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# The French Army and Its African Soldiers

Ruth Ginio

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**THE FRENCH ARMY AND  
ITS AFRICAN SOLDIERS**

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STUDIES IN EMPIRE AND  
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# THE FRENCH ARMY AND ITS AFRICAN SOLDIERS

*The Years of Decolonization*

RUTH GINIO

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Set in Lyon by Rachel Gould.

Designed by N. Putens.

*For Eyal, Nitai, and Ophir*



# CONTENTS

- List of Illustrations ix
- Acknowledgments xi
- List of Abbreviations xv
- Introduction xvii
- 1** Historical Background: The Army, the Empire, and the Decolonization of French West Africa 1
- 2** The Aftermath of World War II: Frustration, Protest, and Rebellion 13
- 3** The Military Reforms: A New Army in French West Africa? 35
- 4** African Troops in the Wars of Decolonization: Indochina, 1946-1954 77

<b>5</b>	African Troops in the Wars of Decolonization: Algeria, 1954-1962	105
<b>6</b>	Alternatives to Independence: The Army's Colonial Vision in French West Africa	141
<b>7</b>	Adjusting to a New Reality: The Army and the Imminent Independence	171
	Conclusion	203
	Notes	211
	Bibliography	231
	Index	239

## ILLUSTRATIONS

### FIGURES

- 1 Map of French West Africa 3
- 2 African paratroopers over the savanna 71
- 3 Map of French Indochina 85
- 4 Map of Algeria under French rule 107
- 5 Stamp issued for the celebration of the centenary of the Tirailleurs Sénégalais 156

### TABLES

- 1 Number and percentage of African soldiers serving in Indochina 86
- 2 Military coups d'état in the former territories of French West Africa 199



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The journey of this book began almost a decade ago in a visit to the Musée des Forces Armées in Dakar. This museum exposed me to the complex and fascinating ways in which the story of the African soldiers who served in the French army during the colonial period is officially told today in Senegal. After studying for a while the manner in which these soldiers were both commemorated and somewhat ignored in France and in Senegal, I began to notice a major lacuna in the field, including my own study, namely, the period of decolonization. I then began working on a manuscript that would fill this lacuna by examining the relations between the French army and its African soldiers after World War II and the role the army played in the political processes in the federation from which most of its African soldiers originated, French West Africa.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

AEF	Afrique Équatoriale Française
AERDA	Association des Étudiants du Rassemblement Démocratique Africain
AGED	Association Générale des Étudiants de Dakar
ANS	Archives Nationales du Sénégal
ANSOM	Archives Nationales, Section d'Outre-Mer
AOF	Afrique Occidentale Française
BAA	Bureau des Affaires Africaines
BDS	Bloc Démocratique Sénégalais
CFA	(Franc de la) Communauté Française d'Afrique
CHETOM	Centre d'Histoire et d'Études des Troupes d'Outre-Mer

CGT	Confédération Générale du Travail
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
EET	Écoles des Enfants de Troupes
EFORTOM	École de Formation des Officiers du Régime Transitoire des Territoires d’Outre-Mer
EMPA	École Militaire de Préparation Africaine
FEANF	Fédération des Étudiants d’Afrique Noire en France
FLN	Front de Libération Nationale
IOM	Indépendants d’Outre-Mer
MDRM	Mouvement Démocratique de la Rénovation Malgache
OAS	Organisation Armée Secrète
PCF	Partie Communiste Française
RD	Rassemblement Démocratique Africain
SFIO	Section Française de l’Internationale Ouvrière
SHAT	Service Historique de l’Armée de Terre
UGEAO	Union Générale des Étudiants d’Afrique Occidentale
UGTAN	Union Générale des Travailleurs d’Afrique Noire

## INTRODUCTION

On April 15, 1974, Lt. Col. Seyni Kountche, an ex-sergeant in the French colonial army, committed a successful coup d'état against Niger's president, Hamani Diori.<sup>1</sup> Diori had been on good terms with the French government ever since he had imposed draconian measures against the African opposition parties, which had called for immediate independence during the 1950s. Despite this, the French units stationed in Niger did not intervene and allowed Seyni Kountche to take power. Diori's request for assistance was refused because of his demand to renegotiate the price of uranium, which his country supplied to France. This insistence caused the French to take their chances with a new leader, one who had once been part of France's colonial units and who they believed might be more accommodating.

