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978-1-107-05681-7 - French Colonial Soldiers in German Captivity during World War II

Raffael Scheck

Excerpt

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Introduction

A SOLDIER'S STORY

In the evening of June 16, 1940, a reconnaissance regiment of the ninth German tank division appeared at the eastern gates of the French city La Charité-sur-Loire. Paris had fallen two days earlier, and the French army was preparing a new defensive position on the Loire River. Establishing bridgeheads on the left side of the Loire was therefore a high German priority. After disarming 500 French soldiers in La Charité, the reconnaissance regiment moved to capture the bridge linking the town with a suburb on a small island in the Loire. A French sapper team, however, blew up an arch of the bridge when German motorcyclists appeared, and thirty French soldiers opened fire from the island. In several hours of combat, the Germans drove these soldiers away and captured a small, still intact bridge between the island and the mainland west of La Charité.¹ The reconnaissance regiment guarded the bridges without incident until it was relieved by advance sections of the 205th Infantry Division

¹ Wireless messages Ninth Tank Division to XIVth Army Corps, June 16, at 20:15, 20:35, and 22:10, in Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg im Breisgau (BA-MA), RH 24-14/21; wireless message of XIVth Army Corps to Gruppe Kleist, June 17, 1940, at 16:45, in BA-MA, RH 21-1/27; wireless message Pioneer Battalion 60 to Generalkommando XIVth Army Corps, June 18, 1940 (no time), in BA-MA, RH 24-14/21; “Der Feldzug im Westen,” entry of June 16, 1940, in BA-MA, RH 27-9:76. See also the unofficial history of the Gruppe Kleist, “Mit dem K durch Frankreich,” in BA-MA, RH 21-1/382, which claims that the bridgehead established in La Charité on June 16 was the first German Loire crossing (p. 73). IXth Army Corps, war diary (Kriegstagebuch) no. 3, June 5 to July 1, 1940, in BA-MA, RH 24-9/18, entry for June 18; Generalkommando IXth Army Corps to Armeecoberkommando 2, June 18, 1940. Eugène Roger, *La Charité-sur-Loire. Une ville dans l'histoire* (Raveau: n. p., 2006). See also Les Amis de La Charité-sur-Loire, ed. *La Charité. Place de guerre* (Clamecy: Laballery, 2002), 149–51, with a photo of the German repairs of the bridge.

in the evening of June 18.² These men immediately tried to take possession of a bridge over a canal two kilometers west of La Charité, but they encountered resistance and took the bridge only after a second attack the following morning.³ Meanwhile, other soldiers of the 205th Infantry Division discovered at the station of La Charité a train with top-secret French documents, which Hitler used in a July 19, 1940, speech to claim that France, Britain, and Belgium had planned a joint attack on Germany. In the evening of June 19, German construction specialists made the destroyed arch of the bridge passable again. Fighting near La Charité had ceased by that time.⁴

The French defenders in this sector were dispersed soldiers collected at the bridge of La Charité just before the arrival of the Germans and a small group of reinforcements from a military school in Bourges, a town farther west.⁵ Some of the soldiers from Bourges were black Africans. One of them reported that the Germans, after gathering the prisoners, selected the black soldiers and lined them up against a wall to massacre them. The black soldiers briefly conferred and agreed that they would die shouting “may France live” and “may black Africa live!” Fortunately, a French lieutenant intervened, pointing out that the Germans themselves had congratulated the French for their spirited defense, and he convinced the Germans not to carry out the massacre. The black soldier who reported the incident after the war was Léopold Sédar Senghor from Senegal, at that time a teacher at a high school in Saint Maur-des-Fossés outside Paris and already a renowned thinker who had published articles and speeches about black identity (*négritude*).⁶

² “Kriegstagebuch Gruppe von Kleist,” in BA-MA, RH 21-1/22, entry of June 16; IXth Army Corps, war diary (Kriegstagebuch) no. 3, June 5 to July 1, 1940, in BA-MA, RH 24-9/18, entries for June 15 and 17; Armeeoberkommando 2, “Kriegstagebuch Westfeldzug,” in BA-MA, RH 20-2/56, entries for June 17 and 18, 1940.

