Interventions

Beyond the *Tirailleur*: Narrating and Mobilizing Colonial Experiences of the First World War in the French Empire

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On 15 April 2017, President François Hollande addressed an audience of dignitaries, activists, and African veterans of French forces gathered in the gardens of the Elysée Palace. This presidential homage to the *tirailleurs sénégalais* took place on the eve of the centenary commemoration at the Chemin des Dames, a battle at which, M. Hollande reminded his audience, "three quarters" of the West African contingent "were lost in the first days of the assault." The President's tribute to the West Africans' contribution to the defense of France in the First World War and subsequent conflicts was accompanied by a solemn promise that "those who have fought for France and chosen to live here should be able to become French."[1] While this sounded like a long-awaited honoring of the reciprocal obligation first forged in the trenches of the Great War, the legal reform that followed was in fact a very limited and exceptional provision that applied to less than thirty West African veterans resident in France.

The disparity between the rhetoric of recognition that was articulated around this 2017 measure, and the scope and scale of its impact will be familiar to anyone who has studied how colonial service in the war was rewarded by the imperial polity. Contested notions of what the French state owes to those colonial subjects who fought to defend it and how it has honored its debt have shaped so much of the political and cultural discourse that has arisen around the memory of colonial soldiers, particularly in the recent Centenary period. While those evoking the memory of colonial soldiers may disagree profoundly as to what rights their past sacrifices should confer and to whom they should extend in the present, they continue to anchor their debates around the figure of the *tirailleur*. In this piece, I argue that this focus on the colonial soldier, particularly in

* This piece is the product of research and reflection carried out as part of the COLVET: Ex-Soldiers of Empire project led by the author and funded by the European Research Council. Project No. 101115749. You can follow the project's work on: https://colvet.eu/.

[1] "Déclaration de M. François Hollande, Président de la République, en hommage aux tirailleurs sénégalais à Paris le 15 avril 2017," *Vie Publique*, https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/202769-declaration-de-m-francois-hollande-president-de-la-republique-en-homm.

commemorative and political discourse, has obscured other colonial experiences of the war and limited our understanding of how the conflict impacted the lives of colonial subjects in the colonies. Their experiences may not have given rise to the "idioms of uneven if mutual obligation" that Gregory Mann has convincingly argued defined relations between colonial soldiers and the state they served.[2] But they were central to how the First World War played out in the French Empire. They also open different ways of thinking about the war's legacies and how these should be understood, commemorated and mobilized in the present.

From the outset of the planning for the Centenary of the First World War, the French state acknowledged the potential of an engagement with the war's colonial history to "speak to the plural France of today," specifically evoking the "Muslim headstones of Notre-Dame-Lorette and the memory of the tirailleurs sénégalais" as concrete reminders of the Republic's debt to colonized populations.[3] The subsequent significant investment in the Centenary, notably coordinated by the *Mission du Centenaire*, a multi-agency organism that was guided by an international committee of leading scholars of the First World War, saw an extensive reassessment of and reengagement with the history of the war and the memory discourses to which it has given rise. The experience of colonial soldiers and, to a lesser extent, colonial workers who contributed to the metropolitan war effort was more thoroughly integrated into both public and scholarly narratives of the conflict.[4] This has not been without controversy. The invitation to the rapper Black M to perform at a memorial concert at Verdun became a particular flashpoint as far right figures attacked his lyrics for being 'anti-French' while the artist himself evoked his grandfather's service as a *tirailleur sénégalais* in the Second World War. Ultimately, his performance was canceled on public safety grounds.[5] This new prominence of colonial experiences of the war has also been uneven in its geographical spread, with the figure of the West African soldier still dominating cultural representations of colonial troops, albeit in much more complex, critical and textured portrayals than those that had long defined (neo)colonial portrayals of the *tirailleur sénégalais*.[6] Nevertheless, the Centenary has significantly

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[2] Gregory Mann, *Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century* (Duke University Press, 2006), 65.

[3] Joseph Zimet, *Commémorer la Grande guerre (2014-2020): propositions pour un centenaire international-Rapport au Président de la République* (2011), 29, https://www.vie-publique.fr/rapport/33552-commemorer-la-grande-guerre-2014-2020-propositions-pour-un-centenair.

[4] Nicolas Patin and Arndt Weinrich, eds., *Quel bilan scientifique pour le centenaire de 1914-1918 ?* (Sorbonne Université Presses, 2022), 76.