This was not the first nor the last time in the postcolonial period that the French government instructed the military units stationed in its ex-colonies in Africa to choose sides according to its interests. The critics of this policy, known as *Franceafrique*, accused France of meddling in African conflicts in a manner that did not consider the welfare of the populations in these countries. In fact, after the end of French colonial rule in sub-Saharan Africa in the early 1960s, the French army intervened forty-eight times in various conflicts and crises on the continent within the context of this policy. The French support of the extreme Hutu government, which led the Genocide against the Tutsis and moderate Hutus in Rwanda in 1994, only intensified this criticism.<sup>2</sup>

Gen. Charles de Gaulle and his advisor for African affairs, Jacques Foccart, initiated the policy of *Franceafrique* after de Gaulle's return to power in 1958.<sup>3</sup> Foccart was to become the most controversial figure related to France's manipulations in its ex-African colonies. The term itself was actually borrowed from the first president of the Ivory Coast, Félix

Houphouët-Boigny, who was in favor of maintaining close relations with France, although not in the sense of securing French interests exclusively.<sup>4</sup>

As demonstrated by the successful coup d'état of an ex-African colonial soldier in Niger under the auspices of the French army, the military aspect of this French policy was not only evident but crucial. Immediately after independence France had signed military agreements with most of its ex-territories in sub-Saharan Africa. These agreements allowed it to hold a monopoly over the sales of arms to the newly independent countries and over important minerals such as uranium.<sup>5</sup> These stipulations reflect the lingering military aspect of France's relations with its ex-colonies. It is therefore surprising that so little attention was given to the role the French army had played in the federation of French West Africa (Afrique Occidentale Française, AOF) in the years prior to independence. While numerous studies have dealt with the army in other parts of the French empire such as Indochina and Algeria, practically none have considered the role it played in the political processes within AOF. The reason for this void is rather obvious. An army's principal role is to fight wars; therefore, the importance of the French army in Indochina and Algeria, where two of France's most vicious imperial wars took place, is evident, and the role of the army in these two parts of the French empire attracted much scholarly attention. In AOF, on the other hand, the army had no war to fight, and so it seems that it had a less important role there as a colonial agent. This could not be farther from the truth. Fighting wars was certainly not the only role of the French military units in the empire. In its attempts to defeat its enemies, the French army in Indochina, and even more so in Algeria, did not limit its activities to traditional warfare. Under the guise of what was termed "psychological warfare" the army assumed other roles in domains that were supposed to be under civilian responsibility, including education, social assistance, and health. It was also deeply involved in colonial decision making and in shaping the colonial agenda.

As I intend to show in this book, this important part of the military mission was also relevant to AOF. Maintaining control over the federation was crucial in the eyes of the colonial army's command. The fact that many of the army's colonial troops originated from this territory enhanced its importance and turned these soldiers into a link between the army and the African population of the federation. It is true that no war broke out in

AOF, but the army's fear of losing control over this part of the empire was still significant and was reflected in various ways. In the eyes of the military command of the federation, this was a space that was to be defended and saved from what it perceived as the negative influences of the anticolonial struggles taking place in other parts of the French empire and in other European colonial empires. In addition, both main rivals in the Cold War, the Soviet Union and the United States, were beginning to grow hostile toward France's colonial project. Therefore, the military policy, agenda, and aims in AOF at the time of decolonization are indispensable to our understanding of this important period in the history of the region.

