saga *Egil’s Saga*. Settling here was no mere coincidence; by

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28 Wanner, 38.
29 Wanner, 18.
establishing himself in a culturally important Icelandic location, Snorri sought to remind Icelanders of his culturally important heritage and presented himself as a figure as significant as the famed poet-chieftain Egil. Furthermore, his settlement at Borg illustrates the continued cultural significance that Icelandic history held in the Icelandic present.

Around the time of his settlement at Borg, Snorri entered into his first dispute with his foster family, an event which led to his sending three assassins to Oddi.\(^{30}\) While nothing came of the assassination attempt, Snorri’s quick willingness to assassinate his foster family spoke to his tendencies towards lawlessness, and put him in direct opposition to Icelandic societal constructions. Without a centralized legal system, Iceland had no way of systematically enforcing laws. Instead, Iceland operated on a standardized ethics system guided by their law texts. Society was organized by relationships of loyalty that, if violated, held the potential to turn toward vengeance and blood feuds.\(^{31}\) Without adherence to these societal pillars, the Icelandic Commonwealth would fail to function. By actively breaking the bonds that he had cultivated and exploited, Snorri subverted core Icelandic values—prefiguring the civil strife that would continue to define Iceland until its fall in 1264. Despite his apparent tendencies towards lawlessness, Snorri was elected the lawspeaker\(^{32}\) of the Althing in 1215 and again in 1222, an appointment which solidified Snorri’s status as Iceland’s most prominent figure.

While on a trip to Norway in 1218 by personal invitation of King Hakon, Snorri developed a close bond both with the king and his regent, Jarl Skuli. After two years spent with the jarl, Snorri received

\(^{30}\) Wanner, 19.


\(^{32}\) The Icelandic lawspeaker was the only elected position within the Althing. The lawspeaker was responsible for memorizing the medieval law text in its entirety so that he may recite 1/3 of it per year during the Althing. Traditionally, lawspeakers were reelected in three-year cycles, but as evidenced by Snorri’s single nine-year appointment from 1222 to 1231, this was not the case in the thirteenth century.
The distinguished title of *skultilsveinn* from both the jarl and king, and effectively became a vassal of the Norwegian crown. The distribution of this title of honor onto an Icelander was not unheard of but carried serious implications: the young king and his jarl saw the politically prominent and crafty Snorri as an exploitable Icelandic resource. Belonging to a strong family and being the only, and thus most influential, governmental leader of the Althing, Snorri held the potential to be a puppet of Norwegian influence in Iceland. Before leaving Norway in 1220, Snorri agreed to act on the king’s behalf upon his return to Iceland and sway public opinion toward Icelandic subjugation to Norway. As a gesture of goodwill, Snorri sent both his son and son-in-law to Norway. This promise dissuaded the king and jarl from acting on their desire for military intervention themselves, and as such allowed for Iceland to briefly retain its independence—a period of time which proved beneficial to Snorri’s political aspirations and increased Icelandic-Norwegian tensions.

Unsurprisingly, Snorri did not keep his promise to King Hakon. Snorri’s power in Iceland continued to expand throughout the decade after his return. By 1228, he established kinship ties through marriage with three of Iceland’s six most prominent families and had informally married the richest woman in Iceland. Through his rapid and strategic land-grabbing, it is apparent that Snorri saw his high-status position with King Hakon as giving him a monarchical-sanctioned right to take Iceland for himself. Whether this perceived “right” was in concordance to or defiance of the wishes of the Norwegian crown is ambiguous, but the period of his political activity between 1220 and 1228 speaks more of his independent Icelandic roots than of his vassalage to the Norwegian king. While Snorri was attempting to consolidate Iceland under the rule of himself and his family, an action antithetical to Iceland’s history of shying away from centralized government, Snorri nonetheless displayed a firm anti-Norwegian political stance. If power had to be centralized, it was better to be centralized under a native Icelander than a foreign Norwegian.

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33 Snorri already belonged to two of these six families, the Sturlungs and the Oddaveryjar.
Snorri actively engaged in politics while developing his prolific literary abilities. During his life, Snorri wrote two seminal texts: the *Prose Edda* and *Heimskringla*. *Heimskringla* is a historical saga concerning and at times appearing to praise Norwegian kings from the ninth century to 1177, which seems to contradict Snorri’s anti-Norwegian sentiments. Yet as scholar Magnús Fjalldal illustrates, *Heimskringla* may be more appropriately read as a political critique—propaganda warning Icelanders of the threat of Norwegian leadership. In particular, he draws from the section on the rule of King Olaf, who attempted to exert control over the newly Christianized Iceland by commissioning a church on the site of the Althing. After hearing a speech by one of King Olaf’s Icelandic retainers, native Icelander Einarr boldly states: “I believe that it is advisable for the people of this country not to agree to pay any kind of taxes—like the ones which he collects from his own people in Norway—to King Olafr. If we agree to pay tribute to the king, we are bringing upon us servitude, not just for ourselves, but for our sons and the entire population of this country. And this servitude shall never disappear from Iceland.”

*Heimskringla* is largely considered a work of history, but there is little doubt that Snorri is here interjecting his personal thirteenth-century ideals to take a definitive stance against Norwegian political involvement in Iceland. This theme is seen throughout the saga in various passages regarding Norwegian bribery and expansionist ideals. The most explicit attention, however, is given to descriptions of torture and punishment by Norwegian monarchs—a factual but fearmongering attempt to demonize Norwegians.

Snorri was not the only influential political leader of his time to attempt to use literature as a means of swaying public opinion or providing contemporary commentary. In fact, King Hakon himself utilized literature as a means of transforming his traditionally Norwegian court into one that was more in-line with continental society. King Hakon imported and sponsored the translation of foreign literary genres in an attempt to sway the intellect and culture of his

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Norwegian subjects toward more appropriate avenues. In addition to being highly educated and a shrewd politician, Snorri experienced firsthand King Hakon’s attempts to shift public opinion via literature. As such, Snorri was no stranger to the power of words, both in a political and social context. Nor was he a stranger to the creation of political propaganda. To accept that passages of Heimskringla are thinly veiled propaganda is to accept that Snorri, despite his antiquarian tendencies, was not averse to coding his “faithful” text with his personal thirteenth-century political ideals. This revelation requires that his works be read in a new light, for if Heimskringla can provide insight into his anti-Norwegian attitudes, it may be surmised that the Prose Edda can do the same.

Hod and Loki as Thirteenth-century Creations

To return to the Edda, evidence for Snorri’s thirteenth-century tampering can be found in the characters of Hod and Loki. Snorri’s characterizations of these characters are intimately connected with Snorri’s social and legal experiences. While in name these gods are not uniquely thirteenth-century creations, the ways in which they are presented in Snorri’s Edda are. They, more than any of the others, most closely resemble medieval Icelandic ideologies, especially those concerning masculinity and appropriate punishments for homicide. Their actions and attributes prove them to be the antithesis of medieval Icelandic ideals. Through their lack of masculinity and upheaval of social norms and structures, Snorri uses Hod and Loki to symbolize the subversive undercurrent extant in Iceland which threatened to topple the Commonwealth.

During the myth of Baldr’s death and throughout the Prose Edda, both Hod and Loki display an innate lack of masculinity, and as such are placed on the periphery of the gods and their masculine entertainment. As medievalist Carol Clover shows, Old Norse and medieval Icelandic society conceptualized a gender binary divided not between male and female, but between the powerful and the
powerless. 35 These categories, simplified into the male-female distinction and elaborated upon by the Icelandic family sagas, are fluid and not defined by biological sex. Instead, they are defined by actions and attributes which allow for individuals to either rise into positions of power or fall into positions of powerlessness. Retaining a traditional masculine image was of the utmost importance in Old Norse and medieval Scandinavian society, and sexually derogatory insults against men, known as nið, were punishable by outlawry and oftentimes death. Being disabled in some fashion, especially being blinded, was one of the specific attributes that resulted in an immediate fall into powerless effeminacy. Without sight, one’s role in medieval Icelandic society was severely and irreparably diminished.36

The trope of blindness leading to effeminacy is seen in multiple sagas written during the thirteenth century, including Egil’s Saga, in which the titular character, Egil, blinds a man in retaliation for his wrongdoing and eventually goes blind himself, living the final years of his life in a world defined by his complete lack of power and masculinity. In Hod’s case, it is not specified whether he was born blind or was blinded by another; instead, importance rests on the fact that he is blind, and thus emasculated. As Annett Lassen argues, Hod’s blindness “does not seem to suggest any supernatural powers,”37 an observation supported by the fact that Hod’s blindness is unique to Snorri’s Edda. Therefore, this particular feature has no mythological importance aside from the thirteenth-century ideology prescribed to it by Snorri. Hod’s effeminacy reinforces the taboo of his act of kin-slaying, the most egregious transgression of societal norms which was not uncommon during the Age of the Sturlungs. His blindness furthermore exemplifies the fact that he is “blind to his fraternal feelings and has no appreciation for the foundational principle of the

36 Clover.
family.”

While Baldr is perfection, Hod is imperfection. If Baldr is to represent Iceland, Hod represents the violent undercurrent of societal subversion willing to destroy it all. As such, the blind and unmasculine Hod is antithetical to the ideology of medieval Icelandic society, so heavily built upon the “frantic machismo” of males and the importance of ties of kinship.

Loki’s location on the periphery of the Aesir during the Baldr sequence is also associated with a lack of masculinity. Loki, while not the only god who has the ability to shape-shift, is the only one who has the ability to change both shape and gender. This crossing of gender boundaries is so complete that Loki is in fact the mother, not the father, of Odin’s eight-legged horse Sleipnir, after a convoluted scheme leads to him transforming into a mare to lure a giant’s horse away from Asgard. Loki’s gender transgressions are referred to twice in the myth of Baldr’s death: once when he disguises himself to deceive Frigg, and again when he disguises himself as the mysterious giantess Thanks, who stymies the Aesir’s plans to rescue Baldr from the underworld. While this episode including the giantess Thanks is not attributed to in any other mythological sources, Snorri determines that “it is presumed that this was Loki Lafeyjarson, who has done most evil among the Aesir.”

Grágás, the medieval Icelandic law text, establishes strict penalties for cross-dressing, with both men and women accused of such being subject to lesser outlawry. While Loki does not experience explicit lesser outlawry for his gender transgressions, he is forced to exist on the periphery of the gods in all scenarios, much in the same way that Icelandic outlaws were no longer considered a part of Icelandic society. As with Hod, Loki’s gender transgressions serve no

38 Lassen, 223.
39 Clover, 380.
40 The home of the Aesir.
41 Sturluson, 51.
42 Grágás, volume 2, ed. Haraldur Bessason, Robert J. Glendinning, trans. Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, Richard Perkins (Winnipeg, University of Manitoba Press, 1980), 69. Lesser outlawry lasts for a period of three years, during which time the accused individual must either leave Iceland or live within three “safe zones” inside of Iceland. They do not have to forfeit their property, but can be killed with impunity.
necessarily supernatural purpose, and as such, they factor into the social commentary provided by Snorri.

Finally, the punishments that Hod and Loki receive in recompense for killing Baldr reflect the appropriate punishments as dictated again by Grágás for their respective crimes. According to the law, the penalty for all types of homicide is full outlawry.\footnote{Grágás, volume 1, ed. Haraldur Bessason, Robert J. Glendinning, trans. Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, Richard Perkins (Winnipeg, University of Manitoba Press, 1980), 139-175.} This type of outlawry requires that the individual forfeit their property and leave Iceland forever, in addition to paying compensation, or “blood money,” to the family of the slain. Furthermore, these outlaws can be killed with impunity. As many of the family sagas illustrate, however, there was an additional dimension to the penalties for homicide: that of the lingering blood feud. Blood feuds occurred when the family of the slain decided that the law had not upheld the honor of the dead to a proper degree, and thus the family was made to take matters into their own hands. The ultimate goal of the blood feud was to kill the murderer in an act of ultimate compensation.

As such, there are two sides of the legal coin as concerns homicide: that of the legal code and that of the social code. The punishments of Hod and Loki serve both of these concepts, as Hod is killed outright as compensation and Loki is symbolically outlawed to a nondescript cave. The punishment system for these two figures therefore adheres closely to the social and legal structure of medieval Norse society, both of which Snorri was extremely well-versed in. The parallels between Hod, Loki, and medieval Icelandic values are of critical importance, as they exemplify the ways in which Snorri used thirteenth-century ideologies to create the cultural landscape of his mythological cosmos, displaying the increasingly apparent fact that these myths are not as purely mythological as they might seem.
A Mythmaking Society: The Myth of Icelandic Settlement

The question remains as to why Snorri was tempted to utilize the literary vehicle of mythology to express Icelandic nationalism. As seen with Heimskringla, historical texts were easily used as political propaganda—so why resort to myths? Early Icelandic society was built around a structure of myths and a belief in the inherent supernaturality of Iceland itself. This was a belief system which, as shown by Icelandic family sagas and historical texts, existed as early as the settlement period and well into the thirteenth century. Despite its settlement-era roots, the practice of mythologizing Icelandic history was woven into the fabric of Icelandic culture during the thirteenth century, primarily through the creation of the family sagas and the utilization of historical texts as their foundational material. It is this cultural phenomena of mythic Iceland that pervaded the atmosphere within which the Prose Edda was written.

As established by the mythmaking trends beginning in the settlement period, Icelandic myth and reality were often inseparable. The settlement of Iceland is recorded in two twelfth-century Icelandic historical texts: Landnámabók and Íslendingabók. According to Landnámabók, Iceland was settled “874 years from the Incarnation of our Lord,” and only fifty-six years later was declared completely settled. Both Íslendingabók and Landnámabók claim that the first permanent settler of Iceland was a man named Ingolf Arnarson, who traveled to Iceland from Norway with his family, retinue, and blood-brother Hjorleif. Although his reasons for relocation are left ambiguous, Landnámabók details the events leading up to his voyage, including a particularly striking sequence regarding pagan sacrifice. Landnámabók explains that before settling Iceland, “Ingolf held a great sacrifice to discover what the future had in store for him. . . . The oracle told Ingolf to go to Iceland.” Ingolf’s decision to settle Iceland was thus divinely ordained, with his passage through nearly uncharted waters given divine guidance. Hjorleif, however, refused to sacrifice or obtain the

45Landnámabók, 19.
blessings of the gods—a decision that ultimately proved to be fatal, as Hjorleif was killed by his slaves shortly after establishing his farmstead. While the author of Landnámabók never explicitly connects Hjorleif’s demise to his refusal to engage in pagan sacrifice, it is heavily implied. In this unlikely scenario written by a Christian Icelander, it is the devout pagan who succeeds and prospers, while the less faithful one does not. This apparent contradiction highlights the integration of traditional religion and mythology into the fabric of Icelandic culture and history well into the Christian period. The inclusion of this myth of divine settlement into one of the two primary Icelandic historical texts gives it legitimacy, placing it firmly within the official history of Iceland. In one small chapter, historical myth becomes cultural truth.

