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Effects of the Two World Wars in Shaping  
African Colonial Soldiers' Perceptions of Colonialism

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Master of Arts  
in African Studies

by

Eric W. Schiff

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Effects of the Two World Wars in Shaping  
African Colonial Soldiers' Perceptions of Colonialism

by

Eric W. Schiff

Master of Arts in African Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2019

Professor Edmond Keller, Chair

This study investigates the extent overseas military service of African colonial soldiers during the two World Wars altered their perceptions of Europeans, colonialism, and themselves. The subsequent impact of these changes is also explored. Soldiers of the French West African *tirailleurs sénégalais* in World War I and the British East African King's African Rifles in World War II are both examined and compared over the course of their respective periods of service and return to civilian life. While the two World Wars provided significant opportunities for unprecedented numbers of African soldiers to formulate deeper assessments of their role and status in the colonial system than previously imaginable, using this newfound knowledge gained through military service overseas to undermine the European order was another matter. Ultimately, the experiences of colonial soldiers in World Wars I and II proved most notable for showcasing the hypocrisies that sustained colonialism.

The thesis of Eric W. Schiff is approved.

Ghislaine E. Lydon

William H. Worger

Edmond Keller, Chair

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2019

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Abstract</b> .....	ii
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	v
<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
<b>Chapter One: The <i>Tirailleurs Sénégalais</i> on World War I’s Western Front</b> .....	4
Historical Background on the <i>Tirailleurs Sénégalais</i> .....	5
French West African Soldiers in World War I .....	9
How World War I Shaped the Perceptions of West Africans.....	15
<b>Chapter Two: The King’s African Rifles Overseas in World War II</b> .....	20
Historical Background of the King’s African Rifles .....	20
The King’s African Rifles in World War II.....	26
How World War II Shaped the Perceptions of East Africans.....	28
<b>Summary and Conclusion</b> .....	38
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	41

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goes out to my family, who have given me their support and encouragement every step of the way.



## Introduction

By definition, wars are the result of relationships that have broken down to such a degree that armed conflict becomes a recourse for problem solving. While their power of division is obvious, wars can also lead to the formation of unions and coalitions that may have seemed impossible prior to the outbreak of hostilities. In essence, this paper is about how the Two World Wars acted as vehicles for intimate contact between groups of Africans and Europeans who rarely shared such moments, and the subsequent implications of such interactions. This study focuses on the former group, examining to what extent the overseas service of African colonial troops in the two World Wars shaped their views of Europeans, Europe, and the institution of colonialism amongst these African soldiers and their communities upon returning home from combat.

Research initially began as an investigation into the history of the King's African Rifles (KAR), a twentieth-century colonial military regiment based in British East Africa, and how it acted as an agent of colonialism throughout the course of its existence. Notably, this initial research project emphasized World War II and its immediate aftermath, then emphasizing how KAR units were influenced by their service overseas. Interest in this subject led to the creation of an auxiliary research paper on the *tirailleurs sénégalais*<sup>1</sup> and Moroccan *Goumiers*,<sup>2</sup> colonial soldiers of French West Africa who fought in World Wars I and II, respectively. Later on, this paper would be abridged through removal of the section on the *Goumiers* and adapted into this greater research project. As such, the structure of the paper is essentially a comparative analysis

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<sup>1</sup> Designation for infantry recruited in the French colonial territories during the 19th and 20th centuries from the colony of Senegal.

<sup>2</sup> Indigenous Moroccan Muslim soldiers who served in auxiliary units attached to the French Army of Africa between 1908 and 1956.

of these two case studies, utilizing similarities and differences between the *tirailleurs* in World War I and the KAR in World War II to explore some of the larger questions at hand about colonialism and colonial military service. The comparative approach is the selected method of analysis for several reasons, the primary one being its ability to show trends and commonalities in a way that a single example cannot. As this paper hopes to demonstrate, the stories of the *tirailleurs sénégalais* and King's African Rifles paralleled each other in many ways, with both groups of colonial soldiers sent overseas in a World War to fight for causes they could hardly call their own. Furthermore, in both cases overseas service brought about large, if not radical, shifts in perceptions about how these soldiers started to view Europeans and their cultures, institutions, and justifications of colonialism. While differences did exist between which World War the colonial units fought in, the European powers they fought under, and region of the globe they fought in, these dissimilarities proved useful for judging which aspects of overseas service were tied to factors unique to either the *tirailleur* or KAR and which aspects carried over in more universal ways. Additionally, by examining two groups of colonial soldiers that are usually studied in isolation of one another this approach hopes to discern overarching themes of overseas colonial service that might otherwise be overlooked.

The initial hypothesis of this thesis was that colonial soldier perceptions not only were changed by their wartime experiences but that these shifting perceptions also had a substantial impact in Africa after their respective wars ended. Changing perceptions were measured by first distinguishing what were the common views of Europeans and colonialism in the regions *tirailleurs sénégalais* and King's African Rifles soldiers were recruited from before the start of their respective World Wars, then contrasting these initial views with those stated by soldiers of these two units after they returned from overseas service. Likewise, post-war impact was

measured by the direct and indirect effects colonial soldiers had on their respective colonial governments upon their return from military service. After research was completed, it became clear that only the first half of this thesis was correct. In most cases African perceptions were fundamentally altered through military service abroad, with their views on the aforementioned subjects generally evolving from simplistic and ill-informed to significantly more intricate and nuanced over the course of their service. However, these shifts in perceptions altered only in limited ways their ability to bring about change after each war. The reasons for this lack of impact are complex, though the efforts of colonial governments after both World Wars was perhaps the largest explanations for this outcome.

Historical evidence for this research paper comes from a variety of sources. Difficulties in obtaining written and oral accounts from African colonial soldiers of the *tirailleurs sénégalais* and KAR means there is a leaning towards secondary sources in each chapter. Alongside these secondary sources are a number of primary documents from media such as journals, cartoons, and newspapers of the periods studied. For primary sources of European origin as well as older secondary sources there has been a conscientious attempt to ‘read between the lines’ and work around the biases inherent to these documents and accurately reconstruct the experiences of the studied colonial subjects.

## Chapter One: The *Tirailleurs Sénégalais* on World War I's Western Front

This opening chapter focuses on the West African soldiers of the French colonial army, in particular the *tirailleurs sénégalais* who fought in the First World War. Broken down into three main sections, the chapter begins with a brief history of the *tirailleurs sénégalais*, as well as a general overview on what most West Africans thought of Europeans prior to World War I and why the French sought to introduce colonial soldiers on the Western Front. The following section concentrates on World War I and soldier experiences overseas, specifically the West Africans 'recruited' to fight for the French in Europe. The final section covers the changes in these soldiers' perceptions that took place in the course of war and the effects these shifts in views had in the post-war era.

As the only African soldiers to fight overseas in Europe, the experiences of the *tirailleurs sénégalais* on the Western Front offer a unique African perspective on World War I. Specifically, these soldiers were able to not only meet with both French soldiers and civilians but many also formed relationships with these French people that far surpassed virtually all African-European relations on the African continent. Thanks to these uncommon experiences, the *tirailleurs sénégalais* came back from the war with a different, more nuanced understanding of the French compared to their peers who did not serve overseas. They were able to see the French, their rule, and the overall colonial experience not as something invulnerable or inevitable but very much built on unnatural, fallible, and fragile principles. Their service was part of a greater trend to mobilize and utilize African manpower by European powers during the conflict. World War I brought about increasing connections between Europeans and Africans, with the role of African soldiers stationed overseas being amongst, if not the first, group of African people from non-elite backgrounds to visit the European continent in large numbers. As the following

sections will show, interactions these soldiers had with the French and Europeans proved highly formative. While the need to exploit such manpower and resources during the war led to increased structural capacities and greater European control over their colonies in the interwar period, these soldiers' experiences would ultimately prove to be a forerunner of the later colonial soldier experiences in World War II that would play a greater role facilitating decolonialization.

