French Officers, African Officers, and the Violent Image of African Colonial Soldiers*

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Abstract • The article examines the ways in which French officers manipulated the image of the “savage and violent” African colonial soldier. While the background for the development of this image was the general European perception of Africa as a violent space, during World War I, officers, as well as parts of the French public, began to see Africans as “grown children” rather than savages. However, as this image served French military purposes and made the soldiers useful on the battlefields, it was not rejected outright. I look at the debate around recruiting Africans to serve in Europe on the eve of World War I, and the French attempts to refute the German accusations around the deployment of African soldiers in the Rhineland during the 1920s. Finally I examine how, thirty years later, during the Indochina War, African officers dealt with these conflicting images in reports about violent incidents in which African soldiers had been involved.

Keywords • African colonial soldiers, African officers, French Army, French officers, Indochina War, Tirailleurs Sénégalais, World War I

In his short story Fahavalo, the Malagasy author Jean-Luc Raharimanana describes the following scene from the repression of the Malagasy insurgency in 1947:

The conquerors swooped down out of the night, panicking everyone in the village. Tracking down the rebels, the Fahavalos, and the sorcerers. Dogs barking. Purebred dogs. Huge. Obeying only the black soldiers. Men, women, children, my friend, all lined up. Some were still naked, torn from their sleep. The conquerors asked about the Fahavalos. Nobody could answer. The conquerors shot ten men, then three others, five more …

In this short and poignant description of colonial violence, African soldiers are the only representatives of this brutality. It is they who perform the lineup and the brutal killings, they who give orders to huge dogs. This description reflects one of the images of African colonial soldiers, known as the tirailleurs sénégalais, that was widespread in French colonies that underwent
violent anti-colonial struggles during the years of decolonization. But the image of the brutal and savage African soldier was much older. It had taken root in the European mind even before the colonization of Africa and served to justify the slave trade and, later, the establishment of colonial rule. It also encouraged the colonial powers to recruit such ostensible “natural” violence to assist them in their conquests.

Much has been written about the violent image of Africans in general and, more specifically, on the image of the tirailleurs sénégalais in literature, French and German propaganda, and popular culture. This article does not aim to examine or evaluate that image but rather to discuss how it was used and manipulated by military officers who sent African soldiers into battle. I examine how French officers manipulated the violent image of their African soldiers, which was disseminated both among the French public and the German enemy—using it to their advantage in some cases, and denying it in others. The term “manipulation” can be misleading. I do not suggest that the French officers presented a coherent discourse regarding the violence of their African soldiers. Neither do I insist that the French officers who wrote about the tirailleurs had a preconceived scheme in mind to present them in a way that would contribute to their military aims. Rather, I maintain that their perception of African soldiers represents one of the tensions of empire discussed by Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler. Cooper and Stoler present the most basic tension of empire as lying in the fact that “the otherness of colonized persons was neither inherent nor stable; his or her difference had to be defined and maintained.”

As I will show, the presence of African colonial soldiers in the “motherland” and their encounters with the French civil population threatened to destabilize their otherness. This was certainly reflected in the ambivalence of the French military discourse regarding their violent and brutal image. On the one hand, presenting the African soldiers as primitive and naturally violent served French military interests, since it made them more menacing in the eyes of enemies in Europe and in the empire. On the other hand, the soldiers were supposed to be living proof of the success of the French civilizing mission and the supremacy of French colonialism over that of other nations. In this regard, presenting the soldiers as especially violent and brutal made no sense. It is precisely that ambivalence which makes the French treatment of the violent image of the tirailleurs so complex and constantly changing. It also reflects, to a large extent, the general colonial attitude to Sub-Saharan Africa and the ongoing struggle between the aspiration to civilize and the fear of blurring colonial boundaries.

The Image of the Violent African

It is strange, in a way, to speak of a violent image of soldiers, since warfare is by nature a violent phenomenon. A soldier’s job is to kill; therefore, accus-
ing him of being violent seems senseless and even hypocritical. However, the violence associated with African soldiers was not the regular sort one would expect of any soldier. It was a savage and barbaric violence that ostensibly defied the rules of Western warfare.

