



Richard S. Fogarty.- *Race & War in France: Colonial Subjects in the French Army, 1914-1918* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press 2008), 374p.

“Most of the other Americans have taken advantage of the permission to pass into a regular French regiment. There is much to be said for their decision, but I have remained true to the Legion, where I am content and have good comrades. I have a pride particularly in the Moroccan division, whereof we are the first brigade. Those who march with the Zouaves and the Algerian *tirailleurs* are sure to be where there is most honor. We are *troupes d’attaque*

now, and so will assist at all the big *coups*, but be spared the monotony of long periods of inactive guard in the trenches, such as we passed last winter.”¹

“Undoubtedly, then the triumph of the allies would at least leave the plight of the colored races no worse than now. Indeed, considering the fact that black Africans and brown Indians and yellow Japanese are fighting for France and England it may be that they will come out of this frightful welter of blood with new ideas of the essential equality of all men.”²

On the fourth of August, 1914, Germany invaded Belgium quickly overwhelming that country’s defenses and advancing into France as far as the area of the River Marne only a month later. France seemed in peril of imminent defeat; Paris was threatened. No effort could be spared in mounting the defense of *La Patrie*. Mobilization therefore, from the earliest days of the war, involved drawing on all available sources for this purpose, including the deployment of colonial forces already in uniform and then the recruitment of large numbers of colonial subjects to supplement French troops on the Western Front. Colonial troops, especially the Moroccan contingents played a

1. Letter from Alan Seeger to Elsie Simmons Seeger, October 25, 1915. Reprinted in *World War I and America Told by the Americans Who Lived It*, A. Scott Berg, ed., (New York: Library of America, 2017), 198. Seeger (1888-1916) was an American poet who served as a volunteer with the French Foreign Legion. He died at Belloy-en-Santerre, during the battle of the Somme, July 4, 1916.

2. W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963), *The Crisis*, November, 1914, text reprinted in *World War I and America Told by the Americans Who lived It*, A. Scott Berg, (ed.), (New York: Library of America, 2017), 48. Du Bois was a prominent historian and civil rights activist. He was a founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the editor of its magazine, *The Crisis*.

significant role in halting and driving back the German forces that had reached the Marne River, a battle (6-9 September, 1914) which many historians consider one of the most significant of the war, perhaps the twentieth century.³ The victory came at an appalling cost in human life: the Moroccan units alone lost some 80% of their ranks killed and wounded during those few days; a harbinger of the carnage to come in a war that would last another four years. Millions of European men would be killed or wounded before the end of the conflict. Tens of thousands of non-white soldiers in the service of the Entente and Central powers would perish as well. Millions more were disabled. No one had imagined in 1914, the cost that the technology of modern warfare could exact on the armies that deployed it. No one expected the war to last as long as it did. Everyone was soon hard pressed to meet the voracious demands for manpower that the conflict demanded. Despite deep and abiding misgivings about the quality and loyalty of what were called *les troupes indigènes*, France recruited and conscripted large numbers of soldiers from its colonies and protectorates in West Africa, Madagascar, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco and Indo-China. By 1918 it had raised some 500,000 troops from these areas, in addition to the men in the colonial armies standing at the war's beginning. Most of these troops saw service on the Western Front. They fought alongside French units, were trained, given medical treatment, and interacted in other ways with French citizens in many parts of the country during the war years. By all accounts their loyalty to France was manifest. The performance of some of their units in battle, especially the Moroccans and Algerians, was highly praised. They were often used as shock troop against the German lines. They were much decorated by the French army. Their service often elicited reports from their French officers attesting –sometimes framed with an embarrassing sense of amazement at what colonial soldiers could and would do– to their courage and tenacity under fire and their skill as soldiers.

Yet, as Fogarty clearly demonstrates in this important and well-documented study of racism and republican values in France during the Great War, while the service and presence of the *troupes indigènes* in metropolitan France did raise profound and provocative questions about France's relationship with its colonial subjects and about its commitment to republican values of liberty, equality, and fraternity when it came to people of color, it did not fundamentally change the fact of racism in the *metropole's* treatment of its colonial subjects, even those who served loyally and heroically on the side of France in a time of its greatest peril. Using a wide and comprehensive array of primary sources found in French ministerial and military archives,

