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Raffael Scheck

Excerpt

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Introduction

On 4 December 1945, the president of an association of former French POWs in the Jura Mountains sent a letter to the prefect of the department Oise, about fifty kilometers north of Paris, indicating that he had found a witness of a massacre that had occurred there on 10 June 1940. The witness was Gaston Bousson, a former leader of the French resistance movement in the Jura and thus a person with excellent credentials. As a soldier in 1940, Bousson had observed two German officers overseeing the shooting of sixty-four black prisoners in front of a ditch. He claimed to remember the name of the village where this had happened and offered to travel to the Oise to help the local police search for the mass grave.

The prefect swiftly contacted the local police and the national service for war crimes research and ordered an investigation. A few days later a police inspector found a witness who had seen the shooting of ten black POWs in front of a mass grave in a tiny village near Saint-Just-en-Chaussée, and Bousson was invited to visit the department to help the investigation. When he arrived on 3 January 1946, the police and a representative of the service for war crimes research drove him through the area. They visited the place identified by the other witness and found a grave of thirty-six soldiers from West Africa a few kilometers from there,

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in the backyard of the farm belonging to the mayor of the village Erquinvillers. According to local residents, these black soldiers had been “cowardly murdered” by the Germans after capture. Bousson, however, did not recognize any of these places. The name of the village he remembered did not exist in the department. The investigators brought him to some places with phonetically similar names, but Bousson was unable to orient himself and to find the site of the massacre he remembered. The police concluded that his memories were too vague to help their investigation. The representative of the service for war crimes research argued that it would be impossible to find out who exactly was responsible for the massacres and did not pursue the matter further.¹

The scattered pieces of evidence revealed by this short investigation refer to a cluster of massacres that happened in this area on 9 and 10 June 1940. The victims were black soldiers from the 4th Colonial Infantry Division (DIC) based in Toulouse. These soldiers, called *Tirailleurs Sénégalais*, were part of the force that the French government had mobilized in French West Africa, a vast colony stretching from Mauritania and Senegal to Niger, according to a conscription law of 1919. Altogether, over 100,000 soldiers of the French army in 1939–40 were recruited in French West Africa (including some volunteers), of which approximately three quarters served in France, while the rest performed guard duty in France's colonies. While thousands of *Tirailleurs Sénégalais* were still in transit to the front or in training in southern France at the time of the armistice, it is estimated that sixty-three thousand of these troops stood in the

¹ J. Boichot to Prefect of Oise, 4 December 1945; Prefect of Oise to M. Dumenil, 7 December 1945; M. Dumenil to Prefect of Oise, 17 December 1945; Colonel Laboureur to Prefect of Oise, 4 January 1946; Prefect of Oise to J. Boichot, 7 and 19 December 1945 and 8 January 1946, all in Archives départementales de l'Oise, 33 W 8259.

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frontlines against the German Wehrmacht in May and June 1940 and that approximately forty thousand experienced combat, of which ten thousand were killed and thousands more were missing in action.² Some Tirailleurs Sénégalais belonged to black regiments (RTS) and some to mixed units (RICMS). The officer corps of these regiments was predominantly white, although there were a few respected and well-known black commanders. Typically, a colonial infantry division combined RTS or RICMS units with some all-white regiments. The 4th DIC, for example, included the 16th and 24th RTS as well as the 2nd Colonial Infantry Regiment (RIC), which consisted of white soldiers and volunteers from other French colonies.³

How many black POWs were murdered on 9 and 10 June in the department Oise is unclear (the estimates in archival sources range from 150 to 600), but it is certain that these massacres were by no means unique. Whereas German troops, with some notable exceptions, treated white French and British POWs according to the Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War (1929), they dealt with the black Africans in a way that anticipated the horrors of the racialized warfare associated with the later German campaigns in the Balkans and the Soviet Union. The Germans often separated the black prisoners from the whites, North Africans, and soldiers from other colonies and subjected them to abuse and

² Myron Echenberg, *Colonial Conscripts: The Tirailleurs Sénégalais in French West Africa, 1857–1960* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and London: Heinemann and James Currey, 1991), 88; Ministère de la Défense, ed., *Les Tirailleurs sénégalais dans la campagne de France 10 mai–25 juin 1940, Collection “Mémoire et Citoyenneté” 10* (Paris: Ministère de la défense, 2001). This publication speaks of 17,000 casualties among the 40,000 troops in combat.