**Historical Background on the *Tirailleurs Sénégalais*:** Prior to World War I, the usage of colonial soldiers by Europeans throughout Africa was generally limited to the internal policing of individual colonies. These forces tended to be small in number and typically consisted of men motivated to fight primarily by the economic incentives tied to military service in the early colonial systems.<sup>3</sup> The *tirailleurs sénégalais* were no exception. Officially founded in 1857 by Louis Léon Faidherbes, they went from being a group of soldiers numbering around 3000 before 1900 and less than 10,000 a decade later to swelling up to some 180,000 troops during the First World War.<sup>4</sup> As historian Myron Echenberg describes, World War I effectively transformed the *tirailleurs sénégalais* from “a small conquest army of largely slave mercenaries... into a mass army of conscripts drawn from virtually every level of West African society.”<sup>5</sup> Though their roots were in Senegal and neighboring colonial territories, the *tirailleurs sénégalais* came to refer to virtually all French colonial infantry troops from West

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<sup>3</sup> Balesi, *From Adversaries to Comrades-in-Arms*, 31

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 5-6; United States, *Colonial Army Systems*, 76

<sup>5</sup> Echenberg, *Colonial Conscripts*, 26

Africa. In fact, only around 30,000 or so of the *tirailleurs sénégalais* in World War I actually came from Senegal itself.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, perceptions of the French by West Africans in the decades before World War I were subject by a number of limiting factors. First and foremost, it is important to note that West African perceptions of the French did not just emerge out of the colonial moment but were also shaped by the centuries of the slave trade that had predated colonialism in the region. Additionally, most West Africans living in rural areas never actually saw or directly dealt with Europeans and had to rely on secondhand knowledge for an idea of what the French and France were like. Rural people in French West Africa primarily felt the pre-war colonial regime through taxes, the most important being a ‘head tax’ on individuals. Demands for manual labor from men and sexual exploitation of women by French administrators were two other sources of direct African-European interaction, while the indirect growth of the export economy was a fourth notable source of influence.<sup>7</sup> Colonial towns on the West African interior saw little more European contact than their rural counterparts, with the towns’ small European populations and relative isolation limiting the amount of actual communication between Africans and the French.<sup>8</sup> One of the few places where Africans did come into contact with Europeans on a regular basis were in major coastal cities such as the “Four Communes” of Senegal.<sup>9</sup> The communes of Dakar, Rufisque, St. Louis, and Gorée housed some eighty-five percent of all Europeans in Senegal and the original African inhabitants of these areas were granted unique

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<sup>6</sup> Lunn, *Memoirs of the Maelstrom*, 37

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 12-17

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 17-21

<sup>9</sup> These were the four oldest colonial towns in French West Africa.

status as *originaires*.<sup>10</sup> This status gave them rights to voting and immunities to taxes that only they were afforded, much to the chagrin of colonial authorities in these areas.<sup>11</sup>

Regardless of where they were encountered, French in the prewar period were described by West Africans as arrogant and abusive of their virtually unlimited repressive power. Unsurprisingly, West Africans were wary of and tried to avoid contact with the French at all costs due to this nasty reputation. Furthermore, with a dearth of information on the French available the end result was skewed and heavily biased stories of what was true about them. The French had little incentive to give accurate information on the subject of Europeans to their African counterparts and were happy to foster all sorts of exaggerated notions about themselves in order to solidify French colonial rule. Overall, the period was notable for its limited contact between the two sides as well as the brutal French actions and general powerlessness of West Africans when such encounters did take place.<sup>12</sup>

While all European powers would leverage the use of their African colonies during World War I, only the French considered and eventually implemented the use of African colonial soldiers in Europe during World War I. The reasons for France's unique decision arose partially from the nation's *relative* tolerance of Africans peoples compared to their European counterparts and partially due to France fighting the war on her own territory and being particularly challenged for resources and manpower. Arguably the critical push leading to the presence of African soldiers in France came from the relentless campaigning of a French General by the name of Charles Mangin. At the time, a huge issue pressing the French publics' conscience was

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<sup>10</sup> Most of the African population of the Four Communes were termed *originaires*: those Africans born into the commune, but who retained recourse to African traditions.

<sup>11</sup> Lunn, *Memoirs of the Maelstrom*, 18

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 20-21, 24-26

the growing demographic imbalance between their country and neighboring Germany. As the two countries continued on opposite demographic paths prior to the war the calls for France to look for solutions grew. Mangin was the foremost proponent for turning the French West African forces from a small army that dealt with local issues to a much larger force that could fight outside of their local territory and help make up for both real and perceived manpower shortcomings in the imperial French Army. His work *La Force noire*, published in 1910, played a major role in eventually bringing about the creation of a West African fighting force.<sup>13</sup>

It is important to note how the French, despite generally holding Africans in better regard than other European powers, still had many racist and deeply-ingrained beliefs that guided their nation's ideology and policies towards Africans. General Mangin's assertions that West Africans could make good soldiers was born not out of a belief in human equality but instead from an interpretation of biological determinism and martial race theory that asserted some Africans were naturally inclined to be warlike and therefore could become highly capable soldiers. These perceived attributes included greater resistances to harsh climates, tolerating carrying heavy loads over long distances, enduring pain thanks to a less-developed nervous system, and familiarity to hieratical systems similar to the military. As colonial soldiers would discover, these 'positive' traits Europeans were willing to attribute them with conveniently allowed them to fill some of the most dangerous and least desirable jobs within the military. In the case of the West Africans that fought under the French in World War I this meant frontline action as shock troops since Mangin and others believed groups of West Africans like those in Senegal made ideal soldiers for such missions.<sup>14</sup> As a result, well over ninety percent of Senegalese recruited during

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<sup>13</sup> Balesi, *From Adversaries to Comrades-in-Arms*, 66-67

<sup>14</sup> Lunn, "Les Races Guerrières," 519-521



the war were classified as ‘warriors’ (*guerriers*) and mobilized as frontline soldiers.<sup>15</sup> Scholarly opinion on whether or not the deliberate practice of using Africans as cannon fodder resulted in disproportionately high African casualties has been surprisingly polarized historically. However, more recent contributions to this debate largely support the beliefs that that the French military would have subjected African soldiers to more dangerous actions in order to sacrifice the ‘other’ before themselves, a viewpoint historical actors like Blaise Diagne<sup>16</sup> and Charles Mangin both held.<sup>17</sup> In all likelihood it was true that fatalities would be notably higher for *tirailleurs sénégalais* compared to their French counterparts.

**French West African Soldiers in World War I:** During the war there were two areas West Africans found themselves fighting, inside German territories in Africa and on the Western Front in France. For the majority of enlisted Africans, experiences of World War I were confined to their home continent. Proportionally few enlisted men would actually go on to serve as frontline soldiers, let alone as soldiers in Europe. Instead, most were conscripted as carriers or porters, providing military labor for the European armies in Africa. However, a sizable number of colonial soldiers did find themselves drawn outside the continent for the first time in their lives. French military recruitment of West Africans for the Western Front began in earnest in 1916 due to an increasingly strained and desperate military situation. In the case of most of the French colonial soldiers during World War I, ‘recruitment’ was a misnomer, if not an outright lie. Few West Africans willingly went off to fight for a cause they had little stake in and what for

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<sup>15</sup> Lunn, *Memoirs of the Maelstrom*, 145

<sup>16</sup> Diagne, born in Gorée, was the first black African elected to the Chamber of Deputies of France. He represented the Four Communes, holding this position from 1914 until his death twenty years later.

