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# The Legacy of African Veterans of World War II and Their Role in the Independence Movements of the Mid-Century

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**ABSTRACT:** Throughout the First and Second World Wars, armies of African soldiers fought in defense of European interests, while being relegated to colonial status and making very little progress toward gaining independence of their own. The focus of this article is Léopold Senghor, the first president of independent Senegal, and the profound impact he had as a war veteran and member of the *Tirailleurs Sénégalais* (Senegalese Skirmishers) on independence movements in French West Africa. This essay will then examine the origins of post-war independence movements, the role that veterans like Senghor played in these movements, and the means by which they broke free from France. This essay builds on the work of historians Frederick Cooper, Myron Echenberg, Gregory Mann, Nancy Lawler, and others to paint a more comprehensive picture of veteran participation in independence, while using Léopold Senghor as a constant thread to help explain why veterans who had reason to remain loyal to the French colonial empire decided to break free from it.

**KEYWORDS:** Léopold Senghor, Africa, Senegal, France, World War II, decolonization, colonialism

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**CASE STUDY: LÉOPOLD SÉDAR SENGHOR**

A veteran of the French Colonial army<sup>1</sup>, a prisoner-of-war (POW), and a widely influential intellectual, poet, and philosopher, Léopold Sédar Senghor embodies the decolonization of French West Africa. Senghor's contributions to the winning of independence are perceptible in many different ways, ranging from the unifying philosophy of *Négritude*, of which he was a founder, to his political activism after the Second World War, culminating in his election on September 5, 1960 as the first President of independent Senegal.

The philosophy of *Négritude* was a literary and philosophical movement that promoted the idea of a common black identity and heritage, defined by Senghor as “Negro–African cultural values.” This philosophy was a response to the colonial racism and racial science of the period and was critically important to independence movements in French West Africa, as it helped unify black Africans under a common identity that later fermented into ideas of nationalism.

Léopold Senghor was called into service by France in April 1940 and pressed into active duty with the increasing French fear of Nazi activity in Denmark and Norway.<sup>2</sup> Senghor's time on active duty was relatively brief, as he was captured in May of 1940, shortly after being deployed to France,<sup>3</sup> but there were two occurrences during his time as a POW that would prove important for his philosophy of independence and future political leadership. First, Senghor had time to reconnect with African peasants who had also been taken as POWs, allowing him the opportunity to understand their opinions on French colonialism and living under France.<sup>4</sup> Second, as Senghor began contemplating the nature of the relationship between France and her African colonies, he wrote collections of poems, *Hosties noires*, focusing on the commitment of African soldiers to the French war effort.<sup>5</sup> Senghor's experiences during the Second World War dramatically changed his world outlook in a way that would affect his philosophies on independence from France. As a black African POW, Senghor experienced Nazi racism and all of the horrors that accompanied it, yet he later claimed that during this time, he became “cured of racism”<sup>6</sup> after seeing the profoundly negative effects that it had on European society.

Senghor explains his “cure” in this discussion of the evolution of *Négritude*:

Our distrust of European values quickly turned into disdain – why hide it – of racism. We thought – and we said – that we Negroes were the salt of the earth, that we were the bearers of an unheard of message – and that no other race could offer it but us. Unconsciously, by osmosis and reaction at the same time, we spoke like Hitler and the Colonialists, we advocated the virtues of the blood.<sup>7</sup>

Senghor then took this understanding of the negativity of racism and applied it to his vision of West African independence, realizing that independence for Africa would not come solely from black Africans. Specifically, Senghor believed that in order to be successful on the national level, Africans needed to “assimilate, not be assimilated,”<sup>8</sup> and had to incorporate aspects of European life into an independent African culture if they were to gain independence.

In addition to the time of introspection and lessons learned during his time as a POW, Senghor experienced another defining moment in 1944 that precipitated feelings of outrage amongst the black population of Senegal: the Thiaroye Massacre of December 1, 1944.<sup>9</sup> In this incident, which occurred in a demobilization camp at Thiaroye, Senegal, in which at least twenty-four Africans were killed, eleven were wounded, and thirty four were detained while waiting to receive back pay that was owed to them during their time as POWs.<sup>10</sup> The incident occurred when colonial soldiers protested France's refusal to pay them for their duty, and resulted in the massacre of African veterans of the French army, a massacre carried out by French soldiers. This incident had a profound impact on Senghor, who expressed strong feelings of anger and disillusionment with the colonial system in his poem *Tyaroye*, stating: “is it thus true that France is no longer France,”<sup>11</sup> and “did not your blood wash away the country that forgot yesterday's mission? / Say, was not your blood mixed with the blood of its martyrs?”<sup>12</sup> The sentiments expressed in this poem demonstrate the disconnect that Senghor personally felt with France after the Thiaroye massacre and question where the French loyalty was to the soldiers who were returning home from fighting on behalf of France. *Tyaroye* ends with Senghor stating “No, you did not die for no reason, you are the witness of immortal Africa, / you are the witness of the new world that will be tomorrow,”<sup>13</sup> clearly demonstrating that he sought change in the treatment of Africans by the French

colonial government.

