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## ***La Force Noire: Race in the French Colonial Army during the Great War***

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**19-24 août 1914, Givet, Ardennes, France.**

*Gare de chemins de fer à la frontière Belge*

« *Passage de troupes, de blessés des lignes de Charleroi (Belgique)*

*...un grand diable de tirailleur blesse aux jambes a son pantalon rouge de sang de la hanche au genou.*

*a notre question, il nous répond 'Pas sang à moi, ça Boche, zigouille ' '*

*les autres tirailleurs que j'ai vu se trouvaient dans les mêmes conditions... »*

### **English Translation of Excerpt**

August 19-24, 1914 Givet, Ardennes, France

Railroad station at the Belgian border

Trains arriving carrying wounded from the Charleroi (Belgium) front line

...A tirailleur (Senegalese) as big as a devil with a leg wound, and his trousers covered with blood from the hip to the knee. Answering our question [How were you wounded?], he

responded "Not my blood, but the Boche's [German], zigouille [I got him]"

The other tirailleurs I saw were in similar conditions...

- Charles Desire Brasseur

### **Introduction**

The First World War was likely the most important conflict in defining European history and cultural identity. To this day its profound cultural impacts can be seen. However, while the Great War is often mischaracterized as a conflict solely between European forces, the war was a truly global affair. This was done by bringing colonial subjects from the fringes of the various European empires to fight on the frontlines of the war in Europe. While both the British and French made use of their colonial holdings as sources of soldiers during the First World War, the French would do so to a much greater extent. The French army would become a cosmopolitan force, bringing people from all over the empire to fight in the fields of France during the Great War.

This interaction between white soldiers and commanding officers with colonial troops of people of color would illustrate how dynamics of race played out in the French Empire at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While institutionalized racism was still a very important aspect of

French, especially colonial policy, the army provided a way in which certain racial boundaries could be breached within the metropole. The way in which the French army dealt with race and their colonial non-white soldiers was also quite different than how other allied armies did so, which led to conflict between the heads of the armies. This was certainly the case with the American expeditionary force which brought over African-American soldiers to the Western Front in 1917 when they entered the war.

The purpose of this paper is to explore how the French colonial army came into being, as well as investigate the relationship between colonial soldiers and their white French commanding officers. This will be done by delving into then Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Mangin's 1910 book *La Force Noire*, which argued for the creation of a French African colonial army. By studying these relationships and the history of the creation of the colonial army, the French understanding of race in the military should become visible. The way in which the French army dealt with the issue of race and racism will then be compared to the way in which American officers interacted and treated their non-white soldiers. This will be done through the examination of the *Linard Circulaire*, a French army memo reflecting the American view on how to deal with African – American units. This discussion of the French colonial army and its use during the Great War will end by observing the ways in which the fighting of these troops is remembered in monuments.

### **Review of Previous Literature**

Richard S. Fogarty is one of the main historians on the topic of African soldiers from the French colonies and their role in the First world war. His book, *Race and War in France*, illustrates the paradoxical nature of the French colonial army during the First World War, founded on both the ideals of republicanism and colonialism. Through studying and analyzing

the writings of various military and colonial officers and soldiers as well as those of French politicians, before and during the First World War, Fogarty illustrates how perceived racial differences and needs to uphold the colonial systems kept colored troops in a liminal zone between imperial subjects and free French citizens. Fogarty conveys that colonial troops experienced a certain degree of privileges within the French military, such as being able to fight in the war in the first place, when compared to the colonial and colored troops of other imperial powers at the time. However, Fogarty shows that the systems of racism and colonialism held by the French Republic kept these undoubtedly French soldiers from reaching true equality with their European counterparts, and that the view of “color-blind” France or French army is not true.<sup>1</sup>

Fogarty begins by discussing the historical use of colonial troops in French armies, which occurred as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century. North African soldiers also fought on the mainland during the Franco-Prussian war. In this way, Fogarty demonstrates that the use of non-white colonial troops within metropolitan France was not without precedent. He then moves on to explain why colonial troops were brought into the Great War. Drawing on sources from both military officers and colonial governors, Fogarty explains that for both logistical and ideological reasons stemming both from republicanism and colonialism, it was decided to train and arm colonial soldiers to fight for France. For some officers, the colonial soldiers were just another resource that the French empire could use for its benefit. For others, it represented a way to bring soldiers into a larger French republican identity. Fogarty interestingly notes that other nations, such as Great Britain, were less willing to bring in troops from their own colonies, as that could go against the narrative of white supremacy that these colonial empires relied upon. However,

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Standish Fogarty, *Race and War in France: Colonial Subjects In the French Army, 1914-1918* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 32-34.