The Icelandic family sagas of the thirteenth century also contribute to Icelandic settlement myths, primarily in regard to the motivation behind the relocation of Norwegians to the uninhabited island. According to the family sagas, Iceland was settled by Norwegians fleeing the oppressive reign of King Harald Fair-Hair, whose desire to unify Norway under one monarch drove out Norwegian chieftains reluctant to relinquish their power. The thirteenth-century Egil’s Saga begins with the relocation of the powerful Kveld-Ulf to Iceland after a feud between himself and the king. Spurred by the murder of Kveld-Ulf’s son Thorolf by order of the king, Kveld-Ulf and his living son Skallagrim flee to Iceland “where they had heard of the fine land that was available. . . . Their friends and acquaintances . . . had already gone to Iceland . . . and had found land for the taking and were free to choose wherever they wanted to live.” Later, the fourteenth-century Laxdæla Saga tells the story of Ketil Flat-Nose, who migrated to Iceland as “King Harald Fair-Hair grew so powerful in Norway that no petty king or any other man of rank could thrive in Norway unless he had received his title from the king.” There is a tenable historical truth to what these sagas claim: in the ninth century, Viking-oriented communities living in the southwestern provinces of Norway posed a threat to the commercial provinces in Hálogaland and

the southern coast of Norway. Hálogaland suffered repeated Viking attacks to the point where their trade with Frisia all but ended.\(^{48}\) In an effort to end the violence that was damaging Norwegian fiscal prospects, King Harald and Jarl Hákon Grjótgarðson of Hálogaland united to “extend their authority over [all of Norway], and . . . to suppress all acts of violence within its boundaries.”\(^{49}\) This attempt to suppress violence led to the battle of Hafrsfjord between 872 and 900, resulting in a victory by King Harald and leading to his subsequent unification of Norway. While this civil war between the southwestern provinces and King Harald had benefited the Norwegian seafaring and trading communities, petty chieftains from the defeated Viking-oriented provinces found themselves deprived of power. This deprivation was not altogether unjustified, however. As the chieftains continued their violent attacks, King Harald was forced to take matters into his own hands, diminishing the power of the few to save Norway as a whole. Nevertheless, it was these chieftains who sought political reprieve in Iceland, and who constructed an Icelandic governmental structure that was the polar opposite of what they had fled. While the chieftains were perhaps not as victimized as their sagas lead readers to believe, their actions constituted a subtle act of defiance and a display of what would become an innate Icelandic desire to retain cultural traditions.

Neither Landnámabók nor Íslendingabók explain the definitive reasons behind Icelandic settlement. Consequently, the family sagas compounded by Norwegian sources concerning King Harald Fair-Hair’s political revolution must be relied upon for the historical truth of the matter. The pure historical reliability of the sagas has been debated, on account of their being written centuries after the events which they describe, but the existence of primary saga characters (including Egil, Kveld-Ulf, Skallagrim, and a multitude of others throughout all of the family sagas) in Landnámabók and Íslendingabók presents a compelling argument that some of the less-fantastical saga elements are likely to be


\(^{49}\) Johannesson, 25.
true. The emphasis on a desire to thrive, as indicated in *Egil’s Saga* and *Laxdæla Saga*, suggests that there was likely more at play in the relocation of these and other settlers, chiefly that a rising Norwegian population corresponded to less arable land and fewer chances to establish societal position via landholdings. Nevertheless, Icelandic sagas and historical texts favor the more riveting myth of fleeing the oppressive tyrant, rooting their history and the inception of Iceland firmly within the historical-mythic sphere. As such, by the thirteenth century, the mythical cosmos of Icelandic history and society had become so intertwined that they were nearly indistinguishable.

**The Supernatural Landscape of Iceland**

There is another dimension to the cultural mythic-history of Iceland in addition to what is found in the family sagas: that of the supernatural. Before Iceland was settled by chieftains on the hunt for land, Iceland’s first law text *Ulfjotslog* suggests that it was settled by beings of a different sort. One law states that “people should not have ships with [carved] heads at sea, but if they had, they should remove the heads before they came within sight of land, and not sail towards land with gaping heads or yawning snouts, lest the land spirits be frightened at them.”

These land spirits, known in Old Norse as *landvættir*, were believed to be the supernatural guardians of Iceland. They existed in and belonged to Iceland prior to its settlement and, as Kirsten Hastrup illustrates, did not leave post-settlement. Instead they retreated to the *utangards*, the land outside the boundaries of Icelandic farmsteads. Their existence in the Icelandic wilderness contributed to the mythic majesty of Iceland and endowed the landscape with supernatural provenance. It is this supernatural provenance that *Ulfjotslog* sought to establish and defend, as the law outright confirms the inherent supernaturality of Iceland. Furthermore, it concretizes the existence of

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the landvættir in the consciousness of the Icelanders and confirms them as a part of Icelandic cultural history. Ulfjotslog gives legitimacy to these beings and establishes Iceland as a place within which the supernatural and natural were meant to intermingle and coexist.

For the Icelanders to prosper in this new and untamed country, it was imperative that they deferred to the benevolence of the land’s guardian beings. Margaret Clunies Ross notes that these spirits “were thought to be able to influence human affairs in certain ways in their role as guardians of the land,” confirming that there was an impetus for Icelanders to coexist in harmony with the supernatural. Supernatural influence on human affairs is most strongly seen in the accounts of Icelandic land-claiming practices via the usage of high-seat pillars. Aboard their ships, settlers threw these pillars overboard and, guided by both native and foreign supernatural entities, established their farmsteads at the site where they washed ashore. It has been hypothesized that these pillars may also have been a way of introducing traditional gods to a new supernatural landscape, as the Icelandic family saga titled Eyrbyggja Saga features a pair of pillars engraved with images of the god Thor. By casting these pillars overboard, settlers were physically and symbolically casting their gods into a new and unknown realm, allowing them to be the first foreign settlers on their new land. Once the gods settled, the people were allowed to settle too, a deferment which exemplifies the importance carried by the supernatural in the lives of these new Icelanders.

These examples of the supernaturality of early Iceland as discovered in settlement-era sources provide support for the theory that, while Iceland’s mythologized history rapidly gained importance during the thirteenth century, a deep connection to the mythical realm was integrated into the Icelandic cultural consciousness from its inception. As the centuries progressed and Scandinavian countries gradually began to reject their pagan traditions in favor of Christian

52 Clunies Ross, Prolonged Echos, 127.
53 High-seat pillars (Öndvegissúlur) were wooden poles that adorned either side of the high-seat, or the seat of the head of the family. Icelandic settlers brought these poles with them from Norway.
ones, Iceland’s connection to the supernatural became increasingly unique and distinctive. By utilizing traditional mythology to suit his thirteenth-century political purposes, Snorri tapped into this distinctive characteristic and almost exploited the sentiment he knew was attached to it. As other countries abandoned their pagan mythologies, Icelanders were presented with the opportunity to make these traditions their own. Over time, Scandinavian mythology became increasingly Icelandic, eventually entering the realm of traditional supernaturality that defined Iceland during the settlement period. As such, Snorri’s nationalist propaganda had no better vehicle than the mythology that defined and distinguished the very country he was attempting to defend.

Iceland’s Religious Opposition to Norway
Snorri’s decision to utilize Norse mythology for his propagandistic purposes also lies in Iceland’s tumultuous history of conversion, during which Iceland was forced to convert under hostile pressure from the Norwegian monarchy. Iceland remained a formally pagan country until the year 1000, when Christian conversion was decided upon at the Althing. Although the Icelandic sagas portray Christian conversion as an Icelandic decision uninfluenced by outside powers, the historical reality suggests the opposite. In 995, the formidable, baptized ex-Viking Olaf Tryggvason took the Norwegian throne. Immediately upon ascension, he began to force his pagan Norwegian subjects to convert, likely emboldened both by his Viking spirit and the significant amount of wealth given to him by the Christian King Ethelred of England. During this time, King Olaf dispatched missionaries to Iceland with the intention of converting and subjugating the island country. Iceland was no stranger to Christian missionaries, with the early Icelandic convert Thorvaldr Koðránsson persuading the Bishop Frederick of Saxony in 981 “to accompany him to Iceland to baptize his kinsmen.” Upon their arrival at the Althing, they were met with harsh lampoons from the Icelanders, many of

54 Johannesson, 127.
55 Johannesson, 125.
whom insinuated a homosexual relationship between the two men. Incensed and levying punishment authorized by Grágás, Thorvaldr killed two of the offending men and was driven out of Iceland, failing in his conversion efforts.

King Olaf’s first missionary, a man named Stefnir, had little more success than both Thorvaldr and Bishop Frederick. Stefnir himself was an Icelander, but his fellow Icelanders were perturbed by his zealous preaching and as such “were not much moved by his teaching.” Outraged at his inability to convert people so far on the outskirts of continental society, Stefnir “began to destroy temples and places of worship and to break up idols.” This militant display of Christianity infuriated the Icelanders, who saw this attack by a Christian on their temples as evidence of the destruction that foreign countries, such as Norway, could subject the small country to. The implications behind Stefnir’s acts were thus not acts of violence perpetrated by Christians, but instead by the Norwegian monarchy. During the Althing in the summer of Stefnir’s destructive rampage, it was declared that “kinsmen of Christians who were closer than fourth and more distantly related than second cousins must prosecute them for blasphemy.” Unwilling to risk their own social standing for someone now seen as allied with foreign powers, Stefnir’s family quickly prosecuted him and Stefnir was subsequently outlawed.

In a final attempt, King Olaf sent the Norwegian criminal-turned-missionary Thangbrandr to Iceland, both as a punishment for the “unruly things” that Thangbrandr had been a part of in Norway, and in the hopes that the quarrelsome criminal might subjugate the wild Icelandic pagans to the new religion. Upon landing in Iceland, Thangbrandr was met with animosity, with all Icelanders he encountered refusing to speak to him or direct him to the harbor. Nevertheless, Thangbrandr quickly converted a man named Hallr and

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57 Porgilsson, 40.
58 Porgilsson, 40.
59 Porgilsson, 41.
60 Porgilsson, 41.
his household, and successfully baptized families throughout the southern and northern quarters of the island. Yet, as what happened with Thorvaldr, the people of Iceland resorted to lampooning the missionary, with two men in particular composing exceptionally libelous verses. Thangbrandr killed them and was immediately sentenced to outlawry.

On his return from Norway, Thangbrandr related his abuse at the hands of the Icelanders to King Olaf, declaring that “there was no hope that Christianity would make progress there.”61 Furious with this reminder of his lack of control over Iceland, King Harald retaliated against Icelanders visiting Norway, many of whom were “seized and put in chains, threatened...with death and...maiming...others were stripped of their possessions. The king said that he would repay them for how disrespectfully their fathers in Iceland had received his communications.” 62 This display of force directly attacked and undermined Icelandic independence. In maiming and stripping Icelanders of their possessions, King Olaf degraded those whom he had the power to affect and forced them to a realization: no matter how independent they believed themselves to be, King Olaf and Norway were far more powerful. Submission to Christianity, and through that, to Norway, was inevitable. Two converted Icelanders living in Norway, Gizurr and Hjalti, managed to assuage the king’s anger by promising to undertake the task of conversion themselves. King Olaf agreed on the condition that he was to keep four Icelandic hostages, one from each quarter of Iceland and all belonging to the prominent families least likely to convert.

Through a combination of the hostage situation, King Olaf’s tactics of emasculation, and the increasing number of native Icelanders sympathetic to Christianity, Iceland ultimately converted. Tensions between pagans and Christians were palpable, and to nullify the animosity between the groups, the lawspeaker Thorgeirr first agreed to speak both the Christian and heathen laws. Feeling that this solution was not sustainable, Thorgeirr returned to his booth at the Althing and

61 Þorgilsson, 46.
62 Þorgilsson, 46.
covered himself with his cloak, beneath which he stayed for an entire day and night. Upon emerging, Thorgeirr proclaimed: “it seems advisable to me not to let those who oppose each other here with most vehemence prevail, and let us arbitrate between them, so that each side has its own way in something, but we all have the same law and the same religion, because this will prove true: if we tear apart the law, then we tear apart the peace.” To fight against Christianity and conjointly the Norwegian kingdom, was futile. Moreover, the tensions between heathen and Christian Icelanders threatened to disrupt the cultural cohesion which Icelanders had developed for over a century. With no cultural unity, Icelanders stood no chance of preserving their Commonwealth.

Through the proclamation of official conversion, it is apparent that the cultural cohesion and cooperation of Icelanders under pressure from foreign impositions were far more important than the official religion adopted. Pagan practices were by no means completely outlawed at this time — the exposure of children, the eating of horseflesh, and private pagan worship were still acceptable, with only private worship being punishable with lesser outlawry if witnessed by others. By allowing these pagan practices to continue, Icelanders took a stand in defending their pagan cultural heritage—a heritage which had become central to Icelandic identity—in the face of the impending Norwegian threat. Equipped with this knowledge of Iceland’s tense religious relationship with Norway, by coding political propaganda into the Prose Edda, Snorri established himself firmly within the complex historical context of Icelandic-Norwegian relations. For Snorri’s purposes, there was no better way to reinforce Icelandic independence than by identifying with and finding pride in the pagan past which Norway had abandoned.