<sup>17</sup> Lunn, *Memoirs of the Maelstrom*, 140-147

was assumed to be a death sentence. The vast majority of men went because they were coerced. West Africans were largely ‘recruited’ through African intermediaries. Chiefs, fearful of French retribution, helped fulfill local quotas through the begrudging sacrifice of “those deemed most expendable” to their collectives.<sup>18</sup> Those considered the most socially dispensable tended to be domestic slaves, those lacking kinsmen, and later on younger siblings who found themselves given up in order to best maintain the structure of their families and communities. Pride, honor, sense of obedience to family and other social groups, as well as fear of reprisals to oneself and others were all common reasons men would accept this grim fate over possibly avoiding conscription. Resistance by communities was incredibly difficult at this time; those who attempted to revolt were usually quick to discover just how outmatched they were to fight back against French forces that held significant material and military advantages over them.<sup>19</sup>

The one major exception to the forced enlistment of West Africans arose during the final year of the war via a recruiting drive spearheaded by Blaise Diagne, the first black African elected as a French Deputy and representative of Senegal’s Four Communes. Diagne argued for the *originaires* “right to be soldiers in the French army” instead of being segregated into separate units.<sup>20</sup> Diagne accepted an appointment to recruit West Africans for the war effort in exchange for soldiers to receive political concessions and exemptions from many common obligations Africans faced under colonialism. An astounding 60,000 men voluntarily answered Diagne’s call to service in 1918, demonstrating that many Africans were willing to risk their lives for a

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<sup>18</sup> Lunn, *Memoirs of the Maelstrom*, 41

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 39-44, 49

<sup>20</sup> Balesi, *From Adversaries to Comrades-in-Arms*, 84-85

legitimate chance to received improved political rights.<sup>21</sup> Diagne and the *originaires* aside, the overall impact of French conscription in West Africa was exceptionally severe even by the standards of its era.<sup>22</sup>As historians such as Philip Curtain have shown, the scale of French military recruitment in World War I was comparable, if not far greater than the exportation of people in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade centuries earlier. Curtain argues that there is “considerable justification in viewing the wartime recruitment of soldiers as the last, the largest, and the most inescapable “man hunt” in the history of Senegambia.”<sup>23</sup> Overall, 135,000 West Africans conscripted into World War I would go on to serve on the Western Front.<sup>24</sup>

For the West African soldiers who served overseas, World War I was not some abstract concept, but a lived reality for them just as it was for Europeans, one lived through and interpreted *very differently* by Africans. While Europeans struggled with the need to glorify the actions of Africans fighting and dying on their behalf while also reinforcing white supremacy, Africans had to navigate another system designed to exploit themselves. Simply getting to France was a challenge. The ocean voyage from West Africa to France was brutal both physically and mentally. Most of these men, who had never seen the ocean before, let alone been on a ship, now were confined to their cabins for the duration of the multi-week journey. Illness was common and many on board dealt with everything from seasickness to psychological issues.

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<sup>21</sup> Lunn, “Kande Kamara Speaks,” 42-44

<sup>22</sup> Rathbone, “World War I and Africa,” 5

<sup>23</sup> Lunn, *Memoirs of the Maelstrom*, 47, 49

<sup>24</sup> Lunn, “Kande Kamara Speaks,” 28

Few had any idea where they were going or why they were to be fighting, leading to frequent fears they were actually heading off to be sold into slavery.<sup>25</sup>

Despite France's reputation amongst European nations as being much more open in their acceptance of black soldiers they still tried to segregate colonial troops like the *tirailleurs* as much as possible, both during combat and outside of battle.<sup>26</sup> The conditions which West African conscripts fought under were extremely trying. The *tirailleurs* were often thrust into undertaking the most dangerous missions on the battlefield and those who refused orders or did not engage enemy troops risked being shot by their own officers. Forced into a situation where their only chance of survival could be achieved through fighting, nearly all colonial soldiers chose to fight.<sup>27</sup> Beyond self-preservation there were a number of additional reasons why Africans fought once they found themselves on the frontlines of the war. Personal pride and a desire to distinguish oneself amongst their peers and to Europeans provided incentive for some to go above and beyond what might have been expected. Later on, the *originaires* who came voluntarily had their own rights to fight for, giving them an extra sense of purpose those who had been forcibly conscripted did not possess.<sup>28</sup> One thing that was not very effective motivating African soldiers was anti-German propaganda; while colonial soldiers were well aware of the animosity many Europeans held towards African people, due to their own circumstances they were more likely to view Germans as human beings just like themselves rather than buy into anti-German

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<sup>25</sup> Lunn, "Kande Kamara Speaks," 36-38

<sup>26</sup> Lunn, *Memoirs of the Maelstrom*, 161

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 136-137; Lunn, "Kande Kamara Speaks," 40-41

<sup>28</sup> Lunn, *Memoirs of the Maelstrom*, 137

messages.<sup>29</sup> Military structure and combat alongside Europeans demonstrated to many West Africans a lack of difference between themselves and white people.<sup>30</sup> Examples that particularly stood out for these colonial soldiers included exchanges where black soldiers had authority over white soldiers based on rank, heavily contrasting pre-war realities where Africans could not even look in the eyes of the French colonialists without risking serious retribution.<sup>31</sup>

Outside of combat and the military hierarchy, the *tirailleurs sénégalais* had a variety of experiences with the civilians of France. Not all West African troops experienced French life the same way and quite a few never got to meet French civilians at all. Those who did not get to interact with French civilians tended to be those whose units were highly segregated, especially those who came to Europe earlier on in the war.<sup>32</sup> European militaries like the French felt a need to watch over and restrict the autonomy of their black colonial soldiers to a greater degree than other troops in order to ensure good behavior.<sup>33</sup> These soldiers were also usually taught a pidgin form of French that further marked them as colonial subjects and kept them separated from the French.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, there were fears over the dangers of female sexuality amongst French women. Historian Philippa Levine's article "Battle Colors" describes this phenomenon, writing:

Women and black men were seen as unstable and unreliable because their actions defied the categories necessary to imperial stability. The ambivalence toward them, in many

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<sup>29</sup> Lunn, *Memoirs of the Maelstrom*, 136

<sup>30</sup> Page, "Black Men in a White Man's War," 19

<sup>31</sup> Lunn, "Kande Kamara Speaks," 45

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 36-38

<sup>33</sup> Levine, "Battle Colors," 115

<sup>34</sup> Fogarty, *Race and War in France*, 62

respects, was remarkably similar, for both could do serious damage to the empire—most particularly via their sexual actions, the very root in Western philosophies of unreason. In war, both were at the same time indispensable to Allied success and a potential source of trouble. As a result, harsh controls, out of proportion even to the perceived level of problems, were used to bring them to order and – crucially – keep them apart.<sup>35</sup>