Fogarty claims that the need for more soldiers as well as ideological motivators in either assimilating or associating colonial peoples with French republicanism overpowered these reservations. Fogarty then goes on to explain that beliefs on race and white supremacy greatly dictated the structure of the regiments of colonial troops, with different ethnicities being treated differently based on whether they are a “war-like” race or not. These troops, while still fighting alongside white regiments, were segregated in their regiments, and fought under white commanders. Therefore, Fogarty illustrated how French colonial soldiers in the nominally equal republican army were organized by notions of race that themselves were inherently based in inequality. He continues his study by looking at how colonial soldiers fit into the hierarchy of the French army, showing that they were almost always put under the command of white officers, and that there was little upward movement within the military hierarchy for colonial troops. Fogarty points to examples of less experienced white soldiers being given promotions over more experienced colored troops, decried by several African soldiers. Simply put, the racism inherent to the colonial system kept the Army from applying the republican egalitarian ideals it claimed to uphold to its colonial troops.<sup>2</sup>

Fogarty moves on to discuss the teaching and enforcing of the French language onto colonial troops, and draws an interesting parallel between the policies for French lingual hegemony in Metropolitan France as well as its colonies. The French language was imposed on the colonial troops and used as a way to further “civilize” their subjects. Again, this process of teaching the French language to troops is shown by Fogarty to be an interesting mesh of colonial and republican ideology. Lastly Fogarty brings forth how the French army government interacted with the Muslims within the colonial army, illustrating that changes in policy towards Islam

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<sup>2</sup> Fogarty, *Race and War in France*, 65-66

occurred for a large part to keep morale high within their regiments, combat German propaganda, and justify their fight against the Ottoman empire. Therefore, accommodations to Islam, as well as other foreign colonial religions, were done not as result of republican ideology, but instead as a need to keep the colonial army loyal to France<sup>3</sup>. Through these discussions, all heavily supported with various textual and archival references, Fogarty illustrates the paradoxical combination of republican and colonialist ideology that would characterize the experiences of the French colonial troops and their inability to reach full citizenship within the French Imperial system.

Throughout his book, Fogarty does an excellent job of combining a variety of sources, including army communications, personal letters of soldiers, and political discussions, to provide a convincing and well-referenced description of the condition and position of French colonial troops. Not only does Fogarty draw on a wide-ranging and expansive collection of documents to prove his points, he covers a larger swath of topics regarding colonial troops, ranging from how they were organized to how their various religions were accommodated. This gives the reader a truly holistic understanding of the views held by the French government and army on their colonial soldiers. Fogarty makes sure to include the reactions of the colonial troops to their treatment, illustrating that the interactions between these two groups are not one-sided. Lastly, Fogarty illustrates the great diversity of the colonial army, which is not often discussed.

Although Fogarty's book is exhaustive regarding the experiences of colonial troops within a nominally republican egalitarian army, it would greatly benefit from some discussion of the experiences of the white troops within the army. The issue is that Fogarty provides few baselines for which to compare the lives of colonial troops. For example, in terms of promotion

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 177-179

within the army, it would be worth discussing how likely it was for a regular white soldier to be promoted to a higher rank, if only to further prove the colonial racism inherent in the army. Although he does briefly discuss the British use of colonial troops, it would also be insightful to further compare across other armies. Overall, while Fogarty's analysis and discussion are exceptional, it could have been more powerful had he done additional comparisons with the experiences of French white troops within the army.

For anyone at all interested in the relationship between France and its colonies, *Race and War in France* is an excellent account of that relationship in terms of the First World War. Fogarty fully demonstrates not only the paradoxical nature of the republican colonial army, but also the French Colonial Empire as whole, as the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity formally expressed by the French republic are in direct conflict with the ideals needed to enforce a colonial system. While mainly focusing on the interactions between colonial troops and the army, Fogarty is still able to illustrate an in-depth and complete analysis of the views of colonial France on its subjects, as well categorizing the intermediate position between imperial subject and citizen occupied by French colonial soldiers.

*Empires in World War I* is a collection of writings by several different authors all regarding colonial participation in First World War. The main argument proposed through these authors' writings is that the First World War was truly a global conflict due to the imperial aspect of almost all the nations involved, and that the war itself resulted in several changes in the way that an empire was interpreted. The book is divided into four parts. The first discusses some of the aspects of colonial expansion, looking specifically at the contribution of the Belgian expansion in the Congo as well as general imperial expansion in the Pacific as helping set the scene for the First World War. The second part of the text focuses on the experiences and interactions of

colonial soldiers within Europe during the war. Specifically dealing with the difficulties of accommodating Indian cultural practices in war hospitals, the accommodation of French Muslim soldiers in the colonial army, issues with military courts in Egypt and Palestine, and the unsegregated nature of Native American soldiers within the American Expeditionary Force. The 3<sup>rd</sup> part deals with the results of an expanding presence of Imperial subjects in Europe as a result of the war and increased interaction between colonial subjects and their white European colonizers. These include shifting ideas of citizenship due to the military service of black colonial soldiers in the French army and increased missionary service in colonial Africa during the war. The fourth and final part of the book discusses lingering effects that the war had on the empires that participated in them, such as the prominence of West Indian servicemen in anti-colonial movements in the Caribbean due to lack of recompense for their service by the British colonial government and cementation of the U.S. as an Imperial power across both North and South America. All four of these parts work together to illustrate the importance that the war played on shaping the ideas colonialism of the various European empires. Besides previous works dealing with more specific views of the various topics, the majority of primary sources used in this work were government and military reports. This means that government and military archives would be very important in gathering information regarding the ways in which the empires affected the Great War and vice versa.<sup>4</sup>

