

#GreatWarInAfrica: France, Africa, and the First World War, 100 Years On

France stands out as the only European country to include black African soldiers in their armies that fought in Europe. Richard S Fogarty of the University at Albany, State University of New York explores the resulting issues of identity for Africans and French people.

In April of this year, the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War, 90 year-old Claude Mademba Sy died in a small village in southwestern France. He was, in fact, a French-African veteran of the Second World War. But his father, Abdel Kader Mademba Sy, was a Senegalese veteran of the Great War of 1914-1918, and the son's memories of his father encapsulate some of the complex ways that war affected the people living in France's African colonies.[1]

As Claude Mademba Sy remembered, his father "let himself die" when ill with pneumonia in 1932. And this assimilated African living in France, a career soldier and officer in the French army, refused to speak French during the last few months of his life. According to his son, this was the result of his tortured conscience, since he had helped recruit thousands of Africans to fight for France, many of whom died. What, then, did the Great War mean for Africans, for French people, for ideas about identity among both groups?



Senegalese Tirailleurs are addressed by an armored French Cuirassier at a 1913 Bastille Day parade.

This centenary year of 2014 has been the occasion for a great deal of remembering and commemoration activity, particularly in Europe. But increasing recognition that the Great War was a genuinely global event has focused attention on Africa as well. France, one of the war's major combatants and scene of the devastated and decisive Western Front, as well as a major colonial power in Africa, brought Africans into the heart of the war experience in Europe. Nearly 450,000 Africans lived, worked, and fought in France during the war. The presence of large numbers of Africans on French soil for the first time rendered African, French, and colonial culture very visible and placed them in the forefront of political, military, and colonial policy.

Africans from North and West Africa and from Madagascar joined some 50,000 Indochinese soldiers as the human contribution of the colonies to the French army fighting in Europe. Wearing a uniform, marching under the French republican tricolor flag, and defending the metropole in its hour of dire need associated these men closely with the French nation. Yet although revolutionary tradition and republican ideology linked military service and citizenship very tightly, these men were colonial subjects, without the rights of citizens.

And, of course, they were men of colour. Despite republican rhetoric of egalitarianism and universalism, racial prejudices marked attitudes and policies toward these soldiers. Republican ideals and a sense of racial superiority underpinned the French “civilising mission,” which would raise up the cultural level of colonised peoples. Military service was part of this. This “school of the nation” would inculcate French ideals in recruits, who paid a “blood tax” in return for the benefits of French rule.

Yet the contradiction remained – subjects without rights fighting to defend a republic of citizens with rights – and an impulse toward republican egalitarianism and the tendency toward racial discrimination competed and conflicted throughout the war. Race helped determine policies toward African soldiers, and hence their experiences in uniform and in France, at every turn. Coercion marked French recruiting efforts, since colonial populations were a resource to be exploited. Supposedly “warlike races” were more likely to end up in uniform, and engaged in combat as attacking “shock troops.”

Nonetheless, French policies were shot through with inconsistency and contradiction, with impulses toward egalitarianism as well as racism. Colonial subjects could become officers in the French army, but not of very high rank or in command of white troops. Yet the French army was more racially diverse and integrated than any of the others engaged. And intimate contact between colonial subjects and native French people occurred far from the front: many colonial men crossed the colour line for sex and love, in contacts ranging from prostitution, to romance, to marriage. Not everyone approved, but the relationships showed that at least some in France were open to interracial intimacy.

Attitudes toward religious differences revealed similar complexities. The army went to great lengths to accommodate Muslim religious practice. Yet authorities never rid themselves of suspicions about Islam, especially its effect on loyalty to the French cause. For this reason, the army declined to deploy North African troops, thought to be “fanatical” in their belief, in the 1915 Dardanelles campaign against the Muslim Ottoman Empire.

Indeed difference, of colour, race, or religion, was not supposed to matter in official French republican rhetoric. This ultimately pushed French officials and legislators seriously to contemplate rewarding veteran colonial subjects with French citizenship for their service to the nation, their “adopted fatherland.” Yet racism and colonial politics intervened, and even former soldiers found it more difficult to become French citizens in the postwar decades.

Events during the war illustrate the difficulty many in France had integrating Africans into conceptions of French identity, despite their war service. But what of Africans? War experiences could not help but affect Africans, as many saw colonial exploitation even more starkly revealed, or expanded their horizons through travel and contact with new peoples, or lost friends and family members in a war that hardly seemed their own, or gained new status by virtue of their experience and connections to the colonial state and military. Yet the effects could be extremely complicated, even contradictory. Some came away more outraged than ever by racism and colonial exploitation, while others came away more invested in an order that employed them and gave them status and even a uniform. As decolonisation began after the Second World War, Africans who had lived through 1914-1918 would negotiate complex and sometimes divergent paths on the way to national independence.

Things were never, could never be simple for these men and women. The story of Claude Mademba Sy and his ancestors is a case in point. His great-grandfather and grandfather helped the French army build colonial rule in West Africa during the 19th century. His father served the French army as well, but while he ended his life in France itself, he no longer spoke the nation’s language. As for Claude Mademba Sy, he was a decorated officer and veteran of the Second World War, and even fought later to keep both Indochina and Algeria French. Yet when Senegal became independent in 1960, he returned to Africa to help build the new nation’s army, then served as Senegal’s ambassador in several posts, including at the UN.

Perhaps his words during his later struggle to unfreeze African veterans' pensions, frozen at the time of independence by a vindictive colonial power in decline, best sum up the complex and contradictory legacy of war and colonialism for France and its former colonies over the last century: "When one loves this nation of France, it is difficult to understand this baseness, this stupidity, this disgrace." [2] Claude Mademba Sy, like his father, died in France and was buried there, 100 years after the beginning of the Great War in which his father and so many other Africans fought. The war is worth remembering in Africa and for Africans, because it was their war too.

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[1] See Stéphanie Trouillard, "Derniers honneurs pour Claude Mademba Sy, doyen des tirailleurs sénégalais," *France24* (<http://www.france24.com/fr/20140411-claude-mademba-sy-tirailleurs-senegalais-seconde-guerre-mondiale-leclerc-debarquement/>).

[2] Africamix, "Claude Mademba Sy, tirailleur exemplaire," *Le Monde Blogs* (<http://africamix.blog.lemonde.fr/2007/10/25/claude-mademba-sy-tirailleur-exemplaire/>).

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