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## ‘Les Races Guerrières’: Racial Preconceptions in the French Military about West African Soldiers during the First World War<sup>1</sup>

**During the first world war**, more than 140,000 West Africans were conscripted into the French army and served as combatants on the Western Front. This temporary enforced migration of Africans to Europe has never been surpassed in scale over a comparable duration, while the unintended effects of this unprecedented cross-cultural encounter ranged far beyond the outcome on the battlefields. This article examines one critical aspect of this unique experience: racial preconceptions in the French military about West Africans and the consequences that these ideas had for the individual soldiers affected.

Important aspects of this question — and, notably, Senegalese casualty rates compared with those suffered by the French — have been addressed by other eminent scholars, including Marc Michel, Charles Balesi and Myron Echenberg. Although differing in their conclusions, these authors neglect to link the consequences of the application of French race theory to military practices in combat; indeed Michel and Balesi downplay notions of racial differentiation among the French altogether.<sup>2</sup> The present article addresses this shortcoming by examining the pre-war debate over expanded military recruitment in West Africa; the evolution of French organizational principles and tactical doctrines concerning the use of West Africans in combat during the war; and the implications of the racial preconceptions in the French military about Africans as confirmed by comparative casualty rates. Such an analysis sheds new light not only on French military views of Africans at the beginning of the twentieth

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Society for French Historical Studies Conference in March 1996 in Boston. I am indebted to Jan Vansina, William B. Cohen and Alice Conklin for their critiques of this piece.

<sup>2</sup> On French West Africa and the first world war, see: Marc Michel, *L'Appel à l'Afrique: Contributions et réactions à l'effort de guerre en AOF (1914–1919)* (Paris 1982); Charles Balesi, *From Adversaries to Comrades-In-Arms: West Africa and the French Military, 1885–1918* (Waltham, MA 1979); and Myron Echenberg, *Colonial Conscripts: The ‘Tirailleurs Sénégalais’ in French West Africa, 1857–1960* (Portsmouth, NH/London 1991). With regard to the issue of French race theory, this interpretation differs in significant respects from the accounts offered by Michel and Balesi. In particular, I disagree with the view that the French were little influenced by the ‘racist’ preconceptions of the era. Rather, I argue that French assumptions about African inferiority were long-standing and deep-seated, that the tenets of biological determinism (including its racist implications) were widely accepted, and that, far from providing an exception to the rule, French attitudes were consistent with the mainstream of western European thought.



**FIGURE 1**

General Charles Mangin, author of *La Force Noire* (1910) and foremost advocate of West African military recruitment, 1915 (Cliché Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, Collection Mangin, G136448).

century, but also on the very real human consequences of the interplay between theory and practice.

The origins of the French recruitment policy in West Africa during the first world war were rooted in the particular exigencies of France's military situation prior to 1914. Due to the increasing demographic disparity that existed between France and Germany (and hence the size of the armies that the two countries could mobilize in the event of war), reliance on conscription was increasingly viewed as an inadequate guarantee of national security.<sup>3</sup>

It was within this general context that the idea of augmenting French strength through the extensive recruitment of West Africans was advanced.<sup>4</sup> This proposal represented a dramatic departure from the previous use of African troops by all other colonial powers; the scheme aimed at transforming a small, mercenary army designed for duty in Africa into a much larger force intended for eventual use in Europe.

The idea of undertaking extensive recruitment in sub-Saharan Africa was initially propagated by a small coterie of 'Soudanese' officers in the French Colonial Army. The foremost exponent of this doctrine was Charles Mangin, who, as Commandant supérieur des troupes du Groupe de l'Afrique Occidentale Française between 1907 and 1911, was uniquely placed to argue in favour of the efficacy of adopting such a policy. Beginning in 1909, he advanced a series of arguments designed to demonstrate the desirability of implementing such a programme.

Mangin argued that the long-term strategic solution to the growing demographic imbalance between France and Germany lay in the creation of a large African reserve for use in the event of a European war. The efficacy of this proposal was based on three military premises: that West Africa contained sufficient numbers of young men to create such a reservoir, that military recruitment there was feasible, and that such troops, once they were raised, would make good soldiers.

Mangin advanced support for the first proposition by employing a combination of historical and demographic arguments and concluded that the human reservoir that could be tapped was substantial and was sufficient to sustain expanded recruitment.<sup>5</sup> Mangin also contended that recruitment would be welcomed by West Africans and that they would make excellent soldiers. He based these premises on a series of racist arguments consistent with the widely held belief in biological determinism of the age, but, where

3 Hubert Tison, *La Loi de trois ans et l'opinion publique française* (Paris 1966); Jules Maurin and Jean-Charles Jauffret, 'L'Appel aux Armes, 1872-1914' in Guy Pedroncini (ed.), *Histoire Militaire de la France*, vol. 3, 1871-1940 (Paris 1992), 80-97.

4 More extensive recruitment of North Africans and a return to a three-year service obligation for metropolitan Frenchmen were also debated as remedies for this problem and eventually promulgated during this same period. Jean-Charles Jauffret, 'Les Armes de la plus grande France' in *ibid.*, 43-69.