Ruth Ginio argues that the preconceived notions regarding Africa that the French and many other Europeans had can be dated back to the period of the Enlightenment. She points to the works of several enlightenment thinkers, such as Voltaire, in order to illustrate what the view of Africa and Africans were at the time. Overall, European views on Africa were negative, to them

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew Tait Jarboe and Richard Standish Fogarty, *Empires In World War I: Shifting Frontiers and Imperial Dynamics In a Global Conflict*. (London: I.B. Tauris), 222-228.

it was a violent continent full of backwards people. These views would continue to grow and be bolstered by new white supremacist ideas such as scientific racism. These views would eventually be used to justify colonialism in Africa. Ginio continues to argue that views stemming from the racist position of being violent savages would both contribute to the creation of the French colonial army but also to propaganda used against it. Like previous works, Ginio demonstrates that the French colonial government believed that certain races were more war-like than others. These beliefs regarding fundamental differences in peoples due to race, along with the need to fight colonial wars, effectively led to the recruitment of local troops in French colonial armies.<sup>5</sup> Ginio puts forth that due to the view that the French colonial project was a “civilizing mission”, French views of their African colonial subjects changed as well. No longer were they savages, but instead “grown children” who needed guidance and education to reach civilization. Ginio, through the evidence of French governmental records, shows that this was how the recruitment of colonial subjects to the French army was framed. Therefore, Ginio argues that the French view of Africans as excellent shock troops stems from the older imperial perception of Africans as savages. Other countries, specifically Germany, had not moved past that view, and instead relied on those old racist tropes to act as propaganda during the military occupation of Germany after the war. France in turn tried to combat these views, but was unsuccessful in doing so. This fact illustrates that the older view of African soldiers had not died, and that the French were slightly different in how their view of colonial African troops had developed.

Joe Lunn, through his article “Les Races Guerrieres!: Racial Preconceptions in the French Military about West African Soldiers during the First World War,” argues that French

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<sup>5</sup> Ruth Ginio, "French Officers, African Officers, and the Violent Image of African Colonial Soldiers," *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 36, no. 2 (2010): 63-66.

notions of some races being more “warrior-like” than others had real consequences in the casualties experienced by the colonial French troops during the First World War. Lunn begins by emphasizing the belief held by many of the French military officials at the time that certain races were more apt at fighting than others. Lunn recognizes that these views stem from earlier ideas of races being more violent and savage. Over time, these ideas, bolstered by scientific racism, would meld with the republican ideas of the French Empire to form a paradoxical mission of colonization. The French would come to see their colonization efforts as a mission of civilizing their African subjects, who in time could become like the French. This argument was in fact used by supporters of the creation of a colonial army to justify the conscription of African troops. However, the cloud of scientific racism would continue to hang over this new view of the purpose of French colonialism, in the form of the idea of the “warrior-race”. Certain groups of people would be targeted for conscription since it was believed that they were more likely to do well in war. Lunn argues that this essentially led to West African troops being placed in very dangerous and difficult combat situations. To justify the existence of the belief in “warrior races” Lunn points to the writing of colonial governors who espoused such beliefs.<sup>6</sup> To illustrate how these beliefs had real effects on the battlefield, Lunn analyzes the deployment methods for the black battalions, which were often placed in front of white battalions. Therefore, the West African troops, believed to be “warrior race” troops, were more likely to receive the worst of the fighting since they were the front line, but it was justified as it was believed that they would fight with unwavering ferocity. What this article does extremely well is illustrate how beliefs and

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<sup>6</sup>Joe Lunn, "'Les Races Guerrieres': Racial Preconceptions in the French Military about West African Soldiers during the First World War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 34, no. 4 (1999): 528-529.

preconceived notions about colonial troops can have real world consequences on their use in the army.