[5] For an account of the controversy see "Black M et la bataille de Verdun : retour sur une polémique," *Le Monde*, 13 May 2016, https://www.lemonde.fr/musiques/article/2016/05/13/le-rappeur-black-m-et-la-bataille-de-verdun-retour-sur-une-polemique_4919120_1654986.html.

[6] See the positive reception and broad audiences of David Diop's novel *Frère d'âme* (Seuil, 2018) and Mathieu Vadepied's film *Tirailleurs* (2022).

expanded both public knowledge and recognition of not just the participation of colonial subjects in the war in France and Europe but also of their lived experiences of the conflict.

This has, I would argue, not extended to the experiences of those colonial subjects whose roles in the war are less easily understood and mobilized through the prism of the established "idioms of mutual if uneven obligation" that emerged around the martial sacrifice of colonial soldiers or militarized labor in the metropole. While the Centenary focused greater public attention on the roles of militarized workers, women and war resisters in France, these were typically treated as categories discrete from the wartime experiences of colonial subjects. And yet, the war saw thousands of subjects mobilized in portering, a distinctly colonial form of militarized labor, that was vital to the war effort in the colonies, extremely dangerous, and grossly under-rewarded (figure 1). Women in the colonies actively shaped the war and, in turn, saw their own lives restructured, even transformed, by the forces it unleashed. Finally, colonial subjects were never the passive recipients of the wartime demands made of them by the imperial polity, with many embracing forms of resistance up to and including armed insurrection against colonial authority.

Figure 1: Transport of injured French Army soldiers across the Mayo-Kebbi in Northern Cameroon. Porters visible in the background. *La Dépêche coloniale illustrée*, 1 February 1917.

There is perhaps no figure of significance more neglected in narratives of the French imperial war effort than the African porter. Portering, a logistical necessity for militaries operating in contexts where limited transport infrastructure could not sustain supply lines, had always been a feature of French military activity in Africa. It represented a link between the broader regime of forced labor and established practices of military recruitment in France's sub-Saharan African colonies. Over the course of the Great War, French authorities raised thousands of porters to serve both in the repression of insurrections against colonial authority, as in Dahomey (Benin) and in the Bani-Volta region (Mali and Burkina Faso), and in the campaigns against the Germans in Togo and in Cameroon. In this latter conflict, porters were raised from across French Equatorial Africa, with French forces frequently raiding villages in what are now Chad, the Central African Republic and the Republic of Congo to capture and impress men (and likely some women and children) into service.[7] Porters were paid a meagre wage, but the degree of compulsion in their service was evident both in the scale of desertion and their constant surveillance by armed guards.[8] The press-ganging of porters into the service of the French Army caused huge tension both in the supposedly "liberated" areas of Cameroon and in surrounding territories, with local men fleeing into the interior, escaping across colonially-imposed borders or even entering into open rebellion.[9] The death toll among the porters, who were given lower rations than soldiers and were often more vulnerable to attack by the enemy, was not officially recorded. The authorities felt little reciprocal obligation towards these vital laborers during the war itself, let alone in its wake.

The indifference of the colonial authorities towards the fate of porters and the resultant archival silences surrounding them have seen them marginalized in narratives of the war. And yet their stories are vital to understanding both how colonized populations experienced the social disruption and violence of the war and how that violence and social disruption was inscribed into longer histories of colonial exploitation that predated and would outlast the conflict. Forced labor had been deployed by the French (and other colonial powers) in the region prior to the outbreak of the war. It was reorganized for the purposes of portage during the war, and it would be central to post-war development, most notably in the lethal construction of the Congo-Océan railway in French Equatorial Africa.[10] Unlike combat veterans who had, in theory if not always in practice, enhanced economic and social rights after the war, porters' service did not give

[7] Colette Dubois, "Les occultés de la Campagne du Cameroun," in *Combattants de l'Empire*, eds. Philippe Buton and Marc Michel (Vendémiaire, 2018), 101-116, 110.

[8] Dubois, "Les occultés de la Campagne du Cameroun," 111-114 and Hew Strachan, *The First World War in Africa* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 6.

[9] Dubois, "Les occultés de la Campagne du Cameroun," 113.