Since their first encounter with the African continent, Europeans tended to see it as a mirror or a screen on which they could project their own fears about themselves and their world. Accordingly, the African was portrayed as animalistic, sexually lustful, lazy, and religiously degenerate. Thinkers of the Enlightenment also held negative opinions about Africans. Voltaire saw them as living in the worst condition of human barbarism and Montesquieu stated that most people living on the coasts of Africa were savages and barbarians.\(^5\) The debate about the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade that took place during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century greatly influenced the discourse around the violent African. Richard Reid notes that this debate shaped notions about the nature of African violence in general, and warfare in particular. The principal question raised was whether the African was inherently violent, or whether his violence was induced by external factors, such as the slave trade itself. Views on this question depended largely on whether their holders were abolitionists or supporters of the slave trade. While most abolitionists maintained that the African was primitive and savage by nature yet salvageable, apologists for the slave trade argued that the African was naturally violent and that violence and warfare, as well as slavery, had always existed among these barbarian peoples. It was this view of Africa as a violent continent that later served to justify European violence during the colonization of Africa.\(^6\) Soon, however, it became clear that the colonization of Africa could not be performed by the limited number of European troops the colonial powers had at their disposal. As massive recruitment in Europe was prone to enrage public opinion, the solution was to tame and recruit African violence for the benefit of the “civilizing mission.” While all colonial powers resorted to African recruits to complete their conquest and maintain order in their colonies, the French went a step further and recruited Africans to protect the motherland against its European enemies, notably the Germans. This decision, however, was not without controversy.

The Debate around the Recruitment of Africans to Serve in Europe

During the nineteenth century, the French expanded possession over what would become the two federations of French West and Equatorial Africa. From an early stage, the French realized that they needed to recruit Africans in order to conquer new territories and establish their rule in them. In some areas they encountered fierce resistance and could not be victorious only with European soldiers. Moreover, African soldiers were more resilient to climate and local diseases; their deployment was economical, since they were paid much less than French soldiers; and French public opinion
was not particularly unnerved by their casualties. 7 Therefore, in 1857, the French established the first battalion of the African military corps, called the *tirailleurs sénégalais* (though they were actually recruited from all over French Sub-Saharan Africa, not exclusively from Senegal). 8 The *tirailleurs sénégalais* were deployed throughout the French Empire up to its disintegration and became indispensable to French colonization and to the maintenance of order in the newly conquered territories. 9

Recruitment was performed according to the preconception that certain African so-called races, such as the Toucouleurs and the Mandingue, were naturally more warlike and fierce than others and therefore could be excellent soldiers. 10 Hence, the image of the African as inherently violent turned into an advantage, as this violence was to be recruited for the benefit of the French civilizing mission. The use of colonial subjects as conquerors of the French Empire, and later as those who maintained order in the colonies, created a paradox that characterized other colonial powers as well. Colonial violence was now applied to a great extent by colonial subjects against other colonial subjects. On the one hand, this situation could be dangerous for the colonial power, as it had to trust the colonized. On the other hand, it made it easier to conceal colonial violence and place the blame for brutality on the so-called violent nature of its African performers. Gavin Rand points to a similar ambivalence in British India following the recruitment of Indians to the colonial army. He notes that, as the Indian soldiers provided the foundation of the imperial military, the apparatus of colonial violence gained an ambiguous status. Colonial violence was no longer a purely metropolitan agency. 11

Thus the French took advantage of Africans, whom they saw as inherently violent, to conquer and protect the Empire. But in 1910, Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Mangin (later to become General) wrote his book *La Force noire*, in which he suggested taking a step further and using the soldiers’ so-called warrior instincts to protect not only the empire but also the motherland. Mangin maintained that the depopulation of France due to falling birthrates made it necessary to recruit African soldiers to defend its borders. 12 He regarded the deployment of black soldiers in the defense of the motherland as the pinnacle of France’s civilizing mission. 13 Yet, while formulating his argument in *La Force noire*, Mangin had already anticipated metropolitan objections to his scheme: claims that the “savagery” of these soldiers might be suitable for conquering the colonies for France but not for fighting on its land. Ambivalence towards the soldiers is already evident in his text. On the one hand Mangin emphasized the soldiers “*jeune sang bouillonne*” and their disregard for their lives. On the other hand he called their fury “French,” noting that they were French soldiers who treated everyone who was not French (meaning other Africans) as savages. He also emphasized that the soldiers were recruited only from peoples who had undergone a certain degree of assimilation. 14 Mangin claimed that several natural attributes of the Africans made them excellent soldiers: their ability to live in harsher climates than other soldiers; their capacity to carry heavy loads over great distances,
related to the fact that many of them were former slaves; and an ostensibly under-developed nervous system that allowed them to withstand pain. He argued that those qualities made African soldiers valuable for deployment as “shock troops” and that their appearance on the battlefields of Europe would have a considerable effect on the enemy's morale.\textsuperscript{15}