In another one of his writings, Lunn addresses other three main topics, those being the policy of the French government for the deployment of colonial African soldiers in the French metropole, the character of the interactions between Senegalese soldiers and the French public, and the ways in which French perception of West Africans changed due to their deployment on the front. While Senegalese soldiers were often praised at their arrival, many fears based in racism lingered within the French government and military. Lunn notes that the camps at which Senegalese and other colonial African soldiers were based when not at the front were often purposefully isolated. When deployed, black soldiers almost always served under white officers. These facts, Lunn argues, was a result of the racism that existed within the French military and within the colonial system. The camps also tended to be segregated, meaning it would be very rare to have white soldiers training in proximity to black soldiers. The interactions between Senegalese soldiers and the French public was highly limited and, when they did occur, were with the intention to chiefly show the power of the French colonial soldiers in their fight for France.<sup>7</sup> However, interactions between black soldiers and French civilians increased when they were wounded in battle and were cared for in military hospitals. Lunn also argues that the French perception of West Africans changed, mostly due to the fact that this was the first time that such meaningful interaction could take place. Lunn states that there was a general feeling of sympathy in the French metropole towards the Senegalese soldiers. Where meaningful connections were made, long lasting friendships could be made between French and Senegalese soldiers, as evidence by personal accounts cited by Lunn. Overall, Lunn argues that while interaction

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<sup>7</sup> Joe Lunn, "'Bons Soldats' and 'sales Nègres': Changing French Perceptions of West African Soldiers during the First World War," *French Colonial History* 1 (2002): 8-10.

between the French population and the Senegalese soldiers was limited, the interaction that did occur caused positive views to grow towards West African soldiers.

Historian William Dean focus on the interaction between Moroccan subjects in the empire and their colonial overlords, as well as their perception of their North African subjects. Dean argues that because the French army was composed of several diversely trained forces, they were able to be very effective in both the suppressing of tribal rebellions in Morocco and the trench warfare of the Great War. Dean also argues that fighting in Morocco could almost be viewed as a training ground for troops, allowing those battalions involved to be better prepared for the war on the European continent. Lastly, Dean argues that the balance between preserving colonial order and rule in Morocco and having enough troops to fight on the Western front tended to lean in favor of having more troops fighting in France, suggesting that the French government placed a much higher importance on defending the metropole as opposed to preserving the colonial empire.<sup>8</sup> Dean draws on several examples to support his arguments. Through various internal military documents, Dean argues that the combination of fairly mobile units of both Native Moroccan and Native French soldier in the colonial wars was significantly effective in suppressing rebellions if they had sufficient numbers of troops.

By citing the colonial government of Morocco at the time, Dean also shows that the French government believed that the Moroccan troops would perform well in the Western Front in Europe, which other military records demonstrated that they did. Lastly, Dean illustrates through his collection of government correspondences that the French government was quick to request the troops fighting in Morocco to return to France to fight Germany. Even when there

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<sup>8</sup> William Dean, "Strategic Dilemmas of Colonization: France and Morocco during the Great War," *The Historian* 73, no. 4 (2011): 740-41.

were issues of rebellion within the colony, the French government believed it more important to put forth the maximum amount of resources possible for the defense of the metropole. This document is very useful in that it highlights the racial hierarchy that was often accepted within the French military command. The French generals believed that the Moroccans were a “warrior race”, and would therefore make the best fighters.<sup>9</sup> While, the Moroccan units did fight well, they did not do so because of some innate ability to do so, but instead had been accustomed to it due to the colonial wars already occurring in Morocco. Therefore, Dean illustrates the scientific racism often accepted as fact by the French army, which in turn greatly affected how they treated their soldiers.

Andrew and Kanya-Forstner argue that the First World War was a turning point in how the French Government viewed their colonies. The authors claim that before 1914, very little thought had been given to the use of French African colonies as pools of both natural resources and manpower. While the “tirailleurs senegalais” had seen successful action in the largely unsuccessful Franco-Prussian war, little had been done to build off the success the Second Empire had with colonial soldiers. Andrew and Kanya-Forstner suggest that it wasn’t until the heavy losses of French soldiers on the Western Front at the start of the war that intense attention was placed on the large-scale recruitment of colonial subjects to fight on the front. As evidenced through military high command correspondences, there were some conflicts regarding the efficacy of the *force noire*, as views of racial hierarchy tainted objective understandings of why under-trained West African troops might fare badly during the harsh European winters.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Dean, "Strategic Dilemmas of Colonization," 745.

<sup>10</sup> C. M Andrew and A. S. Kanya-Forstner, "France, Africa, and the First World War." *The Journal of African History* 19, no. 1 (1978): 14-17

However, Andrew and Kanya-Forstner illustrate through the writing of Prime Minister Clemenceau that regardless of complaints regarding the African Colonial Troops, recruitment would continue in order to hold out as long as needed against the German offensives. What is interesting to mention, and is highlighted in the article, is that Clemenceau was not concerned with the possibility of a revolt in the colonies due to increased recruitment, as he considered France's need for troops more important. Andrew and Kanya-Forstner show that the conscriptions of these colonial troops led to many political consequences, such as the possibility of gaining French citizenship through service. Andrew and Kanya-Forstner also argue that the outbreak of war led to a greater economic involvement of France with her colonies. Before the war most of the trade between France and its colonial empire occurred in Algeria. This changed with shortages in food supply which forced greater trade across the empire, especially with West Africa.<sup>11</sup> Overall, Andrew and Kanya-Forstner effectively argue that the First World War was a time of great change regarding how the French government viewed its colonial holdings. Through various internal government documents, it is demonstrated that the lands originally neglected by the French government came to be viewed as pools of limitless resources and manpower.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 20.