5 Mangin, *La Force Noire* (Paris 1910), 288-9.

**TABLE 1**  
**Répartition numérique par races des populations de l'A.O.F**

Races		Familles	Population par famille	Observations
		Arabe	6,134	
Arabe-Berbère	398,959	Maure (et leurs anciens esclaves noirs)	280,062	Musulmans
		Touareg (et leurs anciens esclaves noirs)	112,403	
Peuhl	1,671,649	Peuhl	1,288,499	
		Rimaïbés (anc. escla. noirs)	103,302	
		Toucouleurs	211,487	Musulmans
		Khassonkés (Métis)	45,817	
		Ouassoulonkés (Métis)	21,864	
		Laobé	680	
Mandingue	3,971,060	Malinké	1,127,421	
		Bambara	872,934	
		Saracolé	315,518	Musulmans
		Sénégalaise	661,105	tièdes pour
		Sénoufo	349,058	la moitié;
		Nigérienne	11,031	fétichistes,
		Soussou	323,945	pour l'autre
		Nord-Forestière	307,048	
Voltaïque	2,553,005	Mossis	1,751,667	
		Bariba	230,578	
		Gourounsi	82,095	Fétichistes
		Lobi	77,616	
		Bobo	290,302	
		Habbé	120,717	
Centre-Africaine	875,307	Sonraï	318,712	
		Nagot	77,980	Musulmans
		Dazza	168,668	
		Haoussa	309,917	
Achanti	724,758	Agni	323,137	
		Achanti	3,679	Fétichistes
		Oué (sous-tribu Achanti)	397,942	
Côtière	575,259	Casamance	87,987	
		Guinée	88,405	Fétichistes
		Côte d'Ivoire	398,867	
Total	10,769,637	Total	10,769,637	
Population non recensée		Territoire nouvellement acquis dans la Komadougou (Zinder) environ	200,000	Musulmans
		Forêt de la Côte d'Ivoire D'après M. le gouverneur Clozel, environ	1,200,000	Fétichistes
		Mauritanie. A ajouter d'après les chiffres de l'annuaire 1910	375,000	Musulmans
		Evaluation totale pour l'A.O.F.	12,544,637	

Source: Mangin, 'L'Utilisation des Troupes Noires', op. cit., 85.

appropriate, Mangin also invoked cultural relativism to buttress his case. Referring to the 'warrior instincts that remain extremely powerful in primitive races', Mangin claimed that once Africans were made aware of the benefits of French military service, recruits would be plentiful.<sup>6</sup>

Mangin asserted that Africans were endowed with a series of natural attributes that made them outstanding soldiers, including: (1) an ability to live in harsher climates than other races; (2) the capacity (owing to centuries of portage and migration) to carry heavy loads great distances; (3) a nervous system that was less developed than that of 'whites', which gave them greater resistance to pain and hence more willingness to shed blood in battle; (4) the patriarchal nature of African societies, which endowed them with a sense of discipline and hierarchy that was readily transferable to military life; and, finally, (5) the 'selectionist' argument that Africans were naturally suited to be excellent soldiers, since Africa had for centuries been a 'vast battlefield'.<sup>7</sup> Collectively, he argued, these factors not only contributed to making Africans ideal soldiers but, considering the character of European warfare, also rendered them especially valuable to be used as 'shock troops':

The black troops . . . have precisely those qualities that are demanded in the long struggles in modern war: rusticity, endurance, tenacity, the instinct for combat, the absence of nervousness, and an incomparable power of shock. Their arrival on the battlefield would have a considerable moral effect on the adversary.<sup>8</sup>

Though arguing that all West Africans possessed these particular attributes, Mangin contended that the comparative military value of various Africans was further delineated by an internal racial hierarchy. He provided a ranking of groups, which ranged from those 'races' that constituted a 'superior element' among West Africans, through a series of lesser peoples who were reckoned to be progressively more 'backward', to the 'coastal' inhabitants in the colonies characterized as the 'least advanced' of all (see Table 1). Those races at the upper end of this scale were distinguished, in Mangin's eyes, not only by their 'courage' and 'warrior qualities' but also by their 'intelligence' and their relatively high degree of 'civilization'. Those at the lower end lacked the latter two attributes. Even though fearless fighters, they were, he claimed, bereft of notions of 'progress', which he viewed as accounting for the retarded and in some cases 'anarchistic' nature of their societies.

Mangin's martial hierarchy, therefore, was not based exclusively on the 'primitive' character of the populations involved.<sup>9</sup> Rather, by applying a set of

<sup>6</sup> Mangin à Gouverneur Général, 2 November 1910, *Archives nationales du Sénégal* (hereafter ANS): Affaires militaires: 4 D 31; Mangin, *La Force Noire*, op. cit., 289, 228.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Mangin, 'L'Utilisation des Troupes Noires', *Bulletins et Mémoires de la Société d'Anthropologie de Paris*, 2 (1911), 89–91; idem, *La Force Noire*, op. cit., 225–8, 247–52.

<sup>8</sup> Mangin, *La Force Noire*, op. cit., 343. For the value of Africans as 'shock troops', see also 257–58.

<sup>9</sup> Mangin, 'L'Utilisation des Troupes Noires', op. cit., 81.



**FIGURE 2**

Geographic origins of West African 'races' serving in the *Tirailleurs sénégalais* (*La Dépêche coloniale Illustrée*, January 1916).

subjective criteria as an index of the degree of ‘civilization’ among African groups, Mangin believed that the best soldiers came from what might be called the most ‘advanced’ of West Africa’s ‘primitive’ races.

The classification system Mangin outlined not only reflects contemporary assumptions about the racial superiority of ‘whites’ over ‘blacks’, but also illustrates, in its ranking of West Africans, a series of other European prejudices.<sup>10</sup> Assessments of the comparative degree of ‘civilization’ among African groups relied upon a set of subjective value judgments about the relative merit of their respective cultures and customs; they also generally corresponded to the size, and hence the military strength, of the pre-colonial African states. This, in turn, bore a close correlation to the extent of resistance (or in some cases support) they had offered to the French during the conquest.

