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## Fighting France: The Unsung Heroes and Forgotten Victims of Free French Africa in WWII

Elizabeth Crow  
efisher@harding.edu

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# **Fighting France: The Unsung Heroes and Forgotten Victims of Free French Africa in WWII**

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**By Elizabeth Crow**

Native African soldiers surround a truck, some looking into the camera behind them, but most escorting a white officer onto the back of the truck. This was not, however, a polite escort as General Louis Husson, the escorted, was compelled by rifle to leave the city. Brazzaville, the capital of the Congo, characterized colonial France in Africa in the early 1900s, embodying the diversity, economy, and power dynamics that stretched across the continent. In 1940, the world watched as Nazi Germany moved through Poland and then into France. Africans in Brazzaville had been reading leaflets and listening to local Free French patriots. By August 28th, the Vichy Governor General Louis Husson was expelled from the colony, sparking the fire of resistance. African non-commissioned officers possessed strong anti-German sentiment and disgust towards Nazi racism, defying orders and forcefully ousting the Vichy Governor. The photo from Archives Nationales d'Outre-mer depicts the French patriots, mostly African natives, armed and surrounding the truck in which the governor is being forced into as he is exiled from the colony.<sup>1</sup> What should be an iconic photo summarizing the fervency of the Second World War remains largely unknown.

In the summer of 1940, Marshal Philippe Pétain gave in to Nazi Germany quickly after suffering from the new evils of World War Two.<sup>2</sup> This surrender created the puppet state of Vichy France. At the same time, another power rose. French general, Charles de Gaulle, fled to London to establish Free France as a resistance force against the Nazi

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<sup>1</sup> Eric T. Jennings, *Free French Africa in World War II: The African Resistance* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, July 8, 2015), 37.

<sup>2</sup> David Ahlstrom and Linda C. Wang. "Groupthink and France's Defeat in the 1940 Campaign." *Journal of Management History* 15, no. 2 (2009): 159-177.

invasion.<sup>3</sup> General de Gaulle's forces included 17,013 African troops.<sup>4</sup> While de Gaulle's victories alongside the other Allied forces were renowned, the efforts of Free France within the African continent have lacked recognition. The focus of the global conflict of the Second World War lies on the imperial powers.<sup>5</sup> European and American casualties are listed by name, their heroic stories becoming novels and films. In the early 2000s, more historical literature was published that analyzed the influence of colonial powers.<sup>6</sup> Global systems, geographically and politically, have evolved rapidly and extremely since WWII, as Africa largely transformed from European colonies into young independent countries following the war. Thanks to new efforts from the academic community, the significance of francophone Africa within the war is recognized.

David Killingray describes in "*Fighting for Britain: African Soldiers in the Second World War*" how he was denied access to the archives when researching for his dissertation as the Congo was under a military regime at the time.<sup>7</sup> Restrictions like these due to political turmoil has been an obstacle for this area of research in the past. Recent studies have been able to navigate within more stable governments to tell the story which Eric T. Jennings describes as the "improbable/improbable French military and institutional rebirth through central Africa."<sup>8</sup> Jennings, from the University of Toronto, is a leading historian and prolific writer on French colonialism and its influence globally. With numerous English and French sources and his intense study of local archives, Jennings provides a clear and objective perspective of the French Equatorial Africa, or FEA's, role in WWII. The sources he references, such as David Killingray and Raffael Scheck, have released

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<sup>3</sup>David Ramiro Troitiño, "De Gaulle and the European communities." *Proceedings of the Institute for European Studies. Tallinn University of Technology*, no. 4 (2008), 139-152.

<sup>4</sup>Jennings, *Free French Africa in World War II*, 4.

<sup>5</sup>Judith A Byfield, et al., *Africa and World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1.

<sup>6</sup>Jennifer M. Dueck. "The Middle East and North Africa in the Imperial and Post-Colonial Historiography of France." *The Historical Journal* 50, no. 4 (2007), 935-949.

<sup>7</sup> David Killingray, *Fighting for Britain: African Soldiers in the Second World War* (Martlesham, Suffolk, United Kingdom: Boydell & Brewer, 2010), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Jennings, *Free French Africa in World War II*, 2.

recent monographs that more thoroughly dissect the role of Free French Africa in WWII. Jennings's work and inherent passion for the history of French colonies align with the pursuit of reframing and refocusing the influence of Free French Africa during WWII.

