ONE

INTRODUCTION

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The Military Experiences of Ordinary Africans in World War II

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Ordinary African men and women are largely missing from grand narratives of the Second World War. Most histories of the global conflict pay scant attention to Africa and Africans because they focus primarily on the European and Asian theaters, but this lacuna is also due in part to the imperial powers' explicit efforts to downplay and obscure the extent to which they relied on their African subjects to fight and win the war. Faced with severe manpower shortages as the Axis overran much of Europe and Asia between 1939 and 1942, British and French military planners desperately looked to their African colonies to supply combat troops, military laborers, and specialist units. As the tide of the war turned in their favor after 1943, the British and Free French used African formations to augment their overextended forces. Their goal was to "win the peace" by restoring their national honor and reclaiming lost imperial territories before they could fall into the American or Soviet spheres of influence. Mindful that the brutality of the Axis version of imperialism and the egalitarian promises of the Atlantic Charter had made formal empires less reputable after the war, the African imperial powers had good reason to understate the extent to which they had drawn subject populations into a war that did not directly concern them. African soldiers, and the women who interacted with them, are therefore usually consigned to the footnotes of the official histories of the Second World War.

In reality, ordinary Africans were deeply involved in every major theater of the war. Indeed, colonial African troops played central roles in two of the major conflicts that historians conventionally date as preceding the formal outbreak of the conflict in 1939. The Italian forces that invaded Ethiopia in 1935 included approximately 40,000 Somalis, Eritreans, and Libyans.[1] One year later, Francisco Franco began his attempted coup d'état against

[1] Harold Nelson, *Somalia: A Country Study*, 3rd ed. (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1982), 24.

the Spanish Republican government by sending Moroccan soldiers from the Armée d'Afrique to Spain. Some 62,000 Moroccans had fought on the Fascist side by the end of the civil war, and British and French military observers estimated that they suffered a staggering 40 percent casualty rate.[2] Italy and Spain were both minor African powers, but their relatively inexpensive and expendable colonial forces gave Benito Mussolini and Franco the means to pursue the imperial ambitions that helped touch off the Second World War in Europe.

By comparison, French African soldiers played a much more central role in making France a great power. More significantly, French strategists in both world wars relied on the Armée d'Afrique, the army of French North Africa, and Troupes Coloniales, commonly known as the *Tirailleurs Sénégalais*, drawn from the West and Equatorial Africa federations, Madagascar, and Indochina as a counterweight to the much larger German Army. In the spring of 1940, they deployed twelve North African and eight other colonial divisions (roughly 100,000 Africans in all) against the Germans in western France. In practice, French generals broke down many of these larger formations into companies and integrated them with metropolitan French units. Consequently, the Tirailleurs suffered heavy losses when the Nazi blitzkrieg broke through the French lines and forced the leaders of the Third Republic to request an armistice. Records of this chaotic period are incomplete, but it appears that Germans killed approximately 17,500 African soldiers and took 15,000 more as prisoners of war (POWs) in the months of May and June 1940.[3] Marshall Philippe Petain's Vichy regime repatriated some Tirailleurs to Africa, but it sent the more intact African regiments to garrison French colonies in North Africa and Syria. Moreover, many Tirailleurs continued to languish in hastily constructed camps in southern France. Petain's government did little to look after the African POWs who often experienced brutal and humiliating treatment at the hands of their Nazi capturers.[4]

In West Africa, French imperial officials moved solidly into the Vichy camp after the Royal Navy bombed the French fleet at the Algerian port of Mers el-Kebir to keep it out of German hands and the Free French attacked Dakar. Seeking to expand their West African garrison and lay the groundwork for the invasion of Britain's West African colonies, Vichy commanders impressed tens of thousands more Africans into the Tirailleurs

[2] Gervase Clarence-Smith, "The impact of the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War on Portuguese and Spanish Africa," *Journal of African History*, 26 (1985), 324.

[3] Anthony Clayton, *France, Soldiers and Africa* (London: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1988), 6–7, 124; Myron Echenberg, *Colonial Conscripts: The Tirailleurs Senegalais in French West Africa, 1857–1960* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1991), 88; Gregory Mann, *Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 111.