In contemplating recruitment in the colonies, Mangin placed a premium on attracting those groups deemed to be of the greatest military value to the French. In the case of Senegal, for example, he explicitly stressed the need for the ‘Toucouleurs’ and the ‘Mandingue’ (including the ‘Sénégalaise’, comprising the Wolof, the Serer and the Lebu) to be strongly represented in the African contingents, on the assumption that these races produced the best soldiers (see Figures 2 and 3).<sup>11</sup> Mangin concluded that such men would undoubtedly comport themselves in combat in a manner befitting the proudest traditions of the French army: ‘In future battles, these primitives, for whom life counts so little and whose young blood flows so ardently, as if avid to be shed, will certainly attain the old “French fury”, and will reinvigorate it if necessary.’<sup>12</sup>

Mangin’s proposals engendered a heated debate in French society.<sup>13</sup> The discourse over undertaking expanded African recruitment between 1909 and 1912 was conducted in various forums and by various disputants — including journalists writing over 4300 articles in the national press; members of the scientific community including those in the Parisian Societies of Anthropology, Geography and Political Science; and members of the Chamber of Deputies. However, military opinion ultimately proved most significant. The High Command of the army bore primary responsibility not only for deciding whether such a policy should be recommended to the government but also for

**10** It should be stressed that these implicit prejudices were by no means uniquely limited to the French. Similar classification systems were also used by other European powers in their recruitment of colonial troops. See A.H.M. Kirk-Green, ‘“Damnosa hereditas”: Ethnic Ranking and the Martial Races Imperative in Africa’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 11 (1980), 393–414; and J. Bayo Adekson, ‘Ethnicity and Army Recruitment in Colonial Plural Societies’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 11 (1979), 151–65.

**11** Mangin à Gouverneur Général, 2 November 1910, ANS: Affaires militaires: 4D 31.

**12** Mangin, *La Force Noire*, op. cit., 258.

**13** On the pre-war French debate over ‘la Force noire’, see *Les Troupes Noires* (Le Parlement: Rapports. Commissions. Séances. L’Opinion Militaire et Coloniale. La Presse. Les Conférences. Conférences. Documents. Conclusion.) (Paris 1911). See also Marc Michel, ‘Colonisation et défense nationale: le général Mangin et “la force noire”’, *Guerres mondiales*, 37 (1987), 27–44 and idem, ‘Un mythe: la “Force Noire” avant 1914’, *Relations Internationales*, 1 (1974), 83–90.





determining how African troops should be utilized were they to be employed in combat.

The discourse conducted within the highest echelons of the French army hinged on a series of military considerations, which were cited as evidence of the Africans' comparative worth as soldiers. In this respect, those in positions of authority on the *État Major de l'Armée* were influenced by the opinions of lower-ranking officers who had commanded African troops and were ostensibly more familiar with their abilities. In addition to General Louis Archinard (Mangin's commander in the Sudan and subsequently his patron), Mangin's assessment of the hereditary fighting capabilities of Africans was supported by two of the foremost military theoreticians in France. General Henri Bonnal, director of the *École de Guerre Supérieure*, 1889–1902, 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 distributing them (with Arabs) along the front lines, where 'their savage impetuosity in attacks with the bayonet' would prove decisive.<sup>14</sup> This tactical line of argument was supported by Bonnal's successor at the *École de Guerre Supérieure*, General Hyppolyte 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'.<sup>15</sup>

Views like these were contested by a series of other French officers who were more sceptical about the utility as well as the advisability of deploying such troops in Europe. Prominent critics of Mangin's proposals included General Louis de Torcy, the former commander of the French forces in Madagascar, and General Charles Moinier, the *commandant* of the expeditionary corps in Morocco. Their reservations included: (1) the greater susceptibility of Africans in colder climates to diseases, and the danger they posed in spreading tropical contagions to Europeans; (2) the increased costs, owing to the need to seclude the troops in 'isolated' training camps; and (3) the spectre, despite precautions, of 'permanent contacts' between Africans and the 'white population' if the former were garrisoned in France. Further, they also argued that African soldiers suffered from a series of fundamental shortcomings that limited their military utility; were mediocre marksmen prone to be excitable and sometimes undisciplined under fire; and lacked an ability to manoeuvre effectively.

Referring to their mental aptitudes, Moinier concluded that Africans were simply 'not capable of adapting themselves with the same facility [as Europeans and North Africans] to the necessities of modern warfare'.<sup>16</sup> Similar

<sup>14</sup> Henri Bonnal, *Gaulois*, 8 December 1909.

<sup>15</sup> Hyppolyte Langlois, *Temps*, 12 November 1909.

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Captain Rachou, *Le Mirage des armées indigènes* (Angoulême 1911), 65. See also Général de Torcy, 'La Question des troupes noires en Algérie', *Bulletin de la Réunion d'Études Algériennes* (Paris 1911), 4–28.

reservations about the quality of African troops were eventually raised by other influential North African commanders, including Generals Hubert Lyautey and Louis Franchet d'Esperey. As a result, the État Major declined to endorse the more grandiose plans for African recruitment; prior to 1914, they sanctioned plans — such as the Plan Ponty of 1912 — only on a limited and experimental basis. Before the outbreak of the war, in short, the extensive use of Africans in Europe remained at best only a possible contingency plan. Nevertheless, the idea was sown of West Africa as a 'land of soldiers' who could be utilized in the defence of France in the event of a national emergency.

With the outbreak of war in August 1914, the French initially made little use of African troops. Notwithstanding the 1912 decrees authorizing expanded recruitment in West Africa, extensive enlistment of men had yet to be undertaken and, hence, the African troops available for service overseas were comparatively few in number. Moreover, the French High Command, imbued with the erroneous belief that the conflict would be brief, and often sceptical about the military value of African soldiers, generally opted to use them as garrison troops in North Africa or in secondary operations outside France.