³ Ch. Deschênes, “Les troupes coloniales dans la bataille de France (mai–juin 1940),” *L’Ancre d’Or*, no. 255 (1990): 30–1. Some Tirailleurs Sénégalais also belonged to West African infantry battalions and colonial artillery units.

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neglect. On many occasions, black prisoners of war were shot – sometimes up to several hundred at a time. In some battles, moreover, the Germans gave no quarter to *Tirailleurs Sénégalais*, thus contributing to their unusually high casualty rate. Most of these incidents happened during the German offensive launched on 5 June against the French defenses along the Somme River and during the pursuit of the retreating French forces in the following two-and-a-half weeks. The abuse and killing of black POWs continued on the way to the POW camps and in the camps themselves, although the situation improved after August 1940 when permanent camps were built and when Germany renewed its interest in acquiring African colonies.

There were several investigations of the massacres against black POWs after the war, such as the one conducted in the Oise, but none of them led to a trial. Until the liberation of France in the summer and fall of 1944, the German occupation regime would have discouraged a judicial inquiry, and most potential French witnesses were in German POW camps and could not have been interrogated.⁴ After the liberation, special tribunals were created for the prosecution of German war crimes, but most of them focused on more recent events, particularly the crimes committed during the fighting in France after the Allied invasion on 6 June 1944. On the basis of the French Law of 15 September 1948, which held all members of a German unit responsible for an atrocity unless they could prove *not* to have participated in it, several German soldiers and commanders were taken to court for crimes committed after 1940, but these trials were hampered

⁴ The war crimes sections of the French and German national archives have no materials relating to a trial: Françoise Adnès (Archives Nationales de France) to author, 31 July 2003, and Melanie Wehr (Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg) to author, 28 January 2004. For an argument regarding the difficulties of prosecuting crimes from the 1940 campaign, see Francis Rey, “Violations du droit international commises par les allemands en France dans la guerre de 1939,” *Revue générale de droit international public* 49, no. 2 (1945–46): 7.

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by controversies over the legality of punishing people for being unable to prove their innocence. In any case, the trials revealed how difficult it was to identify and track down potential perpetrators. Many witnesses and suspected perpetrators had been killed or were held in POW camps, where they could be difficult to find (particularly in the Soviet Union, which had the majority of German POWs and did not release much information about them).⁵

Still, it is hard to avoid the impression that the German crimes against French civilians and white members of the Free French forces were considered more important than the massacres of black POWs in 1940. The French efforts to investigate these massacres usually entailed little commitment. On the events in the region of Erquinvillers, for example, significant documentation had accumulated in the French official records by 1945, mostly in reports submitted by white French officers from the units that were destroyed there on the night of 9 to 10 June 1940. Had the service on war crimes research pursued access to this documentation in 1946, it might have been able, with the help of local witnesses and German documents captured by the Allies, to fill the gaps in Bousson's account and to gather enough evidence for a trial. Instead, the material languished in files of the French military archives that were closed to the public until the 1980s.⁶

⁵ Yves Frédéric Jaffré, *Les tribunaux d'exception, 1940–1962* (Paris: Nouvelles Editions Latines, 1963), 223–8.

⁶ Another example of a half-hearted inquiry is the investigation into the murder of the black Captain Charles N'Tchoréré (53rd RICMS). The French director of military justice in Paris had received a tip that N'Tchoréré, who was murdered in Airaines (Somme) on 7 June 1940, might have been one of the victims of the massacres near Lyon (hundreds of kilometers away from Airaines) on 19 and 20 June. It would not have been that difficult for a high military justice official to determine N'Tchoréré's unit and to find out where it actually did fight. See Archives départementales du Rhône, Lyon 3808 W 908 (Tchoréré).