Less than a year after Thiaroye, on October 21, 1945, Léopold Sédar Senghor began his career in politics with his election to the Constituent Assembly of the French Provisional Government as a member of the Socialist party. Upon beginning his political career, Senghor sought to achieve individual equality between black African colonials and white French citizens, as well as an expansion of autonomy for the colonies. At this stage, Senghor associated independence with violence, which he desperately sought to avoid.<sup>14</sup> As such, his goal at this time was not to achieve independence for Senegal or the French West African colonies; instead, his goal was civil or legal equality among all French people. Senghor ran on a platform in favor of “one sole category of Frenchmen having exactly the same rights in as much as all are subject to the same duties.”<sup>15</sup> In fact, advancing equality between Africans in French West Africa and French citizens had been a priority for Senghor even prior to his election to public office. This is evidenced in a 1943 essay written by Senghor, entitled *Views on Black Africa, or to Assimilate, Not be Assimilated*, in which he explained that Africans must actively assimilate French culture and use it to their advantage, but should also be recognized by France for their own cultural and artistic achievements.<sup>16</sup> Most importantly, this essay proposed a restructuring of the political relationship between metropolitan France and its African colonies, wherein the entities would interact more like a capital and province, yielding a greater level self-determination for the colonies, but still maintaining French authority, or as Senghor himself stated: the proposed change would be “far from weakening the authority of metropolitan France, it could only reinforce it because it would be based on the consent of free men.”<sup>17</sup>

As members of the Constituent Assembly, Senghor and the other overseas deputies made a concerted effort to enact laws that followed the ideas presented at the Brazzaville conference of January 1944, including the abolition of the *indigénat* and forced labor in the colonies, as well as ratifying the Lamine Guèye Law, which finally granted French citizenship to all people living in the French Union.<sup>18</sup> These provisions were granted to the colonies as a show of gratitude on behalf of France<sup>19</sup> and played a great role in reducing the disparity between French citizens and African subjects. However, Senghor was angered with the constitutional committee, of which he was an appointed member, when his proposed draft of the constitution was voted down. His draft would

have “created a French Union based on equality and free consent, allowed for African representation in the French National Assembly as well as in a consultative Council of the French Union, and established local territorial assemblies in black Africa.”<sup>20</sup> After this setback in August of 1946, an angry Senghor stated:

We do not wish any longer to be subjects nor to submit to a regime of occupation ... while waiting for complete independence, we advocate as a solution federation in the context of the French Union ... I would like in conclusion to assure the whites of our unshakable will to win our independence and that it would be stupid as well as dangerous for them to wish to make the clock march backwards. We are ready, if necessary as a last resort, to conquer liberty by any means, even violent ones.<sup>21</sup>

At this moment, Senghor demonstrated his frustration with the French government for its irreverent attempt to subjugate the African people who had fought in defense of France in World War II. These actions by the French government, and the lack of appreciation for African sacrifices in the name of France, drove Senghor away from his initial philosophy of “to assimilate, not be assimilated” while maintaining a federal relationship with France, toward a more complete and independent break from France. This paradigm shift was thus a critical moment in the history of West African independence.

In late 1948, after becoming frustrated with the way the Socialist party (SFIO) conducted itself, Senghor broke away from the SFIO and created a new party called *The Bloc Démocratique Sénégalais* (BDS).<sup>22</sup> In the years following his break from the SFIO, Senghor invited members of the four main Senegalese political parties to form a single party under the BDS, and was able to incorporate parts of the old socialist party into the new party.<sup>23</sup> The new *Union Progressiste Sénégalais* (UPS), as the party was called, was formed in the spring of 1958 and emboldened Senghor toward a militant approach to independence. Then, unexpectedly, Senghor was granted an opportunity to seek independence in 1958 when the outbreak of the Algerian War led to the collapse of the Fourth Republic in France.<sup>25</sup> As Senghor’s biographer Louis Hymans states, the collapse of the Fourth Republic marked Senghor’s shift away from autonomy within a Federal Republic and towards an independent state within a multinational confederation.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, despite Senghor’s shift toward independence, on September 28,

1958, when a referendum was held to determine whether or not the African colonies would remain members of the French Union, Senghor had to back away from his calls for independence, and vote to remain in the Union for fear of the economic repercussion that would follow immediate independence.<sup>27</sup> This strategic vote against Senegalese independence by Senghor was not, however, a reversal of opinion, but simply a realization that immediate independence from France would produce adverse economic consequences, as France would likely demand repayment of all outstanding loans and debts on behalf of the colonies, a move that would have financially ruined a newly independent country, as occurred in Guinea, which experienced a withdrawal of French money, records, and even medicine, when Guinea voted to become independent.<sup>28</sup> While Guinea's Sekou Touré declared "we prefer poverty in liberty to riches in slavery,"<sup>29</sup> Senghor remained consistently cautious as he had throughout his career, and continued to take a more pragmatic and moderate approach, seeking independence for a federated West Africa, while maintaining a friendly relationship with France, unlike Guinea.<sup>30</sup>