In the wake of the disasters suffered during the first year of the fighting, French policy toward the Senegalese was revised in late 1915. Now convinced that the war would be both bloody and protracted, the High Command authorized massive recruitment in West Africa, and, beginning in the summer of 1916, the new formations raised there were combined with pre-existing units and deployed in large numbers on the Western Front, notably on the Somme and in the counter-offensives at Verdun that retook Fort Douaumont. French policy thus crystallized, and thereafter Senegalese troops were extensively used in France.

With the near collapse of the French army in 1917 after the futile attacks on the Chemin des Dames in which African troops figured prominently, the use of the Senegalese entered a final phase.<sup>17</sup> From mid-1917 onward, Africans were dispersed along the Front to serve as the tactical spearheads for larger French units. In this capacity, Africans served in the first wave of assaults or counter-attacks in the front lines, notably at Reims and against Villers-Cotteret and St Mihiel, until the armistice.

Just as the use of African troops went through several distinct phases, so, too, were the principles governing the organization of Senegalese formations in combat modified during the war. The French High Command was presented with three main options regarding the organization of African troops: (1) they might be grouped with European and other colonial soldiers to form fully integrated (*mélangeant*) units in the *Armée coloniale*; (2) they could be segregated into separate battalions or regiments composed (with the exception

<sup>17</sup> Only one Senegalese battalion participated in the mutinies in the French army in 1917. This occurred in August on the front of the Chemin des Dames, when portions of three companies of the 61<sup>e</sup> Bataillon de Tirailleurs Sénégalais refused marching orders. Eight African 'ringleaders' were eventually arrested and two imprisoned. See Michel, *L'Appel à l'Afrique*, op. cit., 350–2.

of their French cadres) exclusively of Senegalese; or (3) the principle of segregation of the Africans could be maintained except during combat, when African units of various sizes — companies, battalions or regiments — might be juxtaposed (*accolant*) or amalgamated (*amalgamé*) with other similar-sized formations in the Colonial Army to create larger units, either variegated (*panaché*) or mixed (*mixte*) units of battalions, regiments or brigades.<sup>18</sup>

The first option — fully-integrated units — was never seriously considered by the military authorities.<sup>19</sup> Instead, following the second option, the *Tirailleurs sénégalais* were systematically 'isolated' in units behind the lines and frequently during combat. However, the third alternative was also employed by the army. Never formally systematized by the High Command (which generally left the tactical organization of combat formations to the discretion of unit commanders), the types of African-European alignments utilized during the fighting varied in the extreme.

The decision to employ large numbers of Senegalese troops on the Western Front in 1916 initiated a period of ongoing experimentation that continued throughout the war. During 1916, African units were deployed — notably on the Somme and at Verdun — by the Colonial Army in one of three types of combat formations: (1) in regiments composed entirely of Senegalese battalions; (2) in regiments consisting of both Senegalese and European battalions; and, more rarely, (3) in battalions or 'tactical groups' that interspersed African companies among other companies of colonial infantry.<sup>20</sup> Regardless of how they were deployed, all African combat units used from 1916 onward had one thing in common: they contained a very high percentage of soldiers recruited from the so-called 'warrior races'.<sup>21</sup>

After Mangin's rise to a position on the High Command in 1917, Senegalese units were concentrated in order to maximize their power of 'shock'. Two organizational patterns predominated. Senegalese battalions were temporarily assigned to *régiments 'blancs'* to create a fourth battalion for assault, or they were grouped into exclusively African regiments. These two types of formations were combined into *brigades mixtes*, which were intended to pierce the German lines in an initial rush and then to hold them against counter-

**18** African units were comprised as follows: a squad (9 men), two squads comprised a demi-section (18), two demi-sections a section (40), 4 sections a company (160), 4 or more companies (including one of machine-gunners) a battalion (ranging between 800 and 1200 men), 3 or more battalions a regiment, and 2 regiments (sometimes with additional battalions) a brigade. Although the use of brigades fell into disuse during the war, two brigades, or alternatively three regiments, comprised divisions, with two to four divisions composing an army corps.

**19** An exception was made, however, in the case of the African citizens, or *originaires*, of the Four Communes of Senegal. Numbering less than 6000 combat troops, they were dispersed — along with French West Indian soldiers from the 'old colonies' — among French units in the Colonial Army.

**20** See the *Journaux de marche et d'opérations* (hereafter *JMOs*) of the Senegalese regiments and battalions: AG: Unités: 26 N 869, 26 N 870, and 26 N 871. For different patterns of combat organization, see AG: Grand Quartier Général (GQG): 16 N 196 and AG: Unités: 22 N 2468.

**21** See: AG: GQG: 16 N 196 and AG: Unités: 26 N 871; AG: Etat-Major de l'Armée (EMA): 7 N 1990; AG: GQG: 16 N 196; and AG: Unités: 22 N 2481.

attacks.<sup>22</sup> Limited experimentation continued to be conducted with the *panaché* of units, whereby Senegalese and European battalions placed in line next to each other exchanged one company apiece.<sup>23</sup> These measures, however, failed to achieve the desired result. Indeed, far from vindicating pre-war assertions about the irresistibility of massed African formations in combat, they helped to precipitate a disaster during the attack on the Aisne that nearly wreaked havoc on the French army.

In the aftermath of the mutinies that erupted in May 1917, the High Command's general policy concerning the deployment of Senegalese troops was revised. Though still assigned primarily to the Colonial Army, African battalions were also dispersed among metropolitan formations for the first time. During the last year and a half of the war, these latter units were temporarily 'loaned' to French infantry divisions as 'tactical groups' of two or three battalions whenever a 'determined' attack (or counter-attack) was planned.<sup>24</sup> Their cadres had been increased to about one fifth of their complement by this time, and the *panaché* deployment of Senegalese and French battalions was often (though not exclusively) adopted by divisional and corps commanders.<sup>25</sup> The principle of massive deployment, which had been used in 1916 and especially in 1917, was largely eschewed.