## Fighting for the French Empire before 1910

It is important to be aware of the historical context of the French colonial army in order to better understand its creation and its mission. Even before the First World, France had made use of its colonial subjects as soldiers. Mostly this was done during colonial expeditions, as native troops were better accustomed to the environment where they were fighting and lessened the need to transport troops from metropolitan France. While not part of the official army of France, various colonial subjects and allies would play an important role in the conquering and holding of colonial territories. French colonial troops would even see action, albeit limited, in the Franco-Prussian war of the 1870s. However, while there was a history of the use of colonial troops in a military fashion, there was no larger army tradition or structure that allowed for the enlistment of colonial troops in the regular French army.<sup>12</sup>

This would change right before the First World War, as new ideas would come into play regarding the uses of the French colonies in warfare. Certain military officials, such as then lieutenant-colonel Mangin, would suggest that the populations of the French colonies could be enlisted in the regular army, giving France a powerful strategic advantage over its rivals. This enlistment of indigenous colonial peoples would also serve to further the “civilizing mission” used to justify French colonialism. What this leads to is an interesting combination of French republicanism and colonial theory grounded in white supremacy. This is further expressed in Colonel Mangin’s *la Force Noire*, which brings these two conflicting views together into a somewhat cohesive view on French colonial subjects.

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<sup>12</sup> Andrew and Kanya-Forstner. “France Africa and the First World War,” 12-13.

## ***La Force Noire; Mangin's Manifesto***

Published in 1910, then Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Mangin's book *La Force Noire* (translated to *The Black Force*) covers a large variety of topics. However, its main purpose was to argue for the creation of a French colonial army composed of non-white soldiers. This army would not only be used within the colonies themselves, but also in the case of a future European war on the continent. This idea to create a standing army from colonial subjects to fight in European wars was a revolutionary idea at the time. The ways in which Mangin imagines this colonial army and the assumptions he makes illustrate French understanding of race at the time, and reveal some of the major contradictions that plague both the French Empire and the French Colonial Army

Mangin's book is divided into four larger sections, with each being subdivided in chapters. He begins his first section of the book by discussing the population of the metropole of France. He compared various types of data, including population and marriage data, in order to argue that while the French population was growing, it would not be sufficient to field enough soldiers for the next war in Europe. He argued that France needed an increased birth rate, promoting laws that would encourage having multiple children. His next focus was on the armies of Europe, stressing the important aspect of numerical superiority. In this chapter he begins to discuss the use of Black African and Algerian soldiers to gain such an advantage.<sup>13</sup>

The next major section of his writing discusses the history of the use of black people and people of color as soldiers in war, beginning with Ancient Egypt. He goes on to talk about how the various Arab empires made use of black regiments. In the next chapter he brings forth more modern examples of African soldiers, including the Haitian revolution and the Black regiment

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<sup>13</sup> Charles Mangin, *La Force Noire* (Paris: Librairie Hachette et C<sup>ie</sup>, 1910), 68-69.

used by the Union in the American Civil War. This section reveals the scientific racism accepted as fact at the time of publication with statements such as “Arabs are the most ungovernable of all races.” This section also illustrates the scientific racist view that black Africans made good soldiers because they were inherently adapted to warfare, a “warrior race.”<sup>14</sup> Through his claims and his “historical” study of the use of black soldiers, Mangin wanted to illustrate that Africans were capable of being extremely good soldier, which went against the prevailing view of Africans as inferior in all ways to whites. In essence, Mangin dismisses some racist claims and held up others in order to make it seem that recruiting African subjects would lead to a powerful fighting force.<sup>15</sup>

At the end of this section, he discusses other ways in which black soldiers would be a benefit to the French republic, again citing scientific racist view of Africans as more tenacious fighters. However, he also discusses how their colonial subjects will be loyal to France, going as far as to say that “It is a real French army we have in the Senegalese Tirailleurs (soldiers). . .” Comments like these give a slim vision of equality, as Mangin is able to see to a certain extent a “Frenchness” in African soldiers, even if it is just in their military capabilities. Mangin finishes his book by saying that the African colonies are an untapped pool of manpower, another resource of the colonies to exploit for France. However, the numbers he gives for conscriptable men for the colonial empire are way overinflated.<sup>16</sup>

Mangin’s *La Force Noire*, illustrates how the French colonial army was created both as a way to exploit another resource of the French colonies, manpower, but also as way to further the

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<sup>14</sup> Mangin, *La Force Noire*, 111-113.