With world powers investing increasingly more in Africa, a deeper and more intentional approach to the continent's history is necessary. De Gaulle's African troops influenced the Second World War's outcome and the following global structure through their pursuit of independence from, first Vichy France, and subsequently, other imperial powers.

The after-effects of the First World War cannot go without mention. British and French colonial armies fought on the European battlefields and were sent back to their home countries after the war.<sup>9</sup> Richard S. Fogarty and David Killingray, in their article for the *Journal of Contemporary History*, claim that the average non-literate African soldier would not have identified as a "victor" in the Great War or had a strong sense of colonial identity.<sup>10</sup> African soldiers had no ownership or choice in their fight in the First World War. The second, however, would not be the same.

In June of 1940, France officially surrendered to Germany. Parliament voted for full power to be given to Marshal Philippe Pétain, creating the authoritarian regime known as the "Vichy Government".<sup>11</sup> This meant the Vichy government had control over all French colonies. The armistice moved, or "repatriated," the *tirailleurs*, the African soldiers for the French colonial army, from their deployments in Europe back to Africa once again, creating the beginning of tension and instability.<sup>12</sup> Raffael Scheck details the process and the poor

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<sup>9</sup> Gregory Mann, *Native Sons: West Africa Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 74.

<sup>10</sup> Richard S. Fogarty, David Killingray, "Demobilization in British and French Africa at the End of the First World War", *Journal of Contemporary History* 50, no.1 (January 2015), 123.

<sup>11</sup> Jackie Clarke, "Organization in Vichy France." In *France in the Age of Organization: Factory, Home and Nation from the 1920s to Vichy*, NED-New edition, 1., 128.

<sup>12</sup> John H. Morrow, "Black Africans in World War II: The Soldiers' Stories." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 632 (2010): 16

communication in his monograph, *Hitler's African Victims*.<sup>13</sup> Riots occurred throughout the fall of 1940 due to the demobilization of the *tirailleurs*.<sup>14</sup> In her chapter in *Africa and World War II*, Ruth Ginio claims that “France’s defeat led the discharged soldiers to scorn the authority of the colonial administration.”<sup>15</sup> Although French West Africa did eventually fall to Nazi Germany, the frustrations of the soldiers gained political momentum as it transformed into an anti-authoritarian movement. Most of the repatriated *tirailleurs* joined De Gaulle’s Free France, with 1,500 of them joining the Free French First Division.<sup>16</sup> The demobilized African soldiers became an unpredictable and passionate group, setting the scene for systemic change.

Motivated by the humiliation of defeat of their motherland and frustration with their own role and treatment as a colony, one other factor drove the African soldiers towards de Gaulle’s cause; the hate of Nazi Germany. The *tirailleurs* that were left to defend France faced horrific treatment and suffered tremendous loss.<sup>17</sup> Soldiers that were repatriated knew what treatment under Nazi Germany would mean, adding to the fire against Axis power in Africa. German troops treated white French prisoners of war largely in accordance with the Geneva Convention; however, black troops were victims of the racial warfare that is so closely tied to World War II.<sup>18</sup> Michael C. Mbabu and Anna Marie Evans reveal in “Other Victims of the Holocaust,” “As many German military and colonial administrators have admitted, it was the German *modus operandi* to inflict extreme torture and cruelty on Africans in the

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<sup>13</sup> Raffael Scheck, *Hitler's African Victims: the German Army Massacres of Black French Soldiers in 1940* (New York, NY: Cambridge University, 2006), 40-41.

<sup>14</sup> Mann, *Native Sons: West Africa Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century*, 115.

<sup>15</sup> Ruth Ginio, “African Soldiers, French Women, and Colonial Fears during and after World War II,” in *Africa and World War II*, ed. Judith A. Byfield (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University, 2015), 328.

<sup>16</sup> John H. Morrow, “Black Africans in World War II: The Soldiers’ Stories.” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 632 (2010): 16

<sup>17</sup> Raffael Scheck, *Hitler's African Victims: the German Army Massacres of Black French Soldiers in 1940* (New York, NY: Cambridge University, 2006), 2.