[4] See Scheck, Chapter 22, this volume.

Sénégalais.[5] Similarly, North African officials continued to conscript men for units of the Armée d'Afrique.[6] Ironically, Charles de Gaulle's generals did much the same thing in French Equatorial Africa. Most western-focused histories of the Second World War overlook the reality that Brazzaville was the de facto capital of Free France until the Allied invasion of North Africa in 1942 and that the bulk of de Gaulle's forces in the early years of the war consisted of conscripted Equatorial African Tirailleurs. Very few African soldiers in the Vichy and Free French forces had a direct stake in the ideological divisions that split the French empire and put them on opposing sides in the global war.

The same could be said for the Nigerians, Gold Coasters, Sierra Leoneans, and Gambians who joined the Royal West Africa Frontier Force (RWAFF), which was Britain's West African colonial army. Alarmed by threat of a Vichy attack, British military planners rapidly expanded the RWAFF from a collection of lightly armed independent companies intended for colonial self-defense into a modern military formation. Although the French invasion never materialized, the British War Office used the expanded RWAFF to shore up the empire in Africa and Asia.

This was also the case in Northeast Africa where the West Africans were part of a larger African and Indian force fighting to drive the Italians from the Horn of Africa. Caught off guard by the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, British strategists launched a crash mobilization campaign to upgrade their colonial forces in East Africa and the Sudan.[7] Nevertheless, they were still unprepared for Italy's entry into the war in 1940, powerless to prevent Mussolini from threatening Red Sea communication routes by overrunning British Somaliland.

To meet this threat, the War Office took direct control of the King's African Rifles (KAR) and followed the West African template in transforming it into frontline infantry units. Where the interwar KAR consisted of six small, territorially based battalions drawn from Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika (now Tanzania), and Nyasaland (now Malawi), it too expanded markedly under metropolitan control. The Northern Rhodesia Regiment and the Somaliland Camel Corps – similar to KAR battalions – were also part of the imperial forces confronting the Italians. As in West Africa, the War Office raised an extensive array of armored car, artillery, medical, educational, transportation, engineering, and other specialist units that allowed

[5] Estimates for the numbers of men conscripted in French West Africa between 1940 and 1942 range from 25,000 to 125,000. Nancy Ellen Lawler, *Soldiers of Misfortune: Ivoirien Tirailleurs of World War II* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992), 133–14; Echenberg, *Colonial Conscripts*, 88.

[6] See Maghraoui, Chapter 5, this volume.

[7] K. D. D. Henderson, "The Sudan and the Abyssinian campaign," *Journal of the Royal African Society*, 42 (1943), 14; Ahmad al-Awad Muhammad, *The Sudan Defence Force: Origin and Role, 1925–1955* (Khartoum: Institute of African and Asian Studies, c. 1980), 80.

these colonial African battalions to operate as brigades and divisions. Kenya served as the staging area for the liberation of Northeast Africa in 1939. To provide support for the frontline combat troops, the Kenyan government raised two uniformed labor units, which it called pioneer battalions. Recognizing the need to ensure that civilian laborers did not come under enemy fire, imperial planners worked with Kenyan officials to establish the much larger East Africa Military Labour Service (EAMLS) one year later.

Units of the South Africa's Union Defence Force (UDF) formed the core of the forces that invaded Italian East Africa from Kenya. Brushing aside the opposition Nationalist Party's call to remain neutral, Prime Minister Jan Christiaan Smuts took the dominion into the conflict on the side of the Allies in 1939. Nevertheless, Smuts's generals took pains to ensure that wartime mobilization did not disrupt institutionalized racial segregation in South Africa. Consequently, they refused to recruit non-Europeans into the UDF and shunted Africans into the unarmed Native Military Labour Corps (NMLC). The NMLC's officers, who were drawn from the South African Native Affairs Department, were often as concerned with upholding the Union's segregationalist ideals as they were with defeating the Axis. The authorities in Namibia raised a similar unarmed and segregated African labor unit that joined the men of the NMLC on guard duty (often armed only with spears) and menial labor assignments throughout southern Africa. Nonetheless, South African racial sensibilities did not prevent the UDF combat units from serving alongside RWAFF and KAR battalions in two integrated African divisions during the invasion of Italian East Africa.