**Ragnarok and the End of the Icelandic Commonwealth**

Ragnarok as a mythic event exists in texts outside of the Prose Edda, and therefore little scholarship has dealt with the potential similarities between the fall of the gods and the fall of the Icelandic

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63 Þorgilsson, 50.
Commonwealth. Yet the similarities between the two events are undeniable: infighting instigated by individuals on the periphery of the inner society leads to the downfall of tradition by foreign imposition, ultimately leading to the creation of a new social order. The new society in the *Edda* has the ability to look back upon the old traditions with an air of nostalgia, an emotion that suggests a desire, a wish, to have better enjoyed, respected, or appreciated the past while it was still the present. At the same time, the gathering of the second generation of gods after Ragnarok indicates a hope that Iceland might return to, or even retain, its independent glory in the face of foreign powers. It is likely no coincidence that six gods inhabit this new world, much in the same way that six powerful families ruled Iceland at the time of this text’s composition. Ragnarok and the death of Baldr act as prophetic and propagandistic warnings to the Icelandic public. In the same way that *Heimskringla* can be read as such, the fiery doom and devastatingly destructive social and cultural divides described during Ragnarok are a warning, a premonition, of Iceland’s future under Norwegian rulership.

One characteristic of Snorri’s version of Ragnarok that has been discussed within academic circles are the multiple parallels that this myth has with the Christian Armageddon as seen in the Book of Revelation. Similarities include, but are not limited to, the disappearance of the sun, the emergence of a serpent from the sea, the raising of the dead from the underworld, and the ultimate birth of a new and pure world after a battle between good and evil. Thirteenth-century Icelanders were intimately familiar with the Christian biblical tradition, and these allusions would not have been lost on them. As such, it appears that Snorri adopted these biblical similarities into his version of Ragnarok in order to create a sense of religious, cultural cohesion between medieval Icelanders and these myths of pagan origin. Yet, unlike the Christian Armageddon on its own, Ragnarok possessed the potential to act as a more culturally poignant piece of propaganda. While Christianity was imposed upon Iceland by Norway and was a reminder of Norway’s anti-Icelandic independence sentiments, the myth of Ragnarok and the mythological cosmos it belonged to were an innate and indivisible piece of Icelandic culture. By incorporating
tropes that Icelanders were familiar with and applying them to a piece of cultural history that no other Scandinavian country at that time appeared to appreciate, Snorri fervently attempted to pull at the deep-seated desire for independence that existed in the consciousnesses of all Icelanders. The usage of a mythological scenario so closely mirroring their own was intended to remind Icelanders of their cultural roots, encouraging them to resist foreign powers as they had for nearly four centuries.

**Conclusion**

Snorri, the powerful political figure that he was, had a vested interest in keeping Iceland independent. His political prowess in Iceland was self-made, and the Norwegian crown’s involvement in Icelandic affairs promised to complicate matters more than not. In true Icelandic fashion, the independent Snorri did not want to be ruled, he merely wanted to be the ruler. In 1237, Snorri traveled again to Norway, and in 1239 returned to Iceland in defiance of the king’s orders. King Hakon declared Snorri a traitor, and in 1241 Snorri was murdered by Gizurr Thorvaldson. Despite Snorri’s best efforts, Iceland fell to Norwegian control in 1264, after years of infighting and the biggest battle in Icelandic history. Gizurr Thorvaldson, his murderer, became the first jarl of Iceland under the Norwegian monarchy. Secluded and dependent on foreign resources, the Icelandic Commonwealth’s fall was inevitable.

Tragically, with the fall of the Commonwealth came the gradual relinquishing of and disinterest in traditional forms of Icelandic literature. While saga literature continued to be developed well into the fourteenth century, Iceland’s literary culture became increasingly influenced by foreign genres. Literature has the ability to influence intellect and culture, and Iceland was no exception. Much as in the same way that King Hakon used literature to make his Norwegian court more continental, Iceland found itself becoming more like the continental societies it now belonged to. As a result, traditional texts such as the *Prose Edda* decreased in cultural importance. It was not until the early nineteenth century that these texts would be rediscovered and valued for their intrinsically Icelandic character. Just as the German
Grimm brothers sought to recover traditional folklore in an effort to find pride in their cultural history, so too did Iceland.

In the nearly 200 years since the *Prose Edda* has regained its cultural importance, few instances of contemporary scholarship dedicate the time to analyzing and interpreting its myths as nationalistic propaganda. Although it is not a form of nationalism as understood in a modern context, in its subtleties and defense of Iceland it is nationalistic all the same. The propaganda that Snorri so artfully constructed was born not out of a hatred for Norway, but out of a deep fondness for Iceland, the country uniquely populated with spirits, farmers, and disgruntled chieftains. In a sense, the myths about Baldr’s death and Ragnarok are a grand farewell to this small and fierce country, in which Iceland, the most perfect of them all, is cut down by the outsiders it always knew would cause it harm. While Snorri both feared and knew that subjugation to Norway was inevitable, the peaceful reconciliation after Ragnarok speaks to his hope that Iceland would one day emerge unscathed and regain its natural purity.

This hope, instilled by Snorri, is mirrored in the century-long struggle for independence beginning anew in the nineteenth century.64 This struggle, influenced by continental romantic and nationalist ideals, was begun by a new generation of poets and writers—not unlike the second generation of gods that rises from the destruction of Ragnarok. These poets took control of Iceland’s native literature and brought it to the forefront of Icelandic consciousness. Through their use of native texts, they claimed that Icelandic cultural history could be discovered and understood through literature. After all, the *Prose Edda* and Icelandic family sagas were not written in a vacuum, and it would be remiss to assume that they were devoid of truth, either historical or cultural. For a society such as medieval Iceland which has few contemporary texts regarding its historical reality, a deep understanding and analysis of the literature is imperative in understanding the society itself. The literary boom of the thirteenth

The importance of literature in the lives of medieval Icelanders indicates the significance that literature had in their culture. To understand medieval Iceland means to understand its literature, fantastical though it may be.

After 100 years of nationalistic revival, Iceland achieved independence in 1944. The Althing was reestablished and the burgeoning interest in Icelandic literary culture flourished. The connection between the struggle for Icelandic independence and the rediscovery of Icelandic traditional literature is not merely coincidental. In rediscovering these texts, Icelanders were able to rediscover their cultural history, reading and engaging with the texts and their propagandistic urges for Icelandic independence. Although Snorri could not have predicted it, the Icelanders of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries succeeded where his kinsmen could not: they became the new generation that Ragnarok promises. Whether they recognized it or not, they took up the mantle left for them by their thirteenth-century kinsmen. By engaging with traditional texts and striving for independence, these modern Icelanders displayed that a deep connection to the fervent independence of Iceland’s mythic past is ever-present in Icelandic cultural consciousness—just as Snorri intended.
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Primary source


**Secondary sources**


Invasions of the Commonwealth

Erastus Sergeant, Shays’ Rebellion, and the Monetary-Debt Crisis, 1786-1787: An Economic Microhistory

Liam Cronan

In the early morning hours of Tuesday, February 27th, 1787, twelve armed men surrounded the home of Dr. Erastus Sergeant, a local physician in the rural town of Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Shouting into the house, they demanded that Dr. Sergeant surrender and allow them entrance. For the next few minutes, the men waited outside the grey Georgian-style home, set high on Prospect Hill, waiting for a response. Terrified for himself and his family, Sergeant remained frozen in his bed. Using their rifles, the men drove their bayonets through the window, shattered the glass panes, and forced their way into the main bedroom. In the commotion, his wife Betsy and their children abruptly awakened. One of the unnamed men “pointed the bayonet into [Betsy’s] breast” and commanded Sergeant to surrender to them all arms and ammunition in the house. Sergeant, despite being described as a “tall, erect” man, was in no position to stand against them. With one man holding the entire family hostage, the eleven other men searched every room of the house, taking Dr. Sergeant’s hunting rifle along with anything else of value they could plunder, including the family’s “clothing, silver buckles…cash, hats, etc.” Departing with haste, they left the house in complete shambles.

Having ransacked Sergeant’s home, the men rounded up the family, still in their nightclothes, and “prepared [them] to march to

1 Erastus Sergeant, “Letter to Major General Shepard about Shays’ Rebellion,” Digital Amherst, Jones Library Special Collections, March 5, 1787, 1
2 Dr. Stephen W. Williams, American Medical Biography: Or, Memoir of Eminent Physicians, Embracing Principally Those Who Have Died since the Publication of Dr. Thacker’s Work on the Same Subject (Greenfield, MA: L. Merriam and Co., Printers, 1845), 514.
head quarters ... at Mr. Bingham’s.” Upon arriving at Bingham’s Tavern in Stockbridge, Sergeant “found all of [his] neighbors in the same unhappy situation.” The leader of the armed men, who presented himself as Captain Hamblin, ordered him to ready a sleigh and team of horses, and to assemble any “comforts [he] pleased.” Along with thirty-two other prisoners, Sergeant was marched out of Stockbridge that cold, snowy morning, unaware of his destination or the motivations behind his abduction.

At the town of Great Barrington, more prisoners joined them. Along the common road between Great Barrington and Sheffield, the Sheffield militia, many of whom knew Sergeant and the other men from Stockbridge, ambushed the group and attacked Captain Hamblin and his men. One of the prisoners, three militia men, and Hamblin himself were wounded or killed, in a scene Sergeant later described as a “cruelty unknown in the most barbarous nation.” Sergeant escaped from the ordeal unharmed and returned to his family thereafter, but he did not soon forget the events that had transpired early one morning that winter.

Erastus Sergeant and his family, that morning in February, fell victim to a group of men known as “Shaysites.” Participants in Shays’ Rebellion, these men had been active since the summer of 1786. Led by Daniel Shays, a former Captain of the Continental Army, these bands of rural farmers, most of them poor and many having lost their farms to foreclosure, shut down courthouses, raided homes, and organized efforts to march to Boston. In simplest terms, they rebelled over a crisis of debt, taxes, and currency in the state of Massachusetts, which had disproportionately affected rural areas. However, an event as

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3 Silas and Anna Bingham’s tavern later became what is today “The Red Lion Inn” in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. It remains a functioning inn and restaurant. (See Appendix A).
7 Christopher Clark, The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1780-1860 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 44.
complex as Shays’ Rebellion, both historically and economically, cannot truly be reduced to such straightforward terms.

The incident described above by Sergeant in his letter to Major General William Shepard presents just one small story in the greater narrative of Shays’ Rebellion and its short reign of violence in western Massachusetts. The Rebellion itself, in turn, was a microcosm of greater economic and political difficulties that were facing the state of Massachusetts and the United States as a whole during its first decade of independence. Liberated from the control of the British monarchy, America found herself without a strong central government. The Articles of Confederation, ratified in 1777, “…built an alliance of states rather than a cohesive nation.”

This confederate system left the United States without a true national legislature. As such, Congress was forced to rely on state legislatures to execute essential legal functions, including raising an army and dictating economic policy. Even in victory, there was still much to be done to forge a new, cohesive nation.

Shays’ Rebellion exemplified just one of many struggles for power and control under the Articles, as America searched for a sense of unity in the wake of war. In studying grounded events such as those of Erastus Sergeant and his family, one can analyze the true causes and impacts of Shays’ Rebellion; in studying the rebellion itself, one can glean a clearer picture of the American economic system as it was in the earliest years of our nation’s history. The assault on Sergeant’s house raises questions that go to the heart of the Rebellion and to the broader forces that motivated it, guided its conduct, and brought it to conclusion. This paper will attempt to answer in full why the events of February 27, 1787 occurred as they did. What business did Hamblin and his men have with the Sergeants? Why did they resort to such violence? Who was Erastus Sergeant and what role does his story play in the Rebellion? More broadly, what sparked the unrest in western


Massachusetts and the proceedings of the Rebellion? How did currency policy, taxes, and economic resentments play into the Rebellion? In short, what broad political and economic difficulties resulted in the violent encounter experienced by Dr. Sergeant that night?

This analysis will begin first by reconstructing and outlining the life of Erastus Sergeant. Second, it will attempt to present the events of Shays’ Rebellion from his perspective. Finally, this paper will explore the economic climate in which he lived in order to demonstrate how Shays’ Rebellion reflected the American economic difficulties of the 1780s more broadly. From inflated paper money to the “monetary-debt crisis” that had engulfed rural Massachusetts, these events all culminated in the outbreak of rebellion in 1786. They represent a complex series of occurrences that were as local as they were international, as socio-political as they were economic, and altogether unmatched in their expression of the varied economic desires in the early Republic.

While intermittent interest has been placed on Shays’ Rebellion as a whole by scholars of early American history, what little there is on the subject of the economic causes of Shays’ Rebellion is often found as pieces of larger works, usually making up little more than five to ten pages—scarcely enough to give this topic its full due. Rather, much of the study of the Rebellion has instead either focused on its political causes, influence on the Constitutional Convention, or effect on state politics. In studying the economy of rural Massachusetts around the time of Shays’ Rebellion, for example, the work of historians Christopher Clark and Winifred Rothenberg touches upon the events of the Rebellion, but only briefly. Focusing on the origins of Shays’ Rebellion, however, we can learn much from Dr. Sergeant’s story that differs from common conceptions of the American Revolution and the period following it. Whereas some might see the American victory at

Yorktown as the end of the struggle to form a new nation, the decade following the Revolution was only the beginning of a long fight towards unity, independence, and stability in a new America.

**Dr. Sergeant and General Shepard**

Much of Dr. Erastus Sergeant's early life has been lost to history. His complete memoirs were given upon his death in 1814 to his brother-in-law, Dr. Oliver Partridge, who lost them sometime before his own death in 1848. It is known, however, that Sergeant was born in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, on July 17, 1743 to John and Abigail Sergeant, and is described as a tall, thin man.\(^{11}\) From one surviving portrait, we know he had light hair, a slender face, and a thin, prominent nose. Firmly of New England stock, Sergeant was descended from the Sergeants of Great Yarmouth, England, who settled in Roxbury, Massachusetts in 1637 (Appendix B).\(^{12}\)

Sergeant's father, Rev. John Sergeant, was a graduate of Yale College who moved his family to Stockbridge to serve as a missionary to the Mohican tribe.\(^{13}\) There on Prospect Hill, Rev. Sergeant built a two-story home, where Erastus was born and later lived in with his own family—the same home which was later ransacked during Shays' Rebellion (Appendix C)\(^{14}\). Rev. Sergeant died in 1749, when Erastus was just six years old, and was replaced as minister by Rev. Jonathan Edwards, a pastor who had played a major role in the First Great Awakening. Sergeant's maternal uncle, Ephraim Williams, who died when Erastus was 13, was a hero of the Seven Years War and a fellow son of a famous minister whose wealth was bequeathed to found

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Williams College. Sergeant’s connection both to Edwards and Williams places Sergeant within the same vein of influential figures of the period from western Massachusetts.