Mangin was not alone in claiming that African soldiers were ferocious and natural warriors. In 1909, General Hippolyte Langlois expressed his opinion about the soldiers in these words:

Those who belong to the black race take their qualities as warriors from their heredity, because, as far back as we can go in history, the state of war has been normal in Africa—their social situation that teaches them discipline; the harsh conditions of their existence which render them persistent, their carelessness, which makes them tenacious in the long struggles that characterize the modern battles; their bloody and fatalist temperament, which renders them terrible and shocking …\textsuperscript{16}

A year later General Galienni, who commanded many of the colonization campaigns in Africa and in Indochina, stated that “[t]he warriors’ qualities of the Senegalese can no longer be contested, proud to serve under the orders of the French leaders, it is impossible to treat them as simple mercenaries; in the service of our flag they constitute, on the contrary, elite troops which it would be regrettable not to deploy.”\textsuperscript{17}

Voiced by prominent military figures, these views did not prevent the emergence of a heated debate in France over Mangin’s plan to recruit African soldiers to fight on European soil. This debate was conducted between 1909 and 1912 in various fora—including the national press, members of the scientific community, and members of the Chamber of Deputies.\textsuperscript{18}

In November 1909, the Socialist member of the National Assembly, Jean Augagneur,\textsuperscript{19} who objected to the recruitment of Africans, proposed merging the colonial army with the metropolitan one. His scheme sparked off a series of articles whose authors were outraged by the suggestion. One ridiculed Augagneur’s naivety thinking that African soldiers were no longer needed after the conquest of the French colonies. The author reminded readers of the naturally violent and chaotic nature of Africans, and asserted that without the use of force they would quickly return to the state to which their cultural inferiority condemned them.\textsuperscript{20} In another article, the author explained that the colonial army was a new organ within France’s national defense. He told his readers about the vicious and hypocritical attack in the German press against the recruitment of Africans to serve in Europe, launched both by rightist and leftist newspapers that expressed shock at the idea that uncivilized and barbaric blacks might be sent to face warriors of the German race. The author asked whether this attack was not the ultimate proof that Mangin’s idea was an excellent one.\textsuperscript{21}

Indeed, German hostility towards the idea of recruiting African soldiers to fight in Europe reinforced French officers who supported this scheme.
The heated German response reflected their fear of the soldiers and thus emphasized the Africans’ value for the protection of France. Therefore, in spite of the objections raised, military opinion got the upper hand. Within the military, the debate focused on the value of African recruits as soldiers. The question was not whether to enlist them, but rather how to use them in battle. In this respect there was broad agreement that their finest quality was their ability to scare the enemy and weaken its morale. General Henri Bonnal, director of the Ecole de Guerre Supérieure from 1889 to 1902 and a member of the Comité technique de l’État Major, enthusiastically endorsed Mangin’s proposal. Asserting that in the “coming war … the ‘black’ troops will have no rivals when it is a matter of delivering the final shock,” he recommended deploying them (alongside North Africans) on the front lines, where “their savage impetuosity in attacks with the bayonet” would prove decisive. This tactical line of argument was supported by Bonnal’s successor at the Ecole de Guerre Supérieure, General Langlois, who contended that the “warrior qualities” of the “black race” were “hereditary” and that, in the prevailing conditions of “modern” warfare, “their cold-blooded and fatalistic temperament [would] render them terrible in the attack.”

The assumption of French generals that Africans could serve as excellent shock troops was thus based on a deeply rooted European image of Africa as a violent land and of Africans as inherently brutal. The military authorities did not perceive this violence as a problem, claiming that through the French civilizing mission this violence was tamed and recruited to protect this mission and the motherland itself. Nevertheless, they knew how deeply entrenched was the European fear of savage and barbaric African violence, and did not hesitate to exploit that fear.