French tactical doctrine about how best to use the Senegalese troops in combat, no less than military opinions about their value, was sharply divided at the beginning of the war. Continuing to mirror many of the pre-war arguments about Africans raised during the debate over recruitment, it remained largely unresolved during the first two years of the conflict. Thereafter, when it was decided to deploy the Senegalese in large numbers on the Western Front, controversy continued over the question of their qualities as soldiers, while the tactical principles concerning their deployment, as with the evolution of organizational schemes, were subject to ongoing experimentation and revision.

While those who advocated using Senegalese troops emphasized their innate fighting qualities, detractors laid stress upon their 'limited intellectual faculties',<sup>26</sup> including their inability, because of the perceived 'simplicity' of their languages, to comprehend complex instructions in French. Africans, it

<sup>22</sup> Nine of the 21 Senegalese battalions deployed on the Aisne (the 57th, 58th, and 59th Colonial) were grouped in African regiments; the remaining 12 were either added as a fourth battalion to other Colonial Infantry Regiments or formed into 'mixed tactical groups', in which the Senegalese predominated by ratios ranging from 2-1 to 3-1. See AG: GQG: 16 N 100 and AG: Unités: 22 N 2468.

<sup>23</sup> Four of the 21 Senegalese battalions engaged on the Aisne were variegated with European battalions: AG: Fonds Clemenceau: 6 N 96.

<sup>24</sup> Of the 44 Senegalese battalions engaged in France in 1918, 22 were assigned to the 1st or 2nd Corps of the Colonial Army, while the remainder were loaned to metropolitan formations. See: AG: GQG: 16 N 100. See also: Jean Charbonneau, *Les contingents coloniaux: du Soleil et de la Gloire* (Paris 1931), 62.

<sup>25</sup> By 1918, French cadres amounted to 22-24 per cent of the complement of Senegalese battalions: AG: Unités: (JMOs): 26 N 869, 26 N 870, 26 N 871.

<sup>26</sup> Comments by General Pierre Berdoulat, commander of the 1st Colonial Army Corps during the attacks on the Somme in 1916: AG: GQG: 16 N 196: 9.

was argued, were excessively dependent on their European officers, and if these were killed or disabled in action, their formations quickly lost cohesion. Worst of all, in such circumstances they were thought to be prone to rout. These inherent deficiencies, impossible to overcome, made Africans unreliable troops who were incapable of mastering the intricacies of 'modern' warfare.<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, opposing views about Senegalese 'aptitudes' in combat gradually became reconciled in French military doctrine. In light of their inconsistent performance on the Western Front in 1916 and 1917 (which prompted inquests to determine better means of maximizing their effectiveness), principles governing their tactical use were codified in the 'Notice sur les Sénégalais et leur emploi au combat' issued during the last year of the war. Distributed to French officers commanding African units, this directive provided a policy that represented a synthesis of earlier preconceptions.<sup>28</sup>

Accepting the martial ranking of African races as a basic premise, the 'Notice' enumerated the specific military attributes and shortcomings of each group. The most 'basic' element of the Senegalese infantry battalion was the company, to be composed of races whose dialects permitted intercommunication via their African NCOs and whose natural fighting qualities complemented each other. Units comprised of Wolofs, Serers, 'Tukulors', and Bambaras — all deemed 'warrior races' — for example, were considered to be among the very 'best' combat formations. Irrespective of how the Senegalese battalions were deployed at the Front, under no circumstance was the internal organization of the African companies to be touched.

Senegalese combat characteristics were discussed in detail in the 'Notice', and a series of tactical recommendations concerning their use was made. Though possessing '[highly] developed warrior instincts', they also suffered from serious shortcomings. While there were exceptions to the rule, defensive operations frequently posed difficulties for Africans because of their 'unskilful' use of terrain. Offensive actions were, however, a different matter, provided certain necessary precautions were taken.

'Brave' and 'impetuous' in attack, the Senegalese were said to pursue assaults to the very 'limit of their endurance' if these developed favourably. If they were 'checked', however, they became easily confused and unreliable. In such situations, their 'sole idea' was to escape from the 'hot spots' where their officers had led them and to seek safety in 'flight without stopping'.

Because the French cadres within African battalions were insufficient to prevent such a situation from occurring, it was 'indispensable to provide [additional] support' for Senegalese units in combat. The means of doing so was made explicit: '*behind* "black" battalions one always ought to have a French unit to sustain [them]' and to 'stay their movement if necessary'. The

<sup>27</sup> General Maurice Sarrail, commander of the French forces in Thessaloniki, AG: GQG: 16 N 196. See also AG: GQG: 16 N 196 and AG: Unités: 22 N 2481.

<sup>28</sup> CMIDOM: 'Notice sur les Sénégalais et leur emploi au combat' (no date, but written between May 1917 and September 1918). For favourable reactions to the 'Notice' by French officers who commanded Senegalese combat units in 1918, see: AG: GQG: 16 N 2094.