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What motivated the German atrocities against black soldiers from the French army? In their study *Crimes of Obedience*, Herbert Kelman and Lee Hamilton discuss the concept of “sanctioned massacres,” defined as “acts of indiscriminate, ruthless, and often systematic mass violence, carried out by military or paramilitary personnel while engaged in officially sanctioned campaigns, the victims of which are defenseless and unresisting civilians, including old men, women, and children.”⁷ Obviously, civilians were not victimized by Wehrmacht atrocities against blacks in 1940, but soldiers who have surrendered and been disarmed are just as helpless as civilians. Therefore some of the observations that Kelman and Hamilton derive from sanctioned massacres committed by the U.S. Army in Vietnam also apply to the executions of black POWs in 1940.

The first criterion for a sanctioned massacre is authorization.⁸ It needs to be evident that violence against defenseless groups is, even if not ordered, *permitted* or *encouraged* by the authorities in charge. Although some perpetrators may be sadists, such predisposition is not necessary for massacres to occur on a larger scale if soldiers believe that the authorities condone excessive violence. As will be shown, the German commanders in 1940 had no orders to shoot black POWs, but they considered killing them a legitimate choice under certain circumstances, even though they knew that this contradicted the Geneva Convention. The men carrying out mass executions⁹ usually acted on the orders

⁷ Herbert C. Kelman and V. Lee Hamilton, *Crimes of Obedience: Toward a Social Psychology of Authority and Responsibility* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 12. For a confirming approach, see James Waller, *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁸ Kelman and Hamilton, *Crimes of Obedience*, 17.

⁹ An anonymous reviewer asked me to substitute “murder” or “killing” for “execution,” because “execution” implies that some legal procedure, no matter

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of their officers, and when they committed individual acts of violence against black POWs, they could justify their behavior with reference to the massacres ordered by officers. Violence against black POWs was never prosecuted by the Nazi authorities. The only known legal case concerns a soldier of a Waffen-SS unit who *refused* to shoot a wounded black POW. The soldier was acquitted of criminal charges by an SS court but expelled from the SS.¹⁰

A second criterion is routinization. Although moral scruples may be present when soldiers carry out a sanctioned massacre the first time, such scruples tend to vanish as the killing is repeated. Christopher Browning persuasively documented this process in a German reserve police battalion involved in the execution of Jews in Poland in 1942–43. Some men who had at first been revolted by their orders turned into hardened, ruthless killers with the help of lavish amounts of alcohol. In the words of social psychologist Ervin Staub, they practiced “learning by doing.”¹¹ In the Western campaign of 1940, the time span between the first and last executions of black POWs was relatively short (less than one month), but some units were repeatedly involved in massacres and thus likely to have experienced routinization.

how distorted, took place. I did not find this nuance relevant enough to adopt the suggestion. Most massacres of black soldiers probably occurred without any legal procedure, but they were a legitimate act of reprisal in the minds of many German officers. The decisive point is that all massacres were illegal. Whether a feigned legal procedure occurred or not seems secondary to me. I therefore use “execution,” “massacre,” and “murder” (as well as the related verbs) interchangeably.

¹⁰ Robert W. Kesting, “Blacks Under the Swastika: A Research Note,” *Journal of Negro History* 83 (1998): 95.

¹¹ Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Row, 1992); Ervin Staub, *The Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), xi.

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Moreover, we have to consider that the German army had already committed crimes against civilians and POWs in Poland in September 1939. While shooting civilian hostages and POWs the previous fall, a significant number of German soldiers fighting in France had gathered experience in mass executions. This must have made it easier for them to shoot black POWs.¹²

The last criterion for a sanctioned massacre is dehumanization. Soldiers are more willing to engage in systematic killing if they can strip their victims of human status, denying them an individual identity. Dehumanization occurs more readily if directed against groups who have experienced a long history of discrimination and hatred.¹³ As will be shown, German public discourse had stigmatized black men in arms from the colonial wars of the early 1900s right up to the Western campaign of 1940. They were depicted as cruel savages and animals – as illegitimate combatants not worthy of the legal protection granted to white soldiers.