**The Violent Image of African Soldiers during World War I**

Most of the African soldiers were recruited to fight in Europe after 1916, when French casualties were becoming heavy and mutiny was on the rise in the ranks. Some 134,000 tirailleurs fought in the trenches of World War I, 1.6 percent of the French army. While in service, most of their French commanders considered them the best offensive troops among all colonial soldiers. These officers’ idea was that Africans were mentally primitive and savage, but also loyal and dependable. After several unsuccessful campaigns in which African soldiers participated, officers’ opinions about their value as soldiers became more ambiguous. Nevertheless, their value as “shock troops” remained unquestioned. According to Richard Fogarty, this prevalence of the vision of Black Africans as bloodthirsty and savage warriors within the French Army encouraged their commanders to dispatch them on dangerous offensive missions, causing them to suffer particularly disproportionate casualty rates. The negative effect of this image on the African soldiers was also evident in the battles of 1940. Rafael Scheck points to this image and its
revival in Nazi propaganda during the 1930s as one of the major motives for the massacres of African prisoners-of-war by German soldiers in the early stages of World War II.  

Encouraging the image of the bloodthirsty and savage African indeed achieved its aim and affected German soldiers. During the war, German troops were reported to be terrified of the African soldiers’ “aboriginal ferocity” and rumors spread even among Allied soldiers that the Senegalese often returned from a fight with a “pocketful of white men’s ears.” French officers reported “an almost irrational fear” of the Black units among German soldiers and the Kaiser’s government focused on alleged atrocities—such as rape, summary execution of prisoners-of-war, and the mutilation of corpses—in its propaganda campaign against the alleged violations of the rules of warfare by the French and the introduction of “uncivilized elements” into “civilized Europe.”

The problem was that, while this image was convenient when held by the enemy, it was problematic when it came to the French population. The French army did not want its own civilians to be terrified of the soldiers who were recruited to protect them. The military authorities did their best to limit the soldiers’ contacts with the French population. In hospitals, wounded tirailleurs were separated from metropolitan soldiers, for example. Nevertheless, contacts with civilians occurred, sometimes even intimate ones, especially during the winter months when African soldiers were sent to towns in the south of France due to harsh conditions.

These encounters contributed to a gradual transformation of the image of the African soldiers in France and, by the war’s end, the image of the African soldier as a “grown child” gradually replaced that of the barbaric savage. While this image was still paternalistic, barbaric violence was no longer part of it. This transformation is evident in various artistic representations of the soldiers and also in books written by their commanders. Laurent Gervereau examines sketches of foreign soldiers in World War I in France and Germany. He demonstrates that earlier French portrayals of the soldiers emphasized their violent nature; Africans were shown stabbing German soldiers ferociously with their bayonets—a Western weapon that resembled the African machete. One postcard portrayed African soldiers cutting off German soldiers’ ears to prepare a necklace. Towards the end of the war, however, the soldiers were presented as more civilized, though still as “grown children.”

The best example for this transformation in the soldiers’ popular image is the post-World War I advertisement for the hot breakfast drink “Banania” which portrayed a grinning tirailleur, whose smile later became a symbol of French paternalism towards the African soldiers. Nevertheless, it is significant that the soldier’s gun is only partially visible in the ad and nothing in his presentation points to any kind of savagery.

Nicole Zehfuss indicates a similar process of transformation from savages to grown children in the soldiers’ images in France, relying on two books written by a French commander of African soldiers. She shows that contacts
with African soldiers changed their stereotypical perception into one that saw them as individuals. Zehfuss also refers to the way in which Mangin, as well as other French commanders, manipulated race-based scientific arguments, accepting those that suited their plans and visions and rejecting those that did not. This made it possible for them to view Africans as subordinated beings and ferocious savages on the battlefield, while simultaneously portraying them as *bon sauvages* for the French public.

**French Attempts to Refute the Violent Image of the African Soldier: The “Black Shame on the Rhine”**

During wartime, the French generally ignored German protests against the deployment of African soldiers. However, when the conditions of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 dictated that an occupation force be stationed in the Rhineland, the French decided to deploy African soldiers as part of this force. Keith Nelson lists several practical motives for this decision, such as concerns about harming the soldiers’ morale and the fear of an overly large concentration of African troops within France. Yet he notes that, at least partly, the decision was aimed at using these soldiers as a weapon of psychological warfare against the Germans, to humiliate them and remind them that France could employ other races to fight its enemies.

The German reaction to this move was not slow to come. German officials attempted to recruit the racial fears and prejudices prevalent in other nations, including France’s allies, into a widespread international campaign against the French. In June 1915, the German government had published a document describing alleged atrocities committed by “Black” troops (the term referred also to North Africans). The Germans claimed that these men had imported their savage methods of warfare into civilized Europe. The extensive use of brutal and cruel weapons and forms of warfare during World War I rendered these accusations rather ironic. Indeed, in interviews conducted by Joe Lunn, African soldiers described the war as a form of extremely brutal warfare to which they were not accustomed and which severely affected them.