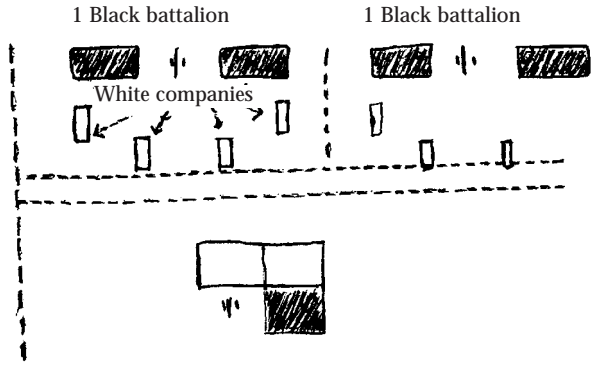
**FIGURE 4**

Tactical deployment of Senegalese troops during assaults: *panaché* and *accolé* of Units

Assault units:

2 Black battalions, variegated (*panachés*)

White battalion in reserve (*panaché*)



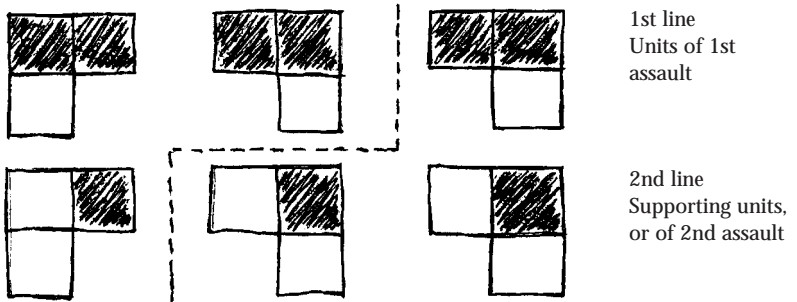
In this case, the black company of the white variegated (*panaché*) battalion could furnish support for the front line.

The schemes below represent diverse combinations — all possible — without which it would be necessary to disrupt the command at the last moment.

A. Brigade by regiments placed side by side (*accolés*) and surrounded (*encadrés*)

Amalgamated Black regiment

Amalgamated White regiment



Source: Chef de bataillon Arnaud, Commandant de 64e bataillon de Tirailleurs Sénégalaises, 'Note au sujet de l'organisation d'unités offensives mixtes Sénégalaises', 12 février 1917 (Archives de la Guerre: Fonds Clemenceau, 6 N 96).

recommended method for making such troops available was to variegate Senegalese and French battalions in the lines (*panacher*), which would permit the temporary exchange of one company from each unit during combat. Hence, French tactical doctrine by the final year of the war embraced the notion that the Senegalese were useful primarily as assault troops, but recognized that they required European formations both behind them and at their sides to fulfil this role properly. (See Figure 4: note the suggested tactical deployment when two Senegalese battalions were variegated [*panaché*] with a French one [top diagram], and when two such regiments were placed side by side [*accolé*]. Notice too the predominance of Senegalese troops in the first wave of the assault with French units dispersed behind them. Also note the suggestion in the top diagram that the Senegalese company assigned to the two French companies in reserve might be moved forward to provide added support for the assault units in the front line.)

The absolute number of casualties suffered by the Senegalese during the first world war and the proportional comparison of these with French casualties have long been a subject of debate. Even discounting the more exaggerated estimates of some contemporaries, the current opinion among recent investigators of this question remains divided. Several scholars, including Michel, Balesi and Echenberg, have flatly disputed the claim of higher African casualties and argued that the figures were either equivalent to or lower than those of the French.<sup>29</sup> Alternatively, Anthony Clayton contends that the casualties sustained by *tirailleur* units were 'slightly higher' than the French ones.<sup>30</sup>

These seemingly irreconcilable positions are prompted by the nature of the available evidence employed to support them and differing indexes used to gauge the results. Despite the inherent limitations presented by the evidence on casualties, however, a series of indexes can be evaluated to offer a more precise comparison. Total African combat fatalities during the war, based on the most consistent and generally accepted official estimates, can be reckoned at approximately 31,000 soldiers.<sup>31</sup> Although almost certainly an underestimate

<sup>29</sup> Michel, *L'Appel à l'Afrique*, op. cit., 403–8. Stressing the non-racist character of the French in comparison with other Europeans of the era, and pointing to the tactical amalgamation of African and French troops in combat, Michel has concluded that Senegalese casualties were equivalent to those incurred throughout the war by the French infantry. Balesi supports Michel's contention, emphasizing many of the same cultural and organizational considerations and concluding that African and French losses — even on the Aisne — were roughly equivalent. Balesi, *From Adversaries to Comrades-in-Arms*, op. cit., 101–2. These general findings are also endorsed by Echenberg, who, while stressing the negative 'cultural and racial' stereotypes held by French military planners about Africans, suggests that instead of being higher than French losses, Senegalese casualties were actually proportionately lower. Echenberg, *Colonial Conscripts*, op. cit., 46.

<sup>30</sup> Clayton, *France, Soldiers and Africa* (London 1988), 338.

<sup>31</sup> This figure is cited by Michel, *L'Appel à l'Afrique*, op. cit., 407–8, and also by Echenberg, *Colonial Conscripts*, op. cit., 46 (excluding the losses of *originaires*). It also accords with the most reliable estimates for combat fatalities (cf. Joe Lunn, 'Memoirs of the Maelstrom: A Senegalese Oral History of the First World War' (PhD Dissertation 1993), Table 5.1, 304), but probably does not include deaths from disease.

owing to the fact that incidental deaths were not included, this figure none the less affords the means for a comparative enquiry about the dimensions of the sacrifice of the Senegalese and their particular use in combat.