After the death of his father, Sergeant’s mother remarried to Joseph Dwight and moved her family to the town of Great Barrington. From age fourteen to seventeen, Sergeant left home to attend The College of New Jersey (Princeton University), where his paternal uncle served as the college’s bursar. At Princeton he was a classmate of Benjamin Rush, a fellow future doctor who went on to sign the Declaration of Independence. After returning to Stockbridge, he apprenticed to Dr. Thomas Williams, another of his uncles and a reputable surgeon in western Massachusetts at the time, and became a physician in 1765. That same year, he established a practice on South St. in Stockbridge. Around the age of twenty, he married Elizabeth “Betsy” Partridge of Hatfield. Together, they bore twelve children between 1770 and 1792.

Sergeant served as a delegate to the County Convention during the early 1770s and commanded a company under Colonel Benjamin Simond’s Berkshire County Regiment in the American Revolution. He is credited with working as a surgeon at Fort Ticonderoga, among many other notable battles. It is also recorded that he fought at the Battle of Saratoga under Benjamin Lincoln, who ten years later led the militia that put an end to Shays’ Rebellion. After the war, Sergeant

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15 See Wyllis Wright, Colonel Ephraim Williams, A Documentary Life (Berkshire County Historical Society. Pittsfield, MA, 1970).
16 Erastus Sergeant, Undergraduate Alumni Records, 18th Century, AC104.01, Princeton University Archives, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.
17 Williams, American Medical Biography, 515.
became one of the most skilled surgeons in the Berkshires, and was reported to have often ridden upwards of fifty miles to see patients due to his skill. He was elected a fellow of the Massachusetts Medical Society in 1785, where he co-authored a petition to the Massachusetts state legislature pledging his support for smallpox inoculations. Sometime in the mid-to-late 1780s, he became a master to a physician’s apprentice named Moses Lynch, who lived with the family in their home in Stockbridge.

As a similar influential figure from the Berkshire region, William Shepard likely met Sergeant at a young age, and the letter between them is presumably one of many. Though less important to our story, Shepard is far better remembered than Sergeant and the records on him are far more extensive. He was born on December 1, 1737 in Westfield, Massachusetts. Like Sergeant, Shepard was politically active in the years leading up to the American Revolution and served as a Lieutenant Colonel in the Continental Army. He was later commissioned as a Colonel in the Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. In total, he fought in twenty-two different battles over the course of the war. After the war he returned to Westfield, was elected to the Massachusetts State Legislature, and rose to become a Major General in the Massachusetts Militia (Appendix D).

**Erastus Sergeant and The Rebellion**

While the life of Dr. Sergeant is historically significant in its own right, its most important facet for us is his role in Shays’ Rebellion. The earliest traces of revolt had been cinderng not only in western

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Massachusetts but also in much of the United States. Under the Articles of Confederation, Congress had no direct power to tax or control the monetary system. This fact alone does much to explain the Rebellion. Article IX, which relates directly to money, asserts that Congress was required to

Ascertain the necessary sums of money to be raised for the service of the United States, and to appropriate and apply the same for defraying the public expenses—to borrow money, or emit bills on the credit of the United States, transmitting every half-year to the respective States an account of the sums of money so borrowed or emitted.

While this gives some provisions to control money, it does not give Congress the direct power to tax or to regulate the money supply. Without the power to tax or raise funds, it became difficult for the United States government to repay loans, especially loans of foreign origin. The economics of this issue will be expanded upon in greater detail, but the results were difficulties for many in paying taxes and debts, with few chances of their situations improving. By August of 1786, things in the western part of Massachusetts reached a tipping point, and many towns went into full rebellion. In response to state taxes and personal debt demands, frequent foreclosures, and a lack of action from Boston, rebels closed down courthouses and raided homes.23

Daniel Shays, who like Erastus Sergeant and William Shepard, was a veteran of the Continental Army, emerged as the leader of the rebels late in 1786. In January of 1787, Daniel Shays and “his” rebel group of 1,200 other indebted farmers planned to march on the arsenal in Springfield, Massachusetts, and then move on to Boston. The Springfield Armory, or “The Arsenal at Springfield,” had been founded in 1777 in Springfield near the Connecticut River, and was a major depository of weapons and munitions by the time of Shays’ Rebellion. In response, 3,000 militia men sent by Governor James

23 “Articles of Confederation: March 1, 1781,” The Avalon Project, Yale University School of Law, March 1, 1781, Article IX; Appleby and Brinkley, The American Vision [Excerpt], 3.
Bowdoin arrived in Springfield under Gen. Benjamin Lincoln. On January 25, 1787, Lincoln and Shays’ forces came to heads at Springfield. Some four thousand volunteers from across the state, mostly towns surrounding Boston, gathered under General Lincoln to defend the Springfield Armory. Arrayed together in the snow on a hill above the Connecticut River, Shays’ men opened fire. Before the main militia force had arrived to defend the arsenal, the local militia returned fire. Four of the rebels died in the outburst and the rest broke and scattered. When Lincoln’s troops arrived the next day, the rest of the rebels had all but fled. After that encounter on January 25th, most of the rebels disband and either returned to their homes or fled to New York and Vermont.

With the Rebellion on hold in February 1787, former Shaysites went on the defensive. By the end of February, most of the Massachusetts militia under Gen. Lincoln had withdrawn from the region, while many of the rebels who remained loyal to Shays’ cause stood in hiding. Under the control of Captain Perez Hamblin, eighty Shaysites moved across the border to New Lebanon, New York. On February 26th Hamblin led his men from New Lebanon back over the border to West Stockbridge (See Appendix E). His reasons for this were threefold. First, the militia’s withdrawal provided a safe opportunity to return from New York. Second, he wrongly believed there was an artillery piece kept in Stockbridge, which by then had been moved north to Pittsfield. Third, Hamblin was seeking Theodore Sedgwick, with whom he had a personal grudge. Sedgewick, like many in Stockbridge, was a leading opponent of the Rebellion.

25 David Dudley Field and Chester Dewey, A History of the County of Berkshire, Massachusetts, in Two Parts: The First Being a General View of the County; the Second, an Account of the Several Towns (S. W. Bush, 1829), 136-137.
When Hamblin and his men arrived in Stockbridge the night of February 27th, they found no weapons, but they did find the homes of a number of wealthy men who had been opposed to the Rebellion. By this point in Shays’ Rebellion, rather than the relatively more organized political campaign of 1786 and early 1787, their goals had devolved into looting, raiding, and exacting revenge. As historian David Szatmary describes in a passing reference,

Their victims included Elijah Williams (whom they physically attacked), Erastus Sergeant [Sr], Timothy Edwards, and Jahleel Woodbridge. Edwards and Woodbridge had been despised before and during the Revolution by many Berkshire County radicals, both because of their wealth and because they were judges in the hated courts, which seemed always to oppress debtors. The rebels...had damaged and robbed the homes of about thirty Stockbridge merchants, professionals...and ruling gentry.28

Hamblin, along with Peter and Nicholas Brazee, Daniel Owen, Isaac Vosburgh, Jr, Stephen Seyley, Aaron Knapp, John Minclair, Asahel Newell, and Nathaniel Austin— the unnamed men from earlier in our story—gathered outside the Sergeants’ home and forced their way in. Their names, though unknown to Sergeant, were later identified in court records.29 Sergeant, along with Judge Jaheel Woodbridge, Captain Joshua Jones, and other prominent townsmen were marched towards Great Barrington.30 Moses, Sergeant’s apprentice and an active member of the Stockbridge militia, was also taken prisoner (See Appendix F).31

Timothy Woodbridge, the three-year-old son of Judge Woodbridge, later described the events of that night, remarking that

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29 “Shays’ Rebellion Recalled By Old Court Records,” March 22, 1938, Newspaper Records, The Berkshire Athenaeum, Pittsfield Public Library, Pittsfield, MA.
30 Benjamin Lincoln, ”Extract of a letter from Hon. General Lincoln, to his Excellency the Governor, received last evening,” Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, Deerfield MA, March 3, 1787.
they were his earliest memories. Though it was likely a faint memory in the mind of someone that young, he spoke vividly of event, saying,

My earliest recollection is a belligerent one...I remember...seeing a number of brutal soldiers with their green boughs [a symbol worn by the rebels] waving over the bed where my father and I lay. The dreadful gleam of their arms was reflected by the burning lights in the room. They demanded the surrender of my father, and I shrieked in an agony of terror as my father passed me between the guns to the arms of my sister. They plundered the house most unsparingly and continued these deprecations for some time—going from house to house, frightening the inmates unmercifully.  

Before leaving Stockbridge, Captain Hamblin, his men, and their captives returned to Bingham’s Tavern, where Hamblin had established headquarters. At the tavern, the rebels looted Bingham's liquor stock. As a result, two of Hamblin’s men became so intoxicated and so weighed down by all the goods they had stolen that they were unable to stand.  

At nine the following morning, Hamblin, those rebels who were still sober, and their prisoners left the tavern, freshly fallen snow below them, and marched towards Barrington. Runners had already begun to spread the news to surrounding towns, where local militias gathered whatever arms they could and attempted to route Hamblin and his men before they reached Sheffield. No one knew Hamblin’s intentions in taking his prisoners there—by all accounts, neither did Hamblin—but the danger these thirty-two men were in was nevertheless omnipresent (Appendix G). When Hamblin’s company reached Great Barrington, they stopped near a public house. Meanwhile, eighty Sheffield militiamen under Colonel John Ashley prepared an ambush. Ashley and his men arrived at one o’clock in the afternoon, broke into groups, moved through the trees to surround Hamblin’s company, and opened fire. Outnumbered, the rebels fled and scattered in different directions.

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Two of them lay dead, and another thirty wounded, including Hamblin. The militia suffered only three casualties. To some historians, the skirmish that commenced that winter’s day in Great Barrington is seen as the final battle of the American Revolution (Appendix G).  

**Explaining a Rebellion: Taxation, and Currency**

The end of this skirmish brings us to the end of the story that Sergeant had experienced during the winter of 1787. In the wake of that fateful day, he returned to his home, his family, and his Betsy. Never again was he involved in any scene so violent nor any event so crucial to American history. But why did it happen in the first place? The short answer is that Sergeant was embroiled in an economic conflict that interlinked his small community to a much grander international economic system. It was a system that was rife with problems, including a monetary-debt crisis in which Sergeant, and thousands of others, were enmeshed. Whether the armed closing of courthouses or the armed robbery of a rural Stockbridge farm, the impacts of the monetary-debt crisis and the rebellion were truly extensive on everyday life. In studying this crisis, one can far better understand just why so much resentment and strife created the conditions necessary for the sparking of Shays’ Rebellion.

The letter that Sergeant wrote serves as the first point of proof that these events had both economic causes and economic ramifications. His letter to General Shepard only arose out of monetary need, and begins with an excuse for why he could not yet pay on a debt to Shepard,

> When you was (sic) here, I had the most sanguine prospects of making you a payment before this time, but we have had nothing but a scene of war and distress since the beginning of Feby. which has prevented my collecting any money...You may depend on my exercions (sic) in your favor as soon as there is the least prospect of success.  


The rest of the letter, which thoroughly describes the events of the night in question, was only told to Shepard as an explanation for why he could not return the payment to him. The nature of this debt is, sadly, unknown, but the presence of a debt to him in the first place represents an important fact in the economic nature of these events.

In his forty-three years of life by the time of Shays’ Rebellion, Sergeant had lived through some of the most turbulent economic changes ever seen in American history. The Articles of Confederation had given measures that “The taxes for paying that proportion shall be laid and levied by the authority…[of the] States within the time agreed upon by the United States in Congress,” giving states power over taxation.36 Its provisions for the use of money had been limited at best, giving the states most of the monetary and financial powers, in the hope that states would in turn provide for national needs. This expectation of state-level cooperation created a conundrum for states themselves, which were torn between national monetary obligations and their own state-level needs. As such, states like Massachusetts were forced into a nearly impossible balancing act between diverse economic and monetary needs.

Prior to the American Revolution, money in America had largely been based off of the British system of currency, which both issued paper bank notes and minted coins on the basis of pounds, shillings, and pence. After 1652, the American colonies began minting its own hard currency (i.e. “specie,” or currency made from precious metals), using the same denominations as English currency. Each of the thirteen colonies’—those colonies that later became the United States—currency was valued at different amounts.37 While some colonies like South Carolina had issued paper money since 1690, others like Virginia operated solely on a system of specie prior to the Revolution. At the start of the American Revolution in 1775, the

36 “Articles of Confederation,” The Avalon Project, Yale University School of Law, Article IX.
Continental Congress began to allow the issuance of paper currency, often referred to as Continental money, to be issued at the state level. The following table represents that issuance.38

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Old Emission Dollars</th>
<th>New Emission Dollars</th>
<th>90th</th>
<th>90th</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1776</td>
<td>20,064,464</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1777</td>
<td>26,426,333</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1778</td>
<td>66,965,269</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1779</td>
<td>149,703,856</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1780</td>
<td>82,908,320</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>891,236</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1781</td>
<td>11,408,095</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1,179,249</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>357,476,541</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>2,070,485</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These data show that the issuance of paper currency during the American Revolution rapidly increased at an average of $59,579,389 each year. More importantly, it increased erratically. Initially, the United States faced a problem of deflation, in which there was not enough money to meet the aggregate demand for goods and services in the fledgling American economy. By the end of the war, America was in the throes of an economic depression, nearing a complete bankruptcy. Those in Congress quickly recognized the need for a controlled monetary system. In response, Robert Morris, an English merchant and member of the Continental Congress, helped found the Bank of Pennsylvania in 1780, in the hope that it would aid problems of sporadic and inconsistent paper money issuance.39

The inherent problem with this currency system—a system whose difficulties plagued western Massachusetts and would become

a driving factor in Shays’ Rebellion—was that the value of the state-
issued paper currency was highly fluctuating and unpredictable. As
such, the exchange rates of these currencies, valued in an open market,
shifted radically based on the demand for goods and services in the
economy as a whole. Given that the currency was so likely to change in
value, one did not want to accept this paper currency for long-term
transactions (i.e. loans). This fact was especially true for loans due
outside the United States. Basic macroeconomic theory would dictate
that when money begins to inflate those who take loans benefit and the
banks and merchants who issued loans lose money, as was exactly the
case in the early United States. In 1786, the state of Rhode Island even
saw a bitter court dispute arise over the use of paper money. The case
of Trevett v. Weeden emerged when a Newport merchant refused to
accept paper currency as payments for a debt. Held before the state’s
highest court, the case is described as a “test case for the whole system
of paper money and tender laws.”