*Originaires* tended to have the most contact with French people since they had a greater number of rights and typically understood the French language and customs more than the average *tirailleur*.<sup>36</sup> Whereas *tirailleurs* in general would not be allowed to take leave from the army until 1918, *originaires* were given this right a year prior.<sup>37</sup> The stereotype of the ‘Africans as fearless warrior,’ an excuse for some to associate their race and masculinity to primitivism, did help with bring about positive receptions from quite a few French civilians.<sup>38</sup> Beyond furloughs and leave, hospitals were the second most significant manner in which these soldiers interacted with French civilians. Wounds and higher military ranks helped soldiers receive support from many they interacted with, a far cry from their treatment by the French living in Africa.<sup>39</sup> Possibly the most interesting interactions between West Africans stationed in France and the country’s inhabitants came from the phenomena of *marrines de guerre*, who were essentially pen pals or girlfriends of soldiers. These bonds consisted of friendships and occasionally intimate relationships between the soldiers and French women, oftentimes nurses. Sympathetic and

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<sup>35</sup> Levine, “Battle Colors,” 119

<sup>36</sup> Lunn, *Memoirs of the Maelstrom*, 173

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 163

<sup>38</sup> Levine, “Battle Colors,” 115; Clark, *West Africans at War*, 9

<sup>39</sup> Lunn, *Memoirs of the Maelstrom*, 164, 168

compassionate to these men, they provided moral support during the war as well as another source of radical departure in treatment from prior African-European interactions in Africa. The *marrines de guerre* offered a way for soldiers to transcend established boundaries, racial or otherwise, and foster substantial connections with French individuals.<sup>40</sup>

**How World War I Shaped the Perceptions of West Africans:** When World War I concluded and the *tirailleurs sénégalais* returned home, they “had been changed by the war, but the societies from which they had come, and the tenor of colonial life, had not.”<sup>41</sup> Reflecting back on World War I years later, most *tirailleurs* stated they would not have re-enlisted if given the option.<sup>42</sup> While around a fourth of the men claimed they still would have, usually citing martial pride or a masculine sense of duty as rationales, the vast majority of soldiers mentioned how terrible the war was and how they wanted no part of it.<sup>43</sup>

West African soldiers came back not just with memories of the war but with a sizable amount of money as well due to a quarter of their pay being withheld until discharge.<sup>44</sup> Most gave their earnings to their parents or guardians though a few did retain these funds for themselves, typically using the extra money to buy livestock or to marry early. These ex-soldiers were also able to share knowledge of Europeans many of their community members were eager to hear about, partially circumventing the traditional structure of elder kinsmen holding a

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<sup>40</sup> Lunn, *Memoirs of the Maelstrom*, 172-179

<sup>41</sup> Lunn, “Kande Kamara Speaks,” 46

<sup>42</sup> Lunn, *Memoirs of the Maelstrom*, 214-215

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 215

<sup>44</sup> Echenberg, *Colonial Conscripts*, 23

monopoly on accepted knowledge. However, the vast majority of *tirailleurs* that came back from the war alive returned to their former homes and took up their previous ways of living.<sup>45</sup> The desire to fit back into society after the war was prevalent throughout Africa, though those who served closer to home demonstrated an easier time readjusting to civilian life compared to the *tirailleurs* who saw action on the Western Front.<sup>46</sup> World War I veterans did not function as major initiators of political activity like their World War II counterparts would, although they did play an important role building the foundation for those later developments.<sup>47</sup> Shrewd communities in West Africa could and did use these soldiers as cultural intermediates and leveraged their knowledge for the own ends when dealing with the French, though this was typically the extent of their ‘subversive activities.’<sup>48</sup>

The First World War, while not delineating as clear a turning point in African and world history as World War II, nonetheless brought about changes for both West Africans and Europeans in how they perceived one another and colonialism as a whole.<sup>49</sup> For Europeans, World War I was shifted how many viewed colonialism as an institution. As Africanist Richard Rathbone describes,

Before 1914 Africa was for the most part a dream for the greedy speculator. From 1918 it seems likely that her role was more centrally related, or at least perceived to be more

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<sup>45</sup> Lunn, *Memoirs of the Maelstrom*, 210

<sup>46</sup> Greenstein, “The Nandi Experience,” 92-93

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 91-92

<sup>48</sup> Lunn, *Memoirs of the Maelstrom*, 192

<sup>49</sup> Rathbone, “World War I and Africa,” 1



centrally related, as part of the empire, to the very heart of the metropolitan economies themselves.<sup>50</sup>

For many French civilians and soldiers who encountered the *tirailleurs*, the war helped gradually push their views and perceptions of Africans in a positive direction towards an appreciation of their shared humanity.<sup>51</sup> As a few historians such as Richard Fogarty have argued, amongst Westerners at the time World War I was seen as having “cemented France’s reputation as a color-blind society, especially in contrast with the prevailing racial climate in the United States.”<sup>52</sup> Of course, there were *very* significant limits on just how far the French or any other European nation was willing to go towards accepting Africans as equals. The legacy of the war was seen by some in France as a vindication of Charles Mangin and the beliefs he espoused. Concerns about upholding “the future prestige of the white race” were frequent amongst Europeans of all nations recalling their service with Africans during World War I.<sup>53</sup> For European soldiers fighting in Africa, the local inhabitants were seen as part of the background to such an extent that one European soldier’s account of his experiences grouped African people in a ‘Nature Notes’ section dedicated to the “the category of wild things” on the continent.<sup>54</sup> The fact that historical records on cattle diseases in Africa around World War I are significantly more common than records on how diseases like human influenza affected Africans further speaks to how far European mindsets still were from seeing Africans as anything close to equals and where

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<sup>50</sup> Rathbone, “World War I and Africa,” 3

<sup>51</sup> Lunn, *Memoirs of the Maelstrom*, 224

<sup>52</sup> Fogarty, *Race and War in France*, 3

<sup>53</sup> Buchanan, *Three Years of War in East Africa*, viii

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 200

their priorities remained.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, while World War I had increased the pace of changes taking place in the political, economic, and social spheres across Europe and Africa, after the war ended these changes slowed down to a crawl during the interwar period. The French very much feared and were probably correct in assuming that men such as Blaise Diagne could be disruptive forces against their established order of rule.<sup>56</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the shift World War I had on West African perceptions of Europeans and colonialism differed greatly from European interpretations of the war. The experiences of the *tirailleurs sénégalais* stationed in France, while subject to their own differences in what they saw and how they reacted, nonetheless back up this shift in perceptions. Estimates from historian Joe Lunn hypothesize that around half of soldiers stationed overseas saw metropolitan French treatment as something different than a continuation of prior treatment in the colonies; though quite a few West African soldiers considered their service in the military as nothing more than an extreme permutation of the colonial system, a significant number of Africans ultimately *did* have their views altered because of their time as *tirailleurs* in World War I. Those who were able to meet and form deeper relations with a variety of French civilians and soldiers during the war were able to build “a much more sophisticated understanding of Europeans. In turn, this experience greatly transformed their earlier views of their colonial oppressors.”<sup>57</sup> Important was that while those who were able to experience French citizens, society, and everyday life were a small proportion of the total number of West African soldiers who fought in World War I, they were not insignificant in number. Even on the lower end of estimates tens of thousands of West

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<sup>55</sup> Rathbone, “World War I and Africa,” 9

<sup>56</sup> Page, “Black Men in a White Man’s War,” 20

<sup>57</sup> Lunn, *Memoirs of the Maelstrom*, 175-179

Africans returned with the types of nuanced evaluations of the French that few would have thought possible just years before. In turn, they were able to share these experiences with many others in West Africa, experiences that provided a major assist in the expansion of accurate African knowledge on the French, colonialism, and their place within this greater system. As a whole, the experiences and resulting shifts in perception these West African soldiers underwent during World War I were both unique at the time and incredibly similar to what would be experienced by many more British colonial soldiers decades later in the Second World War, as seen in the next section. The soldiers of the *tirailleurs sénégalais* were not so sizable and influential as to have completely transformed perceptions of colonialism throughout West Africa yet they undoubtedly helped lay the groundwork for a new generation of West Africans to later make claims to and re-contextualize.