The Germans’ appeal to other nations’ racial fears was indeed successful. In 1920 the English journalist E. D. Morel (1872–1924) published a brochure titled “The Black Horror on the Rhine.” He complained about those who “trust barbarians—barbarians belonging to a race inspired by nature ... with tremendous sexual instincts—into the heart of Europe.” This pamphlet was only one of dozens in which the main accusation against the African soldiers was their sexual appetite and their lust for white women.

In spite of the international protest against the French use of African soldiers in the Rhineland, the French did not agree to remove their colonial troops. Their numbers were significantly reduced only after the Locarno Treaties of October 1925, in which the French promised to withdraw from
the northern Rhineland. Nevertheless, the severe accusations against the African soldiers and the French who stationed them in the Rhineland put the French in an awkward position. On the one hand, the hysteria about ostensible savages who raped white women played into the hands of the French, as it ensured that the Germans were fearful of France and therefore might hesitate to attack in the future. On the other hand, American and British criticisms demanded a response. Moreover, the French wanted to prove that the colonial natives who had been subjected to the civilizing mission were no longer savages. In some ways, the French even considered the accusation of barbarity as leveled at themselves.

Therefore the French tried to spread counter-propaganda, insisting that the African troops’ behavior did not differ from that of any other soldiers. This counter-propaganda was influenced, however, by the ambivalent approach of the French themselves to the continued deployment of African soldiers on European soil. A government document from 1925 exposes French colonial fears regarding the destabilizing consequences of the soldiers’ service in Europe for colonial rule, particularly their relations with white women. The document, issued in Paris, probably by the Ministry of the Colonies, discussed German, American, and British accusations regarding the deployment of African soldiers in the Rhineland. While not accepting these accusations, the document’s author conceded that their deployment caused some social and colonial problems. The African soldier was easily influenced by the vices of European civilization and could reach the dangerous conclusion that his acquaintance with the European way of life rendered him equal to the white man. Special concern was directed to the relations of African soldiers with white women and the problem of métissage. Such relations, and the presentation of photos of Frenchwomen in the colonies, were tremendously harmful for colonial prestige.

Nevertheless, the German-induced international campaign forced the French to refute the image they themselves had helped to create. French newspapers published articles dismissing the charges and accusing Germans of the worst forms of racism. It is discernible, though, that French fears of interracial relations influenced the campaign to exonerate their African soldiers. In other words, while this counter-propaganda refuted allegations of rape, it was not thereby sanctioning about voluntary interracial relations.

This ambivalence regarding the presence of African soldiers on European soil was reflected in a report drafted by the Comité d’Assistance aux Troupes Noires in 1922. This seventy-nine-page pamphlet aimed at refuting the German allegations that African soldiers stationed in the Rhineland had raped numerous German women. Camille Fidel, who served at the time as Secretary-General of the Société des Études coloniales et maritimes and as the secretary of the Ligue coloniale française, drew up the report. He collected various testimonies, newspaper items, and military reports written by commanders of various nationalities in order to prove that the conduct of the African
soldiers posted in the Rhineland was exemplary, or at least no different from that of any other nationalities in the Occupation Forces.41

The committee’s report focused on the chief accusation the Germans had directed towards the African soldiers—rape. In concentrating on this issue, the authors of the report found themselves struggling between their own apparent repugnance for interracial sexual relations and their will to exonerate African soldiers. The report insisted that in most cases of sexual relations between African soldiers and German women, the women were the initiators and that sometimes relationships ended in marriage and the birth of children, who were later raised by maternal grandparents.42 The text thus “placed the blame,” so to speak, on the German women by citing German testimonies about their “pursuit” of black soldiers. The women were described as having low morals, but not necessarily as being prostitutes. These interracial relations were sometimes described as “la honte blanche” (the white shame) to replace the German term “Der schwarze schande” (the black shame) which designated the presence of African soldiers in the Rhineland.43 The conclusion that can be drawn from this description is that interracial relations were always shameful and the crucial question was which side to blame.