James Varnum, attorney for the
plaintiff, described the system of money in the 1780s as “a system of
revenue and finance, subversive of private contracts and public faith,”
reflecting what many felt of the present economic situation.

Though the currency had been nationalized to a limited extent,
power largely remained in the hands of the states, with different states
having varied exchange rates among the Continental currency they
used. Therefore, there was rampant disunity in the monetary system as
a whole. By 1784, many felt that there was sufficient paper currency
and specie in balance in the American economy. Taxation, however,
was still a major problem. With so many variations of currency, it
became difficult to decide which currencies to accept and which would
lose their value. States such as Massachusetts, which had one of the
highest state debts coming out of the Revolution, were desperate for
revenue. Though not executed until 1790, Alexander Hamilton’s

40 Cutterham, Gentlemen Revolutionaries, 131-132.
41 Ford, “Reviewed Work: The Financier and the Finances of the American Revolution,”
162.
proposed policy to assume state’s debts from the Revolution made the issue of stabilizing taxation even more pressing.42

On the state level in Massachusetts, things were much the same. Governor John Hancock (governor 1780-1785 and 1787-1793) and Governor James Bowdoin (governor 1785-1787) both kept measures in place requiring that most taxes were paid in hard currency, refusing to accept the paper money issued by the states on behalf of the national government. Given their high debt burden after the war, Massachusetts needed to raise its taxes. As this happened, the debts were passed from the state level to the individual. Disliking the tax policies of Governor Hancock, the majority of Massachusetts voters elected Bowdoin to replace him by 1785. Though Bowdoin wanted to ease the debt crisis, he failed to pass any reformed tax bills in his first year in office, still maintaining the strict specie requirements. While this was largely not a problem for merchants and bankers in Boston, for those in more rural areas, like those in western Massachusetts with fewer financial resources than Sergeant, this proved a difficult task.43

Rural Economies and Debt in the New Republic

Often wealthy in land but lacking in the specie needed to pay their taxes, many farmers in rural Massachusetts were faced with the choice of taking out loans to be able to pay their taxes and provide for themselves, or risk losing their homes and farms. Even those with means were rich in the wrong types of commodities, by the government’s standards. With this fact, one can now establish a link between the state and federal debt, to taxes, and, in turn, personal debt. This growing debtor class became acutely aware of the problems they faced and the complexities of a nation that lacked a central monetary system. Many men in western Massachusetts took loans out from banks in Boston, who in turn took loans from banks in London and Paris. These banks, aware of American paper money’s turbulent exchange rates, required the American banks to back their loans in

43 Cutterham, "Rebellion." In Gentlemen Revolutionaries, 127, 132-133.
gold or silver. In turn, Boston banks passed these burdens on to their debtors.\(^{44}\) Not only were taxes now expected to be paid in hard currency, but loans soon switched over to payment in gold and silver as well.

The following balance sheet helps to explain this discrepancy in cash flows, showing a comparison of towns in Massachusetts that supported Shays’ Rebellion versus those that did not:

A Comparative Balance Sheet of Towns Supporting and Opposing Shays’ Rebellion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assets</th>
<th>Non-Shaysite</th>
<th>Shaysite</th>
<th>(Difference)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meadow acres</td>
<td>669</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>-327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pasture Acres</td>
<td>1,611</td>
<td>1,177</td>
<td>-434</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tillage acres</td>
<td>939</td>
<td>673</td>
<td>-266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heads of livestock</td>
<td>1,589</td>
<td>1,320</td>
<td>-269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money on hand ($)</td>
<td>$135</td>
<td>$77</td>
<td>-58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stocks in trade ($)</td>
<td>$1,176</td>
<td>$259</td>
<td>-917</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Liabilities and Taxes</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Debts ($)</td>
<td>$2,151</td>
<td>$438</td>
<td>-1713</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tillage taxes ($)</td>
<td>$1243</td>
<td>$855</td>
<td>-388</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meadow taxes ($)</td>
<td>$611</td>
<td>$297</td>
<td>-314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Livestock taxes ($)</td>
<td>$761</td>
<td>$592</td>
<td>-169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total tax ($)</td>
<td>$6,934</td>
<td>$4,948</td>
<td>-1986</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Contrary to what one may think, the actual amounts of taxes were not higher in those towns from where a majority of the rebels originated. Rather, the issue was more complex. As shown by this table, the non-Shaysite towns—those towns (including Stockbridge) that were loyal to the Massachusetts government—had higher assets than Shaysite towns, but also had higher liabilities. In other words, those towns that supported Rebellion actually had lower tax rates, less debt, and lower total levels of taxes, but they also had less capital, less money on hand (in paper or hard currency), and fewer shares of stocks than those towns that supported the Rebellion. Their lack of capital and lack of access to hard currency made any amount of taxes and debts a difficult burden to bear.

The town of Stockbridge was one of the wealthier centers in the Berkshires; and men like Dr. Sergeant, Judge Woodbridge, and so on were among the more well-off in western Massachusetts. While they too were affected by the failure of state-level paper currency and increasing levels of debt, they had the assets and personal capital to withstand it. Those who supported the Rebellion did not. It is this fact that explains why Sergeant did not join Hamblin and the other Shaysites. Sergeant, while still affected by this monetary-debt crisis, had the personal wealth and income still to hold on to his land, his home, and his property, in spite of the difficulty he faced in paying his loans and taxes in hard specie. Those who were apt to join in the Rebellion lacked the right type of personal wealth to prevent changing monetary demands from leading them to ruin. Thus the Rebellion

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was a result of not only a conflict between urban and rural, as so many have long claimed, but also a competition within rural towns themselves. Rural farmers had been pushed down by the conflicts with merchants, bankers, and the state government over currency, and were also held back by their own development and resources in an evolving rural economy.

Court records of the trials of the men who invaded Sergeant’ home provide us with an outstanding body of data with which to analyze both how wealthy Sergeant was as well as the discrepancy between those with personal capital and those without in rural Massachusetts.
Invasions of the Commonwealth

Court Record of Items Stolen from Erastus Sergeant on February 27, 1787

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>£</th>
<th>s</th>
<th>Inflated Value (£)</th>
<th>Inflated Value ($)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Silver mounted sword</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>£925.67</td>
<td>$1203.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gun Bayonet</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>£277.70</td>
<td>$361.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powder horn and cartridge box</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>£92.57</td>
<td>$120.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beaver Hat</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>£308.56</td>
<td>$401.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shirt</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>£77.14</td>
<td>$100.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Clothing (Misc.)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td>£2,314.17</td>
<td>$3,008.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damage to the House</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>£925.67</td>
<td>$1203.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>25</strong></td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>£4921.48</strong></td>
<td><strong>$6397.92</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean Value (μ)</strong></td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>£703.07</td>
<td>$913.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Standard Deviation (σ)</strong></td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>£795.38</td>
<td>$1034.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The men who robbed him amassed a total value of £27-8s. In today’s money, those goods are worth £4,921.48 or $6,397.87. In only a matter of minutes, they were able to find and steal more than roughly twice a laborer’s yearly salary worth of goods.48 The presence of so many goods of value, including clothes that alone were worth £10, provide evidence that corroborates what the balance sheet of Shaysite and non-Shaysite towns demonstrated in the aggregate: these data suggest that

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48 According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, an agricultural laborer’s average daily salary in 1787 was $0.38. $0.38 x 24 workdays/month = $9.12 x 12 months = $109.44 / year ($109.44 in 2019 = $3,100).
rural Massachusetts was divided between those who had the resources to assume the passed-on burden of taxes and debt and those whose lacked the means to withstand it.49

Outside of the interactions of the economy of western Massachusetts as a closed unit, peace with Great Britain had caused a flood in the market with goods without funds to pay for them. As well, pressures to settle debts came from “coastal debtors need to pay overseas debts, local traders seeking to collect remittances from their debtors, and general pressures of debt from local creditors.” Though some towns in Massachusetts attempted to help those suffering from debts, the state government had done little. Their refusal to accept paper money, just as banks did, in exchange for taxes owed on land placed a disproportionate burden on the most rural parts of the economy. Small farmers in western Massachusetts had fewer resources with which to pay their debt and taxes, a fact which the government on Beacon Hill chose to ignore. Moreover, these farmers, whether large or small, had wealth in land, livestock, and equipment, which are hardly liquid assets. Their income too was often reckoned in book debts and credits, not accompanied by the exchange of actual currency, let alone hard currency. Armed support, like Captain Hamblin and his men, came from the young men who felt that they had been left out of this economic system and saw a very small chance of their situations improving.50

On a national level, delegates to the Constitutional Convention of 1787 nearly unanimously condemned Shays’ Rebellion, as they needed to secure the ability to tax their people. This need to secure


50 Clark, The Roots of Rural Capitalism, 45-46; Cutterham, "Rebellion." In Gentlemen Revolutionaries, 127.
taxes was at the heart of the Rebellion: the state and federal government desperately needed revenue after the war, but failed to recognize the effects of their tax and currency policies. For many farmers, the only solution was to assume personal debts, but debts also had to be paid, eventually, in hard currency. The lawmakers on Beacon Hill, in failing to grasp this reality and in following the same monetary policies used on a federal level and by the banks, unwittingly fostered the conditions necessary for the Rebellion to take place.\textsuperscript{51}

From the perspective of Shays’ Rebellion, the work of historian Charles Beard on debtors prevents a fascinating perspective on the issues of debt at the time despite his work’s age. Beard argued that southern American states’ desires to put down slave revolts were as pressing as northern creditors’ desires to put down debtors (e.g. Shaysites). In the wake of Shays’ Rebellion, there is evidence that slave owners in southern states were reassured by the idea that the government was willing to put down rebellions. In short, both groups were reassured that a stronger federal government would protect assets. In rural Massachusetts, many were against the formation of the central government, especially the west, which had been the core of Shays’ Rebellion. With the legacy of the Rebellion fresh in their minds, their fears over the Constitution derived, among other things, from concerns that their financial stations would only be made worse at the hands of a stronger federal government. The tables below show votes for the Constitution from western Massachusetts, compared to their public finance.

\begin{tabular}{l|c|c|c} 
\textbf{Constitutional Convention Voting, Berkshire and Worcester Counties} \\
\textbf{Worcester: For the Constitution, 7. Against, 43.} \\
\textbf{Berkshire: For the Constitution, 7. Against, 15.} \\
\hline
\textbf{Money and Public Securities} & \textbf{Worcester} & \textbf{Berkshire} & \textbf{(Difference)} \\
\hline
Funded, sixes & £12,924 & £981 & £11943 \\
Funded, threes & £8,184 & £655 & £7529 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}

\textsuperscript{51} Beard, \textit{Economic Interpretation of the Constitution}, 40-41.
Based on this table, we are provided with data which show that access to funds, outside of taxes and debts, were of crucial importance in Shays’ Rebellion. Both counties were against the idea of a national Constitution, owing in large part to their more rural economic situations.52

While the table above cannot be used to show a direct causation, we can infer a correlation between the lower rates of public funds in the counties and their reluctance to vote in favor of a national Constitution. Widening differences in the rates of productivity growth in western Massachusetts had exacerbated inequalities both in yearly income and overall wealth in the rural economy. Berkshire and Worcester counties were just beginning to enter a period of more diverse sources of wealth formation and increased market-oriented growth, which tended to be more divisive, both economically and socially, than the rural agrarian system that had dominated the region prior to the Revolution.53

Shays’ Rebellion illustrated the political consequences of rural development and of the uneven development in rural communities. Moreover, it exemplifies the forces of an emerging global economy—insofar as the British Empire could be considered global—that were present as well. Farmers in western Massachusetts not only faced the pressures of their own economy but were connected with a far more vast world of credit and trade than it would at first seem. The connections of their debts from the Berkshires to Boston to London, as well as the imbalance of trade between Britain and America after the war, work to highlight this promise. Rural farmers, given what we

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52 Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*, 262.
have established about the nature of their debt and tax burdens, had been excluded in many ways from the emerging American economy in the 1780s and had been near the bottom end of an economic chain that led from Northampton and Springfield to Boston to the streets of London. These facts alone, in the absence of political and other ideas, can alone explain why the events of February 27, 1787 occurred as they did. The datasets presented lead us to the conclusion that one can summarize Shays’ Rebellion as an agrarian movement, a movement for market access, a struggle for scarce resources in an expanding economy, a failure of a new currency system exacerbated by high tax and debt burdens, and a question of factors in economic growth that touched on issues of the limits of the rural economy in New England.54

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The End of a Rebellion and the Later Life of Erastus Sergeant

Thus, we have now come to the end both of the Rebellion and of its economic causes. In its wake, the Massachusetts courts resumed the debt collection process, and Governor Hancock proposed measures of amnesty for the rebels. He used this in part to win re-election in the spring of 1787 over Bowdoin, by a ratio of 3 to 1. Once governor, he worked with the courts to make amends for the damages of the Rebellion and passed a law banning juror service for anyone who took part in it.55 The state legislature reworked tax policies to aid the more impoverished towns, capitalizing on the changes occurring with economic policy at a federal level and easing the currency requirements for tax payments.