3. David Evans, *The First World War* (Chicago, IL: Contemporary Books, 2004), 19.

including some very interesting material from the several postal censorship services charged with reading the correspondence sent home by colonial soldiers, along with an impressive bibliography of published sources, Fogarty investigates what he argues is a fundamental tension between republican ideals and military and civilian practice during the time of the war and in the broader colonial relationship in general. His study focuses primarily on the *troupes indigènes* in France, but he also includes some very informative material on the experiences and French popular and official reception of African-American soldiers from the United States. In this context he challenges the widely held stereotype of France as “color-blind” when it comes to matters of people of color in national service and social and economic relationships. He shows how perhaps France did seem a place of tolerance and republican values compared to the United States, but that color prejudice and negative cultural stereotypes of its colonial subjects prevailed everywhere in fact over the republican ideals of equality and inclusion, despite the expressed anxieties of a part of the intellectual and political elite who feared the political consequences at home and abroad of the increasingly apparent gap between the war service and wartime experience of colonial troops in France and the pronounced reluctance of the ruling elites to seriously consider the extension of citizenship rights to (at least) the men who served in the defense of the country. These anxieties were no doubt intensified by reason of the fact that already before the war, voices of Algerians, Tunisians and others in the empire were already calling attention to this issue and demanding that their willingness to be assimilated should extend to them the full rights accorded to citizens of the Republic. Fogarty examines in detail the contrast between the rhetoric of national mobilization for the defense of France and the reality of service in France by colonial soldiers in chapters dealing with recruitment, deployment, rank and promotion, language instruction, Islam (as many of his examples and much of his documentation focuses on North Africa), and on the social relations between colonial soldiers and French civilians on and off the battlefield.

Recruitment of colonial subjects for service in Europe, despite the vigorous advocacy of military service as a portal to full citizenship and assimilation by people like Blaise Diagne (1872-1934), the first black African to be elected to the French Chamber of Deputies (1914, as representative of Senegal), drew mixed responses. Many volunteered for service, others evaded the draft or complied with it only grudgingly. As the horrors of the trenches became more widely known and the demands for manpower to replace catastrophic losses intensified French recruiting efforts, there was open and violent resistance.

French officers treated and spoke of their colonial troops as children: brave, fatalistic, intrepid, enduring of hardship, oblivious to danger, but intellectually limited, always in need of paternal guidance, and certainly not capable of operating on their own. Colonial officers were never allowed to rise above the rank of Captain, and officers of that rank were few. Under no circumstances, would the army countenance officers of color commanding white troops. Indigenous officers often faced discrimination and disrespect. Even the growing demand for officers as the war progressed did not lessen the French Army's reluctance to promote colonial officers.

Although Fogarty, throughout his work argues for the existence of a tension between a consciousness of republican values in the military and civilian command structure and discrimination against colonial soldiers and officers in uniform, his research provides copious documentation of the prevalence of prejudice against men of color in the French armed forces, as at every level officers and administrators insisted on the maintenance of the hierarchies of race and power that prevailed in the colonies and the *Metropole* in 1914.

This determination to maintain subordination of the *troupes indigènes* no matter what the quality and value of their service, extended to an unwillingness of the army to provide adequate linguistic training to colonial soldiers, teaching them an "incorrect and impoverished" French, even though this undermined the need for better communication between officers and men on and off the battlefield and put in question the fact that republicans constantly insisted that good French was the key to civilization. For soldiers from Islamic areas this refusal to facilitate linguistic accommodation was reinforced by a refusal to accommodate cultural difference. While the army made efforts to provide for the dietary and religious needs of their Muslim troops, the documentation shows a deep and abiding prejudice against Islam and Muslims. Lastly, Fogarty devotes a very interesting chapter to the investigation of the relationships between colonial soldiers and French citizens: convalescent soldiers and the nurses, social contacts between soldiers on leave and French women (and not at all only with prostitutes) interested in more serious personal relationships. This sort of "fraternization," as the censors called it was seen as a form of incitement to insubordination, the cause of weakened military spirit, and certainly evidence of the potential breakdown of the prevailing separation of the races in the colonial context.

The war ends with France victorious and knowing that part of this victory was due to the effort of its colonial soldiers. Fogarty argues that many

in France seriously thought the service of the *troupes indigènes* was owed the “civilizing Republic,” that its military need required their support and that the treatment of these soldiers was free of racial prejudice and could eventually lead to a realization of assimilation of the colonies into French republican values and culture. The burden of his evidence, however, and an important contribution of his work, demonstrates how lofty assumptions and appeal to republican ideals in the rhetoric of mobilization were undermined at every turn by the tenacity of color prejudice and negative attitudes and stereotypes held toward all colonial subjects. At every turn, military officers and civil administrators, at home and abroad, whatever they really believed about liberty, equality, and fraternity, felt certain it did not apply equally to Frenchmen and the colonial peoples in their charge.

By war’s end there were some in France and the colonies who thought that service and sacrifice for France in the Great War must change this perception. Prime Minister Clemenceau for one argued that some recognition had to be given to the men of the colonies who fought for it. But his efforts at reform in places like Algeria were thwarted by those in power and in the population who opposed making any concessions to colonial subjects. This obstinacy was not doubt strengthened by a clear sense of a victorious, but weakened France and by a growing chorus of colonial voices demanding more rights and recompense within a French system; voices that soon, in the face of continued discrimination and disappointment, would begin to advocate for a future separate from France. Fogarty’s exceptional study provides an abundance of new material and analytical insights critical for an understanding of France’s relationship with its colonies after the Great War and for our understanding of culture and communal relations in France today.

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