³ “Fortsetzung des Tätigkeitsberichts vom 5.6.40 für die Zeit vom 4. bis 24.6.40,” in BA-MA, RH 24-9/145, entry for June 18; Armeeoberkommando 2, Anlagen (Befehle), BA-MA, RH 20-2/64, Abendmeldung, June 19, 1940, at 16:30, and IXth Army Corps, war diary (Kriegstagebuch) no. 3, June 5 to July 1, 1940, in BA-MA, RH 24-9/18, entry for June 19.

⁴ “Ic-Abendmeldung der 15. Div. vom 20.6.1940” and “Ic-Abendmeldung vom 20.6.1940,” both in “Taktische Meldungen an Armee 10.6.-1.7.1940,” in BA-MA, RH 24-9/22. The published history of the 205th Infantry Division in France mentions the discovery of the documents and the repair of the bridge: *Vom Rhein zur Loire. Erinnerungsheft einer Felddivision* (205.), (n. p. [1940]). See also “Übergänge über die Loire im Abschnitt der 2. Armee,” in BA-MA, RH 20-2/64.

⁵ “Compte rendu des opérations 13 mai-25 juin” [XXIIIrd Army Corps], entries for June 16–20, 1940, in SHD, 30 N 228; “Compte-rendu des opérations auxquelles a pris part le 23e C. A. entre le 13 mai et le 25 juin,” SHD, 29 N 220; “Groupe d’armées no. 4, Instruction Générale,” June 18, 1940, and “Compte rendu de mission” [4th Army Group], June 17, 1940, 6 AM, both in SHD, 28 N 67; “Journal de Marche et d’Opérations” [4th Army Group], entry of June 17, 1940, in SHD, 28 N 66; “Compte rendu journalier du 16 juin” and “Compte rendu du 17 juin 1940” [4th Army], in SHD, 29 N 201; “Opérations de la IVème Armée du 6 au 25 juin 1940,” in SHD, 29 N 187.

⁶ Léopold Sédar Senghor, *La poésie de l’action. Conversations avec Mohamed Aziza* (Paris: Éditions Stock, 1980), 82–3.

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After capture, Senghor was sent to several POW camps in northern and northeastern France. He suffered in these overcrowded and undersupplied initial camps, but he was spared the harsh transfer to Germany that 40,000 prisoners from the French empire had to endure in June and July 1940 before most of them were sent back to France on Hitler's orders. Not much more than an anecdote is known about the first four months of Senghor's captivity: According to a white French prisoner, a German guard approached him and began rubbing his finger against Senghor's skin, trying to see if the dark color stuck to his finger. The guard was dumbstruck when Senghor said in German, "*Nein, das ist nicht Kohle!*" ("No, this is not coal!").⁷ Senghor was formally registered as a POW in the camp of Poitiers, Frontstalag 230, in October 1940. (Frontstalag was the term for German POW camps near the front and in occupied countries.)

From this moment on, an anonymous report by Senghor from June 1942, which I identified, gives a fuller picture of his captivity experience.⁸ In Poitiers, Senghor experienced a brutal camp commander who once ordered a guard to shoot and kill a hungry black prisoner who had "stolen" a potato. The food rations were insufficient and of poor quality (rutabagas and half-rotten potatoes), and the prisoners – predominantly French colonial soldiers – were housed in drafty hangars without heat in a camp that turned into a vast swamp after every rain. Senghor described these conditions in the poem "Camp 1940" that he published in the collection *Hosties noires* (1948):

It is a huge village of mud and branches, a village crucified
By two pestilential ditches.
Hatred and hunger ferment there in the torpor of a deadly summer.
It is a large village surrounded by the immobile spite of barbed wire
A large village under the tyranny of four machine guns
Always ready to fire.
And the noble warriors beg for cigarette butts,
Fight with dogs over bones, and argue among themselves
Like imaginary cats and dogs.⁹

⁷ François Szyłowicz to author, e-mail, June 16, 2011.