This book contributes to our understanding of the three main themes mentioned in its title: the French army, its African soldiers, and decolonization, focusing on the army's agenda, policies, and activities during the last fifteen years of French colonial rule in the federation of AOF. Thus it examines the army as a significant political agent during this period and demonstrates the often-blurred boundaries between the military and civilian authorities in the federation. I will show that even though the army did not have to wage war in the federation and the level of violence it had to handle was limited, it still played a major part in the attempts to control the political processes that took place in the federation. Military officers often criticized the civilian authorities for not protecting the federation enough from what they perceived as negative influences of other politically more sophisticated and more dangerous parts of the French empire, most notably, Indochina and Algeria. A thorough examination of the army's role in the political processes in AOF in the post-World War II years will enhance our understanding of the continued military presence and involvement in France's ex-colonies in the region after independence. My focus will be on the nonmilitary activities of the army in AOF, such as education, propaganda, and attempts to control the civilian administration. I will also examine the military policies toward West African soldiers during the Indochina and Algeria wars.

Another major theme of this book is the participation of African soldiers in the wars of decolonization. African soldiers who served in the French colonial army were a vital component of the military attempts to keep AOF French. The African soldiers' service in the French army gained much scholarly attention during the last decade as public awareness of these

soldiers in France and West Africa increased, thus encouraging academic research and popular debate on the subject.

A notable example is Rachid Bouchareb's 2006 film *Indigènes (Days of Glory)*, which revived public debate regarding the African veterans' demands to equate their pensions to those of French veterans after those pensions were frozen just before independence. However, the main goal of this new awareness, at least in France, is to remind the French public of the sacrifices these soldiers made for France and therefore of the right of their "descendants" (i.e., African immigrants in France, most of whom in fact had no relation to the veterans) to be regarded as part of the French nation. It is not surprising, then, that the focus of both public remembrance and academic research is on the soldiers' roles during the two world wars (the second more than the first) rather than on their participation in France's controversial wars of decolonization.<sup>6</sup>

While it is definitely important to shed light on the African contribution to the war effort in the two world wars, focusing mainly on these episodes in the history of African soldiers' service in the French army might anachronistically conceal a large part of the picture. This focus turns the story of the soldiers into a French or European one; it relates their service to the history of metropolitan France rather than to the history of the regions from which these soldiers originated. It also makes us forget that the original aim of recruiting Africans to the army was to conquer the empire and maintain order in it by utilizing the supposedly violent nature of the Africans as a screen behind which colonial violence and brutality could hide.

When studying the role of African soldiers in the two world wars there is a tendency to present them as unsung heroes, exploited but brave colonial subjects who came to the motherland's rescue but whose reward was not recognition but rather discrimination and later oblivion. This depiction, which is largely accurate, must be completed by further research. Otherwise it is quite easy to marginalize the fact that African soldiers also took part in the occupation of the French empire and in maintaining order in its territories. These soldiers also participated in the post-World War II repression of anticolonial movements in Madagascar, Indochina, and Algeria, in which France tried to save its empire. African soldiers participated in the brutal repression of the revolt in Madagascar; they fought in Indochina against the Viet Minh and in

Algeria against the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), where they were assigned the most abhorrent jobs; they were also sent to subdue protests in AOF. In fact, in the most infamous repression of African ex-POWs in Camp Thiaroye near Dakar at the end of World War II (a subject that I will deal with in chapter 2), African soldiers brought from other regions were those who opened fire on their protesting comrades under the command of French officers. I have no intention of denying that African soldiers, even those who had participated in such brutalities, were in a way also victims of the colonial system. They were assigned these roles by their French commanders in order to pass the responsibility of violent repression onto them. Nevertheless, I maintain that ignoring the less heroic and glorified activities of African soldiers prevents us from understanding their story in the context of the French colonial project, in which they played an essential part. Furthermore, examining the French colonial army and its African soldiers at the time of decolonization allows us a more nuanced perspective of both the army as a political agent in AOF and the story of the African soldiers serving in its ranks.