<sup>18</sup> Scheck, 3.

colonies.”<sup>19</sup> References to Nazi Germany’s state belief that African people were sub-human were used in speeches to draw native support for Free France.<sup>20</sup>

Raffael Scheck’s expertise on Nazi Germany’s racial motivations aids in the understanding of the perception of French African troops:

Members of German units involved in massacres carried with them the full baggage of racial prejudice that had built up over the past forty years and was heightened by a massive Nazi propaganda offensive during the campaign in France. They saw black soldiers as bestial, savage, and perfidious, and they described them in animalistic terms.<sup>21</sup>

The context which created such strong anti-Vichy sentiment snowballed in the fall of 1940, especially in French Congo, as a “patriotic league for freedom and honor” was formed.<sup>22</sup> Leadership quickly followed. Adolphe Felix Eboue, the colony governor of Chad and the highest-ranking black official in the French Empire stood for Free France against Pierre Boisson, the Vichyite governor-general over French Equatorial Africa.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, Edgard de Larminat’s leaflet campaign convinced literate Africans to join the cause behind Free France and de Gaulle while threatening Vichyite leaders.<sup>24</sup> Just months after the first riots, the expropriation of the Vichy government in Brazzaville took place. Petainist leadership “lit the tinder keg” in August of 1940, losing command and control of many native forces.<sup>25</sup> Governor Eboue joined Free France on August 26.<sup>26</sup> Personal conviction and a

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<sup>19</sup> Michael C. Mbabuiki and Anna Marie Evans. “Other Victims of the Holocaust.” *Dialectical Anthropology* 25, no. 1 (2000): 1–25.

<sup>20</sup> Jennings, *Free French Africa in World War II*, 31.

<sup>21</sup> Raffael Scheck, *Hitler’s African Victims: the German Army Massacres of Black French Soldiers in 1940* (New York, NY: Cambridge University, 2006), 9.

<sup>22</sup> Jennings, *Free French Africa in World War II*, 33.

<sup>23</sup> Edward L. Bimberg, *Tricolor over the Sahara: The Desert Battles of the Free French, 1940-1942*. (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, Incorporated, 2002), 23.

<sup>24</sup> Jennings, *Free French Africa in World War II*, 36.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>26</sup> Edward L. Bimberg, *Tricolor over the Sahara*, 23

taste for national independence drove the Free French movement out from under paternalistic power and revealed the weakness of Nazi Germany.

As the legitimacy of African Free France was established, global media began to lend some credibility to de Gaulle's efforts in the colonies. London's *The Times* reports on the Free French Front on September 2, 1940, that M. Henri Lemery, Minister of Colonies in the Petain Government, admits the "extensive dissidence" of the French colonies and that "the movement began, he added, at Duala in the Cameroons, and then spread to Brazzaville, in the French Congo, and then to the Chad territory of French Equatorial Africa."<sup>27</sup>

Significant changes to the colonial city were necessary as the capital became a epicenter for Allied power.<sup>28</sup> The administration felt the need to transform colonial operations within French Equatorial Africa and particularly its capital, Brazzaville, to build and maintain order.<sup>29</sup> General Edgard de Larminat became the governor of the FEA capital.<sup>30</sup> FEA and Cameroon became a solid power behind Free France, giving General de Gaulle a chance to argue for Free France's power and legitimacy. Jennings references the following:

On October 9 from Douala, General de Gaulle dispatched two telegrams, one to FEA, the other to Winston Churchill...The second, to the British Prime Minister, ran: 'On French land free from the enemy's control, I am transmitting to you and the valiant people of the British empire the ardent confidence and faithful friendship of 14 million French citizens and subjects now united with me to pursue the war on the allied side until the final victory.'<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> "Gabun Joins Free French Forces." *Times*, September 2, 1940, 4. *The Times Digital Archive* (accessed November 5, 2022).

<sup>28</sup> Jennings, *Free French Africa in World War II*, 52

<sup>29</sup> Danielle Christina Sanchez, *Free(ing) France in Colonial Brazzaville: Race, Urban Space, and the Making of Afrique Française Libre* (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 2015), 123-124.

<sup>30</sup> Edward L. Bimberg, *Tricolor over the Sahara*, 24.

<sup>31</sup> Jennings, *Free French Africa in World War II*, 45.

American journalist Ben Lucien Burman, a reporter and writer who served in both world wars, writes in 1941 in his report on Free France in *Miracle on the Congo*, “I remember that Paris is lost and that I am witnessing a miracle, the rebirth of France in the jungles of Africa.”<sup>32</sup> Burman beautifully articulates the vibrant and heroic revolution in Brazzaville, “The cause is alive with the young native men, patriotic and independent.” This insight at the start of African Free France is formed as Burman spends time in Brazzaville, gaining a more comprehensive perspective of the French colonies and their influence on the war.