⁸ "Note pour le cabinet," by Dr. Bonnaud, June 27, 1942, in AN, F9, 2345, with the appended report, as well as "Compte-rendu de captivité établi par un prisonnier indigène récemment libéré," July 7, 1942," also in SHD, 2 P 70, "Rapports de prisonniers de guerre rapatriés sur leur détention dans les camps 1941–1943," Dossier II: 1942–1943. The report was published in full in *Jeune Afrique*, 51, no. 2637, July 24, 2011, pp. 25–30, Benoît Hopquin, "Un document inédit de Léopold Sédar Senghor," *Le Monde*, June 17, 2011; "Senghor: Le manuscrit inconnu," *Jeune Afrique*, July 24, 2011, 22–31. See also Hopquin, "Un document inédit de Léopold Sédar Senghor"; "Senghor: Le manuscrit inconnu," 22–31.

⁹ Léopold Sédar Senghor, *The Collected Poetry*, trans. Melvin Dixon (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1991), 57 (English); Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Poésie complète. Édition critique* (Paris: CNRS éditions, 2007), 154 (French).

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The only bright spots for Senghor and the other colonial prisoners were the packages and letters they received from French women who had agreed to serve as *marraines de guerre* (war godmothers) for many of the colonial soldiers. Senghor praised them in his captivity report: “Almost everyone has a *marraine* who spoils him as much as possible. French women, through their selfless generosity and their courage, have been the best propagandists for France.”¹⁰ One of the poems of *Hosties noires*, “Femmes de France” (“Women of France”), is dedicated to Jacqueline Cahour, Senghor’s own *marraine* and the sister in law of his friend Georges Pompidou, later the president of France (1969–74). The poem deems the *marraines* “The only support during days of overwhelming pressure, / Days of panic and despair” and concludes, “For them [the soldiers] you were mothers, for them you were sisters. / Flames of France, flowers of France, bless you!”¹¹

Yet, Senghor soon noticed changes in the camp. A new German commander arrived in February 1941 and began to work hard to improve the conditions. The abuses stopped, the prisoners received heatable wooden barracks, the food rations became larger and better, and the installation of drainage pipes took care of the mud. The commander, after finding Senghor reading Plato, appointed him secretary in the camp administration, one of the most desirable jobs for a prisoner. Senghor enrolled in an advanced German course to perfect his German (there is a famous photo of him with some other prisoners displaying a sign “*Deutschkurs für Fortgeschrittene*” [German Course for Advanced Students]¹²). He learned German well enough to read Goethe and other German authors in the original language, which made him appreciate the contrast between the cosmopolitanism of classical German literature and the murderous parochialism of Nazism. Senghor later recalled that the guards felt much sympathy for the prisoners. He even befriended one of them, Walter Pichl, a high school teacher from Vienna who was, like Senghor, interested in West African languages. Pichl made sound recordings of West African prisoners and listened to them together with Senghor. While on leave, Pichl brought Pompidou manuscripts of Senghor, probably including the poem “Camp 1940” quoted above. As president of Senegal (1960–1980), Senghor renewed his friendship with Pichl, whom the German military police arrested for unknown reasons in late 1944. After Pichl escaped and returned to Vienna, the Soviets abducted him, holding him in a labor camp until 1955, again for unknown reasons. In 1974, Pichl went to Senegal at Senghor’s invitation to pursue his linguistic studies.¹³

¹⁰ “Senghor: Le manuscrit inconnu,” 26.

¹¹ Senghor, *The Collected Poetry*, 58–9; Senghor, *Poésie complète. Édition critique*, 156.

¹² János Riesz, “Léopold Sédar Senghor in deutscher Kriegsgefangenschaft,” in *Zwischen Charleston und Stechschritt. Schwarze im Nationalsozialismus*, ed. Peter Martin and Christine Alonzo (Hamburg: Dölling and Galitz, 2004), 598.

