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0521857996 - Hitler's African Victims: The German Army Massacres of Black French Soldiers in 1940

Raffael Scheck

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## Hitler's African Victims

*The German Army Massacres of Black French  
Soldiers in 1940*

During its campaign against France in 1940, the German army massacred several thousand black POWs belonging to units drafted in France's West African colonies. This book documents these war crimes for the first time on the basis of extensive research in French and German archives. A massive Nazi propaganda offensive approved by Hitler, reviving traditional images of black soldiers as mutilating savages, formed the background for the massacres. The book shows, however, that the treatment of black French POWs was highly inconsistent and that abuses were often triggered by certain combat situations. It connects the massacres of black French soldiers to the debates on the Nazification of the German army during World War II and places them in the context of the treatment of nonwhite "illegitimate combatants" in colonial wars.

Raffael Scheck is Associate Professor for Modern European History at Colby College, where he has been teaching since 1994. He received his Ph.D. from Brandeis University in 1993 and his *Habilitation* from the University of Basel in 2003. He is the author of two other books, *Alfred von Tirpitz and German Right-Wing Politics, 1914–1930* (1998), and *Mothers of the Nation: Right-Wing Women in Weimar Germany* (2004). Professor Scheck has published numerous articles on German right-wing politics, Swiss funding for Hitler, and the history of childhood. His new project explores the experience of African prisoners in German POW camps during World War II.

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*Dedicated to the victims,  
to the French physicians and officers who tried to save the lives  
of black soldiers, and to those Germans who helped to prevent  
a massacre*

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RAFFAEL SCHECK

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## Preface

The idea for this project goes back to my time in graduate school. When I was preparing for my general examinations, I read in a French textbook on the Vichy period that a massacre of black soldiers had taken place outside of Lyon in 1940. No detail and no footnote were provided, and I did not pursue the matter further. After having written two books on German right-wing politics, however, I was looking for a new project and became interested in finding out more about the incident near Lyon and potentially other massacres of black soldiers. At the German Studies Association conference in 2001, I asked the eminent World War II scholar Gerhard Weinberg whether it was worth starting the project, and he very much encouraged me to do so. Since then, many scholars have given me advice and helped my project in a variety of ways: James L. Webb, Martin Thomas, Myron Echenberg, Nancy Lawler, Paul Gaujac, Antoine Champeau, André Siamundele, Alexander Rossino, Jürgen Förster, and James Quinn (in chronological order). Gerhard Weinberg provided helpful criticism of the project, as did another (anonymous) reviewer for Ohio University Press. Myron Echenberg and Nancy Lawler published the most instructive books related to my subject, and they both answered some special questions for me. I want to thank particularly my friend and colleague James L. Webb, who teaches African and world history at Colby College



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and shared his great expertise on French West Africa. His interest in my project has been as precious to me as his advice. The University of Basel allowed me to present my ideas on my topic as part of my inaugural lecture in January 2004. Paul Gaujac, former director of the military archives in Vincennes, amicably shared his rich insights about French military history. Two anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press offered much-valued suggestions for improving the manuscript. To my dismay, they discovered that my English contains not only the Germanisms that are to be expected from a German expressing himself in English but also Gallicisms that have crept from my research into my writing. Cathy Stankard and the copy editor at Cambridge University Press, Sara Black, gave the manuscript a close look and provided helpful corrections and suggestions. I also want to thank Gillian Berchowitz, senior editor at Ohio University Press, for soliciting extremely insightful reviews for my manuscript, offering me a contract in record time, and, especially, for understanding why I did not sign it. My children, Anselm and Adelia, deserve thanks for letting me participate in their amazing development and for taking my mind off the sad matters covered in this book, and my wife, Lori, has been a wonderful and most supportive partner. Melodies from our duets for violin and cello often resounded pleasantly in my head while I was writing this book.

I have been fortunate to work at an institution that values and supports not only my passion for teaching but also my dedication to research. This book would not have been possible without the support from the Social Science Division at Colby College, which gave me a travel grant for this project every year from 2001 to 2004. Moreover, Colby's Interlibrary Loan department under the leadership of Kathy Corridan was helpful beyond the call of duty. They provided me with more than two hundred books and

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articles for this project. Jackie Tanner from computer services gave me advice on how to draw the map.

The staffs of the French military archives in Vincennes and of its German counterpart, the Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv in Freiburg im Breisgau, were admirably helpful. Their expertise and flexibility greatly facilitated my research. The staff of the CHETOM at the Musée des troupes de marine in Fréjus made me feel as if I were part of a large family. Colonel Antoine Champeau shared with me his great insights into French historiography of the Second World War, let me borrow a pile of books that I would otherwise have found only with great difficulty, and was a most generous host. Annie Domenech was always helpful by providing me with documents and giving me rides, which saved me from endless walks across the countryside on the scorching streets of an extraordinarily hot Provençal summer in an area with erratic public transportation. The departmental and communal archives I contacted in France were almost all extremely helpful and generous, belying the negative rumors about work in French archives that I had heard from colleagues. Some of these archives sent me copies of all the materials from their holdings pertinent to my subject. Véronique Blanchard at the town hall of Clamecy and Déborah Lutignier at the Société scientifique et artistique de Clamecy searched out important documents and gave me helpful advice. Janette Colas, a former member of the *Résistance*, met with me and shared some of the documents in her private collection. Miriam Lavie from the archives of the department Nièvre helped me get most of the photos. I am particularly indebted to Mr. Francis Alphonse, the mayor of Aubigny (near Amiens), who wrote me a long letter about the battles in his village and sent me copies from manuscripts and photos of the cemetery that contains the graves of black soldiers killed there at the end of May 1940. The German Military Research Institute in Potsdam patiently answered my inquiries about the positioning

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of German troops in May and June 1940. Finally, I thank the editors of the *Journal of Modern History* and of the *German Studies Review* for allowing me to use material from articles I published in their journals.

It is possible that more references to black soldiers could be found in the German records. On the advice of colleagues who warned me not to search for a needle in a haystack, I did not venture into the extensive collections of private letters from German soldiers (*Feldpostbriefe*); however, I did find some informative letters in the German military archives that were collected right after the campaign and, in some cases, after the war, as a contribution to a future history of a unit. Nonetheless, I am confident that the rich sources I examined offer a representative image of the attitudes of German officers and soldiers toward black soldiers in 1940. Given that explicit references to executions are extremely rare in the German documents, it is unlikely that the sources I did not consider contain much information about specific massacres. In France, it is possible that some local archives hold more materials about German crimes against African soldiers, but I have explored the most promising places. In any case, additional local information would hardly contradict my general points and conclusions.

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Abbreviations

AK	Armeekorps (army corps)
BA-MA	Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv (German military archives)
CHETOM	Centre d'histoire et d'études des troupes d'outre-mer (historical center for research on overseas troops)
DIC	Division d'infanterie coloniale (colonial infantry division)
ID	Infanterie-Division (infantry division)
NCO	noncommissioned officer
POWs	prisoners of war
PzD	Panzer-Division (tank division)
RIC	Régiment d'infanterie coloniale (colonial infantry regiment)
RICMS	Régiment d'infanterie coloniale mixte sénégalais (mixed Senegalese [West African] colonial infantry regiment)
RTS	Régiment de tirailleurs sénégalais (Senegalese [West African] infantry regiment)
SD	Sicherheitsdienst (security division of the SS)
SHAT	Service historique de l'Armée de terre (French army archives)
SS	Schutzstaffel (protection squad)