<sup>15</sup> Joe Lunn, "Remembering the "Tirailleurs Sénégalais" and the Great War: Oral History as a Methodology of Inclusion in French Colonial Studies," *French Colonial History* 10 (2009): 126-127, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41935196>.

<sup>16</sup> Mangin, *La Force Noire*, 245-249.

civilizing mission of France. The colonial forces were based in both the ideas of scientific racism and the belief that people of color could become just as good soldiers as the white Frenchmen of the metropole. This contradiction, present in Mangin's inception of the colonial army, would continue to be present as the army was finally formed in the First World War.

### **Assembling an Army**

While Mangin argued vehemently for the creation of his colonial army, he wasn't incredibly successful until several years after publication. Soon to be Senegalese Deputy Blaise Diagne supported the creation of the colonial army, as he viewed the institution as a way for colonial subjects to gain equality with white Frenchman. This fits into the traditional French archetype of the citizen-soldier, where by fighting for France one guarantees their citizenship in the Republic. This view also fits with Mangin's argument of the army acting as an agent of France's "civilizing" mission to Africa, another "benefit" besides increased manpower. Either way, to certain members of the black French colonial elite, the colonial army would be a way to gain privileges denied to most colonial subjects due to the institutionalized racism of the French colonial system.<sup>17</sup>

However, for this exact reason, many of the French colonial administrators and governors were in opposition to Mangin's plan. By allowing colonial subjects to bypass the institutionalized racism that held up the French colonial order through service in the army, the colonial force could cause the collapse of the entire colonial system heavily based on white supremacy. The domination of the French over their colonial subjects would also be brought into question if true equality was achieved. There were other reasons for opposing the colonial army

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<sup>17</sup> Joe Lunn, *Memoirs of the Maelstrom: A Senegalese Oral History of the First World War* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1999), 68-71.

as well, mostly revolving around how it would threaten the established colonial order.<sup>18</sup> The new force would require the conscription of many colonial subjects, which would not always join their overlords ranks so easily. This plan for a colonial army would also lead to the training and arming of non-white colonial troops, which was thought to be dangerous by the colonial elites as it made rebellion easier in their eyes. Lastly, designating colonial troops for use during European wars would mean a lack of troops within the colonies themselves during war.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, colony administrators believed they would have a lesser ability to maintain order within their lands, as they would be down on troops. Overall, most of the concerns came from the French colonial elite, who saw the creation of a large non-white colonial army as a threat to the colonial order on which they relied.

Though some small units were mobilized before 1914, the idea of a grand colonial army didn't gain much traction until the outbreak of World War One. With the front solidified and the transition to total war, the idea of an untapped pool of manpower became very attractive. Campaigns grew in size within the French African colonies. Realizing that the war would not be over by Christmas, recruitment drives were increased even more in 1915, supported as well by Blaise Diagne. By then, Magin's project of a French colonial army was realized.

### **Black Soldiers and White Officers**

The paradox of racism and acceptance present in Magin's original plan for a force made up of colonial subjects would continue to exist in the organization of the army itself. While the army was seen as a meritocratic institution where anyone could rise up as a citizen soldier, there

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<sup>18</sup> Roland André, *Les Indigènes: Armée D'Afrique et Troupes Coloniales À Pied en 1914* (Tours: Editions Sutton, 2015), 18-23.

<sup>19</sup> Eugene Rogan, "No Stake in Victory: North African Soldiers of the Great War," *Studies In Ethnicity & Nationalism* 14, no. 2 (2014): 323-334. Accessed November 21, 2017. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost.

were obvious barriers for non-white soldiers. Almost all regiments of colonial troops were led by white French officers, regardless if there were better or more experienced colonial soldiers who could take their place. Race therefore trumped meritocracy. Scientific racism permeated into military strategy, as the supposed “warrior race” qualities of colonial troops made them better suited for close quarters and intense combat. Therefore, non-white regiments tended to be used as shock troops due to these racialized beliefs held by the French military.<sup>20</sup> Colonial soldiers were sometimes kept in separate camps from their white soldiers, and while they could interact with the general French metropole populace, their interaction with civilians was often kept under tough scrutiny by their superiors. Another issue was the use of the French language, which was heavily enforced for both logistical reasons and as part of France’s civilizing mission to its colonies.<sup>21</sup>

While these racist elements of the French colonial army definitely characterized the institution and were a major part of its organization, the army did provide a conduit in which non-white soldiers could achieve certain elements of equality with their white compatriots. Military honors and recognitions were not withheld from colonial soldiers. While not usually awarded with promotion up the military hierarchy, military medallions for valor and bravery in the fields of battle were given to colonial non-white soldiers. Non-white soldiers also fought in the same battles as white French soldiers, often serving in mixed regiments.<sup>22</sup> This would contrast greatly with how the American commanding officers would treat their non-white soldiers, relegating them to logistical work behind the frontlines and separating them entirely

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<sup>20</sup> D. van Galen, Ralf Futselaar, and Marjolijn De Jager, *Black Shame: African Soldiers In Europe, 1914-1922* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 75-77.