African deaths in combat can be contrasted with those suffered by the French using a variety of standards. As a percentage of all the soldiers mobilized during the war, Senegalese losses were slightly less than those incurred by the French.<sup>32</sup> The picture changes significantly, however, when only combatants are considered. Using this criterion, Senegalese losses were nearly 20 per cent higher than those sustained by their French counterparts.<sup>33</sup> Unlike European combatants, however, Africans seldom served in cavalry, artillery, engineering and aviation units, where casualties were substantially lower than in infantry formations. If only infantry fatalities are considered, the pattern changes again. Using this standard, French and African losses between 1914 and 1918 were virtually identical: they amounted to slightly over 22 per cent in both cases.<sup>34</sup> This last gauge is the one most frequently cited by historians who contend that the deaths suffered by African and French combat troops were comparable.<sup>35</sup>

This interpretation is valid as far as it goes. It neglects, however, to consider a series of other compelling factors that must be taken into account. The most important is temporal. The Senegalese were not employed in significant numbers as combatants in Europe before July 1916.<sup>36</sup> Prior to this time, African losses accounted for less than 10 per cent of their eventual wartime total, and these deaths were primarily borne by the as yet small pre-war army.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup> The precise figures are 15.56 per cent to 16.56 per cent. The total number of West Africans mobilized during the war (including 31,000 in the pre-war army, 161,000 *tirailleurs*, and 7200 *originaires* subsequently recruited or conscripted between 1914 and 1918) was approximately 199,200. Of these at least 31,000 died during the war. French figures are based on the 'Rapport Marin', which was submitted to the French Chamber in 1920 as the definitive assessment of this question. The total number of Frenchmen mobilized during the war was 7,740,000, of whom 1,281,979 perished. See 'Rapport Marin', *Journaux Officiels. Documents Parlementaires*, 1920, t. 2, annexe 633, 44.

<sup>33</sup> Approximately 140,000 West Africans, including *originaires*, served as combatants, of whom 31,000 were killed, representing 22.14 per cent of the total. By contrast, 6,987,000 Frenchmen served as combatants, of whom 1,255,766 died, or 17.97 per cent of the total. Hence, African fatalities were 18.84 per cent higher than those among French combatants. 'Rapport Marin', op. cit., 44.

<sup>34</sup> Among French infantrymen, 5,056,900 were mobilized and 1,158,000, or 22.9 per cent, were killed: 'Rapport Marin', 66. Although not all West Africans served in the infantry, very few were assigned to 'other services' such as the artillery. Since there are no records of the numbers in this latter group, the figures cited for the proportion of losses among all West African combatants (22.14 per cent) have been retained. Though an underestimate of the percentage of Senegalese infantry casualties, the discrepancy is slight.

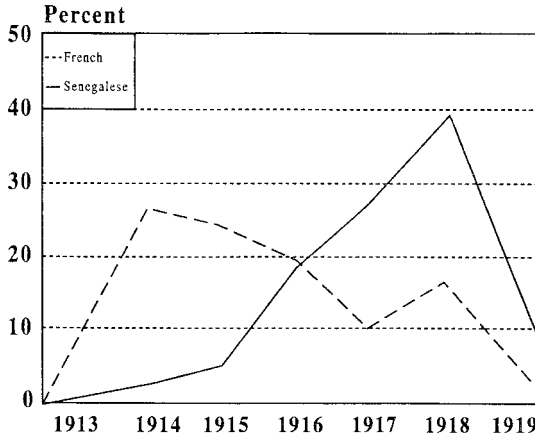
<sup>35</sup> For examples, see Michel, *L'Appel à l'Afrique*, op. cit., 337, 405–8, 423–4; and Balesi, *From Adversaries to Comrades-In-Arms*, op. cit., 267–8.

<sup>36</sup> According to *Histoire militaire de l'AOF*, 826, out of a total of 29,520 combatant fatalities, 29,224 (or 98 per cent) occurred during the fighting in Europe.

<sup>37</sup> In 1914 and 1915 losses among all *indigènes coloniaux* amounted to 2900 men. Senegalese losses during the war constituted about 85 per cent of this category. If these are distributed proportionately by year, Senegalese losses in 1914 and 1915 amounted to less than 8 per cent of their total wartime casualties (2465 men or 7.95 per cent): 'Rapport Marin', 76. See also Table 3.



**FIGURE 5**  
Senegalese and French casualties: % of total wartime losses by year



Source: 'Rapport Marin', *Journal Officiel de la République Française. Documents Parlementaires, Chambre, 1920, t. 2, annexe 633, pp. 65, 74, 76.*

**TABLE 2**  
Senegalese and French casualties: numbers and percentages of total wartime losses by year

Year	Categorization	Casualties	%
1914	French*	491,000	27.05
	Senegalese**	850	2.84
1915	French*	439,000	24.19
	Senegalese**	1,615	5.40
1916	French*	361,000	19.89
	Senegalese**	5,440	18.18
1917	French*	184,000	10.14
	Senegalese**	8,118	27.13
1918	French*	311,000	17.30
	Senegalese**	11,688	39.06
1919	French*	29,000	1.60
	Senegalese**	2,210	7.39

\* French losses include prisoners (which was the practice in reporting the diminution in a unit's effective strength in the French army).

\*\* Senegalese casualty rates have been adjusted from those presented in the 'Rapport Marin'. They have been calculated at 85% (29,750) of those listed for 'indigènes coloniaux' (35,200). This adjustment omits *originaires* losses, all of which were sustained after June 1916.

*Note:* The numbers of French and Senegalese combatants fluctuated by year, but this does not significantly affect the overall trend indicated by the chart. In the case of French combatants, numbers fluctuated between 2,215,000 and 1,688,000 during the period May 1915–October 1918; Senegalese combat battalions varied between 39 and 45 from July 1916 to November 1918. However, even though these casualty comparisons are not exact, they are useful for indicating comparative temporal wartime trends. For casualty and combatant figures, see 'Rapport Marin', *Journaux Officiels. Documents Parlementaires, 1920, t. 2, annexe 633, pp. 65, 74 and 76.*

Conversely, French combat deaths during this same period amounted to over 60 per cent of all fatalities that occurred between August 1914 and November 1918.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, it was precisely because of the staggering dimensions of French losses during the first 22 months of the war — and the general recognition that these were likely to continue — that resistance to the massive recruitment of West Africans and their deployment on the Western Front was overcome. If the time factor is taken into consideration, a very different picture begins to emerge. It indicates that during the last two-and-a-half years of the war, Senegalese casualties in Europe were approximately twice as high as those suffered by French infantry combatants.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, Senegalese losses continued to rise throughout the conflict and, even though roughly equivalent numbers of troops were engaged from 1916 onward, only reached their apogee in 1918, when about forty per cent of all fatalities occurred. Conversely, the percentage of French losses steadily declined throughout this period, with the exception of 1918, when it rose as the war reached crisis point (see Figure 5 and Table 2).