Many of those at the head of the national government, from Washington to Knox to Madison, were repulsed by the idea of rebellion. One of the few who was indifferent to the Rebellion was Thomas Jefferson, who begged the question “What country can preserve its liberties if their rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance?...The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants.”56 With Jefferson in the minority, many began to argue for a stronger government in the Rebellion’s wake, especially those with property to protect. Shays’ Rebellion only added weight to the already growing argument that the Articles of Confederation were too weak to deal with issues of money and taxes. Henry Knox, America’s first Secretary of War, summarized this idea in saying, “What is to afford our security against the violence of lawless men? Our government must be braced, ‘changed, or altered to secure our lives and property.”57

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57 Clark, The Roots of Rural Capitalism, 50; Appleby and Brinkley, The American Vision [Excerpt], 4-5.
Shays’ Rebellion became an influencing factor in the Constitutional Convention of 1787, with Madison and others using the event to support a stronger federal government. He, along with Hamilton, wanted to form a Bank of North America to re-establish public credit, given that a lack of public credit was one of the major issues behind the Rebellion.\footnote{Cutterham, \textit{Gentlemen Revolutionaries}, 142.} The effects of Shays’ Rebellion on the Constitutional Convention has been a long-studied issue, and has remained the primary area of interest for most research on it.\footnote{See Feer, “Shays's Rebellion and the Constitution: A Study in Causation.”.} Economically, the American system eventually did recover from the shocks of the monetary debt crisis, and under the Hamiltonian System, the American economy flourished into the nineteenth century, despite some setbacks.

As turbulent a period in Massachusetts history as Shays’ Rebellion was, the state and national governments learned well its political and economic lessons. Those who had been so deeply affected by Shays’ Rebellion were able once again to return to the normal course of their lives as Beacon Hill worked to alleviate the problems that had left the region so behind and so vulnerable decades prior. Courts began the slow process of arresting those who had participated in the Rebellion, as claims courts attempted to return stolen goods and award damages for destroyed property, but courts could not go so far as to heal those affected by the violence of the Rebellion, as the memory of it lingered for decades to come.\footnote{See Winifred B. Rothenberg, “American Economic History: Economics? Or History?” \textit{Historical Methods: A Journal of Quantitative and Interdisciplinary History}, 42:4, (2009): 131-132.}

On March 5th, 1787, six days after the last battle of Shays’ Rebellion came to an end, Erastus Sergeant wrote his letter to Sheppard, outlining the details of the Rebellion from his point of view. From that day on, his life returned to one of a humble country doctor. He too was awarded damages for his home and his property. He remained a Fellow of the Massachusetts Medical Society, and eventually became the Counsellor of the Society. Over the years, he
Invasions of the Commonwealth

apprenticed many young men of western Massachusetts into the medical profession and lived to see his numerous grandchildren.61

Later in life, Sergeant was afflicted with “pulmonary consumption,” known today as tuberculosis. As such, he was likely affected by difficulty breathing and a severe cough in his later years. On November 14, 1814, more than twenty-seven years after Shays’ Rebellion, he was having dinner with his wife and friends at his same home in Stockbridge. During the meal, he launched into a fit of coughing that resulted in a sudden bout of hemoptysis. Quickly he stood up and walked over towards his fireplace, where he fell to the ground. Though Betsy and his friends rushed to his aid, they soon realized he had passed away. At his funeral, Dr. Oliver Partridge, his brother-in-law and close friend, said of him that, “He was endowed with a sound judgment...[he] was sedate, with a large share of Christian grace, and he was truly, ‘the beloved physician.’ It is said [that] no one ever spoke ill of him...” Sergeant had lived to see America rise from fragmented colonies to a united nation; to see his children and grandchildren become successful members of the community; and to spend over fifty years with his beloved Betsy. In death, he was remembered well for the life he led (Appendix H).62

Conclusion

From one small letter, we have traversed both the history of one man’s life and the history of one of the most important events in the history of the early American republic. The story of the attack on Erastus Sergeant’s home exemplifies the events surrounding Shays’ Rebellion. Unlike so many affected by the Rebellion, his story has never before been given light. In studying his life and his involvement in the events of the Rebellion, we have seen a firsthand account from the perspective of one whose life was directly touched by the violence and chaos of those few short months. In turn, in studying the cause of these isolated events, we have seen the difficulties that the early American economy faced in the years after the American Revolution.

61 Willams, American Medical Biography, 515.
62 Willams, American Medical Biography, 516.
Using the chain of causation from national and state debts to taxes to personal debts, we can conclude that Shays’ Rebellion is a direct result of economic forces and policies that Americans faced during the 1780s. From the ashes of these crises, the foundations of our early-modern economy and our modern political system emerged. Though the governments of Massachusetts and the United States as a whole bore well the lessons of Shays’ Rebellion, it is all too easy to forget that for many, including Sergeant, Shays’ Rebellion was not only a story of monetary theories and court disputes over currency but was equally a story of violence and loss. The life of Erastus Sergeant and the letter he left behind recounting the events of that winter night serve as a reminder of how much can be gleaned from looking past the surface of one small story. Moreover, Shays’ Rebellion, as a whole, serves to show how deeply economic disturbances and failed policies can affect a nation, even in its most seemingly rural and isolated regions.

Appendices

A. The Red Lion Inn, formerly known as Bingham’s Tavern, as it stood around the year 1900. This location, which remains a functioning hotel in Stockbridge, was the site to where Erastus Sergeant was first taken on the night of February 27, 1787.
B. Portraits of Dr. Erastus Sergeant and Elizabeth Partridge Sergeant, created circa 1800 by an unknown artist. This sketch is the only surviving likeness of Dr. Sergeant known to exist. It is housed in The Stockbridge Library, Museum and Archives, Stockbridge, MA.

C. “The Mission House,” located at 19 Main St., Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Built in 1739 by Rev. John Sergeant, this was the home of Erastus Sergeant and his family at the time of Shays’ Rebellion. Today it is called the “Mission House Museum.” This photo was taken during the author’s research trip to Stockbridge, MA.
D. A statue by August Lukeman of Major General William Shepard located in his home town of Westfield, MA. Erected in 1913 at the bequest of Henry Fuller and J.C. Greenough, it is one of the only likenesses of Shepard, other than one surviving portrait held in private collection. Courtesy of the Town of Westfield, MA, www.cityofwestfield.org.

E. A 1901 map of southern Berkshire County annotated with the routes that Captain Hamblin and Colonel Ashley took in February, 1787. Stockbridge is highlighted in the black square.
F. Few maps exist of Stockbridge as it was during the life of Erastus Sergeant. This section of an 1858 map of Stockbridge, MA, annotated with the route Sergeant took the night/early morning of February 27, 1787. It encompasses modern-day Main Street, the location of the Sergeant’s home as well as the Bingham’s Tavern.

G. A monument near Sheffield, MA, located along the Appalachian, which marks the site of the last battle of Shays’ Rebellion. The
monument reads “Last Battle of Shays Rebellion was Here Feb. 27. 1787.” Courtesy of The Berkshire Eagle, May 28, 2018.

H. The grave marker of Dr. Erastus Sergeant Sr. at Stockbridge Cemetery, Stockbridge, Massachusetts. It reads, “This monument is erected in memory of Doct. Erastus Sergeant who died Nov. 11th, 1814 ages 72 years. & of Mrs. Elizabeth Sergeant, his wife who died Dec. 18, 1815 aged 71 years.” Courtesy of Find-a-Grave, findagrave.com.
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Tertiary Sources and Book Reviews


Workplace Conditions and Cognitive Liberation

La Lutte and Anti-Colonial Opposition in Indochina

Grave Vu

Introduction

Although the French allowed a restricted form of freedom of the press in Southern Indochina,¹ a significant number of anti-colonial ideas and sentiments remained censored in the colony. Newspaper publishing in colonial Vietnam faced numerous obstacles due to French authorities controlling newspapers through subsidies and censoring anti-colonial messages.² However, anti-colonialists could still circumvent French suppression of the press.³ The colonial state implemented French laws and legal codes in South Vietnam, which included freedom of the press. As a result, the colonial government granted freedom of the press for all media written in French. In addition, during the colonial era, French was the medium of instruction in schools that were accessible to the Indochinese elite and became crucial for texts of various political ideologies and newspaper printing in the colony.⁴ Holding French citizenship also allowed the Vietnamese to participate more effectively in colonial institutions, including starting their own newspapers.⁵

¹ This paper uses Indochina and colonial Vietnam interchangeably in that Vietnam was included in the former colony of Indochina. More specifically, Southern Indochina correlates directly to South Vietnam.
² Norman G. Owen, ed., The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia, (Honolulu, University of Hawai’i Press, 2005), 339.
⁵ Goscha, Vietnam: A New History, 125.
Pierre Pasquier served as the Governor-General of Indochina from 1926 to 1927 and again from 1928 to 1934. His administration sought to preserve “Vietnamese tradition” and rejected colonial reform. Colonial conservatism diminished with Pasquier’s death in 1934, which coincided with the rise of the Popular Front, a left-wing coalition government in France that was in power from 1936 to 1938. The radical left in Southern Indochina took advantage of the French Popular Front by rebuilding and reorganizing due to the mitigation of censorship and subversive crackdowns. La Lutte, an anti-capitalist and anti-colonial newspaper based in Southern Indochina that circulated from 1933 to 1938, remained uncensored because of the leniency in the French legal system. The newspaper publicly sought to achieve its goals of an Indochina free from capitalism and French rule.

The newspaper editors of La Lutte consisted of intellectuals educated in France. They were part of the modern anti-colonial generation and had their frame of thought influenced by French ideals, especially notions of freedom and liberty. The launching of La Lutte in 1933 was the first step towards collaboration between the Trotskyists and the Stalinists in Indochina. Nguyen An Ninh, an independent Marxist, acted as an intermediary to reestablish the newspaper in 1934, forging a more durable alliance between the two groups. Consequently, the editorial board consisted of left-wing anti-colonialists, Stalinists, and Trotskyists.

Because the newspaper was written in French, La Lutte can offer insight into indigenous Vietnamese opposition to French colonial rule. The newspaper is unique in that it was able to bypass French censorship and publish content on far left resistance to colonialism. In addition to discussing anti-colonial ideas, the newspaper also covered

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6 Goscha, 135
7 Goscha, 146.
8 Goscha, 147.
9 Marr, Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 214.
11 Alexander, International Trotskyism, 962.
workers’ movements and protests over time. Although the writers of the newspaper did not participate in strikes themselves, their coverage of the protests reveals how left-wing groups viewed not only the French but also the Indochinese workers and their specific grievances. The writers connected their own anti-colonial and anti-capitalist efforts to the strikes and protests of the workers. *La Lutte* represents the early forms of Vietnamese far left groups pre-Ho Chi Minh, before his return to Vietnam in 1941, and offers insight into the earlier forms of their social and political consciousness, which leads to the question: How did the emerging anti-capitalist movement in Southern Indochina relate to the colonial regime over time?  

This paper looks at the newspaper’s coverage of workplace conditions to address how *La Lutte* related to the colonial state. Due to the newspaper’s Marxist leanings in which the working class is considered the primary agent of economic and social change within a capitalist society, its primary concerns would lie with the working class and workplace conditions. The colonial state also focused on the workplace, insofar as its primary goal was to secure economic output from the colony. Over the course of the 1930s, the coverage of the workplace in *La Lutte* became increasingly conscious about the intersection of capitalism and colonialism as both the intellectuals’ and workers’ grievances were continually ignored by the colonial state. The newspaper’s acknowledgement of colonialism within their anti-capitalist framework helped facilitate its growth as an anti-colonial movement. Ultimately, the interactions between anti-colonial groups and the colonial state shaped each other’s developments and responses.

This paper examines *La Lutte’s* perception of Indochina’s status as a colonized nation and its relationship with the colonial government. The paper focuses on *La Lutte’s* coverage of the workplace and the

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12 While there were multiple anti-capitalist movements in Indochina, this paper uses the term “anti-capitalist” movement in the singular form because *La Lutte* was based on a single coalition of leftists, Marxists, Trotskyists, and Stalinists.

workers’ conditions in order to examine how the anti-capitalist movement developed in the context of the Great Depression and later the emergence of the Popular Front. The newspaper’s coverage of the workplace reveals how the workers became increasingly discontented about their conditions and their responses to those conditions. In addition, La Lutte’s reports on the workplace indicate the newspaper’s own views on the workers, workplace conditions, and their relationship to the colonial state and later France. This paper also comments on the newspaper’s international solidarity with other workers across the globe, which influenced and impacted the development of the movement.

The workers’ conditions and international solidarity reflect the newspaper’s growing awareness of how capitalism and colonialism intersected and its impact in a colonized Vietnam. La Lutte’s acknowledgement of colonialism and its relationship with capitalism illustrate the development of the anti-capitalist movement that played a role in the larger efforts of the Communist party’s eventual success in seizing power.

**Defining La Lutte’s Efforts as a Protest Movement and Structural Conditions**

Sociologist Doug McAdam defines a social movement as an organized effort by marginalized groups to challenge the status quo in the structure of society, which involves the use of non-institutional forms of political participation that exist outside of the formal political system. In the case of colonial Indochina, La Lutte reflects organized efforts by Vietnamese intellectuals who challenged the colonial capitalist structure by publishing anti-colonial sentiments and supporting worker strikes and protests.

The emergence of a protest movement requires a transformation of consciousness and behavior. A change in consciousness involves “the system” or the current power holders in society losing legitimacy, such that large numbers of people view their rulers as unjust. People

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must also believe that they have the ability and capacity to enact change. A change in behavior entails masses of people becoming defiant, and the defiance being acted out collectively. The emergence of a protest movement, therefore, arises from collective defiance fueled by a transformation of consciousness. However, the possibilities for a protest movement are structurally limited. The change in consciousness that leads to a change in behavior requires exceptional and rare structural conditions.

First, the emergence of a protest movement requires massive social and economic changes. The Great Depression that occurred during La Lutte’s circulation prompted the immense economic and social changes necessary for the emergence of the protests depicted in the newspaper. The poor conditions of the workplace and the economic turmoil from the Great Depression provided the structural conditions for protest movements and strikes in colonial Indochina. Moreover, France imposed higher quotas and more exploitative practices in the colonies, emphasizing the need to make the colony pay. The French colonizers were concerned with gaining acceptance of colonization from the broader French population. The metropole, or the parent state of the colony, funded colonization, which required the colony to economically benefit France, especially during times of economic strain. As a result, there were greater levels of workplace brutality when demands were not met.