<sup>21</sup> Julian Walker and Christophe Declercq, *Languages and the First World War: Communicating In a Transnational War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 44-47.

<sup>22</sup> Mathieu Méranville and Serge Bilé, *Poilus Nègres: Soldats Créoles et Africains en 14/18*. (Achères: DAGAN Document, 2014), 68-70.

from white regiments. For the French, colonial troops fought, died, and were buried alongside white soldiers on the frontlines and in the trenches of the Great War. In the one instance of battle, non-white colonial soldiers had achieved an equality with white French metropole citizens. However, the institutional racism which governed the French colonial army would continue to keep true equality with white soldiers out of reach.

### ***Circulaire Linard; Differences in Understanding of Race between America and France***

While the French colonial army was embedded in the ideals of scientific racism and the civilizing mission used to justify colonialism, it was actually quite progressive in the elements of equality given to non-white troops when compared to the way in which the American expeditionary force dealt with its black soldiers. Black soldiers, when under American command, rarely if ever saw combat. They were relegated to labor intensive supply work, acting solely as a source of manual labor. The few regiments that did see combat were under French command, which illustrates the difference between how the French and American military valued non-white people as soldiers.<sup>23</sup> African-American troops under French command received roughly equivalent treatment to that of France's colonial troops.

This difference in how race was approached by the French and American militaries is best seen through the infamous "Circulaire Linard". This document, reflecting the view of the American Expeditionary force leadership, was a French internal military memo to the commanding officers essentially asking the French to discriminate more against black American soldiers under their command. The document espoused many racist views commonly held by white Americans, such as the idea that black Americans were more prone to vice and that they were a threat to the safety of white Americans within the republic. The document had three main

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<sup>23</sup> Arthur E Barbeau and Florette Henri, *The Unknown Soldiers: African-American Troops In World War I*. 1st Da Capo Press ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996), 89-92.

requests. The first being to not treat black officers as equals to white ones, by doing things such as eating with them, shaking their hands, or by meeting with them outside of military requirements. The second was to not commend the troops too highly, especially in the presence of white Americans. The last was to limit interaction between black Americans and white French citizens, especially white women.<sup>24</sup> These requests criticize all the ways in which the French army provided some sort of equality between white and non-white troops. Americans saw this limited equality as a threat to their social order, a similar complaint to those of the administrators of the French colonies. Nevertheless, this document highlights the great difference in which race was dealt with between the American and French armies. Fortunately, very little evidence exists to show that the French caved in to the requests of the “Circulaire”, and the copies being distributed among the French military were systematically destroyed.<sup>25 26</sup>

### **Remembrance after the War**

The story of colonial soldiers does not end in 1918. After the war, many monuments and mausoleums were constructed in honor of those who served in the Great War. The Grand Mosque of Paris was constructed in part as a way of displaying gratitude for the Muslim Tirailleurs, Zouaves, Spahis and Goumiers who had given their life in defense of France. In 1924 a monument dedicated specifically to the colonial soldiers of France “Aux Heros de l’Armee Noire” was inaugurated in the city of Reims, where the regiments were placed right on the frontline for most of the war. Dedicated to the colonial soldiers who defended the city against multiple German attacks, the monument featured four African soldiers and a white officer.

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<sup>24</sup> Jean-Louis Albert Linard, “Circulaire Linard.” Intra-military memo (French Army, 1918).

<sup>25</sup> Chad Louis Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers In World War I Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 160-161.

<sup>26</sup> Santanu Das, *Race, Empire and First World War Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). 286-287.

Simultaneously, an identical monument was erected and still exists in front of Bamako's station in the then Afrique Occidentale colony, today's Mali. Both of these monuments illustrate that to the French, the colonial soldiers who fought in the war were important aspects of the war that needed to be remembered. It should be noted that during the occupation of France during the Second World War, the monument in Reims was immediately removed in 1940 and destroyed by Nazi forces, such a tribute being viewed as a threat to the white-aryan supremacy that made the basis of Nazi ideology. However, in the 1960s, the monument was reconstructed as a simple obelisk, once again honoring the colonial soldiers who fought for the defense of the city of Reims. In 2013 a historical replica of the original bronze monument was erected in a nearby city park (page 24).

## **Conclusion and Avenues of Further Study**

The French colonial army, both as imagined by Mangin and as it was implemented during the First World War, was marred by contradictions. Born out of both colonialist ideals and scientific racist ideas, the colonial army became a place wherein non-white soldier could reach some level of equality with white French metropole soldiers. While this equality across racial lines was very limited, it was nonetheless quite progressive for the time, especially compared with the hardline segregationist views then held by the American Army as exposed in the “Circulaire Linard”. Through the monuments erected in honor of the colonial soldiers who fought and died for France during the war, it can be seen that they left an important mark on the cultural history of the First World War in France.