A second consideration is the comparative probability of death faced by foot soldiers when they were in the trenches. Under the policy known as *hivernage*, Africans were removed from the Front for five months (between November and March) each year. During these periods, about 18 per cent of all the post-July 1916 French losses occurred. As a result, when Africans were deployed in combat during the late spring, summer and early autumn (the time when all the major offensives took place), their likelihood of being killed was nearly two-and-a-half times as great as that of their French counterparts.<sup>40</sup>

A final factor that gives an indication of both absolute casualties as well as

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Fragmentary contemporary evidence also supports this conclusion. Among the approximately 5000 men comprising the seven battalions that fought in France in 1914, 3728 were available for active duty at the end of the year. Hence, their losses, including the ill and wounded as well as the dead, did not exceed a maximum of 1572 men: AG: EMA: 7 N 444.

**38** French losses (including dead, missing and prisoners) between August 1914 and the end of June 1916 amounted to 62.26 per cent of the eventual wartime total. 'Rapport Marin', op. cit., 74.

**39** Assuming that at a minimum 90 per cent of all West African casualties were sustained after June 1916, some 27,900 men out of 140,000 combatants, or 199 per 1000 engaged, were killed during the final 29 months of the war. By contrast, estimating French infantry losses for this period at not more than 40 per cent of their wartime total, approximately 532,000 casualties were sustained among 5,057,000 combatants, or 105 per 1000. Hence, African losses were 89.45 per cent higher than those incurred by the French infantry after June 1916, or nearly twice those of their European counterparts. On West African losses, see 'Rapport Marin', op. cit., 76, which reckoned losses among 'indigènes coloniaux' from 1916 onward at 91.75 per cent of the wartime total; on French losses, see 'Rapport Marin', op. cit., 44, 66, 74.

**40** Approximately 18 per cent of post-June 1916 French losses were incurred during the periods of *hivernage* between November and March in 1917 and 1918. Hence, the fatalities among French infantry when the Senegalese were deployed in combat from 1916 to 1918 can be reckoned at 436,240, or 8.63 per cent of the total engaged. West African losses during this period amounted to 19.93 per cent of all combatants. As a result, the probability of their death at the Front was almost two-and-a-half times as great (2.31 times).

life expectancy at the Front was the ethnicity of the African soldiers. Those recruited from 'races' deemed by the French to be especially 'warlike' were prominent in the assault battalions that bore the heaviest casualties. These 'warrior races' constituted about two-thirds of the African complement used in major attacks in 1916 and 1917 and perhaps constituted a majority thereafter.<sup>41</sup> Although ethnic breakdowns of casualties are lacking, it is highly probable that those soldiers designated as belonging to one of the warrior races were over-represented in those formations where the loss of life was the greatest, and, hence, that the proportion of their fatalities was significantly higher than among other West African groups. In terms of what this portended for the soldiers, it is probable that a Wolof, a 'Tukolor' or a Bambara recruited as a *tirailleur* between 1915 and 1917, for example, was about three times as likely to die in combat as his French counterpart, while absolute losses were in the order of two-and-a-half to one.<sup>42</sup>

As these proportions indicate, all Africans paid a very dear price indeed for their prominence in the fighting forces during the last two-and-a-half years of the war. But those who had the dubious distinction of having been classified by the French as belonging to 'warrior races' were victimized most of all. It is in this context that the relationship between the theory of racial classification and the practice of troop deployment according to ethnic criteria comes clearly into focus. The pre-war debate, with its seemingly objective anthropological underpinnings, became reified during the war into a policy that carried the most dire consequences for African soldiers.

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41 West Africans recruited from 'warrior races' constituted about two-thirds of the 'line' infantry used during the attacks on the Somme and Aisne in 1916 and 1917, while soldiers recruited from 'non-warrior races' were generally sent to communication battalions (*bataillons d'étapes*). Races with special 'military aptitudes' probably comprised at least one half of the complement of 'line' infantry during 1918. Some battalions, however, were also composed exclusively of 'warriors', while the arrival of reinforcements frequently led to the culling of 'non-warriors' from units in order to replace them with men from ethnic groups deemed warlike. On unit ethnic compositions and proportions, see: for 1916: AG: GQG: 16 N 196 and AG: Unités: 26 N 872; for 1917: AG: EMA: 7 N 2990 and AG: Unités: 24 N 3027; for 1918, AG: Fonds Clemenceau: 6 N 94 and AG: EMA: 7 N 440. On the ethnic composition of particular units at different times, as well as the culling of non-warriors from units to replace them with warriors, see the *JMOs*: AG: Unités: 26 N 869–72.

42 Overall, at least 60 per cent of the West African formations that were most prominent in the fighting from 1916 to 1918 were drawn from those groups regarded as especially warlike by the French. However, in a colony like Senegal, for example, at least 90 per cent of all recruits probably belonged to these 'races'. As a result, it is extremely likely that they were over-represented — and probably in the order of about one third again as much — in those units that sustained the heaviest casualties. Although ethnic breakdowns for casualties are lacking, it seems probable that in absolute terms their losses may be reckoned at approximately two-and-a-half times greater (2.46 calculated at 30 per cent more) than those of the French infantry during the last 29 months of the war, while their probability of death when at the Front was about three times as great (3.00 calculated at 30 per cent more) during this same period.

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