The third theme that this book explores is the ongoing academic debate around the term “decolonization” and its various definitions. In the past this term was largely considered to describe the struggle of colonial peoples to achieve political and so-called national independence. However, during the last fifteen years the emphasis in this field has largely shifted from the national story of an anticolonial struggle ending “happily” with independence to the perception of decolonization as the culmination of a history of interaction and conflict between colonizers and colonized.<sup>7</sup> The uniqueness of this point of view is that it also gives weight to the variation among the colonizers and among the colonized. Frederick Cooper, one of the main scholars contributing to this historiographical shift, noted in 2002 that the outcome of decolonization should not be regarded as the only possible and inevitable one: “Africans cannot be reduced to stick figures in a drama with two actors, colonizer and colonized, or a story with one plot line—the struggle for the nation.”<sup>8</sup>

The study of the army’s political involvement in AOF after World War II contributes to this debate on the nature of decolonization from several perspectives. First, as we shall see, the military vision of the future of AOF

was based on the military reforms of the 1950s, which equated the service conditions of African and French metropolitan soldiers. The success of these reforms in appeasing African soldiers and veterans who were contesting against the army after World War II allowed military officers to believe that a policy of reforms that advanced equality between the French and Africans could indeed become an alternative to independence.

Second, the significance of the army as a political agent in AOF that did not always see eye to eye with other agents such as the civilian authority, the French governments, and various African politicians demonstrates that the political struggles that took place in the federation during this period were not necessarily between oppressed Africans and oppressing French. Various views with regard to the political future of the region existed both among the French and the Africans, and coalitions were sometimes made across these two groups.

Third, 1960 is usually seen as a significant year in the history of AOF, as during this year all of the territories of the federation became independent (except Guinea, which had gained its independence in 1958). The study of the army in AOF shows that in fact other events and processes in the history of the region were no less significant. From a military point of view, the truly problematic turning points in the political processes in the federation were the Loi-Cadre of 1956 and the establishment of the Franco-African Community in 1958. When independence came in 1960 the military authorities were already planning their next steps, which included military agreements meant to preserve the army's influence in the area. In this sense, 1964 was much more important from a military perspective, as this was the year in which all African soldiers who served in the French army were demobilized, some joining the armies of the newly independent countries. This was not, of course, the end of the military presence in AOF, and as we shall see in chapter 7, the army continued to control the politics of the former French colonies. The different chronology that this study offers supports the thesis that decolonization did not necessarily mean the struggle for independence and that in fact the actual year of independence did not always mark the commencement of essential transformations in the history of the region.

The discussion of the French army and its African soldiers in the period of decolonization in AOF sheds light on these three important themes: the

army's political involvement in AOF after World War II, the participation of African soldiers in the wars of decolonization, and the study of decolonization in AOF. It also connects these three themes and thus contributes to our understanding of the postcolonial military relations between France and its former colonies in West Africa.

### *Sources and Methodology*

There are several studies on the army's general involvement in the establishment of the French empire in Africa, as well as specific ones on the French military involvement in certain French colonies before and after independence, that were helpful for my research.<sup>9</sup> This is, however, the only study to date that examines the involvement of the French army in the decolonization process in AOF.

While the recent focus has been on African participation in the two world wars, there are a few important studies that deal with African soldiers in the post-World War II period. One is the pioneer research of Myron Echenberg, *Colonial Conscripts* (1991), in which the last three chapters are dedicated to the period 1945–60. The other is Gregory Mann's more recent *Native Sons* (2006), which also touches upon the period of decolonization. Sarah Zimmerman's doctoral dissertation examines African colonial soldiers from the establishment of their first battalions until the end of the colonial period, including their experiences in Indochina and Algeria.<sup>10</sup> In the final part of his book, Echenberg offers us a glimpse into the military reforms of the 1950s, the major changes in the way in which the military command viewed African soldiers, and the attempts to professionalize the African units. Mann sheds light on the complex relations between the army and its veterans before and after World War II, and Zimmerman examines the actual experiences of African soldiers in the Indochina and Algeria wars and their adjustment to the independence of their own territories. While these important and rich studies served as a vital source for this book, my own focus is on the army's attempts to use its African soldiers as a means of influencing the general population of AOF and as proof of the validity of the army's vision with regard to the political future of this federation. As I will show, the army saw the general loyalty of the African soldiers after the military reforms as evidence that it was possible to maintain AOF as part of the French empire.