While this paper focused on the way in which colonial troops factored into the understanding of race by the French army, it would be also worthwhile to study how fighting against non-white troops was viewed and interpreted by the Germans during the Great War. This was the first time non-white soldiers were used en-masse against a white opponent in an European war. How did the Germany and other members of the Triple alliance conceptualize this challenge to their own brand of white supremacy? It would also be important to investigate whether there were interactions between non-white French colonial troops and black American troops, and if there were, to see if they ever found common ground as both were subjected to different systems of white supremacy.

**8-10 octobre 1915, Choisy au Bac, Aisne, France**

« ..nous croisons des régiments de toutes sortes infanterie, artillerie, cavalerie plutôt des africains qu'autre chose..

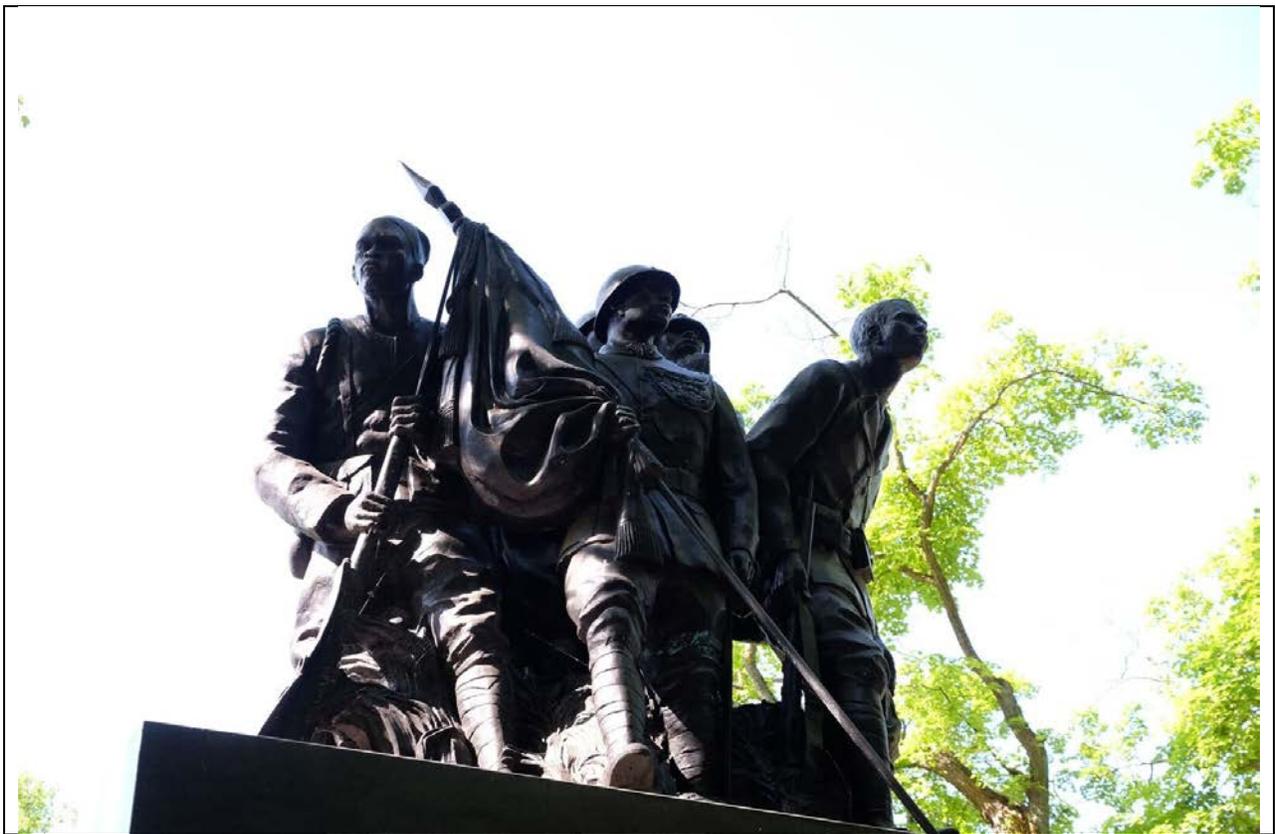
...un cimetière nouveau renferme les tombes de spahis, tirailleurs, alpins et quelques Boches.. »

**English Translation of Excerpt**

**8-10 October 1915, Choisy au Bac. Aisne, France**

“We come across regiments of all sorts; infantry, artillery, cavalry. Mainly Africans  
...a new cemetery includes the tombs of spahis [North African], tirailleurs [Senegalese],  
chasseurs alpins [White French], and some Boches [German]...”

- Charles Desire Brasseur



Reconstructed 2013 monument to the Colonial African troops who defended Reims  
(personal photo)

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