[10] JP. Daughton, *The Violence of Empire: The Tragedy of the Congo-Océan Railroad* (The History Press, 2021).

rise to any long-term obligations on the part of the colonial state. Their service, like that of thousands of Africans coerced into labor throughout the colonial period, did not institute any form of reciprocal relationship, however uneven. This past is harder to construe as a shared history of common, if unequally rewarded, sacrifice. Rather it is exemplary of the violent exploitation that underpinned colonial rule.

The diverse contributions of French women to the metropolitan war effort were also given new prominence in the collective memory of the war emerging from the Centenary. The role of women in the war factories, in maintaining agricultural production and the functioning of public services, in nursing the war wounded, in other auxiliary roles, in providing emotional support to soldiers, and in challenging the war have all been explored in scholarship and integrated into broader public discussions of the war. This feminization of narratives of the war has not, however, extended to the grappling with its colonial impacts. The focus on the mobilization of colonial soldiers, and to a lesser extent, workers in the metropole and Europe has meant that colonized women's experiences both on the home front and in conflict zones have been neglected. The dual "colonial and androcentric" vision of the official archive has undoubtedly complicated historians' efforts to engage with these histories.[11] And yet, we know that women in colonized societies actively participated in economic life and their labor, coerced or voluntary, must have been vital to sustaining the wartime economy and facilitating mobilization. How these women coped with the departure of their menfolk, the broader pressures of military and economic mobilization, and the resultant changes to the social order have yet to really be explored in the scholarship, let alone acknowledged in public discourse around the war.

Women were also notably present in active combat zones in the colonial contexts of the war. In Cameroon, local women (and sometimes their children) were frequently impressed into service to support the soldiers and porters conducting military campaigns by the French and by their German opponents.[12] They contributed by transporting supplies, cooking food, and providing local knowledge of the terrain (figure 2). These roles exposed them to grave danger, from the diseases that ravaged African forces in the war, from the retributive violence of the enemy, and from violence, particularly sexual violence, within the hyper-masculine contexts of the military caravans and camps. African women were prime targets for the atrocities perpetrated by German forces in Cameroon, including abduction, rape and murder. While the Allies did document some of this violence at a local level, the "rule of colonial exception" meant that it never attracted the

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[11] Marie Rodet, "C'est le regard qui fait l'histoire: Comment utiliser des archives coloniales qui nous renseignent malgré elles sur l'histoire des femmes africaines (archives)," *Terrains & travaux* 1, no. 10, (2006): 18-35, 21.

[12] Sylvie Laure Andela Bambona, "Femmes européennes, femmes africaines et Première Guerre mondiale au Cameroun, 1914-1915, " *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains* 4, no. 248, (2012): 27-44.

Figure 2: Eséka (Central Cameroon). The Tirailleur's Kitchen: 'Madame Tirailleur' does her ablutions. Frédéric Gadmer, 16/12/1916, © Frédéric Gadmer/ECPAD/Défense.

attention nor generated the outrage that German gendered violence in France and Belgium would.[13]

In colonial contexts, gendered wartime violence was never solely the product of inter-imperial conflict. The forms of resistance and repression that defined wartime mobilization in the colonies directly impacted and were profoundly shaped by women. As in metropolitan France, women in the colonies used the limited margin for maneuver their gender afforded them to critique the imposition of recruitment, often by force, in their communities. Women in Vietnam wrote to the authorities to denounce the unfair and coercive recruiting practices implemented by local notables.[14] Some Algerian women had participated in the efforts to block the first draft when conscription was introduced in 1912 while others actively encouraged their sons to desert from their barracks prior to

[13] George Ndakwena Njung, "Soldiers of their Own: Honor, Violence, Resistance and Conscription in Cameroon during the First World War" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2016), 305-320.

[14] Mireille Le Van Ho, *Des vietnamiens dans la Grande Guerre* (Vendémiaire, 2014), 60.

being shipped off to France in 1916.[15] In West Africa, and likely across the empire, women were active in hiding potential recruits and facilitating their escape into the inaccessible interior or across colonial borders.[16] These stories deserve to be told alongside those of the women who mobilized in France to critique the prosecution of the war and even to call for its end. Furthermore, the broader gendered nature of repressive violence and resistance across the empire in this period merits closer attention. In the colonies, women were often crucial to efforts to organize not just against the war but against colonial authority more widely. They were among the key conspirators in planned rebellions in Indochina.[17] They were also vital to the organization and supplying of the major military campaign against the French in the Bani-Volta region of the West African interior.[18] There, the French state took women and their children as hostages to force the surrender or subjugation of villages to their authority.[19] The experiences of these and other colonized women who resisted and were victims of imperial violence has rarely garnered the same attention extended to the women in German-occupied northern France who participated in resistance and/or were deported and coerced into forced labor. Their stories merit inclusion in our broader narratives and analyses of how gender structured violence during this global conflict and of how women shaped the war and its outcomes.