As noted, while much scholarly attention has been given to the decolonization struggles in Indochina and Algeria, the relatively quiet and nonviolent parallel political process in AOF was somewhat neglected until recently.<sup>11</sup> In 2010 Charles Robert Ageron and Marc Michel edited a volume on the subject titled *L'heure des indépendances*, and several more studies in French dealt with specific issues regarding decolonization in AOF, but few studies on this theme were published in English. A notable exception is Tony Chafer's *The End of Empire in French West Africa: France's Successful Decolonization?* published in 2002, which demonstrates that in spite of the nonviolent character of the process it was nevertheless full of tensions and contradictions that merit our analyses. In her book *Cold War and Decolonization in Guinea*, Elizabeth Schmidt thoroughly examined the decolonization process in French Guinea, the only French colony that rejected de Gaulle's idea of a Franco-African Community and gained full independence by 1958. A more recent study on decolonization in AOF, although the word does not appear in its title (perhaps not by chance), is Cooper's latest book *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945-1960*. In this book Cooper describes the political debates regarding the postwar form of the old colonial system. He also focuses on the various meanings and interpretations of other key concepts such as citizenship, empire, nation, and sovereignty. None of these studies discusses the army as a significant factor in the process of decolonization in AOF.

In this book I plan to examine the army as an influential political agent in AOF during the post-World War II years. My analysis will be based on the above-mentioned studies, and my conclusions considering the army's role in the federation will enforce the idea of decolonization as a complex struggle between various groups that did not consider independence as the only possible remedy to the evils of colonialism.

The importance of the military aspect of the decolonization process in AOF was acknowledged by Chafer and Alexander Keese in their edited volume *Africa at Fifty*. In the introduction Chafer and Keese present three major narratives that have developed over the years regarding the decolonization of French sub-Saharan Africa. Their book challenges two of these narratives, which in spite of being conflicting are based on the same assumption. One narrative is that of the successful and well-planned

decolonization, the other that of French manipulation and conspiracy. Both narratives assume that the French had some sort of control over the political process of decolonization in AOF. The third narrative is that of the military bond. According to this narrative, military relations were established between France and its territories in AOF as a result of the service of African soldiers in the two world wars and in the Indochina and Algerian wars, during which a narrative emphasizing brotherhood in arms and shared glory and sacrifices was encouraged. This may explain to a large extent both the colonial and the postcolonial relations between France and these territories.

In my own study I accept the rejection of the first two narratives and certainly accord much attention to the idea of the military bond. Nevertheless, I do not consider this concept as a narrative that explains the decolonization of AOF but rather as an additional perspective from which we can examine this process as one that is much more complex than a struggle between French oppressors and their African victims. The military perspective of the decolonization of AOF complicates the story of decolonization and therefore adds an important aspect to the debate around the meaning of this concept.

In this book I connect the three themes—the army as a political actor, the African soldiers who served in it, and the process of decolonization. My main primary sources are military and administrative documents that deal with the military involvement in various domains within AOF, such as education, propaganda, and social assistance, with policies that relate to both African soldiers and veterans and with dilemmas regarding the service of Africans in Indochina and Algeria. These documents are found in archives in France and in Senegal. Newspapers from the period, especially those that were designated for soldiers and veterans, also serve as a basis for my research. Although my main focus in this book is on French military policy, I also use some oral sources and veterans' memoirs to examine the perspectives of Africans who served in the French army after World War II. These sources often expose the irrelevance of some of the concepts that are commonly used in relation to decolonization, such as nationalism, resistance, and collaboration. The struggles against colonial discrimination and mistreatment did not always involve a sense of brotherhood with other colonial peoples. The identity of many of the African soldiers who served

in the French army was complex and flexible, and their main concern was often social and economic rather than “national.”

It is my hope that *The French Army and Its African Soldiers* will contribute to the ongoing debate around the notion of decolonization, as well as deepen our understanding of the major role the French army and its African soldiers played in this process.