On the other hand, along with descriptions of women who dated black soldiers as “easy” or “immoral seducers,” the text also explained that German women appreciated these men because they were far more courteous than the white soldiers.44 As evidence of the good conduct and nature of the black soldiers, the report cited a letter allegedly written by a German woman to General Margin. The woman, who was engaged to a Senegalese adjutant, was described as of high social status. This description rendered the evidence more reliable, as the reader was not expected to be impressed by the testimony of a woman of low morals. The woman told the general that she had decided to write to him after reading a detestable article in a German newspaper slandering the black soldiers, which made her ashamed of her native country. She assured the general that all the black soldiers she had met were gentle and kind, and even if they sometimes seemed childlike, they were as civilized as white people.45

In short, the report is inconsistent because of the contradiction between the hostile view of interracial relations, on the one hand, and the wish to present France’s African soldiers as civilized, on the other. This explains why German women who had been dating black soldiers were sometimes described as quasi-prostitutes, and sometimes as respectable women in love with gentle, polite men.

The authors of this report and others were determined to refute German accusations against France’s colonial soldiers because they saw them as pointed at France itself. In fact, the report concluded by asserting that if all the black soldiers were to be evacuated immediately from the Rhineland, the charges of rape would then be directed at white French soldiers, since the target of this campaign was not France’s black soldiers but France itself.46
Nevertheless, French fears of interracial relations were as strong as their determination to disprove German allegations.

These fears reflected the general colonial concerns regarding *métissage*. Ann Stoler discusses certain groups of colonial subjects that defied colonial categories because they crossed imperial divides. One such group is the descendants of mixed couples, which in the colonies mostly consisted of a Frenchman and a local woman. According to Stoler, the ways in which colonial authorities handled these groups reflect one of the tensions of empire: the relationship between the discourses of inclusion, humanitarianism, and equality, and exclusionary, discriminatory practices. She shows that in both the Indies and Indochina, *métissage* was conceived as a dangerous source of subversion, a threat to white prestige and the embodiment of European degeneration and moral decay. When interracial relations involving black men and white women took place on European soil, such fears intensified. What was involved here was not only colonial fear of losing control, but also a whole set of psychological anxieties—the white man’s fear of the black man’s purportedly more powerful sexuality and masculinity; the fear of losing control not only of African men but also of French women; and the concern that sexual relations with white women would encourage African men to mock French men and women and feel equal, if not superior, to them.

This ambivalence to the image of the violent African as reflected in the report on the soldiers’ conduct in the Rhineland also stemmed from the French concern regarding the soldiers themselves. After all, it was a group that had physically crossed colonial boundaries, arriving in the heart of the motherland and establishing direct relations with French civilians. The French military and colonial authorities were therefore worried not only about Africans’ relations with French women but also about the creation of a group that defied fixed colonial categories and therefore threatened colonial stability.

**African Officers and the Violent Image of the African Soldier during the Indochina War**

I would now like to leap forward in time to the 1950s and to a very different war in which African soldiers also participated—the Indochina War. By examining reports of African officers about violent incidents where African soldiers were involved, I intend to demonstrate that the image of the violent African was still very much alive even thirty years after the international debate over the “Black Shame.”

The idea that some Africans were capable of serving as officers was promoted by the same French officer who had encouraged African recruitment to the European battlefields—Mangin. His opinions about African officers’ training, however, encountered significant opposition. Thus, in the interwar era African soldiers, especially among the *originaires* (those who lived in the
four communes of Senegal and were entitled to French citizenship) were able, at least in theory, to reach the rank of captain.48

After World War II, the French army launched a new policy of “African promotion” (*promotion africaine*), which progressively upgraded the quality and quantity of African officers. During the 1950s, the army took several more steps to attract Western-educated Africans to its ranks and to render military service more appealing to Africans in general. In addition to encouraging African soldiers to become officers, the army augmented the percentage of volunteers, improved pay and service conditions, offered soldiers professional education, and—perhaps the most symbolic change—replaced the term “*tirailleurs sénégalais*” with the much more respectful “*soldats africains*.”49

The French army in Indochina relied heavily on the professional regulars of the colonial army, the Foreign Legion, and North African soldiers.50 Within the colonial army, 60,000 African soldiers served in Indochina.51 Most served in small military posts located near villages and had relatively easy access to the local population. An organ by the name of the Central Office of African Affairs (*Bureau central des affaires africaines*) was responsible for monitoring the African soldiers’ morale, and was headed by African officers. One of the latter’s duties was to draft reports on violent incidents in which African soldiers had taken part. Such incidents were apparently quite frequent during the years 1952–1954. There were two types of violent incidents. One consisted of quarrels between African soldiers and Indochinese civilians, and the other of murders of French officers by their African subordinates.