Indeed, allowing for the presence of two divisions of the Indian Army, the East African campaign, which began in February 1941, was a pan-African conflict that included units of the Sudanese Defence Force, a Free French detachment of Chadian Tirailleurs, elements of the regular Ethiopian army and pro-British Ethiopian "Patriots," and even a small Belgian Congolese combat detachment and medical unit. Belgian officials insisted that elements of their colonial army, the Force Publique, take a nominal part in the operation to strike back against the Axis after the Germans overran their homeland. They also deployed a brigade to Nigeria in 1941 to guard against a potential Vichy attack. Additionally, Lord Hailey, the head of the British Military and Economic Mission in Stanleyville (now Kinshasa), arranged for the No. 10 Belgian Casualty Clearing Station to be attached directly to the British East African forces as a way of keeping the Congo firmly in the Allied camp.[8]

These imperial units faced an Italian force more than 250,000 strong that was roughly 71 percent African. While the opposing forces were equally

[8] Bruce Fetter, "Changing war aims: Central Africa's role, 1940–41, as seen from Leopoldville," *African Affairs*, 87 (1988), 388–9; Kenya governor to general officer commanding East Africa, GH 4/690/1, November 27, 1945, Kenya National Archives (hereafter KNA), Nairobi.

matched in terms of weaponry and materiel, one of the keys to the relatively easy Allied victory was the fact that Britain's African colonial formations were far superior to their Italian counterparts in terms of leadership, training, and morale. Most of the Somalis, Ethiopians, and Eritreans wearing Italian uniforms were unwilling and restive conscripts who had no sympathy for Mussolini's grand imperial designs in Africa. Consequently, many Italian units rebelled or melted away during the fighting, and by July 1941, the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa was in Allied hands. British military and civil officials took the superior performance of their African troops as an affirmation of their superiority as an imperial power, but there was no reason for the Africans in either colonial army to fight each other apart from their different uniforms and officers. Moreover, the British and Italian officers made it clear that race trumped wartime animosities by socializing with each other on equal terms after the Italian surrender.[9] Similarly, many African soldiers angrily noted that Italian POWs lived better than they did.

With Northeast Africa secure in 1942, British military planners looked for ways to use African resources and manpower in the much more strategically important Mediterranean theater. Pressed by Axis victories in Libya and western Egypt that threatened the Suez Canal, they faced a serious manpower shortage after the loss of considerable numbers of imperial troops in the fall of Greece and Crete and the redeployment of Australian units to defend British interests in Asia after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The South African formations that had fought in Ethiopia replaced some of the Australians on the frontlines, but imperial strategists looked primarily to British Africa for uniformed military laborers to provide logistical support for the Allied Forces operating in North Africa and the Middle East. Unlike their counterparts in the uniquely distinct colonial infantry regiments, the Africans who served in this capacity joined a much larger metropolitan military unit. Formed at the start of the war to support the British forces fighting in France, the Royal Pioneer Corps expanded to draw on the manpower of the empire. By 1942, there were pioneers from Africa, Cyprus, Palestine, India, Mauritius, and the Seychelles serving in the Middle East, but civil officials in Africa insisted that their "natives" could not be treated as regular British troops. Consequently, the Directorate of Pioneers and Labour for the Middle East Forces created the African Auxiliary Pioneer Corps (AAPC) to accommodate colonial sensibilities.

