

## REVIEWS

Echenberg, Myron. *Colonial Conscripts: The Tirailleurs Sénégalais in French West Africa, 1857-1960*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1991. 236 pp.

If one image is worth a thousand words, a billboard displayed in France during the colonial period illustrated the humiliation the *Tirailleurs Sénégalais* were subjected to, despite the enormous sacrifices they made for their colonial masters. The advertisement, for a popular children's cereal called "*Banania*," showed a grinning African in a *Tirailleurs* uniform proclaiming in *petit nègre* French: "*Y a bon banania*" ("it be good, *Banania*") (164). Léopold Senghor, himself a *Tirailleurs* veteran, summed up the feelings of African veterans in a poem he wrote during the Second Great War:

You are not poor men, with nothing in your pockets,  
without honor.  
I will tear down the *Banania* smiles from every wall  
in France (165).

Myron Echenberg's study of the *Tirailleurs Sénégalais*, winner of the African Studies Association 1992 Herskovitz Award, offers new insights into the rather sad history of the Africans who fought for their French colonial rulers on countless battlefields on three continents. The author focuses on the social history of the *Tirailleurs*, from their experiences in war, to their readjustment to life in Africa, and finally to their political struggle for equality within the French military structure.

The *Tirailleurs* had a rather obscure and anything-but-noble beginning. The stereotype that was to follow this fighting force throughout the colonial period (and arguably until the present) of the African who embraced French paternalism against the interests of his own people, had its roots during the formative years. Created in 1857 by Napoleon III, the *Tirailleurs* were originally a motley crew of soldiers, drawn mainly from the lowest economic classes, including slaves and prisoners-of-war. During what Echenberg terms the "Conquest Era," 1886 to 1905, they waged war against indigenous polities until the French occupiers announced the end of military rule and the creation of the French West African Federation, the colonial super-state which existed until 1956.

The French colonial regime was unsuccessful in luring Africans into volunteering for service in the *Tirailleurs* because they were reluctant to join a force composed mainly of slaves. In addition, the salary and benefits of joining the force were not a great enough incentive

for most Africans, as many civilian jobs were better-paying. This led, in 1912, to the enactment of a law calling for partial conscription, a blessing for the French, since Africans played an important role in the defense of France during the unanticipated First Great War. In 1919, the French went the final step and instituted obligatory universal military service for men in French West Africa. Through these laws, 170,000 Africans fought for the French in the First Great War (46).

The period between the two Great Wars was dominated by the organized conscription of Africans. The French established elaborate methods to accomplish this, including mobile draft boards which visited each *cercle* annually to register the twenty-year-olds of each district and select a predetermined number for service. Again, the *Tirailleurs* were crucial in the defence of France and African soldiers were often singled out for ill-treatment by the Nazis during the war against fascism.

An episode in Senegal immediately following the Second Great War set the tone for the last two decades of relations between the colonial regime and the *Tirailleurs*. A protest in December 1944 by African veterans over broken promises made by the French for back pay and demobilization premiums ended in the brutal murder of 35 *Tirailleurs* and countless wounded. In addition, over thirty veterans involved in the demonstration were convicted on charges "falling just short of mutiny" and sentenced to prison. The massacre, as Echenberg writes, sent shockwaves throughout French West Africa because

to the ex-POWs the authoritarian manner in which they were being treated was a bitter reminder that they were returning home to an unchanged colonial system, unappreciative of the great sacrifices they and their fallen comrades had made.(101)

Needless to say, the frustrations of these veterans continued until independence, as they organized and fought for the same rights as their fellow European soldiers. I find fault with Echenberg, however, on one important issue in the political development of the *Tirailleurs*. Echenberg focuses almost exclusively on combat in Europe and, to a lesser extent, within the French African colonies. He does not, however, discuss the experiences of African soldiers in other occupied areas, such as Southeast Asia. Surely, as many historians of colonialism and nationalism in Africa have argued, the French wars against the people of Viet Nam helped to instigate anti-colonial sentiments among the *Tirailleurs* who fought there. African soldiers were exposed to one of the paradoxes of the French colonial military establishment: Africans were used to suppress the anti-colonial struggles of another oppressed nationality.

What emerges from Echenberg's work is that the *Tirailleurs* were in an awkward position in the French colonial empire. On the one

hand, they represented to the French the best qualities of their assimilationist policies: Africans who were disciplined in the French army and trained to defend the French empire. On the other hand, they were a source of potential and realized grievance for the French since their experiences and education in the military helped shape their political activism.

Within African societies, the force was resented especially in the early 'conquest' period, for obvious reasons. Yet, these opinions had to (and did) change with the introduction of universal conscription, since no one was (technically) potentially exempt from service. Hence, Echenberg has shown us that the stereotypes of the *Tirailleurs* as 'sellouts' is mostly unfair.

Within the military establishment, African soldiers encountered incredible racism. They were viewed as children by their superiors, who did not try to hide this belief. Echenberg offers the following comments by the Commander-in-Chief for French West Africa, General Gadel, as an example of the bigotry prevalent in the French military:

the black man must be considered to be of low intelligence and a man who forgets matters quickly. As a child he shows intellectual aptitudes that are full of promise, but disappear rapidly at the age of adolescence.(66)

While Echenberg acknowledges that the problem of a limited number of sources makes almost all conclusions difficult to make, he has successfully utilized the available archival material, unpublished studies, and interviews with African veterans he himself conducted, to craft a well-written history. *Colonial Conscripts* is a very readable account, richly illustrated with photographs and helpful charts, which succeeds in presenting the *Tirailleurs* more as victims of the colonial state rather than profiteers of the colonial system.

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