Once Brazzaville found legitimacy and stability, tangible action began to take place in late 1941. In another article from London’s *The Times*, the FEA’s contributions are realized: “The contribution of French Equatorial Africa overshadows all others.”<sup>33</sup> The article goes on to cover the number of resources that the FEA and Cameroon produced for the war effort and accounts for the strategic advantage that could have been lost had the colonies not rallied to the cause.<sup>34</sup> The rapid production from the French colonies was largely due to forced labor practices that were found on both sides of the war effort in Africa throughout WWII.<sup>35</sup> Such rapid progress in infrastructure and production prepared for a new global structure to follow.

Supply routes and industrial progress grew exponentially from 1940 to 1943. The February 26, 1942 edition of *The Times* reported the extensive networks of air routes, coastline ports, and developed roads.<sup>36</sup> Victories across different theaters of the war began to develop, reconstructing the position of the African colonies. Jennings claims, “Notwithstanding the obsession with its vulnerable flank, Free France conquered Africa in a startling south-to-north sweep. Originally a

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<sup>32</sup> Ben Lucien Burman, *Miracle on the Congo* (New York, NY: John Day Company, 1942), 14.

<sup>33</sup> From A French Correspondent. "The Rise Of Free France." *Times*, August 20, 1941, 5. The Times Digital Archive (accessed November 5, 2022).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>35</sup> Carolyn A. Brown, “African Labor in the Making of World War II,” in *Africa and World War II*, ed. Judith A. Byfield (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University, 2015), 46.

<sup>36</sup> From Our Correspondent Formerly With The French Forces. "Supply Routes In Africa." *Times*, February 26, 1942, 3. The Times Digital Archive (accessed November 6, 2022).



marginal dissident movement, it could now genuinely claim expansionist goals.”<sup>37</sup> The years of intense resource extraction did, however, begin its end as the ideas of freedom and reform came to fruition for the colonial labor force after the war.<sup>38</sup> Contribution from Free French Africa went beyond wartime production; at the beginning of 1941, desert warfare within the Italian theatre of war stood on the horizon.

One report from London’s *The Times* on February 24, 1941, recounts a British column making headway down the Red Sea coast towards an Italian stronghold in Keren, reinforced by free French forces from French Equatorial Africa.<sup>39</sup> The Capture of Kufra, another Italian stronghold, on March 1, 1941, was led by Colonel Leclerc and made up largely of African troops.<sup>40</sup> Leclerc, however, considered the native forces more hindrance than help stating to General de Larminat, “We are literally being flooded by native recruits, and I have 1,672 too many African soldiers... Given our shortage of low-ranking officers, recruiting more African troops would not only be useless but actually harmful.”<sup>41</sup> While Leclerc’s perspective did change by the end of the war, he was proven wrong far sooner, specifically by the essential work of the drivers in the raid on Kufra. From Burman’s report, “We talk of famous camel riders and desert auto drivers. I remember General le Clerc’s praises of one of his drivers at Kufra.”<sup>42</sup> The FEA’s troops had convinced even the coldest of leaders of their own value and dedication. Free France’s last resort had risen to the call. Considered the poorest colony, the FEA threw itself into total war with little hesitation, foreshadowing the eminent downfall of Axis power due to the conviction and resiliency of the FEA

Confidence from desert raids and Kufra inspired the Free French troops in their upcoming attack on Fezzan. Edward L. Bimberg details the weapon systems of the force, listing the “1924– 1929 auto-mitrailleuse, the basic light machine gun,” which often jammed, the old

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<sup>37</sup> Jennings, *Free French Africa in World War II*, 138.

<sup>38</sup> Eric T. Jennings, “Extraction and Labor in Equatorial Africa and Cameroon,” in *Africa and World War II*, ed. Judith A. Byfield (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University, 2015), 219.

<sup>39</sup> “New Successes In Africa.” *Times*, February 24, 1941, 4. The Times Digital Archive (accessed November 6, 2022).

<sup>40</sup> Jennings, *Free French Africa in World War II*, 120-121.

<sup>41</sup> Jennings, *Free French Africa in World War II*, 122.