While there were West African pioneer companies, the bulk of the AAPC came from Kenya, Uganda, and the High Commission Territories (HCTs)

[9] G. Gifford, "The Sudan at war: The Composite Infantry Battalion of the Eastern Arab Corps, Sudan Defence Force, the Abyssinian Campaign," *Journal of the Royal African Society*, 42 (1943), 164; Neil Orpen, *South African Forces in World War Two* (Cape Town: Purnell, 1971), 342; "History of the war in the Northern Frontier District, 1 June–31 August 1940," PC NFD 4/1/11, KNA, Nairobi. See also Barrera, Chapter 14, this volume.

of Bechuanaland (now Botswana), Basutoland (now Lesotho), and Swaziland. In the East African case, Kenyan and Ugandan officials recruited most of their companies from men already serving in the EAMLS. In southern Africa, British district officers and African elites in the HCTs welcomed the opportunity for their men to enlist in an imperial formation that provided a welcome alternative to the degrading and unpopular South African Native Military Labour Service. Ever mindful that the South Africa government hoped to incorporate them into the Union, the Sotho, Swazis, and Tswana hoped to maintain their autonomy by placing the British empire in their debt. Thus, the "native authorities" in these protectorates strongly supported the imperial recruiting efforts.

The AAPC's primary mission was to provide logistical support for the British Eighth Army's campaign against the Germans and Italians in North Africa. African pioneer companies repaired tanks, assembled trucks, served as dockworkers and built railway lines, roads, and water pipelines. While the AAPC companies had some combat training, their officers never actually expected them to fight because their official role was to work behind the front lines. This was an unrealistic assumption in the Egyptian and Libyan deserts, where the fortunes of war shifted constantly in the first half of 1942. In 1942, the Axis forces captured several hundred East African pioneers after they overran the fortified Libyan port of Tobruk. Later that month, forty more East Africans burned to death when the Germans bombed the oil depot at the Abu Hagag railway station.[10] Given the intensity of the fighting, it was hardly surprising that several East African companies broke under the stress of the British retreat back into Egypt. More than 200 pioneers ended up in first Italian and then German POW camps where they often suffered the same brutal treatment experienced by the Tirailleurs who fell into German hands after the fall of France.[11]

While most of the Eighth Army was in disarray during this difficult period, colonial political concerns placed additional strain on East Africans. Most of their officers were former members of the colonial administration who lacked military experience and insisted that the AAPC follow "native custom" to ensure that the pioneers did not become "detribalized" during their military service. Morale understandably sank as the East Africans realized that this meant that their rations and service conditions were decidedly inferior to other imperial units. Similar tensions simmered in the South African forces where the civil authorities insisted on digging up the graves of white

[10] Kenyan secretariat minute, July 28, 1942, MD 4/5/66/24; Report by Lt. J. E. V. Ross, welfare officer, July 27, 1942, MD 4/5/66/26a, KNA. Nairobi.

[11] Kenyan chief native commissioner, minute, 1943, MD 4/5/66/38, KNA, Nairobi; Private Pherison Batton, Camp 85/VI to native commissioner (Chiradzulu, Nyasaland), January, 1943, S45 3/2/2, National Archives of Malawi (hereafter NAM), Zomba; Bildad Kaggia, *Roots of Freedom,* 1921–1963 (Nairobi: East Africa Publishing House, 1975), 56.

soldiers who were buried alongside members of the NMLC.[12] The West African and High Commission Territory AAPC companies missed most of the fighting in the months before the British victory at El Alamein in August 1942, and therefore had a better reputation than their East African counterparts. Nonetheless, the pioneer experience during this difficult time demonstrated that colonial racial sensibilities undermined the military effectiveness of Britain's African troops.

French African soldiers in the Middle East served under equally difficult conditions. There was a Tirailleur battalion with the Free French forces attached to the Eighth Army in Egypt, and Tirailleurs fought on both sides when the Allies seized Vichy-controlled Syria in June 1941. Knowing nothing of the larger political divisions that led one French force to go to war against another, Ivoirians in the Vichy garrison were shocked to find that their attackers were French Equatorial Africans. As Namble Silue told Nancy Lawler: "De Gaulle's men attacked us. The Camerounians attacked us. We were amazed because they weren't Germans. They were black. Why were they attacking us?"[13] When Silue and his comrades surrendered, de Gaulle's generals simply dressed most of them in new uniforms and incorporated them into the Free French forces on the assumption that conscripted Africans were not entitled to choose sides in the war.