## **Chapter Two: The King's African Rifles Overseas in World War II**

After the First World War, Africans continued to be exploited by a variety of European colonial military regiments, one such outfit being the British King's African Rifles. Studying the history, legacy, and lasting implications of this particular colonial military organization aims to reveal how military institutions like the KAR worked to reinforce colonial rule not just through the monopolization of violence, but through control over social identity as well. Both British and African accounts of service in the King's African Rifles are examined, with the most significant disparities in how they viewed themselves, each other, and their military service as a whole highlighted. I hope to show how the structure and service of a regiment like the KAR worked to first keep the colonial system intact on African soil despite an apparent multitude of inherent tensions and contradictory policies, then later helped play a role in the eventual downfall of colonialism in Kenya after the Second World War. The body of this second chapter has also been divided into three main sections. It begins with a history and general overview of the KAR, providing background and context for the arguments posed above. The second section is an analysis of viewpoints held by the British and Africans who fought in the KAR, given to showcase how service within the regiment meant very different things for these two groups. Finally, the last section concentrates on delivering evidence which proves that, despite the existence of what appeared to be multiple intrinsically fatal issues with using a colonial military, the KAR at first did not act as an influence to split the colonial system but rather was an integral force holding together colonial Africa both militarily and socially until after World War II.

**Historical Background of the King's African Rifles:** To better understand how a colonial regiment like the King's African Rifles helped to reinforce and eventually subvert the

empire it served. The story of the King's African Rifles can be understood as having unfolded over six successive periods: the buildup to the regiment's formal establishment in 1902, the consolidation of the KAR in East Africa prior to World War I, World War I, the interwar period, World War II, and from the end of World War II until the fracturing and ultimate dissolution of the KAR in the early 1960s. With the 'Scramble for Africa' encouraging heavy territorial expansion in a race to establish colonial control, European powers like Great Britain saw a much greater need to possess armed forces that were not just capable of defending older coastal enclaves like before but who could also go on the offensive and effectively control new territorial claims. Prior to the establishment of the King's African Rifles in 1902, several native military forces were already operating within British East and Central Africa: these were the Central Africa Regiment, the Uganda Rifles, and the East Africa Rifles.<sup>58</sup> Originally these units mainly consisted of foreign soldiers sent over from British India since they were both cheaper and more resistant to disease than their metropolitan British counterparts.<sup>59</sup> African troops consisted of an slowly growing portion of these new regiments, though for some time the Indian troops remained the backbone of their operations; for example, in 1893 the Central Africa Regiment comprised of a mix between "three British officers, 200 Sikhs, 150 native regulars, and a varying number of irregular levies."<sup>60</sup> However, these Indian troops were seen by the British a stop gap, an improvement on employing British soldiers in the rank-and-file but still not considered as economical or hardy as African soldiers.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, given the necessity of the

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<sup>58</sup> Moyses Bartlett, *The King's African Rifles*, 129-131

<sup>59</sup> Killingray, *Guardians of Empire*, 6-7

<sup>60</sup> Moyses Bartlett, *The King's African Rifles*, 19

<sup>61</sup> Ukpabi, *The Origins of the West African Frontier Force*, 1

protectorates to gain approval from the British War Office each and every time they needed to procure British or Indian troops, as well as the fact they were for the most part in charge of funding their own defense, a turn to native troops made sense.<sup>62</sup> Inspired by the consolidation of local forces in West Africa as the West African Frontier Forces in 1897, these three precursor units were combined and centralized on January 1<sup>st</sup> of 1902 as the King's African Rifles.<sup>63</sup> Even after this official union the operations and overall police, military, and civil administrative work of the KAR effectively remained unchanged.<sup>64</sup>

World War I brought an immediate end to these early trends, introducing a significant and pressing need for manpower and rapidly transforming the King's African Rifles into a modern military regiment. At the outbreak of the war the three battalions comprising the KAR had just 2,325 *askaris*<sup>65</sup> and 73 British soldiers and were notably lacking in adequate weaponry; by the end of WWI nearly 3,500 British officers and NCOs and 32,000 askari were concurrently enlisted in the KAR and served in the East African Campaign.<sup>66</sup> The soldiers of the King's African Rifles who joined the regiment during this time generally viewed themselves as mercenaries fighting in order to earn a living wage.<sup>67</sup> Loyalty existed to their fellow KAR soldiers but not to the British crown and there were cases of askari soldiers fighting for both the British and German armies in World War I, depending on who was offering the best terms of

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<sup>62</sup> Ukpabi, *The Origins of the West African Frontier Force*, 1-4

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 17; Moyse Bartlett, *The King's African Rifles*, 123

<sup>64</sup> Moyse Bartlett, *The King's African Rifles*, xvii

<sup>65</sup> African soldiers or police officers, typically of eastern Africa and in the service of a European power. The word is derived via Swahili from the Arabic word for soldier.

<sup>66</sup> Moyse Bartlett, *The King's African Rifles*, 262, 413

<sup>67</sup> Kakembo, *An African Soldier Speaks*, 9; Kolk, *Can you tell me why I went to War*, 19

service.<sup>68</sup> For many poor or unskilled Africans, service in the KAR was amongst the best options available during the colonial period: wages were typically several times higher than other unskilled positions, tax exemptions existed for those who served, and the prestige that came along with a position as a soldier in the KAR were all significant factors that influenced service.<sup>69</sup> Additionally, 494,936 carriers were officially recruited or conscripted as part the service, around 40,000 of whom died from disease or warfare.<sup>70</sup> Unlike with the KAR soldiers, incentives to join as a carrier were virtually nonexistent; in fact, most were forcibly conscripted in a similar manner to what took place in West Africa. The notion of prestige and the position of soldiers within the colonial society at large was an important point for *askari*; while the European system imposed on Africa was difficult for virtually all native subjects, KAR soldiers were relatively better off than most of their peers. With the exception of a few educated fighters who joined during the Second World War, KAR soldiers tended to view themselves as distinct from and generally superior to the general native populace as well as those natives who served in non-combatant colonial military units like the carrier corps.<sup>71</sup>

After the war, demobilization and the need to occupy former German territory in Tanganyika led to reorganizing the KAR into six battalions totaling some 5,700 Africans and 150 British officers and NCOs in 1920.<sup>72</sup> This number subsequently declined throughout the years; by 1930 no metropolitan British soldiers were stationed south of Khartoum and in all of

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<sup>68</sup> Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File*, 65

<sup>69</sup> Nunneley, *Tales from the King's African Rifles*, 150

<sup>70</sup> Moyse Bartlett, *The King's African Rifles*, 414

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 84

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 453-456, 465

Britain's sub-Saharan colonies there were less than 12,000 locally recruited soldiers, just over 3,000 of whom were in the KAR.<sup>73</sup> Driven by the continuing global economic crisis, three years later the strength of the whole regiment would shrink to just 2,400 soldiers compared to a population of 12 million in the territories they watched over.<sup>74</sup> Nonetheless, the King's African Rifles played a critical role in internal defense during interwar period, patrolling frontier lands and once again undertaking punitive expeditions, albeit on a smaller scale than during the pre-WWI years.<sup>75</sup> The Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935-1936 brought a quick reversal to this trend of declining military strength in the colonies: a seventh KAR battalion was created in Uganda, reserve forces were prepared, and the KAR readied external defensive plans in the following years.<sup>76</sup>