Finally, the history of wartime resistance to the demands, the authority, and the sovereignty of the French colonial state has been particularly sidelined by discourses focused on the reciprocal relationship between the imperial polity and those who fought to defend it. Across the empire, thousands of colonial subjects conspired to throw off the yoke of French rule, with many taking up arms in their efforts to do so. While each of the armed insurrections against French rule during the war responded to local logics, it is clear that the rejection of the increased demands of the imperial war effort fueled resistance. The fateful meeting of local leaders at the village of Bona in modern day Burkina Faso that marked the beginning of the Bani-Volta War followed a refusal to provide recruits to a visiting commission. This, the largest of the wartime insurrections in the French Empire, affected almost 900,000 people in West Africa and left an estimated 30,000 dead.[20] In the heart of the prime recruiting ground in French West Africa, this lengthy and costly campaign of resistance waged by a diverse coalition of local

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[15] Gilbert Meynier, *L'Algérie Révélée* (Editions El Maarifa, 2010), 98 and Antonin Plarier, "Le Banditisme rural en Algérie à la période coloniale (1871 - années 1920)" (PhD diss., Paris I Sorbonne, 2019), 433.

[16] Marc Michel , *Les Africains et la Grande Guerre: L'appel à l'Afrique (1914-1918*) (Karthala, 2014), 35.

[17] Jonathan Krause, "Rebellion and Resistance in French Indochina in the First World War," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 48, no. 3 (2020): 425-455, 425/426.

[18] Mahir Şaul and Patrick Royer, *West African Challenge to Empire: Culture and History in the Volta-Bani Anticolonial War* (Ohio University Press, 2001), 4.

[19] Şaul and Royer, 5.

[20] Şaul and Royer, 4-5 and 120-123.

communities was motivated, at least initially, by a desire to end the excessive demands for soldiers. The insurrection in Algeria's Aurès mountains in November 1916 was preceded by a surge in desertion in the region and directly precipitated by the arrival of a recruiting commission.[21] In Vietnam, southern Madagascar, and northern Dahomey, the increasing encroachment of a colonial state in search of manpower aggravated existing tensions and drove armed resistance.[22] What emerges here is not a narrative of colonized peoples rallying to defend the imperial polity, whether voluntarily or by force, but rather of a rapacious imperial polity driving colonized peoples into resistance in defense of their own communities.

Resistance in the colonies was never solely a response to excessive French demands. The perceived (and actual) weakening of the apparatus of the French colonial state, embodied in the withdrawal of white officials to the front, was seen in many parts of the empire as an opportunity to challenge colonial authority, perhaps even a precursor to its ultimate extinction.[23] The ambitions of groups that sought to seize this opportunity and rise up against French authority far exceeded the simple refusal of the colonial state's wartime demands. In the Bani-Volta region, rebels in liberated villages, plowed up colonial roads and planted them with vegetables, and paraded captured cutlery and medical utensils to represent their rejection of coercive colonial modes of modernity.[24] While these rebels in West Africa and their Kanak equivalents in New Caledonia may have sought to overturn the colonial order for an imagined return to the precolonial order, elsewhere in the empire insurrections against colonial authorities incorporated novel political ideas. In Vietnam, wartime rebellions were marked by the transition from long-standing traditional secret societies as the key organizers of resistance towards more overtly nationalist movements of anti-colonial contestation.[25] In Madagascar, the radical nationalist Vy Vato Sakelika (VVS) group used the shared experience of mobilization and wartime repression to insist on the common nationality of Madagascans and promote the idea of a future unified and independent island-nation.[26] In Algeria, the Aurès rebels' proclamation of *al-bublīk* (the Republic) may not have corresponded to a clear political

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[21] Ouanassa Siari Tengour, "La révolte de 1916 dans l'Aurès" in *Histoire de l'Algérie à la période coloniale : 1830-1962*, eds. Abderrahmane Bouchène, Jean-Pierre Peyroulou, Ouanassa Siari Tengour and Sylvie Thénault (La Découverte, 2012): 255-260, 256.