This is how large numbers of French African subjects again found themselves fighting on European soil as the Allies rolled up the Nazi empire in the later years of the war. Although they are largely missing from the grand French narrative of self-liberation from the Germans, colonial troops from North, West, and Equatorial Africa made up a significant portion of the Free French forces fighting in Italy and then France.[14] Seeking to obscure the role that Africans played in freeing France from Nazi rule, de Gaulle ordered the *blanchissement* (whitening) of the Second Free French armored division before the liberation of Paris in August 1944 by replacing Africans with members of the French resistance. As winter approached he further obscured the role that non-European troops had played in the liberation by redeploying some 20,000 African soldiers to southern France.[15] The Free French government had every intention of reclaiming the French empire after the war and therefore did not want to acknowledge that it owed any debt to its imperial subjects.

[12] Ashley Jackson, "African soldiers and imperial authorities: Tensions and unrest during the service of High Commission Territories soldiers in the British army, 1941–46," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 25 (1999), 648–9; Kenneth Grundy, *Soldiers Without Politics: Blacks in the South African Armed Forces* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 81.

[13] Lawler, *Soldiers of Misfortune*, 143.

[14] See Maghraoui, Chapter 5, this volume.

[15] Anthony Beevor and Artemis Cooper, *Paris after the Liberation, 1944–1949*, 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 31; Lawler, *Soldiers of Misfortune*, 179.

Most British imperial officials opposed using colonial troops in Europe for just this reason. This was particularly true in East Africa where the colonial governments barred the War Office from using their AAPC companies in the 1943 Italian campaign. Citing concerns over cold weather and promises to keep African troops in Africa, they rejected the Middle East Command's proposals to free up European manpower by assigning African pioneers to support roles in Italy. In opposing this "dilution" of regular British Army formations with East African pioneers, a senior Kenyan official serving with the Middle East forces made it clear that postwar political concerns trumped military necessity: "Someone has to do the manual work. If we allow ourselves to think for a moment that manual work is in any sense derogatory, what is to happen to these thousands of Pioneers after the war? . . . Their living must for many years be on the land, either their own or a European farm."[16]

The HCTs, which did not have to answer to politically connected settlers, were more willing to allow their pioneers to serve alongside British troops. The Swaziland government bowed to the wishes of Paramount Chief Sobhuza II in insisting that Swazi troops had to stay together, but Sotho and Tswana soldiers became antiaircraft gunners, smoke generator operators, firemen, sentries, and frontline support troops in metropolitan units throughout the Middle East and Italy. Sotho troops serving with a heavy artillery battalion of the Essex Regiment even wore its regimental badge. The dilution experiment was largely successful, but the South African parliament was so alarmed that racial mixing might threaten the racial order in the Union that it passed a law making it illegal for African noncommissioned officers to give orders to European privates.[17]

British colonial governments in East and West Africa met the War Office's demands for African manpower and avoided these thorny sorts of racial problems by only allowing their troops to serve in Asia where, in theory, they would be exposed to fewer contaminating influences. In October 1939, the inspector general of the KAR and RWAFF made plans for the deployment of African troops to defend British interests in the Middle and Far East, and after the Italian surrender in Ethiopia the commander-in-chief of imperial forces in India formally requested African reinforcements.[18] The KAR

[16] Lt. Colonel E. L. Brooke Anderson to chief secretary, East African Governors' Conference, October 16, 1942, MD 4/5/137/125a, KNA, Nairobi.

[17] R. A. R. Bent, *Ten Thousand Men of Africa: The Story of the Bechuanaland Pioneers and Gunners, 1941–1946* (London: HMS Stationery Office for Bechuanaland Government, 1952), 89; Brian Gray, *Basuto Soldiers in Hitler's War* (Maseru: Mojira Printing Works for Basuto Government, 1953), 63; Ashley Jackson, "Supplying the war: The High Commission Territories' military-logistical contribution in the Second World War," *Journal of Military History*, 66 (2002), 652.

[18] Hubert Moyse-Bartlett, *The King's African Rifles* (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1956), 480; commander-in-chief (India), to War Office, December 1, 1941, CO 968/11/5, The National Archives (TNA), Kew.