Generally speaking, British perceptions of Africans stagnated during the interwar period; as historian Philip Curtin describes, the result of First World War on Europe "was a kind of historical hiatus, where many trends and developments that seemed imminent before 1914 simply failed to take place until after 1914, and the Great Depression of the 1930s was a further damper on innovation."<sup>77</sup> The average British KAR officer and NCO considered Africans in the KAR to be brute fighters, capable of following orders but who needed European leaders in order to operate most effectively. The soldiers in the King's African Rifles were seen as having simple needs, a generally cheerful outlook, and capable of deep loyalty to those who earned their

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<sup>73</sup> Killingray, *Guardians of Empire*, 8, 10

<sup>74</sup> Moyse Bartlett, *The King's African Rifles*, 465

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, 450

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 466-471

<sup>77</sup> Curtin, *African History*, 430



respect. While they could be good soldiers, they believed the askaris would always be inferior to the European counterparts.<sup>78</sup> They were also noted for their exceptional reconnaissance skills, something Nunneley elaborates on:

Although few East African tribes are familiar with the jungle, belonging more to the open spaces – the plains and the hills and the desert regions – their acute powers of observation seem to make them equally good trackers in the jungle as elsewhere.<sup>79</sup>

Overall, their views could be described as paternalistic; while some of their descriptions of the askaris were condescending and contained back-handed praises, the majority of British officers and NCOs sincerely believed they were helping with their actions.<sup>80</sup> The notion of promoting European concepts of civilization is common throughout these sources, especially in the older and more official documents. However, even in the most explicitly pro-European sources they were never outright hostile in their opinions of the askari who served in the KAR. Like the French, the British also saw Africans who served in their military ranks through the conceptual lens of ‘martial races.’ In principle, this concept espoused that certain groups of people or societies were particularly well-suited for warfare and would make the best recruits for military service under the British. The designation of martial race originated in British India during the mid-nineteenth century and, by the time the KAR was established in 1902, the term was deeply-entrenched into the official military lexicon and the British imperial imaginary more broadly.<sup>81</sup> As such, the askari who filled the ranks of the KAR throughout its history were seen by the

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<sup>78</sup> Moyse Bartlett, *The King's African Rifles*, 685-686

<sup>79</sup> Nunneley, *Tales from the King's African Rifles*, 151

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 85

<sup>81</sup> Killingray, *Guardians of Empire*, 14-16

British serving with them as superior to other Africans from other, non-martial groups within East Africa.

**The King's African Rifles in World War II:** The Second World War saw the King's African Rifles become involved with three separate military campaigns: against Italy in Ethiopia and Somalia, against Vichy (occupied) France in Madagascar, and against the Japanese in Burma. The KAR again rapidly grew in strength, quadrupling its number of battalions by May of 1942 and passing the regiment's highest figures from World War I soon after.<sup>82</sup> The Burma campaign was particularly notable, with the KAR fighting outside the African continent for the first time in their history. In total, well over 300,000 East African natives were recruited for service in all branches of the British military during World War II, including around a quarter of whom served overseas and nearly 13,000 that were still fighting the Japanese when the war ended.<sup>83</sup>

Unlike typical British views of colonial soldiers, which are widely available in print, exploring how Africans serving in the King's African Rifles perceived their British counterparts prior to and during World War II requires a more complicated course of study. Historian David Killingray points out this phenomenon, stating,

The historiography of the military forces in colonial Africa, inevitably, rests heavily on the official and private documents, memoirs and letters generated by the white men who served as officers and administrators... [African] Soldiers were mainly non-literate and until the

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<sup>82</sup> Moyse Bartlett, *The King's African Rifles*, 574-575

<sup>83</sup> Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File*, 35

Second World War when a good number a literate men were recruited, there are few letters or accounts by Africans.<sup>84</sup>

Furthermore, the few accounts that *were* created by African soldiers require accounting for the rarity of such well-educated men in the rank and file and how their experiences differed from their more common illiterate askari counterparts. However, a general sense of how the KAR rank and file viewed themselves, their European counterparts, and KAR military service as a whole can be synthesized and compared to the aforementioned British understandings by placing these few available primary sources in conversation with more recent scholarly work undertaken to understand the KAR from the African point of view.

Prior to World War II, soldiers of the King's African Rifles largely accepted and even helped foster notions of martial identity and superiority, using it to their advantage when negotiating for concessions from the British as well as to differentiating themselves from other Africans. At the same time, Africans who wished to volunteer for the KAR but were not considered by the British as belonging to a martial race simply lied about their ethnic affiliations to gain admittance, demonstrating a flexible and pragmatic approach to the situation. Given its stature as a downright fictional classification, which groups were considered to be martial races was unsurprisingly subject to change over time.<sup>85</sup> In terms of representation, ethnic groups in the KAR fluctuated significantly throughout the years. One extreme example of this were the Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru in the Kenyan KAR battalions, who went from 0.1% of the force in 1938 to 21.7% of it in 1945, only to shrink back down to 3.3% by 1959.<sup>86</sup> Other times they were

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<sup>84</sup> Killingray, *Guardians of Empire*, 223

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 15

<sup>86</sup> Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File*, 58-59

barely represented at all. Oftentimes these groups did not even view themselves as a unified ethnic group until *after* being categorized that way by Europeans.<sup>87</sup>

Despite the strictness of military service and the rigid structure that put whites in superior positions to their African colleagues, KAR askari also found ways to express agency within the ranks themselves. Some would feign illness and dehydration during long marches to get sick leave, others would make up stories about how they were needed back at their homes and create schemes to get breaks from service.<sup>88</sup> While the official British documents ignore the issue, KAR British officers noted there were even not-so-infrequent cases of askari rebelling against and murdering individual officers.<sup>89</sup> Ultimately, however, there was a grudging recognition that their European officers and NCOs held power in the relationship; as one ex-KAR askari put it, “we knew that they were white men and whatever they said had to be obeyed. That was just the way it was.”<sup>90</sup>

**How World War II Shaped the Perceptions of East Africans:** Thanks to the experiences of King’s African Rifles soldiers overseas, a number of tensions and contradictions inherent to the KAR would surface in ways that challenged the established colonial order. Differing perceptions of military service in the KAR by the British and Africans were just one of the many fundamental issues and concerns with the KAR and its role in colonialism. The KAR askari were the only Africans legally authorized to use lethal force and therefore held an

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<sup>87</sup> Osborne, *Ethnicity and Empire in Kenya*, 3

<sup>88</sup> Kolk, *Can you tell me why I went to War*, 38

<sup>89</sup> Nunneley, *Tales from the King’s African Rifles*, 72-73, 107-110, 172

<sup>90</sup> Kolk, *Can you tell me why I went to War*, 61

important role upholding the colonial system. Without the King's African Rifles, military enforcement in the British East and Central African territories they served would have been prohibitively expensive. No matter how the British justified this, they were ultimately dependent on using a portion of the subjugated colonial population to control themselves, a situation the British were all too aware of and constantly worried about. Encouraging KAR soldiers to view themselves as different from the general populace while serving, then having these soldiers be re-introduced back into civilian life was another tension the British contended with. While they greatly feared what ex-soldiers were capable of, especially when they had to introduce large numbers of them back into the populace like at end of World War II, the protectorates more or less agreed that preferential treatment for ex-soldiers would be just as dangerous.<sup>91</sup>

Given these precarious foundations, it seems fair to assume that the King's African Rifles should have had some very real problems working as an agent of colonialism and perhaps even could have been expected to help delegitimize the colonial system. Some modern interpretations of the KAR's legacy are based off this idea of the KAR functioning as a source of colonial destabilization. In a centennial history produced by the Malawi Rifles, a successor of the KAR, it is mentioned about how the 1915 Chilembwe Uprising "broke the myth and raised questions of the invincibility of the white race which would later become a source of inspiration in the fight for independence."<sup>92</sup> The Malawi Rifles document also goes on to state that, while the KAR was initially tasked with enforcing colonial occupation, "later, many who served in KAR were useful in organizing military insurrection and commando operations against colonial governments."<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File*, 236

<sup>92</sup> Namangale, *A brief history of the origins of the Malawi Rifles*, 5

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, 4

Subsequent uprisings like the Mau Mau Rebellion in colonial Kenya, which was recognized for having ex-KAR soldiers such as Waruhiu Itote leading rebel forces, provide examples of how the KAR did help foster counter-colonial operations and attitudes.