<sup>42</sup> Ben Lucien Burman, *Miracle on the Congo*, 85.

and heavy Hotchkiss machine guns, and defective ammo.<sup>43</sup> The first Gaullist wave into Mussolini's Fezzan was in February of 1942 and further established that fall.<sup>44</sup> The victory over Fezzan gave strategic leverage nearing the end of Axis power over the African continent. There were 2,700 African soldiers as opposed to 550 Europeans in the Fezzan campaigns.<sup>45</sup> *The Times* on January 18 of 1943 reports, "The Fighting French forces under General Leclerc from Fort Lamy, have made contact with general Montgomery's eighth army, after one of the most adventurous advances in military history."<sup>46</sup>

These victories, however, do not begin to cover the battles won by French *tirailleurs*. Outside of the African continent, their numerous exploits drove the Allied triumphs. John H. Morrow illustrates many of their other efforts in *Black Africans in World War II: The Soldiers' Stories*:

The Senegalese soldiers suppressed a revolt in Syria in May 1942, while 1,000 had arrived in Egypt in December 1941 to fight in North Africa with the British Eighth Army against Rommel's Afrika Korps. They fought at Bir Hakeim, where the French sacrificed themselves to delay Rommel's attack, and later, when there were more than 2,000 infantry, at Alamein and across North Africa in the British advance in October and November 1942. French West African soldiers participated in the invasions of Sicily and Italy and fought in the Italian theater of war. Twelve thousand of them liberated the island of Elba, the birthplace of Napoleon, in June 1944. Twenty thousand West African infantry participated in the invasion of southern France and fought in the campaign moving north through southern France, ultimately liberating the city of Belfort in eastern France in November 1944.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Edward L. Bimberg, *Tricolor over the Sahara*, 46.

<sup>44</sup> Jennings, *Free French Africa in World War II*, 131-132

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>46</sup> "A Desert Venture." *Times*, January 18, 1943, 5. The Times Digital Archive (accessed November 7, 2022).

<sup>47</sup> John H. Morrow, "Black Africans in World War II: The Soldiers' Stories." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 632 (2010): 16

The Brazzaville Conference in February of 1944 marked a turning point for the colonies. Many Free French leaders attended; however, there was not a single African delegate as African people were still not considered equal citizens.<sup>48</sup> It was only the first small step towards independence and made very little change in policy.<sup>49</sup> However, the recognition of the efforts from the colonies and the relevance of Brazzaville was the first part of this progress, and, in turn, the conference became “was the *de facto* beginning of decolonization, and it impacted all over the European colonial empires.”<sup>50</sup>

The involvement of the French colonies in World War II signaled the imminent defeat of Nazi Germany and its allies. Recognizing the need for autonomy and equal treatment under the law, the desires of individual African soldiers mirrored that of their war efforts. While francophone Africa still suffered many injustices, improvement came swiftly after the war. Pay and conditions rose, pants and boots replaced the shorts and sandals for soldiers, training, education, and technical skills far surpassed the previous generation.<sup>51</sup> It did not take long for decolonization to spread rapidly through the continent. In the conclusion of *Africa and World War II*, the editor asserts that by the early 1950s, the empirical powers of Britain and France faced unprecedented protests “mounted by broad-based, better-organized, and politically sophisticated movement” and finally decided to relinquish control of the colonies.<sup>52</sup>

Jennings recounts, “In a speech at the Palais Chaillot, in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower, on January 26, 1945, Henri Laurentie observed that never before had a motherland been liberated by its empire.”<sup>53</sup> This idea is what sets apart the battle cry of French Africa in WWII. This idea is what has restructured governments on a global level and restructured imperial powers. De Gaulle’s African troops reveal the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>53</sup> Ruth Ginio, *The French Army and Its African Soldiers: The Years of Decolonization*. (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2016) 8.

<sup>50</sup> Tuomo Melasuo, “The Second World War and Africa – New Regards within Colonial Context” *Tampere Peace Research Institute* (2019), 15.

<sup>51</sup> Mann, *Native Sons: West Africa Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century*, 173.

<sup>52</sup> Byfield, Judith A, eds. *Africa and World War II*. 508.

<sup>53</sup> Jennings, *Free French Africa in World War II*, 273.

importance of WWII in a way the other Allied powers cannot. African Fighting France should not go without memorials or commendations.

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