Emerging protest movements also require institutional disruption in which the routines of daily life break down, such as work and family patterns. In La Lutte’s case the newspaper reported on stories about unemployment, deaths, and suicides that lead to personal and familial turmoil. The institutional breakdown of daily life results in

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16 Piven and Cloward, Poor People’s Movements, 7.
17 Piven and Cloward, 9.
18 Thomas, Violence and Colonial Order, 175.
19 Thomas, 329.
20 Piven and Cloward, Poor People’s Movements, 11.
social dislocation in which people live in a world that is rapidly changing. During the early twentieth century in colonial Indochina, the Vietnamese faced “profound psychological shock and disorientation… often summarized in the phrase ‘loss of country’ (mat nuoc).” The widespread social dislocation of the Vietnamese population arose from the transition of living in a pre-colonial society under Vietnamese monarchs and dynasties to living under a French colonial and capitalist system. Workers were also specifically detached from traditional sources of social control, such as the family and village notables. Ultimately, the Vietnamese population’s feelings of misplacement allowed for the emergence of protest movements.

**Economic Turmoil and the Breakdown of Daily Life Depicted in *La Lutte***

*La Lutte* originally formed in an effort to gain electoral seats in the April-May 1933 Saigon municipal council elections. After the election and the ensuing discontinuation of *La Lutte*, Nguyen An Ninh, a political journalist who consolidated a coalition of leftist groups, revived the newspaper on October 4, 1934. The newspaper subsequently shifted its focus from gaining electoral seats to covering workplace conditions. *La Lutte* initially concentrated on incidents of workplace accidents and suicides. The amount of workplace accidents and suicides serve as an indicator of the larger structural conditions of social and economic turmoil.

On January 10, 1935 an article covered two workplace suicides in which the workers committed suicide after their loss of employment. The newspaper indicated how the larger economic changes from the Great Depression led to the breakdown of daily life through unemployment, which caused the workers to commit suicide. *La Lutte* also reported on a workplace accident in the same month and observed

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22 Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, 30.
that there had not been a day in Indochina in which there was not a workplace accident.\textsuperscript{25} Two months later, \textit{La Lutte} reported an accident at a rice mill. The boiler in the factory had exploded, and the workers, including women and children, did not have enough time to escape. The newspaper described seventeen dead and thirty injured, noting that dozens of families had been deprived of their economic support and sentenced to starvation.\textsuperscript{26} With these descriptions, \textit{La Lutte} created a picture of capitalism destroying daily life by threatening families and their survival.

On June 15, 1935 the newspaper covered a story on a workplace accident in which two workers had to descend from a beam on the roof of a workshop undergoing demolition. The article described how the two workers did the job of six people. Because of these unsafe conditions, the workers were “violently hurled to the ground.”\textsuperscript{27} \textit{La Lutte} blamed the industrial accident on the company, citing its excessive staff cuts that led to the workers being forced to do work beyond their strength. The article then argued that the Indochinese workers have their lives threatened everyday and must be protected against the greed of their bosses.\textsuperscript{28} The following month, the newspaper reported on a story in which a worker died while repairing an iron roof. He knew he was risking his life, but he had to follow “the criminal orders of his bosses” in that if he were to refuse their orders, he would be dismissed. The newspaper added that the worker had to follow orders and help his elderly mother, who was left without support after his death.\textsuperscript{29}

In the same month \textit{La Lutte} targeted a specific electric company, claiming that there had been an accident every week at the Compagnie des Eaux et Electricité. The newspaper cited an accident in which a worker fell five meters and was sent to the hospital in grave condition.

\textsuperscript{26} “La catastrophe de la rizerie Van-ich Nguyen,” \textit{La Lutte}, March 16, 1935.
\textsuperscript{27} All translations of the newspaper are my own.
\textsuperscript{29} “Dans le Chemins de fer Un accident mortel voulu par les chefs,” \textit{La Lutte}, July 20, 1935.
The newspaper then argued that more accidents were happening due to a reduction in workplace personnel, which led to fewer people having more work to do. \textsuperscript{30} La Lutte covered another story of a workplace accident in the following month on a worker who fell off a pole, claiming that it was at least the twentieth accident since the beginning of the year. The article reported the worker was electrocuted and described that electrocution results in death “10 times out of 10.” \textsuperscript{31} The writers of La Lutte emphasized that death was a frequent but preventable occurrence in the workplace.

In 1935, during the earlier period of La Lutte’s revived lifespan, it covered stories of workplace accidents and suicides that resulted in great social dislocation for the Vietnamese working class. These earlier issues reveal the economic conditions and breakdown of daily life that led to the emergence of protests and strikes that the newspaper covered in later issues. The newspaper editors viewed the workplace conditions as unjust, which fueled their anti-capitalist sentiments. La Lutte later supported the efforts of workers to establish unions and to bargain collectively, which was marked by a large wave of strikes in the later months of 1936. \textsuperscript{32} The strikes and worker protests in colonial Vietnam also coincided with the wave of strikes and protests in France in 1936. \textsuperscript{33}

In the mid-1930s, France was under economic strain from the Great Depression, which led to more exploitative practices in the colonies. This facilitated a growth in anti-colonial movements. The newspaper’s stories in 1935 revealed the economic conditions of daily life that led to greater calls for independence. However, objective structural conditions are necessary but not sufficient for the emergence of a protest movement. \textsuperscript{34}

**Subjective Perception and Growing Political Consciousness**

In addition to the objective conditions of massive economic and social changes and the disruption of daily life, protest movements occur

\textsuperscript{31} “Encore un ouvrier électrocuté,” La Lutte, August 17, 1935.
\textsuperscript{32} Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, 962.
\textsuperscript{33} Alexander, 964.
\textsuperscript{34} Piven and Cloward, *Poor People’s Movements*, 12.
because of a shift in subjective perception in which “the system” loses legitimacy.\textsuperscript{35} In the case of \textit{La Lutte}, the colonial system lost legitimacy when the newspaper increasingly acknowledged the injustices of colonial rule within their anti-capitalist framework. Because of the extremity of the workers’ situation and the frequency of workplace accidents, the Indochinese noticed how their situation could not be attributed to individual misfortune. Instead, their situation came from systemic issues. The extremity of their poor conditions necessitated their transformation in consciousness.\textsuperscript{36} The newspaper’s repeated reports on workplace accidents and suicides, therefore, related to the Vietnamese perceiving the system as unjust rather than placing blame on individual hardship.

As well as viewing the existing social order as unjust and illegitimate, people need to experience cognitive liberation, which implies that they perceive injustice that they themselves can repair.\textsuperscript{37} The global economic and social turmoil from the Great Depression and post-World War I period weakened the illusion of French power as unbeatable, resulting in the Indochinese seeing that it was possible to overthrow the French themselves. They gained a sense of efficacy in struggling against colonial power. Later, Japanese encroachment prompted the newspaper to choose between remaining loyal to their French colonizers or to another Asian power.\textsuperscript{38} Therefore, \textit{La Lutte} operated during a period when the strength of French power was increasingly questioned.

Indochina also had a wide number of different anti-colonial movements that competed over different visions for the future of Indochina. Southern Vietnam had an especially diverse number of anti-colonial movements compared to the North, which was already Communist leaning. Historian David Marr categorized Vietnamese

\textsuperscript{35} Piven and Cloward, 12.
\textsuperscript{36} Piven and Cloward, 14.
\textsuperscript{37} Piven and Cloward, 12.
anti-colonialism into three generations: traditional (1860-1900), transitional (1900-1925), and modern (1925-1945). La Lutte fell into the modern phase, which was influenced by the trials and deaths of anti-colonial figures from the transitional phase, further radicalizing students and activists. Modern anti-colonialists in Indochina had a more cosmopolitan outlook and frame of vision compared to that of the previous generations. They were also familiar with the political tactics of civil disobedience and propaganda. In addition, anti-colonialists in the modern generation rejected the pessimism that characterized earlier generations and instead “possessed an infectious spirit of optimism and cultural pride.”

Marxism appealed to Vietnamese intellectuals during the time of the Great Depression and Russian Revolution. According to Marxists, the primary conflict of interest was between the bourgeoisie and the working class. Vietnamese Marxists viewed the primary struggle in colonial Indochina as between the imperialists and the Vietnamese working class, where a victory for the colonized population would be “part of a global proletarian victory over capitalism.”

The workers themselves also became increasingly class-conscious and organized, leading to strikes for both economic and political objectives. Workers were able to influence Vietnamese farmers, agricultural laborers, and poor peasants who became increasingly exposed to proletarian political formulations. Additionally, “intelligentsia concepts of struggle and progress reached Vietnamese villagers in the 1930s,” which led some villagers to view their current conditions differently, especially due to the turmoil of the colonial economy and the disruption of rural society.

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39 Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*.
40 Marr, 273.
41 Marr, 271.
42 Marr, 273.
43 Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, 416.
44 Marr, 316.
45 Marr, 30.
46 Marr, 416.
It is uncertain whether there was an actual increase in the number of strikes or whether the newspaper increased its coverage of strikes to fuel greater anti-capitalist sentiment and rally more workers to protest in solidarity. Nevertheless, it demonstrated a shift in consciousness in which the Indochinese, whether it be just the newspaper editors or both the intellectuals and the working class, increasingly viewed their conditions as unjust but malleable.

**Transformation of Consciousness Depicted in *La Lutte***

The newspaper reflected the change towards political and economic opposition by replacing stories about accidents and suicides, which declined beginning in late 1935, with the coverage of workplace strikes and protests. However, the shift from enduring poor working conditions to outright protests and strikes is not a clear distinction. There is no single major event that led to the first protest. Rather, the occurrence of workplace accidents and strikes overlapped. Stories of workplace accidents continued after 1935 but occurred at a lower frequency. Despite the overlap, the newspaper followed a general trend from focusing on economic turmoil and social dislocation to primarily covering insurgency and protests.

*La Lutte* reported on a story in which potters were protesting against a thirty percent reduction in their salary. The strike began on September 23, 1935, and the newspaper cited how posters, leaflets, and picketing strikes assured the continuation of the protest. The newspaper then reported on how the bourgeoisie announced that this was the first strike of a great level of importance and magnitude in Indochina. The bourgeoisie feared that this strike was a sign of a time of increased insurrection and feared that other workers would follow the example of the potters. The newspaper concluded, “the proletariat of Indochina is following with great sympathy the different phases of the strike of the potters and encourages them in their resistance to inhumane exploitation.”

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The newspaper then covered a strike that was set off on November 4, 1935, when three-hundred workers joined in solidarity to protest with automobile and transporting workers. The article reported how automobile and transporting workers organized “to defend their right to exist against the forces of oppression and suffering.” The newspaper then described how the class struggle for the Indochinese workers evolved rapidly towards effective forms.  

La Lutte described how the class struggle specifically for Indochinese workers is evolving due to the increase in worker solidarity and organizing, indicating that both the workers and the intellectuals viewed their conditions as unjust but changeable.

In the following month when tobacco planters uprooted commercial tobacco plants in protest, the newspaper remarked on the specific conditions of workers under a colonial system. The newspaper writers argued that the politics of the colonial government favored French manufacturers for cigarettes. Although the indigenous workers smoked the cigarettes that they worked on and planted, they still had to buy it back from the French with the high taxes on tobacco. As a result, La Lutte stated how the Indochinese workers were victims of both the colonial system and capitalism.  

The writers of La Lutte were aware of how colonial capitalism operated differently than capitalism in the metropole. In addition to an unequal power relation between the worker and the boss, there was the larger power dynamic between the colony and the metropole since France extracts resources from the colony in order to sell the finished product back to the colonized. The newspaper viewed the revolt of the tobacco planters as an inevitable occurrence under colonial capitalism, writing that their poor living conditions would lead them to rebel eventually.

On February 18, 1936, La Lutte reported an incident in which the workers who went on strike were arrested. However, the article argued

48 “Un millier de cochers des “boîtes d’allumettes” se mettent en grève,” La Lutte, November 9, 1935.
that the workers have the right to strike in Indochina. Although the colonial government repressed the strikes, the newspaper still argued for the workers’ right to strike, indicating their perception in the efficacy of their struggle even after the colonial state’s repression. In addition, La Lutte covered a story on June 24, 1936 about a factory occupation by strikers in which all of the automobile industries in the colony were affected. The strikers were able to reclaim a 40-hour workweek and 13 days of additional pay. La Lutte remarked on the solidarity and discipline of the workers who “delivered a victory to the working class.” The newspaper’s coverage of the success in the strike reveals how they viewed protesting and organizing as an effective means to gain workers’ rights and to change poor working conditions.

Two months later on August 5, 1936, La Lutte reported on the deadly conditions at a road construction site. The article mentioned how the added level of dangerous work was a product of colonial capitalism due to the colonial administration’s lack of care and apathy towards the lives of the colonized population. The newspaper described how the colonial administration employed greedy entrepreneurs, which led to the death of the workers. The article explicitly stated that coolies were victims of colonialist exploitation.

The newspaper transitioned from reporting accidents to covering workplace strikes, reflecting the growing acknowledgement of the systemic injustices of colonial capitalism. The lack of action by the colonial state to improve conditions and the later state repression of the strikes led to greater discontent and anti-colonial sentiment, with the Indochinese increasingly viewing French colonial rule as illegitimate.

**International Solidarity: Aide to the Transformation of Consciousness**

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50 “Une grève déclenchée a 8 heures Une perquisition opérée à 10 heures Des arrestations faites à 14 heures,” *La Lutte*, February 18, 1936.
Vietnamese Marxists struggled with relating Vietnamese history and culture to Marxist revolutionary ideals. They had to grapple with combining a distinct Vietnamese identity with their anti-capitalist stance and commitment to global solidarity. During the newspaper’s run, the Great Depression placed France under economic strain. Consequently, there was a wave of strikes by French workers in France, an opportunity for La Lutte to find solidarity with workers internationally. La Lutte’s adherence to international solidarity reveals both a source of inspiration and knowledge on protests and the newspaper’s changing perception of the intersection of capitalism and colonialism. The newspaper’s solidarity and attention to workers abroad also allowed them to realize the specificity of their own situation under colonialism by comparing the Indochinese workers’ conditions to that of the French workers.