Most of these perceived issues did not materialize into tangible problems until after the Second World War. For all these apparent problems with the King's African Rifles, its system of military rule endured with little indication of undermining colonial institutions for the majority of British rule in Central and East Africa. Even in the few notable examples of ex-KAR soldiers leading movements against colonial rule like in the Chilembwe Uprising, the KAR ultimately put down the uprising and executed its leaders.<sup>94</sup> The fundamental tensions and contradictions brought on from the use of African troops as a cornerstone of the colonial military, and the volatility of martial race as an identity were manageable for some time during WWII, proving beneficial to the creation and maintenance of the status-quo in these British territories. Only the 'winds of change' brought on by a shift post-World War Two landscape and others forces largely outside the KAR's control created a formula under which these incongruities became an issue. For example, the concept of martial races was a flawed and arbitrary notion that was nonetheless perpetuated by the British and, due to pressures imposed by colonialism, to a lesser extent by Africans themselves. In practice, the designation of martial race more or less came down to which local groups were minorities and non-rebellious. These groups would then be designated 'martial' and the communities given special status.<sup>95</sup> It was not a coincidence that African societies like the Maasai, who could obtain some degree of prosperity within their own communities and thus had little incentive to join the KAR, were seen as rebellious and never

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<sup>94</sup> McCracken, *A History of Malawi*, 142-143

<sup>95</sup> Killingray, *Guardians of Empire*, 14-16

classified as martial by the British despite their historical reputation as “warriors” amongst other Africans in Kenya.<sup>96</sup> Most groups were not in such fortuitous situations however, leading individuals to volunteer for the KAR and tribal leaders to use marital status as a means for consolidating their own power. Chiefs would use the “thin veneer” of martial identity to negotiate with and extract wealth from the colonial state, which it then would to introduce back into their communities.<sup>97</sup> Leaders in ethnic groups like the Kamba were therefore encouraged to create and foster a shared ethnic identity within this martial framework, since by playing on their reputation as a martial race and their loyalty to the British they gained a bargaining position allowing them to push the colonial administration for new educational facilities, business permits, markets, and other concessions.<sup>98</sup> However, this bargaining power was only used within the colonial system, not against it. As Myles Osborne points out,

On one level, the veterans were frustrated with the colonial administration: They believed British officials had failed to adequately compensate them for the sacrifices they had made during the war. But their crosshairs were even more firmly fixed on the existing chiefs, headmen, and councilors, whose “easy tyranny” had caused untold stresses and problems in the villages.<sup>99</sup>

Ethnic groups that served in the KAR certainly had their issues with the British authorities, but their primary grievances tended to be with their own leaders and activism rarely

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<sup>96</sup> Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File*, 57-58

<sup>97</sup> Osborne, *Ethnicity and Empire in Kenya*, 3-4, 70-71

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 127-128, 132, 135

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 134

extended beyond local issues.<sup>100</sup> Martial race designations may have been unstable, but they proved to be flexible and encouraged different colonial subjects to divide themselves into manageable groupings that had incentive to compete amongst themselves for access to the resources of the colonial state.

There were a few King's African Rifles soldiers who did argue that service in the colonial military fundamentally changed Africans views and awakened soldiers to pan-African ideals, perhaps most notably Robert Kakembo in his work *An African Soldier Speaks*.

Now, during this war, not only do we meet men from other parts of Africa, but we have been up and down those countries. It will be recorded by historians that it was during the war that the African started to think more in terms of a race than as a tribe. The words 'the African', 'the Native', are showing us that we are all one and the same race. We suffer the same privations, we are treated in the same way. We have begun to think together as a race.<sup>101</sup>

Kakembo's words fell right in line with some of the worst fears the British had following World War Two. Specifically, the British were terrified that the experiences of askari serving overseas would lead them to reject going back to the pre-war status quo and throw the colonial system into disarray. The British government considered re-integration of ex-soldiers to be a touchy and potentially huge issue; the idea was that introducing small numbers of troops in the interwar period had been manageable but doing so on an exponentially larger scale could spell disaster. While the colonial government worried about re-integration, they did their best to keep their

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<sup>100</sup> Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File*, 257

<sup>101</sup> Kakembo, *An African Soldier Speaks*, 19



concerns hidden from the public. A 1945 article in *The Spectator*, a British newspaper speaks to the general population's obliviousness on the issue:

In Burma they have seen all the machinery of war. They have been shelled and machine-gunned, mortared and ambushed. They met civilisation through the medium of destructive weapons, and, like all other soldiers, have developed a philosophy for high explosives. They are still simple-hearted, and when they graze their cattle again in the thorn country of Africa, the war in Burma will fade like an old dream.<sup>102</sup>

The British colonial government ended up spending significant time preparing for the inevitable return of the KAR soldiers after World War II, carefully implementing a demobilization plan over several years that gave educated ex-KAR soldiers improved job opportunities while trying to prevent those without an education from gaining one and getting the ex-soldiers to go back to their homelands.<sup>103</sup> Kakembo validated many of these fears, especially when talking about how the ex-KAR soldier would expect his standard of living to stay the same as it had been during the war and how their overseas service showed the askari that East African Whites treated them much worse than other British soldiers.<sup>104</sup>

Still, the KAR remained an important colonial institution that kept the Central and East African protectorates together until its eventual disbandment. As sociologist Frank Furedi argues, imperial concern over demobilization and the attitudes of ex-soldiers was exaggerated and overblown; if anything, “the imaginary problem of the demobilized soldier was essentially

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<sup>102</sup> Hanley, “Bantu in Burma”

<sup>103</sup> Killingray, *Guardians of Empire*, 13

<sup>104</sup> Kakembo, *An African Soldier Speaks*, 14, 22-24

the real problem of imperial self-confidence.”<sup>105</sup> The issues the British expected to have returning massive numbers of ex-soldiers back to low-paying jobs never materialized on quite the scale they had anticipated for the First World War, while in the Second World War the issues went far beyond just ex-soldiers finding employment. The bigger problem wasn’t so much the rapid discharging of large numbers of soldiers but the types of men the King’s African Rifles had enlisted in the first place. For most of the interwar period, the men who comprised the the KAR infantry largely sought out the profession, acting as career soldiers and serving for nine to eighteen years in order to get benefits; in contrast, the Second World War drew in thousands of men to the KAR who had little or no desire to be professional or even temporary soldiers.<sup>106</sup> These soldiers, often literally forced into the fray, tended to be much more bitter in the recollection of the KAR and colonial Britain. However, the colonial government in East Africa held rigid control of ex-askari organizations, limiting their ability to have political influence after World War II. KAR soldiers had few commonalities uniting them after the war; for example, the large and politically active Kenya African Union (KAU) was supported by many Kikuyu and a few Kamba veterans but few other ethnic groups.<sup>107</sup> The Kikuyu veterans in general were a notable exception to the fact that most ex-soldiers were largely unrepresented in African nationalist movements. The Kikuyu were classified as a non-martial group and subsequently ignored by the colonial government, leaving them with little support and leading many to join organizations such as the KAU and the Forty Group, both of which had ties to leading military