[22] Krause, "Rebellion and Resistance in French Indochina," 441; Chantal Valensky, *Le soldat occulté : Les Malgaches de l''Armée Française, 1884-1920* (L'Harmattan, 1995), 285-286; and Luc Garcia, "Les mouvements de résistance au Dahomey (1914-1917)," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 10, no. 37 (1970): 164.

[23] Valensky, *Le soldat occulté*, 284, Şaul and Royer, *West African Challenge to Empire*, 108 and Dubois, "Les occultés de la Campagne du Cameroun," 102.

[24] Şaul and Royer, *West African Challenge to Empire,* 11 and 147.

[25] Krause, "Rebellion and Resistance in French Indochina," 445.

[26] Faranirina Rajaonah, "La grande guerre du côté des malgaches quelles perspectives pour des colonisés ?" *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains* 255, no. 3 (2014): 27-45, 40.

program,[27] but it did demonstrate an anti-colonial co-option and reimagination of the language of popular sovereignty that pre-empted the so-called Wilsonian Moment.[28] These movements of resistance underline that for at least some in the empire, the period of the First World War was marked not by the establishment of new relationships of reciprocity between colonial subjects and the state but rather by violent attempts to break free of the bonds of colonial rule.

So, what lessons can we learn from engaging with these often-hidden figures of the French colonial empire's experience of the First World War? Firstly, I argue that they highlight the importance of avoiding a one-dimensional diversification of the memory of the war that tends to treat colonial subjects, women, war laborers, and war resisters as discrete categories, obscuring the complex and fascinating ways in which they intersected, particularly on the ground in the colonies. Relatedly, colonial experiences should not be seen as a sideshow but rather as an integral part of the history of the French imperial nation-state's participation in and transformation by the Great War. The stories of women in the colonies should be told alongside and in dialogue with those of women in the metropole, those of resisters to the logics and demands of the war in France alongside and in dialogue with those of the colonial subjects who challenged and even took up arms against the wartime imperial state in the colonies. The integration of these experiences into broader narratives of the conflict is not just a question of expanding the coverage and the representativity of the history we produce on the conflict. It also implies a deeper interrogation of how questions of race, class, and gender structured both the deployment of violence in the period and how it has been remembered subsequently.

Calling for greater attention to these histories is not to imply that the history of the colonial soldier in France's First World War has been sufficiently covered in scholarship or acknowledged in public discourse. Much remains to be done on both fronts. But the *tirailleur* should not become the stand in for the totality of colonial experiences during the war. Nor should the kinds of uneven reciprocity to which his service gave rise become the only reference point for those seeking to mobilize the memory of the war in the empire in the present. The story of the *tirailleur* can activate notions of neglect and betrayal that rely on the state's historical—albeit halting, grudging, and often unrealized—recognition of its duty to those who fought to defend it. Yet its centering of male martial sacrifice and the bond between state and subject, however tenuous, to which it gave rise, not only excludes many of those who participated in and suffered through the First World War in the French Empire. It also limits the reach of the political change it can be effectively mobilized to secure. The tiny breach in the citizenship regime which President Hollande opened for the twenty-eight elderly West African veterans in 2017 hardly constitutes a significant rupture with the increasingly exclusionary logics of immigration policy in France. Indeed, it is of

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[27] Meynier, *L'Algérie Révélée*, 592.

[28] Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Princeton University Press, 2007).

a piece with the shift towards the extension of citizenship rights on the basis of exceptional "merit", a characteristic of an ever more restrictive naturalization and immigration regime in France that polices the boundaries of national belonging.[29] The other stories told here are unlikely to fundamentally alter this harsh political reality. They do, however, remind us of the importance of an intersectional approach to understanding the past and its mobilization in the present. After all, the rights of postcolonial migrant communities in contemporary France should not depend on the recognition of the perceived imperial loyalty of their ascendants in the past, just as the rights of colonized peoples should never have been contingent on their capacity to participate in the defense of imperial sovereignty at home or abroad.

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[29] Jules Lepoutre, "Devenir français est de plus en plus affaire de mérite et de performance," *Le Monde*, 18 September 2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2021/09/18/devenir-francais-est-de-plus-en-plus-affaire-de-merite-et-de-performance_6095119_3232.html.