It is a happy accident that made possible this account of the history of the Central African Republic. The author served this nation in an almost uninterrupted manner from 1949 to 1967, first as a colonial administrator and after independence as technical advisor (p. 24). He had personal contact with a number of elderly persons who took part or could tell him of important events; he also had access to archives "in the bust" and in the capital. He writes: "A partir de 1949, nous avons participe souvent aux evenements relatés et nous avons connu la majorite des acteurs de l'histoire centrafricaine. Pour la vingtaine d'années qui vient de s'achever, ce livre constitue donc, avant tout, un témoignage direct" (p. 25).

Given the author's unquestionable qualifications for writing this history, it is unfortunate that only slightly less that one fourth of the book deals with the period 1940-1966, whereas over one half is devoted to colonial history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Only fourteen pages are taken up with prehistory, but in view of the scarcity of archaeological research in this area, not to speak of most of sub-saharan Africa, Kalck has done well with what he could find. For the precolonial period he establishes convincingly that at least in some areas within the present national boundaries there had been a rather high density of population and societies that were economically important to other areas. But centuries of slave raiding had left terrible scars on the land and its people.

The colonial era is treated in a fairly straightforward manner: thoroughly but unspectacularly. One does not view events in the context of larger movements and power struggles. There is, for example, no allusion to the role played by French Equatorial Africa (including the C.A.R.) and its Governor-General, Félix Éboué, a former administrator on Central african soil, in helping General De Gaulle establish his Free French forces. One does not see history taking place at the personal, human level. Having read a great deal of the government and missionary archives of the period 1880-1910, I can testify to the wealth of material that would move one to anger, amusement, pity, or compassion. This is a weakness of the whole book, in fact. There is no gossip. Even for the period that Kalck knows first-hand, he fails to give us a feeling of "I was there." I would have enjoyed, for example, a description of the response of Central africans to De Gaulle's referendum in 1958.

Kalck comes closest to writing interpretive history when he describes the régime of the nation's first president, David Dacko. (Barthélémy Boganda, who led the movement to independence, died in an airplane accident under what Kalck calls mysterious circumstances.) The book ends with the fall of Dacko in January of 1966.
Perhaps my mild dissatisfaction with the book should not be taken too seriously, for the author makes clear that it was destined "à ceux qui seraient simplement désireux de s'informer sur les grandes lignes du passé centrafricain" (p. 26). This may explain why it reads like a chronicle of political events, sometimes a bit too abbreviated. The full 1700-page version is available, however, in the author's thèse de doctorat és lettres of 1970.

Not having had an opportunity to consult the author's thesis, I cannot say anything certain about the methods he used in collecting his data while in the field. He says nothing about this matter in the book. I am especially interested in his use, if any, of Sango. This was the territory's lingua franca, a pidgin (or creole, depending on one's use of the terms), based on a vernacular of the same name. In spite of its utility, very few colonial administrators acquired any degree of fluency in it. (Many thought that their Sango-field French was actually Frenchified Sango!) Kaick never refers to statements made in Sango by political leaders, although the language is as important among them as Swahili is in Tanzania. It is the language one hears most when Central Africans are speaking among themselves. In 1966 a member of the Israeli embassy informed me that while on a flight from Brazzaville to Bangui he had observed two ministers speaking exclusively in this language. Sango is the nation's national language; French is its official language. Kaick could have learned a great deal more if he had examined the content and rhetoric of political speeches. He does produce a photographic copy of a handbill in Sango in which Boganda advises people how to vote in the 1958 referendum. It is too bad that Kaick's French translation missed the meaning of Boganda's favorite slogan: Zo kwe zo. What we get is "Tout être humain est une personne," whereas the meaning is unquestionably, simply, and directly "Everybody's human." (The slogan appears on a 25-franc postage stamp showing overlapping white and black male figures and the two elements of the symbol of MESAN. Boganda's party: a black hand pointing at a gold star.)