In the first kind of incident, African officers who wrote the subsequent reports pointed an accusing finger towards the Indochinese involved in the incidents. For example, in July 1953 Captain Soglo reported on a series of incidents in Cambodia between African soldiers and Cambodians. Soglo reported that the attackers were ex-rebels who had joined the king. He maintained that they were obviously incited by their leaders against the black soldiers. These Cambodians, Soglo insisted, saw African soldiers as “France’s black slaves” and sought all sorts of excuses to get into fights with them. Soglo urged the military authorities to take serious steps against this activity and not to capitulate by withdrawing the African units from Cambodia.52

Similar explanations were offered in other cases.53 It is obvious from these reports that the African officers who wrote them wished to portray the Indochinese as violent and the Africans as the victims of this violence. It is also clear that they were aware of the tendency to accuse Africans of violent acts, or at least realized that African soldiers believed that such a bias against them existed.

The second kind of incident was much more difficult to handle, and the reports more difficult for the African officers to write. The reports include implicit references to the violent image of the African soldiers, alongside attempts to refute this image, despite the violent act that had undoubtedly been committed. It is difficult to establish the frequency of violent acts by African soldiers towards their French commanders during the Indochina War,
since not all the documents regarding such cases are necessarily kept in the military archives in Paris. However, between May 1953 and March 1954, at least three such murders were committed. In each case, an inquest was conducted, testimonies were taken, and detailed reports were written. Apart from indicating the murderers, these reports were aimed at explaining their motives.  

On 19 May 1953, a French noncommissioned officer and a French soldier were murdered in Nat-Son-Nhut, a military post near Saigon. Captain Guedou recounted in his report that he had reached the post on 20 May, but as everyone was busy with the funerals he did not manage to hear what had happened until two days later. He then opened his report by introducing the main characters in this “drama,” as he called it. He first introduced the murderer, Corporal Zoumba Coulibali, noting that he was from Upper Volta and belonged to one of the most primitive and warlike races in French West Africa. After this introduction, which might lead the reader to believe that his primitive nature drove Coulibali to commit the murder, Guedou emphasizes that Coulibali was a model soldier, loved by the whole regiment, very honest and sensitive. He was promoted to the rank of corporal due to these qualities, was to be discharged within a few months, and had never been in prison. Two points are interesting in this short introduction. First, it is obvious that Guedou accepted the French distinction between primitive and warlike races suitable for recruitment and more docile races lacking the right qualities for combat. Secondly, although he accepted this basic assumption and linked Coulibali to one of the warlike races, he stressed that Coulibali himself was neither primitive nor brutal but, rather, a sensitive well-liked soldier who was promoted successfully and managed until then to keep out of trouble.

The next character Guedou introduced was Coulibali’s main victim, a French noncommissioned officer named Porchet. He described him as a very authoritative commander who loved his men but rebuked them whenever they erred. Guedou then recounted Coulibali’s version of the events. Coulibali told him that his direct commander, Chief-Sergeant Guillaume, ordered him to handle soldiers’ allowances. Coulibali tried to explain that he could not write or read but his commander insisted, and he obeyed. Later Porchet came to him with Guillaume and they accused him of stealing. Porchet then promised Coulibali that he would punish and break him. At that point, Coulibali demanded to see the unit’s commander but was refused. When the sergeant on duty came to arrest him he fired at Porchet while crying out: “You want to punish and break me. This is your end and mine.” The shots hit Porchet and another French soldier who was not involved in the affair. Coulibali expressed his regret at the death of this soldier, but not at that of Porchet and even stated that if Guillaume had been around, he would have killed him too. He then unsuccessfully attempted to kill himself.

Guedou concluded by clarifying that this version did not converge with that of other witnesses. What mainly bothered him was the fact that this
serious incident in which two soldiers had been killed had such an insignificant motive. Guedou noted that the other African soldiers in Coulibali’s regiment saw the murders as savage acts that had brought shame upon all African soldiers. The company’s commander gathered the troops and explained that this miserable incident resulted from Coulibali’s temporary insanity. Guedou’s conclusion was that a quick verdict and a deterrent punishment were essential. These would make all the regiment’s African soldiers happy because they felt that the corporal’s actions had brought shame on all African soldiers.56