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<sup>105</sup> Furedi, *Guardians of Empire*, 169, 192

<sup>106</sup> Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File*, 224-225

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid*, 248-251

figures in the Mau Mau Uprising.<sup>108</sup> Several Kenya Land Freedom Army leaders such as Waruhiu Itote (General China) and Dedan Kimathi (General Russia) were in fact ex-soldiers from World War II and their KAR service was for a long time used as an explanation for their later military accomplishments. However, in spite of this traditional rationale for their prowess in the field virtually all of these men served in labor or specialist units within the KAR, not overseas on the frontlines of the Second World War.<sup>109</sup> Furthermore, King's African Rifles forces were actually called upon to supplement the imperial British army in suppressing the Mau Mau rebellion, and all four Kenyan KAR battalions were used in addition to battalions from Uganda and Tanganyika.<sup>110</sup> A sizeable number of veteran KAR soldiers did take part in the Mau Mau Uprising, but it was also true that there were a number of veterans who remained loyalists in the conflict as well.<sup>111</sup>

Outside of the ex-soldiers who went on to be a part of the Mau Mau Uprising's military apparatus, few KAR soldiers would go on to directly challenge colonial authority via taking up arms. Additionally, ideological challenges from educated KAR soldiers such as Kakembo still proved an exception, not the norm, as most KAR soldiers came into the service with little education. For the few literate and articulate Africans, service in the KAR during World War II did provide a substantial platform for them to see and do everything the British had feared, but it was their academic background, not soldiery that was at the root of this issue. Timothy Parsons again sums things well, stating, "education in the colonial forces was a double-edged sword.

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<sup>108</sup> Maloba, *Mau Mau and Kenya*, 57-58

<sup>109</sup> Itote, "*Mau Mau*" *General*," 1-5; Parsons, "Mau Mau's Army of Clerks," 285, 287

<sup>110</sup> Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File*, 40

<sup>111</sup> Parsons, "Mau Mau's Army of Clerks," 287, 307

While it was an innovative method of controlling African soldiers, it also provided an effective means of articulating their grievances.”<sup>112</sup> However, very few soldiers in the King’s African Rifles were as well-schooled as Kakembo and, similar to the *tirailleurs* in World War I, grievances for a large majority of the KAR rank-and-file remained limited to their immediate communities.<sup>113</sup> Those who were educated tended not to serve overseas but rather in more auxiliary roles where their previous tutelage could be put to better use. For its part, the KAR continued to promote a sense of loyalty through martial identity as well as through intergroup competition for resources within the British colonial framework. The relative prosperity offered to soldiers in the King’s African Rifles and the allegedly martial communities they came from ultimately resulted in non-conscripted KAR soldiers being some of the most reliable East Africans for upholding British rule.<sup>114</sup>

As a whole, overseas service did not do as much for political movements and tangible change as other factors such as economic issues, ethnic ties, and global forces. Many of the King’s African Rifle’s soldiers who served abroad were impacted on a personal level and underwent changes in their perceptions of the British, the colonial system they were a part of, and their place in world affairs; however, how these new understandings translated into tangible action was heavily dependent on these other factors. This sort of overseas service was undoubtedly impactful on the perceptions of soldiers who experienced it, and to some of those they came in direct contact with afterwards, but not very significant in the greater decolonialization process. Those who would go on to play a major role in such activities were

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<sup>112</sup> Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File*, 190

<sup>113</sup> Osborne, *Ethnicity and Empire in Kenya*, 134

<sup>114</sup> Killingray, *Guardians of Empire*, 17

the KAR regulars who either were educated or served in non-combat roles, neither of whom went overseas in great numbers.

## Summary and Conclusion

Overall, what conclusions from a comparative perspective can be reached from evaluating the overseas campaigns of the *tirailleurs sénégalais* and King's African Rifles in the Two World Wars? To begin, it can safely be claimed that overseas service opened up opportunities for colonial soldiers in both these units to obtain a richer intellectual understanding of Europeans, colonialism, and their relation to both. While no two men experienced or interpreted their time away from home in quite the same manner, frequent interactions with foreign civilians and European soldiers offered African combatants' chances to communicate with and learn from these people in ways they never could back home. Many of these colonial soldiers were able to take advantage of their situation. From the vantage points of Europe and Asia it became easier to see how hypocritical the colonial system in Africa was, how their daily lives under such regimes compared unfavorably to virtually everywhere else, and how most of the outside world was unaware of the extensive negative impact these colonial governments had on so many Africans. In short, overseas service provided a path for Africans to gain deeper perspectives on the ways colonialism worked to suppress and deny the rich history of the African continent, overlaying this reality with a web of lies needed to justify European exploitation of the land and those living on it.

Perhaps more importantly, channeling these new understandings and altered perceptions into successful challenges of the colonial system proved to be a much more difficult task. One complicating issue was that those exposed to overseas military service typically were not those who could best take advantage of what they learned. It was rarely the highly educated who found themselves fighting the Germans and Japanese overseas; rather, those from lower status backgrounds and who had limited means to avoid military conscription ended up filling the vast

majority of *tirailleur* and KAR positions during the two World Wars. Another issue was that the military roles occupied by the men of these two colonial units were extremely hazardous. Frontline combat roles were already dangerous and had exceptionally high casualty rates. Additionally, it is exceedingly plausible that the men of the *tirailleurs sénégalais* and King's African Rifles were even more likely to be forced into in dangerous military operations due to their race. A lot of these soldiers would not return home alive and, out of those who did survive, few had any appetite for fighting after their military service concluded; most simply wanted to get back home and return to their way of life, albeit with a bit more money, prestige, and understanding of the way their world worked. Any colonial soldiers that returned back to Africa after their service and made efforts to change the established order found their efforts stifled by colonial governments that overestimated but nonetheless anticipated and prepared for difficulties reintegrating such soldiers back into society.

In the end, the overseas experiences shared by the soldiers of the *tirailleurs sénégalais* and King's African Rifles make up a unique and underappreciated slice of African history. Their impact subverting the colonial systems they inhabited was not overwhelming, yet these experiences also proved to be far from inconsequential. Colonial soldiers that served overseas helped immensely with broadening African worldviews at a time when such observations were at a premium. The messages and information being shared Africans in these colonial systems were mirrored reflections of reality, warped images given to justify and mask the inequalities of the colonial order. What the overseas service of African soldiers in the Two World Wars provided was a means to recognize their existence did not need to be a reflection of European projections; service offered a way to see the world from a more nuanced point of view, one from which these soldiers could take a figurative step back and appreciate the full truth of their situation as

colonial subjects. By going overseas, they were able to realize their colonial experiences in Africa were not just 'the way things were' or the natural order of things but instead a very particular and unnatural system of rule imposed on them. These experiences also exposed bare many of the hypocrisies colonialism fostered, in particular that colonial soldiers were essentially serving to protect nations that, in turn, screwed them over. From outside their home continent, it became clear to many African soldiers how much of a caustic aberration colonialism really was.



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