Senghor, along with delegations from Dahomey, Upper Volta, and French Sudan met to draft a constitution in April of 1959 for a federation of the countries under one state, which Senghor proposed should be named Mali.<sup>31</sup> The newly formed Mali Federation then formally requested independence from France on September 22, 1959. Charles de Gaulle, preferring to deliver his answer to Mali's response in person, flew to Dakar in December of 1959 and delivered the message that France was prepared to grant Mali's request, stating that Mali would be granted sovereignty with the "support, help, and agreement of France." Attaining independence for the Mali Federation was a landmark achievement for Senghor and the delegates of the nations of Mali, as it signaled the beginning of the end of French rule across West Africa. Even though the Mali Federation crumbled shortly after winning independence, Léopold Sédar Senghor had been able to lead the countries into a new era of self-determination, free from the colonial status that West Africa had been relegated to for over a century. After the dissipation of the Mali Federation, Senegal drafted a new constitution that established a separate, independent state, led by Senghor, who was elected as the first President of independent Senegal in September 1960.

Senghor thus presents something of an incongruity with the racial dynamic of the time. While racism was ingrained

in colonial African culture and was present in Western society backed by the pseudoscience of eugenics, black Africans like Senghor were sometimes able to advance in society and were able to earn an education and become politically active. Herein lays the complexity of the subject of race in the French West African colonies. Senghor was a Paris-educated man who became a *Tirailleur*, fought in the Second World War, and entered the post-war anti-colonial political environment. However, despite his education, Senghor was not immune to racism as he was denied the commission that a person with his academic degree should have been given during his military time. Yet, Senghor was able to get an education and engrain himself in the world of French academia as a poet and philosopher. This gave him a firm footing for later political involvement, after returning from war. Senghor was able to use his academic standing to propose ideas and gain influence with white French politicians such as Robert Delavignette. The influence Senghor gained through these connections was crucial to him eventually becoming an elected official in a system that did not wholly support black Africans.

## CONCLUSION

The impact of colonial African veterans of World War II was evident and important to the winning of independence across French West Africa. After contributing heavily to the French War effort, dealing with racism at home and in the army, and being either denied or offered substantially smaller pensions than their white counterparts, many African veterans were driven away from the empire. But, the impact of Senghor during this period is especially important, as he was a veteran, politician, and founder of the influential nationalistic philosophy of negritude. The impact of Senghor was palpable in many ways and is important to acknowledge when trying to understand this period in African history.

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**FOOTNOTES**

1. The French Colonial army formed in 1857 composed of black African soldiers recruited from French West African territories, including Senegal.
2. Janet Vaillant, *Black, French, and African: A Life of Léopold Sédar Senghor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 167.
3. Ibid, p. 167.
4. Jacques Louis Hymans, *Léopold Sédar Senghor* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1971), p. 111.
5. Vaillant, *Life of Léopold Senghor*, p. 171.
6. Ibid, p. 175.
7. Léopold Senghor, quoted in Hymans, *Léopold Senghor*, p. 71.
8. Vaillant, *Life of Léopold Senghor*, p. 176.
9. Ibid, p. 173.
10. Ibid, p. 173.
11. Léopold Sédar Senghor, "Hosties Noires," *The Poetry of Léopold Sédar Senghor*, ed. S. Okechukwu Mezu (London: Heinemann, 1973), pp. 42-43, "Tyaroye", line 1.
12. Ibid, lines 4-5.
13. Ibid, lines 14-15.
14. Hymans, *Léopold Sédar Senghor*, p. 156.
15. Vaillant, *Life of Léopold Senghor*, p. 202.
16. Ibid, pp. 202-203.
17. Ibid, p. 203.
18. Ibid, p. 205.
19. Ibid, p. 204.
20. Ibid, p. 206.
21. Léopold Sédar Senghor, quoted in Janet Vaillant, *Black, French, and African: A Life of Léopold Sédar Senghor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 207.
22. Ibid, p. 232.
23. Ibid, p. 290.
24. Ibid, p. 290.
25. Ibid, p. 292.
26. Hymans, *Léopold Sédar Senghor*, p. 172.
27. Vaillant, *Life of Léopold Senghor*, p. 295.
28. Ibid, pp. 294-295.
29. Sekou Touré, quoted in Vaillant, p. 293.
30. Hymans, *Léopold Sédar Senghor*, p. 174.
31. Vaillant, *Life of Léopold Senghor*, p. 296.
32. Charles de Gaulle, quoted in Vaillant, p. 297.
33. Ibid, p. 299.
34. Hymans, *Léopold Sédar Senghor*, p. 109.
35. Ibid, p. 116.
36. Ibid, p. 143.