### *The Book's Structure and Its Logic*

Chapter 1 offers the reader a political and historical background of the period covered in the book and provides basic information regarding each of the three main themes discussed. I begin with a short survey of French colonial rule in West Africa and its main characteristics. I then discuss the French army's role in the colonization of the region and its structure. Next I present the African soldiers' service in the French army until the end of World War II. Finally, I offer a brief overview of the main stages of the decolonization process in AOF.

Following this historical introduction, my starting point is the aftermath of World War II in AOF and the attempts of both the military and civilian authorities to control the thousands of disgruntled African soldiers returning home from France. Chapter 2 thus covers the years 1944 to 1949, during which relations between the army, its soldiers, and its veterans hit rock bottom. The abovementioned Thiaroye rebellion and its brutal repression marked the lowest point in these relations, but the situation remained extremely tense in the following years. Only in 1950, with extensive military reforms and especially the equation of the pensions, did this period of mistrust and resentment end. Chapter 3 deals with the implementation of the military reforms in AOF and their significance. It examines the revised policy of recruitment, the attempts to professionalize the colonial units and to attract Western-educated Africans to the army, and the reforms in the military schools of the federation, known as the *Écoles des Enfants de Troupes* (EET). In this chapter I consider the question of how much had really changed in the military's perceptions of African troops. The fourth and fifth chapters take us away from AOF to Indochina and Algeria, where a large number of African soldiers were sent to fight against the Viet Minh and the FLN, respectively. This diversion from the main line of the story is important, as the army's policies toward its African soldiers in the two

conflicts are necessary to understand its views on the decolonization of AOF, which will be discussed in the two final chapters. The army's position toward AOF cannot be understood without appreciating the difficulties and dilemmas it faced in the other parts of the French empire and its attempts to "protect" African soldiers from the messages they received from the liberation movements in the two regions. Chapter 4 discusses the military policy toward Africans serving in the Indochina war and the attempts to keep their morale high and their loyalty intact despite the physical and mental difficulties these soldiers faced. Chapter 5 presents similar questions regarding the Algerian war. In addition, it discusses the notion of psychological warfare, which targeted not only the Algerian population but also African soldiers. This form of warfare was formalized in the French army toward the end of the Indochina war and played an important role in the Algerian conflict. Due to the Islamic religious affinity between many of the African soldiers and the Algerians, this chapter also deals extensively with the place of Islam in the military propaganda aimed at the soldiers, focusing on the pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina organized by the military.

Chapter 6 takes us back to AOF and examines the military vision of the political future of AOF and its concerns regarding the influence of political events in the international arena on Africans, specifically on African soldiers, whose loyalty was vital. I begin this chapter with the response of two colonial officers to the suggestion of the army's representative in Washington DC, at the time, Gen. Jean-Étienne Valluy, who formerly served in the colonial army, to abolish the colonial units and transfer their soldiers to newly established African armies. The two vehement responses help us understand the colonial military position on the decolonization process in AOF. Next, I examine the attempts to control the population in AOF through surveillance and the spread of propaganda, indicating that even in the mid-1950s the army assumed the continuous colonial presence of France in the federation. Finally, I deal with the military attempts to encroach on civil administrative responsibilities in AOF. Chapter 7 examines the final years of French colonial rule in AOF, focusing on the period between 1958 and the early 1960s. It explores how the army chose to deal with the official loss of AOF, its attempts to establish the new armies of the independent states and to control them, and the compensation it sought for the loss of direct control over the military power of the federation. This

chapter will also examine the ways in which African soldiers and veterans dealt with the changing reality of newly found independence. Finally, I will briefly discuss the phenomenon of military coups in former French colonies led by African veterans of the colonial army as a means of exploring the influence of the military bonds created in the colonial period on postcolonial politics. In the conclusion I will deal with the significance of the three-way relationship between the army, its soldiers, and the federation of AOF and its contribution to our understanding of decolonization in this part of the French empire.