¹³ Lena Hanusch, “Walter Pichl (1912–1982),” in “Die Geschichte der Afrikanistik in Österreich,” www.afrikanistik.at/personen/pichl_walter.htm (last visited May 24, 2012). Pichl’s last name

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The changes in the camp of Poitiers came to the attention of the French institution charged with inspecting all camps with French prisoners of war, the Diplomatic Service for Prisoners of War (*Service diplomatique des prisonniers de guerre*, SDPG, also called the Scapini Mission after its director, Ambassador Georges Scapini). The camp inspections conducted by the Scapini Mission on April 3 and July 17, 1941, confirmed the improvements in Poitiers. While 48 prisoners had died of disease between January 5 and April 3, 1941, no prisoner died from April to July. In April, the camp hospital had 163 patients (including 76 with tuberculosis), but only ten mildly sick prisoners remained by July. The prisoners unanimously praised the German commander.¹⁴

Although Senghor appreciated the improvements, the susceptibility of many North African prisoners to German pro-Islamic propaganda disturbed him. Especially among the Algerians and Tunisians, he noticed many collaborators and spies. His captivity report mentions strong tensions between pro-German North Africans and pro-French West Africans and Caribbeans. Some North Africans were serving in the camp police and had beaten West Africans with sticks until the new German commander stopped the practice. A North African spy denounced two of Senghor's friends, the brothers Henri and Robert Éboué, for anti-German activities, although it is not clear whether they were punished.¹⁵ Henri and Robert were the sons of Félix Éboué, the black governor of Chad who had declared his allegiance to General Charles de Gaulle in August 1940 and given the Free French movement its first territorial base. Senghor wrote a poem for Éboué, "Au gouverneur Éboué," also in *Hosties noires*, and dedicated it to Henri and Robert.¹⁶ In 1946, he married their sister Ginette.

often is misspelled as "Piehl" in French works on Senghor: Armand Guibert, *Léopold Sédar Senghor* (Paris: Éditions Seghers, 1969), 29; Jacqueline Sorel, *Léopold Sédar Senghor. L'émotion et la raison* (Saint-Maur-des-Fossés: Sépia, 1995), 71; Daniel Delas, *Léopold Sédar Senghor: le maître de langue. Biographie* (Croissy-Beaubourg: Éd. Aden, 2007), 154.

¹⁴ Camp inspection Frontstalag 230, April 3, 1941, by Dr. Bonnaud, and July 17, 1941, by René Scapini, both in AN, F9, 23 56. For details regarding the camp of Poitiers, see also Jean Hiernard, "Rouillé-la Chauvinerie: des camps de la Seconde Guerre mondiale sortent de l'oubli." *Revue historique du Centre-Ouest* (forthcoming).

¹⁵ "Senghor: Le manuscrit inconnu," 26. The name is misspelled "Ebony" in the manuscript, but I have confirmed that both Éboué brothers were indeed in Poitiers. Both were transferred to other camps before Frontstalag Poitiers was dissolved, but both survived the war. See files for Henri and Robert Éboué in BAVCC Caen as well as Christine Levisse-Touzé, "Félix Éboué, le Français libre," in *Félix Éboué. Soixante ans après*, ed. Josette Rivallain and Hélène D'Almeida-Topor (Paris: Publications de la SFHOM, 2008), 259; Brian Weinstein, *Éboué* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 285–6.

¹⁶ Senghor, *The Collected Poetry*, 55–56; Senghor, *Poésie complète. Édition critique*, 153. Elie Castor and Raymond Tarcy, *Félix Éboué. Gouverneur et philosophe* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1984); Albert M'Paka, *Félix Éboué, 1884–1944. Gouverneur général de l'Afrique équatoriale française. Premier résistant de l'Empire, grand Français, grand Africain* (Paris: L'Harmattan,

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Yet, in the same breath as he condemned collaborators, Senghor also expressed admiration for the numerous North African prisoners who escaped from the camp. Given the deployment of many prisoners in work commandos on individual farms, escape was easy. Poitiers was not far from the demarcation line separating German-occupied France from the so-called free zone, and it was known that the Germans did not try to recapture escaped prisoners once they had reached the free zone.