During the lock-out strikes that La Lutte reported on May 13, 1936, the Indochinese workers sympathized “with their French comrades.” The newspaper writers described how workers in the colony were able to feel solidarity with French workers. Additionally, after a protest of Greek sailors that occurred in the following month, the strikers were arrested. The newspaper argued that their arrests were a violation of individual liberty. La Lutte felt solidarity with workers globally and not just with Indochinese workers in that it saw injustice in the Greek sailors’ arrest. In the same issue, La Lutte commented on the intensity of anti-communist repression following an arrest. The newspaper remarked that the colonies were under closer surveillance due to fears of anti-colonial unrest that was spurred on by communist activity. The writers noticed that conditions in the colonies were different due to the fragility of colonial power in which colonial officials often feared rebellion against French rule.

53 Marr, Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 415.
54 Alexander, International Trotskyism, 964.
57 “Une arrestation que les travailleurs exigent,” La Lutte, June 5, 1936.
Later, the newspaper reported on the condition of Indochinese railroad workers with the railroaders describing the pains of their work and comparing themselves to prisoners. The railroad workers demanded a legal labor union for railroaders and a committee to solve work conflicts. The article echoed the demands of the railroad workers in France in that the Indochinese workers sought to replicate the actions of the French workers.\(^{58}\) Furthermore, on April 21, 1938 \textit{La Lutte} reported how in France there was a grand organization of workers consisting of communists and socialists.\(^{59}\) The article invoked the solidarity in France as a source of inspiration for creating solidarity in Indochina. The newspaper viewed the solidarity of French leftists with admiration and sought to emulate the alliance of worker organization in France in the colony.

Moreover, in the following month the writers of \textit{La Lutte} described how they had faith in the Indochinese workers to gain legal compensation for the workers who were mutilated by machines. However, the newspaper still commented on how, on the whole, the country was still comprised of unorganized masses.\(^{60}\) The newspaper focused specifically on the need for greater organization among Indochinese workers, especially after noticing the level of organization and number of unions in France.

Although solidarity with French workers continued, the newspaper remarked on the role of the colonial administration in their own situation by looking at French workers protesting in the metropole. Through their solidarity with French workers, the writers of \textit{La Lutte} were able to compare their own colonized position and realize the differences between being a worker in a colony and a worker in the metropole. As a result, they described the class struggle specifically for Indochinese workers, who were victims of both industrial capitalism and an imperialist government. Indochinese workers faced greater

\(^{59}\) “Pour le premier mai de lutte de classes ! Les travailleurs indochinois manifesteront contre leur exploiteurs !” \textit{La Lutte}, April 21, 1938.
\(^{60}\) “Encore un accident de travail aux distilleries Mazet,” \textit{La Lutte}, September 11, 1938.
repression due to the colonial government using armed forces more frequently to end rebellions. The police in the colonial context had greater ties to the military since the distinction between the two repressive forces of the colonial government were blurrier than the distinction between the police and the military in the metropole. By comparing their situation to other workers, the aspects of colonial capitalism became clearer and the newspaper became more cognizant of colonial power structures. The newspaper saw the injustice of colonialism and was aware of how the colonized populations were treated differently by the state. Therefore, international solidarity aided the newspaper in the transformation of consciousness for their anti-colonial struggle.

**Relationship with the Popular Front: Political Opportunity Structure**

*La Lutte’s* relationship with the colonial government and the metropole also impacted its perception of colonialism. The newspaper initially had hope in the Popular Front, but later became disillusioned with the Popular Front’s failure to substantially improve conditions in the colony. Nevertheless, the Popular Front provided the movement with the structural opportunity to carry out its protest. Initially, the Popular Front period offered the Vietnamese intelligentsia with greater opportunities to combine theory and practice. Vietnamese radicals were also able to publish a larger number of basic Marxist-Leninist texts.”

Division and competition among elites is needed for the emergence of a protest movement in that it creates a circumstantial window of opportunity for the movement. Elites and their cooperation legitimate the protest movement. As a result, division among elites creates a structural opportunity in that it forces some elite groups to ally with the insurgents, fueling and encouraging the movement.

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62 Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, 23.
63 Marr, 348.
by decreasing subversive and anti-colonial crackdowns. As a result, the newspaper perceived that there was a division between the Popular Front and the colonial government since it believed that the Popular Front was against the exploitation of the colonial state.

McAdam’s political process model explains the dynamic of protest movements in which movements develop in response to an ongoing process of interactions between the movement itself and the larger socio-political environment. 65 Because a transformation of consciousness is crucial to the generation of insurgency, the movement’s relationship with the colonial government and the Popular Front is significant in that it indicates how the colonized population viewed the legitimacy of the colonial state and the metropole. In addition, successful insurgency relies on the collective assessment of cognitive liberation, the recognition of the possibility for the movement’s success.66

Movements also depend on the political opportunity structure in which a particular set of power relations characterizes the political environment. The political environment varies, but it ultimately often obstructs successful insurgency. The increased cost of repression leads to a decrease in the participation of protest movements due to the risks involved. However, during exceptional conditions, the political environment allows for moments of political opportunity that facilitate insurgency.67 The Popular Front provided a window of opportunity for anti-colonialists in which their liberal policies lessened the risks involved in participating in protest movements. Therefore, the moment the Popular Front came into power provided the political opportunity structure for the development of anti-colonial movements.

By the late 1930s most Vietnamese intellectuals prioritized modern patriotism. The Vietnamese studied how they “possessed precise, legally enforceable rights and responsibilities as citizens,” which fueled their participation in building and defending the idea of a distinctly Vietnamese country. Previously, the colonial state repressed

65 McAdam, Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 48.
66 McAdam, 48.
67 McAdam, 41.
those efforts. However, the Popular Front lessened state repression, allowing for the growth and development of patriotic Vietnamese groups. Moreover, the leniency of the Popular Front allowed for the spread of “the idea that any citizen with a grievance or demand should be able to present it to French Popular Front representatives and expect it to be seriously considered.”

Initially the newspaper had a more positive view on the French government in the metropole in which they looked to the Popular Front to support workers in the colonies where the newspaper writers viewed that the whims of the colonial capitalists controlled the workers’ lives. For example, during a strike of coolie-planters that the newspaper reported on July 1, 1936, the strikers demanded better salaries and argued that they faced poor and dangerous working conditions. *La Lutte* called for the Popular Front to “stop the anarchy that is going on in the colonies.” The newspaper editors wanted the Popular Front to rein in the capitalists, revealing how they saw the Popular Front as an ally.

When the conditions in the colony did not improve one month later, the newspaper blamed the colonial government for obstructing the progressive politics of the Popular Front. The newspaper writers attributed blame to the colonial state when conditions did not improve while they still believed that the Popular Front could better the conditions in the colony. The writers of *La Lutte* criticized colonial oppression and how the colonial government’s acts of repression sabotaged the Popular Front’s liberal policies. The newspaper consequently insisted on the “necessity for the application of democratic liberties in Indochina to defend against the arbitrariness of the colonial government.” The newspaper asked for the Popular Front’s assistance in their struggle against colonial oppression and for the Popular Front to “associate their politics of peace and liberty for all people.” *La Lutte* blamed the colonial government rather than the French government for the oppression in the colonies, conveying how

68 Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, 93-94.
the newspaper writers still believed that the Popular Front could better the conditions in Indochina. The newspaper latched onto the Popular Front’s ideals of democratic liberties and expected that those ideals would also apply to the Indochinese in the colony.

**Relationship with the Popular Front: Shift in Perception of “the System”**

The newspaper proposed for a Popular Congress in the colony in 1936. *La Lutte* initiated a “semi-legal challenge to the existing colonial system” in which it called for a representative Indochinese Congress.71 The Popular Front, however, rejected establishing a representative government, leading to the failure to modify the colonial status of Indochina.72 As a result, there was a shift in the newspaper’s perception of and relationship with the Popular Front, since the newspaper viewed the Popular Front as hypocritical due the French government rejecting representation for the colonized population in their own country.

Furthermore, in 1937 the alliance between the Trotskyists and the Stalinist broke down. Reasons for the split included disagreements over the Vietnamese relationship with the Popular Front. The Stalinists argued that the Popular Front could still carry out reforms in the colonies and thwart the growing threat of fascism. They thought the Vietnamese had a duty to support the liberal French government to combat fascism. However, the Trotskyists contended that the Popular Front remained imperialistic, and that allying with them undermined the anti-colonial struggle.73 The Trotskyists were against the Popular Front and refused to support the French in any capacity. The split was solidified when the Trotskyists won over the more neutral left-wing anti-colonialists on the newspaper board. As a result, the balance of power shifted in favor of the Trotskyists, leading to the Stalinist faction abandoning *La Lutte* and starting their own newspaper, *The Vanguard*,

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71 Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, 388.
73 Alexander, 965.
in the same year as the split.\textsuperscript{74} Despite the lack of colonial concessions, the Stalinists remained loyal to the Popular Front. In contrast, the Trotskyists rejected the Popular Front, which they felt betrayed the working class.\textsuperscript{75} The dissolution of the alliance led the newspaper, now exclusively under Trotskyist control, to openly critique the Popular Front, reflecting the Trotskyists’ views on the colonial state and metropole. \textit{La Lutte}, as a result, solely reported on its dissatisfaction and frustrations with the Popular Front after the split in 1937.

Because \textit{La Lutte} was now adamantly opposed to the Popular Front, the newspaper published its disillusionment on April 14, 1938, reprimanding the Popular Front for not delivering on its progressive promises and stating that it was “poisonous to the working class.” The newspaper writers then criticized the Popular Front for actively working against the interests of workers both in the colony and in the metropole. In addition, \textit{La Lutte} denounced the Popular Front and how “agents of capitalism are in service of the Popular Front” in which it was “against the combative spirit of the French proletariat.” The writers of \textit{La Lutte} argued that the Popular Front only “guards reactionaries and fascists and promotes anti-worker propaganda.”\textsuperscript{76}

In the next issue, the newspaper described how the Popular Front promised that it “would bring to all bread, peace, and freedom.” However, the newspaper writers criticized each point, arguing that people in the colonies were hungry and faced starvation due to the Indochinese being at the mercy of the imperialist government. \textit{La Lutte} also cited how France was making people in Indochina fight in the upcoming war in the face of increasing Japanese encroachment, which would result in more Indochinese deaths. Lastly, the newspaper brought up how the colonized faced militant repression.\textsuperscript{77} Thus, the newspaper explicitly viewed the Popular Front as the enemy just as

\textsuperscript{74} Frank N. Trager, ed., \textit{Marxism in Southeast Asia; A Study of Four Countries}, (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1959), 142.

\textsuperscript{75} Marr, \textit{Vietnamese Tradition on Trial}, 388-389.

\textsuperscript{76} “Le Front populaire, pourvoyeur du fascisme,” \textit{La Lutte}, April 14, 1938.

\textsuperscript{77} “Les travailleurs indochinois manifesteront contre leur exploiteurs!” \textit{La Lutte}, April 21, 1938.
much as the colonial government. One month later the newspaper wrote that “the experience of the Popular Front has been too cruelly disappointing for the Indochinese people.” The writers of La Lutte described how “to ask in 1938 that the masses of Indochina put their trust in the Popular Front, is to suppose in them the total absence of all class consciousness and political experience.”

La Lutte remained adamant in not supporting the French government, which continued until one of its last issues on September 11, 1938. The newspaper attacked the Stalinists who allied with the Popular Front, stating that allying with the French government would undermine the larger struggle against imperialism. The newspaper rejected patriotism towards France and denounced the Stalinists’ contention that “the workers and peasants must accept all the sacrifices in favor of a hypothetical ‘national defense.’” The newspaper concluded that it had never been “for national defense in a capitalist, imperialist system.”

Because of the coalition’s split in 1937, La Lutte could voice its grievances against the Popular Front and extend its critique of colonialism beyond the colonial state and towards the metropole as well. Having a liberal government created heightened expectations for the Indochinese, who believed that their situation and status as a colonized population would improve. However, when their conditions did not improve, and they realized that their conditions were not a result of just the colonial government, but also of the metropole and the colonial system as a whole. The shift in the newspaper’s perception of the Popular Front contributed to the transformation of consciousness that was needed for the continued development of its protest movement. Not only did the newspaper view the colonial state as illegitimate and unjust, but also the metropole.

Conclusion

La Lutte became increasingly aware of the intersection of colonialism and capitalism after being continually disappointed with the colonial government as their grievances were ignored. Although the newspaper initially targeted solely capitalism as the root of their problems and poor living conditions, it began to view their condition as a product of both capitalism and colonialism. The newspaper became more aware of colonialism and incorporated anti-colonialism into their already anti-capitalist politics, which strengthened the movement in allowing the politics of the movement to become more relevant to the everyday person’s life. By adding anti-colonialism into their politics and grievances, the movement was able to appeal to a wider population, which contributed to the left-wing’s eventual success. The Communist Party was able to gain more momentum after the 1930s, when the newspaper displayed the groundwork of leftist groups by illustrating the transformation of consciousness of workers and peasants.

After the newspaper’s last issue in September 1938, Indochina experienced the effects of the collapse of the Popular Front, the establishment of the Japanese-Vichy alliance in 1940, and the formation of the Communist-led Viet Minh in 1941.\(^\text{80}\) The greater instability of that period created the perfect conditions for the Communist Party’s takeover of Indochina. La Lutte and its news coverage highlighted the Indochinese’s changing relationship with the colonial state and charted the history of the Communists path to victory.

Although protest movements require exceptional structural conditions, what does it mean when there are widespread anti-colonial movements? Does it imply that colonialism itself is an exceptional structural condition in that it is in the nature of colonialism to brew opposition? Under colonialism, the identities of the colonized population became solidified under the colonial experience. However, the Indochinese anti-colonialists were then able to gain pride in a distinctly Vietnamese identity and weaponize it against the colonial state by calling for self-determination. Because the legitimacy of the colonial state is always in a fragile position, it facilitates the growth and

\(^{80}\) Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, 12.
development of anti-colonial movements in which protest movements thrive off of the instability of the political regime. Colonialism itself offers the structural conditions required for successful protest movements. Similar to Marx’s famous statement about capitalism, colonialism creates the conditions for its own downfall.
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Clio’s Scroll
Department of History University of California, Berkeley
3229 Dwinelle Hall, Berkeley, CA 94720

cliosscroll@gmail.com
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