While Kelman and Hamilton focus on the massacres of civilians, John Dower has analyzed the Pacific theater of the Second World War as a “race war,” a conflict in which racial stereotypes transformed individual enemies into a mass of dehumanized beings to whom moral principles did not apply. This view served to justify unspeakable cruelties against POWs and enemy civilians on both sides. Dower takes a cynical view by claiming that “atrocities follow war as the jackal follows the wounded beast.” The fallacy, he argues, lies not in ill-grounded rumors of enemy atrocities but in suggesting that such behavior is peculiar to the other side.¹⁴ Although symmetry of race hatred – and atrocities

¹² Alexander Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland: Blitzkrieg, Ideology, and Atrocity* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2003).

¹³ Kelman and Hamilton, *Crimes of Obedience*, 15 and 19.

¹⁴ John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 12.

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legitimized by it – does not apply to the encounters of Germans and black Africans in 1940, Dower's concept of race war is useful when looking at German perceptions of the black French soldiers.

The German Wehrmacht did conduct a race war against black Africans in the Western campaign of 1940, which, as far as white soldiers were concerned, seems to have followed more conventional patterns of confrontation. The operational diaries of German divisions specifically recorded the presence of black troops on the other side of the front, in some cases warning against their "mischievous" way of fighting.¹⁵ 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.

Germany's race war in 1940 primarily targeted blacks in the French army. The *Tirailleurs Sénégalais*, who formed the largest contingent of France's colonial troops, also included the vast majority of black troops in 1940. There were a few black soldiers from French Equatorial Africa, but recruiting efforts were much less organized there than in French West Africa. A group of black soldiers also came from small French Somalia, and some blacks were present in North African, Caribbean, and Madagascarian units. Soldiers from these units also became victims of German massacres in 1940. The Germans showed more respect toward North Africans with their generally lighter skin color, often hoping that these soldiers would desert and help Germany. During the battle near Erquinvillers, for example, Moroccan prisoners were ordered to gather with the white soldiers, not with the blacks

¹⁵ BA-MA, RH 26-4, vol. 16, page 1.

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who were shot.¹⁶ But there was some ambiguity. Not all Germans making selections for a massacre were able or willing to distinguish between North Africans and blacks. Even a small number of white French officers in charge of black soldiers were murdered.

That the German army conducted a race war against black Africans is not surprising given that it served a state whose ideology posited a hierarchy of races and whose police apparatus ruthlessly persecuted members of "lower" races. In the German campaign against Poland in 1939, some aspects of a race war had already become apparent. The Poles were considered to belong to a lower race than the Germans (in blatant denial of the widespread mixing between Slavic and Germanic populations that had taken place over more than a thousand years), and atrocities against Polish POWs did happen. The worst offenses in Poland, however, were carried out by the SS, not by the Wehrmacht, which on several occasions intervened against the abuses committed by the SS.¹⁷ During the German campaigns in Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, aspects of race war became predominant even in the Wehrmacht, which actively collaborated with the SS and whose leadership approved orders leading to an atrocious treatment of POWs. A powerful racist propaganda helped to justify the classification of the Soviet enemy and of Jewish civilians as subhumans.¹⁸ As we will see, the massacres of

¹⁶ Long, CHETOM 15 H 144, dossier 24ème RTS.

¹⁷ Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland*, 103–9.

¹⁸ Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Christian Gerlach, "Verbrechen deutscher Fronttruppen in Weißrußland 1941–1944. Eine Annäherung," in *Wehrmacht und Vernichtungspolitik. Militär im nationalsozialistischen System*, ed. Karl Heinrich Pohl (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999); Christian Streit, *Keine Kameraden. Die Wehrmacht und die sowjetischen Kriegsgefangenen 1941–1945* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1978); Christian Streit, "Die Behandlung der verwundeten sowjetischen Kriegsgefangenen," in *Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941–1944*, eds. Hannes Heer and Klaus Naumann (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1995); Jürgen Förster, "Operation Barbarossa as a War of Conquest