From Poitiers, Senghor was sent to the *Camp des As*, the main camp of Frontstalag 221 in Saint-Médard-en-Jalles outside of Bordeaux, in early November 1941. In his postwar reminiscences, Senghor claimed that he was sent to a reprisal camp in southwestern France as a punishment for having helped two prisoners from Brittany escape, but this story rests on insecure ground.¹⁷ There were no reprisal camps for POWs in occupied France. Moreover, almost all white prisoners had been dismissed from the Frontstalags in France on July 3, 1941, except for a few officers, translators, and medics – and they could at this time escape fairly easily if they so desired. Senghor did not mention this episode in his wartime report, even though he had no reason to hide any involvement in facilitating escapes and had expressed admiration for the escapes of North Africans from Poitiers.

In reality, the Germans simply closed the camp of Poitiers in November 1941 and sent all of its prisoners to Saint-Médard in the course of a consolidation of Frontstalags. Still, Senghor may have experienced the transfer as a punishment because he found Saint-Médard a poorly supplied camp controlled by a corrupt gang of North African prisoners in league with some German guards. In retrospect, Poitiers appeared to him “as a lost paradise.” In Saint-Médard, the man of confidence (a prisoner who represents his peers and acts as the contact person to the camp command and representatives of the protecting power) was a corrupt Algerian soldier named Mohamed Bel Aïd. Bel Aïd and his accomplices robbed aid packages and sold the contents to the other prisoners. When the Germans decided in December 1941 to liberate 10,000 North African prisoners, Bel Aïd took bribes from prisoners who wanted to be on the list of those to be liberated. He and his camp police beat black prisoners.

When Senghor criticized this regime, Bel Aïd assigned him to an undesirable work commando that had to cut down trees in the woodlands west of Bordeaux. Supplies in this commando were even worse than in the *Camp des As*, and there were no farmers nearby, as there were in Poitiers, who would invite the prisoners on work commandos to eat at their table. Unlike in Poitiers, civilians in this area were indifferent to the colonial prisoners. When Senghor

2008), 117–20; Josette Rivallain and Hélène D’Almeida-Topor, eds., *Félix Eboué, soixante ans après* (Saint-Denis: Publications de la SFHOM, 2008); Weinstein, *Éboué*, 285–6.

¹⁷ Senghor, *La poésie de l’action*, 84; Saloum Diakité, *Léopold Sédar Senghor. Chronique d’une époque* (Dakar: Les éditions Maguilen, 2009), 22.

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caught a mild disease and was admitted to the camp hospital in early February 1942, a French physician suggested to the Frontstalag commander that he be released because he might carry a tropical disease. On February 14, the commander promptly freed Senghor. Communications from the Scapini Mission and the French Red Cross reveal that the corruption network in the *Camp des As* had come to the attention of the German authorities, who opened an investigation against Bel Aïd and the implicated guards. Senghor meanwhile returned to Paris, where, a few months later, he wrote his report on Poitiers and Saint-Médard for the Scapini Mission.¹⁸ Worried in particular about the effects of German propaganda, he recommended that the French authorities launch a counterpropaganda effort for the colonial prisoners, based on the prestige of Marshal Philippe Pétain, the head of the Vichy state, whom they highly revered.¹⁹

Although the story of Senghor's captivity is the experience of an extraordinary man, it contains some features relevant for all French colonial prisoners. Most strikingly, Senghor highlights a powerful shift in German attitudes toward French colonial prisoners, particularly the blacks. As a black man, he narrowly survived a massacre after capture, and he witnessed abuses of black prisoners by guards and a camp commander. Yet, he later encountered compassionate guards and officers, and they made a huge difference.

Senghor also sheds light on the complex tapestry of experiences of French colonial prisoners of war. No two camps were alike. Circumstances could be different even from one work commando to the other. There were periods of hunger, cold, and hardship, but there were also relatively good times. Labor assignments ranged from pleasant, such as being camp secretary in Poitiers, to harsh, such as cutting wood in a commando with poor food supplies. Fellow prisoners could be friends, such as the Éboué brothers in Poitiers, or they could be corrupt brutes, such as Bel Aïd and his gang in Saint-Médard.