What stands out in Guedou’s report is his emphasis on the search for a motive. The African officer realized that a false accusation of theft was not a sufficient motive for cold-blooded murder. He further alluded to the fact that Coulibali’s version of the events might not be totally accurate. That left him with no motive to explain the murder. As I have shown elsewhere, colonial officers who dealt with murder cases in French West Africa during the colonial period often claimed that these murders had no motive. Thus these murders were difficult to solve. The absence of a viable motive (viable to the French mind) was seen as proof of an ostensible typical barbaric and irrational violence associated with Africans.57 Guedou was thus trying to find another explanation for the absence of a significant motive and found it in the notion of insanity. As it was apparently obvious to all those who knew Coulibali that he was usually quite sane, Guedou referred in his report to temporary insanity. It is interesting that Guedou’s insistence on a summary trial and a deterrent punishment did not derive from the severity of the act or its menace to the French Army’s control of its African soldiers, but rather from the sentiments of the other African soldiers who saw in the murder an act of pure savagery. Indeed, they saw in Coulibali the incarnation of an image they were trying to reject. Therefore they unknowingly helped to maintain the same image they attempted to reject. We can see here the phenomenon of psychological colonization Franz Fanon discusses in his Wretched of the Earth, when the colonial subjects are persuaded by the images the colonizer bestowed on them.58

It is interesting that the explanation Guedou chose was insanity, while the idea that the violence was caused by injustice towards the soldiers or the harsh conditions in which they fought was rejected outright. African officers were obviously trying to simultaneously protect two images—that of the French army, and that of its African soldiers. In any case, even if African officers tried to reject the violent image of their African soldiers, it is obvious that, despite French efforts to transform their image after World War II, African soldiers still felt that every single act of supposedly irrational violence performed by one of them stained the name of all Africans.

Unlike the Germans, French officers who commanded African soldiers, as well as French civilians who came to know them, quickly rejected the racist image of the savage African. Nevertheless, because the French military command considered German belief in this image to be extremely useful
on the battlefields of World War I, they did not invest much effort to refute it. This policy kept this image alive during World War II, with severe consequences for African soldiers; it also survived during the wars of decolonization. The employment of African soldiers in acts of repression during these wars reinforced the image in the colonies as well. African soldiers were recruited to protect France and its empire from their enemies, and this necessarily made them part of colonial violence. However, their violent image helped the French colonizers to shift much of the responsibility for this violence onto Africans. Thus, this image was on the one hand contradictory to the French justification of colonization—meaning the civilizing mission—and on the other hand helpful to maintaining colonial control. In this respect, French ambivalence towards this image reflects to a great extent their ambivalence to their colonial project in general.

Notes

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1. Fahavalo means enemy. The French used this term between 1896 and 1948 to designate insurgents.
9. Robert Aldrich, “Colonial Violence and Post-Colonial France,” work in progress. I would like to thank the author for allowing me to quote this paper.
14. Ibid., 246, 258, 324.
17. Ibid.
19. Jean Augagneur (1855–1931) was a moderate socialist. He served as Minister of Education in René Viviani’s 1914 pre-war government. When the war approached he was unexpectedly nominated as Minister of the Navy, after his predecessor suffered a nervous breakdown.
21. Fréjus, CHE-TOM, 15H4 d. 9 (the newspaper title, date and author’s name are not stated, however the entire newspapers clip collection is from October–November 1910)
32. Ibid., 141.
33. Ibid., 612–13.
37. Ibid., 229.
38. The number of African soldiers in the Rhine varied by season, as they were withdrawn during the winter months to southern France, but it probably approached 42,000 men in Spring 1920 and 45,000 in Spring 1921. Nelson, “The ‘Black Horror,’” 610–11, 624.
40. Ibid., 619.
42. Ibid., 39–40, 57.
43. Ibid., 43.
44. Ibid., 51–58.
45. Ibid., 58–59.
46. Ibid., 79.
53. For example, the report by Captain Keita on a violent incident between African soldiers and a dozen Vietnamese presented the Africans as the victims, SHAT, 10 H 420, Affaires Africaines—Rapports Moraux, 1952–1953, 25 March 1952.
56. Ibid.
58. Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York, 1973), 249–54. Fanon was a psychoanalyst from Martinique who served in the 1950s as the head of the psychiatric department of a hospital in Algeria. He supported the cause of the Algerian *Front de Libération Nationale*, resigned from his post and fled to Tunisia in order to assist the Algerians in their fight for independence. One of his main arguments was that violent struggle is necessary for the colonized in order to be released from the psychological inferiority in which he was persuaded to believe.