Moreover, Senghor's experience highlights the colonial prisoners' relationship to France. Already during his capture, the black soldiers awaiting a massacre invoked what he called "a double loyalty" to France and black Africa.²⁰ Later, he mentions tensions among the prisoners revolving around loyalty to France and susceptibility to German propaganda. Senghor also comments on contacts with French civilians. These contacts were mostly friendly, as was the case with the prisoners on agricultural work commandos around Poitiers. The correspondence of colonial prisoners with their war godmothers, or with French women in general, sometimes led to amorous

¹⁸ The delay probably resulted from the fact that the Scapini Mission, which likely asked Senghor about his experiences, obtained the list of released prisoners that featured him only on June 1, 1942. See "Meldung 118," in BAVCC Caen, 22P980.

¹⁹ "Senghor: Le manuscrit inconnu," 26–7 and 29–30. ²⁰ Senghor, *La poésie de l'action*, 83.

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liaisons and in a few cases to marriage. Senghor himself felt strong gratitude, and probably more, for his war godmother.²¹

Finally, Senghor's story reveals some of the problems of memory. His postwar reminiscences do not always agree with the documents from the period. For example, he claimed after the war that he had defended the bridge at La Charité for four days before being taken prisoner.²² The notion of a heroic and prolonged defensive battle might have been politically expedient after the war given that Senghor became a high-profile political figure. Yet, the truth is that the Germans captured the two bridges of La Charité after a few hours and that there was only sporadic combat in the region west of La Charité on the following days. Senghor, as his prisoner of war registration card shows, was captured not in La Charité, as he claimed, but in Villabon, a village thirty kilometers west of La Charité.²³ It is likely that he arrived in the area with the reinforcements from Bourges only on June 17, after the Loire bridges had already been lost. Quite possibly, Senghor and his comrades distinguished themselves during the defense of the canal bridge in the evening of June 18, but the notion of a continuous defense of a bridge over four days is not accurate.

After entering politics in 1945, moreover, Senghor cast himself as a Gaullist of the first hour and claimed that he supported the French resistance already during his captivity, for example by helping prisoners to escape. Contemporary documents, however, do not confirm his story of being sent to a reprisal camp for having helped white French prisoners to flee. Moreover, his captivity report also shows that his Gaullism in June 1942 was compatible with a recommendation to the Scapini Mission to employ the Pétain cult as a way of neutralizing German propaganda – an astonishing feat considering that the Pétain regime had condemned de Gaulle to death in absentia in August 1940.

ARGUMENT

This book makes four principal points, most of which appear in Senghor's story. First, it demonstrates and explains the remarkable shift in German attitudes and behavior toward French colonial prisoners. This is perhaps the most surprising finding. After massive abuses during and soon after the campaign of May–June 1940, the Germans treated prisoners of color from the French army largely in conformity with the Geneva Convention on POWs (1929), despite some discrimination. In marked contrast to other racially stigmatized groups such as Jews and Gypsies, French colonial soldiers,

²¹ Janice Spleth, *Léopold Sédar Senghor* (Boston: Twayne, 1985), 13–14. Janet G. Vaillant, *Black, French, and African: A Life of Léopold Sédar Senghor* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990), 179–80.

²² Senghor, *La poésie de l'action*, 83.

²³ Carte de captivité, Léopold Sédar Senghor, in BAVCC Caen.

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including blacks, did not experience an escalation of brutality under the control of Nazi Germany. This fact requires explanation because a number of factors would have suggested a different outcome. In June 1940, a vicious and all-pervasive German propaganda campaign against French colonial soldiers had helped to inspire numerous massacres of black prisoners.²⁴ Even after the propaganda had faded, blacks and other people from the French empire were considered of lower racial rank than white French prisoners, and of much lower rank than British and American prisoners, whose generally lawful treatment by Nazi Germany is often explained by racial considerations. In addition, the Germans were well aware that the colonial prisoners were considered “second-class” members of the French army and of the French empire, and that France, unlike Britain and the United States, had no German prisoners of war and therefore lacked reciprocity, which often is identified as the key factor favoring humane treatment of POWs.²⁵ In short, German soldiers in charge of French colonial prisoners encountered more incentives for harsh treatment and fewer restraint mechanisms than those in charge of other prisoners from western armies. An explanation for the shift in German attitudes to the colonial prisoners calls for a careful look at the everyday life of guards and prisoners and at German propaganda, as provided in Chapters 3 and 5.

Second, this book stresses the diplomatic aspect of captivity and argues that the Vichy authorities fought hard for the rights and the well-being of the colonial prisoners. The diplomatic aspect briefly touches on the American government, too, which was the protector of the French POWs until the Vichy government, through the Scapini Mission, replaced the United States as protecting power for the POWs on December 10, 1940. The American camp inspectors monitored conditions in the camps in Germany in 1940, where almost half of all French colonial prisoners stayed for a few months (Chapter 1). Thereafter, the Scapini Mission worked hard to ensure the well-being of the colonial prisoners, as Chapter 2 illustrates. With its camp inspections, it created a record of conditions in countless camps and work commandos, and took steps to rein in and investigate abuses. Vichy considered the representation of POWs as a national interest that was inherently opposed to German national interests. This applied not only to mainland French prisoners but also to colonial prisoners, because Vichy was alarmed about a loss of French prestige in the empire after the defeat of 1940 and the troubles caused by the defection of some colonies to de Gaulle.²⁶ Vichy's

²⁴ Raffael Scheck, *Hitler's African Victims: The German Army Massacres of Black French Soldiers in 1940* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 101–12.

²⁵ Simon Paul MacKenzie, “The Treatment of Prisoners of War in World War II,” *The Journal of Modern History* 66, no. 3 (1994).

²⁶ The extent to which the Vichy authorities were committed to national interests even in the context of collaboration has been demonstrated well for example in Simon Kitson's book on French counter-espionage: Simon Kitson, *The Hunt for Nazi Spies: Fighting Espionage in Vichy*

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diplomatic efforts helped to establish a Franco-German understanding that, despite the lack of symmetrical reciprocity, ensured that French prisoners were largely treated within the framework of international law, as opposed to Soviet POWs and Italian military internees after the Italian armistice with the Allies in September 1943. It was crucial that the Scapini Mission persistently made it clear that it considered the colonial prisoners – regardless of Vichy’s own racist tendencies and regardless of the fact that the vast majority of the prisoners did not have equal rights to French citizens – as French POWs covered by the Geneva Convention. Moreover, the efforts of French official, semi-official, and private organizations to help supply the colonial prisoners did, despite many shortcomings, improve their captivity experience. Vichy did make some dubious decisions, especially by agreeing to a German request to place colonial prisoners under French guards. However, national interest motivated even this decision; in particular, the desire to shield colonial prisoners from German propaganda and to better care for them, as Chapter 4 demonstrates. The fact that a relatively powerless government, like Vichy, could make a significant contribution to the well-being of its soldiers in enemy captivity is relevant to studies stressing the positive effects of international oversight in POW camps.

The third contribution of this book is an analysis of the experience of French colonial prisoners in a comparative POW context, suggesting that this experience was somewhat different, but not necessarily worse, than that of “white” French prisoners and other western POWs in Nazi Germany, as Chapters 6–8 reveal. I have previously argued that captivity in France was an advantage for the colonial prisoners because aid agencies could reach them more easily. France also provided a more welcoming civilian environment than they would have found in Germany. It is true that many colonial prisoners suffered occasional abuses, harsh working conditions, and hunger, but so did most white French, British, and American prisoners in Germany. Although estimates do indicate a higher mortality (around 5,000 total, or approximately 5 to 6 percent) for colonial prisoners than for French POWs in general (2.8 percent), the ambiguities of classification of “colonial” soldiers (explained later) and the resulting insecurity regarding the numbers urge a cautious reading of the statistics.²⁷ On the bright side, the colonial prisoners had a much greater chance to be released before the end of the war than did white French prisoners in Germany. It also was easier to escape and to avoid recapture in France than in Germany (although release or escape of a colonial prisoner did not automatically mean a return

France, trans. Catherine Tihanyi (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008). Robert Paxton stresses this aspect in his review of Kitson’s book in *The New York Review of Books*, March 6, 2008.

²⁷ Jean-Luc Leleu, Françoise Passera, and Jean Quellien, eds., *La France pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale* (Paris: Fayard, 2010), 114–17.