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Beyond the Scramble: African Veterans, the Second World War and Decolonization in the World History Classroom[1]

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"Thiaroye 44, A Story Never to be Forgotten." Mural commemorating the 1944 Massacre. Source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Thiaroye_Mural_DSCN1029.jpg#mediaviewer/File:Thiaroye_Mural_DSCN1029.jpg

The Second World War was a global conflict that not only covered Europe and Asia but also spread to nearly every continent. In Africa, Allied powers like Britain and France called on their imperial subjects to step up and fight for the mother country. From Algeria to Senegal to Kenya to South Africa, nearly one million and a half young, able-bodied men proudly or reluctantly served in both combatant and non-combatant

roles. Some participated in decisive military campaigns in Europe, North Africa, and Southeast Asia. Drawing on a growing body of scholarship on the experiences of colonial soldiers in the Second World War, I offer a concrete way to highlight the role Africa and African soldiers of the British and French Empires in one of the most pivotal wars of the twentieth century into the world history classroom. In doing so, I strive to find additional ways to incorporate Africa and Africans into the modern world history course that goes beyond the Scramble for Africa. Moreover, I contend that the inclusion of African wartime experiences in our coverage of the Second World War serves to raise subsequent questions regarding African ex-servicemen's postwar experiences and whether these veterans affected nationalist movements in the 1950s and 1960s.

On February 28, 1948, some two thousand disgruntled African veterans of the Second World War marched to Christiansborg Castle, the residence of the British governor of the Gold Coast in West Africa, to demand that he respond to their petition. Many of these men had recently served as one of the 70,000 members of the Gold Coast Regiment of the Royal West African Frontier Force that made up the 81st and 82nd West African Divisions of the British army. The goal of the march was to press British colonial authorities to address these veterans' demands, which included increased disability pay, government employment, and the release of ex-servicemen from prison. While Governor Gerald Creasy had permitted the Ex-Servicemen Union to organize a peaceful demonstration, the parade ultimately turned deadly when the demonstrators veered from the officially sanctioned route. In a confrontation with Gold Coast colonial police, three unarmed veterans were killed: Sgt. Cornelius Adjetey, Cpl. Attipoe and Pte. Odartey Lamptey. Their deaths sparked a spontaneous riot in Accra, which quickly spread across the colony leading to 29 deaths and 257 injuries.[2]

This incident known as the Accra Riots of 1948 served as a critical turning point in the struggle for Gold Coast independence, which became the nation of Ghana in 1957. In the aftermath of the riots, Gold Coast nationalists like Joseph B. Danquah and Kwame Nkrumah managed to harness residents' violent responses towards the deaths of the veterans into their calls for greater inclusion of Africans in the local government. The subsequent arrest and detention of these leading nationalists some two weeks later galvanized Gold Coast Africans to fight for independence.[3] Soon the Ex-Servicemen Union publicly aligned themselves to Kwame Nkrumah's newly formed Convention People's Party, which listed the association as one of several interest groups who supported their calls for independence. Ghanaians continue to commemorate the tragic deaths of these three ex-servicemen with a wreath-laying ceremony at a cenotaph in Independence Square.[4]

Scholars and nationalist leaders of the 1950s and 1960s alike quickly privileged African veterans of the Second World War as pivotal actors of the nationhood struggle. In addition to the Accra Riots, others called attention to the mutiny and massacre at Thiaroye military base in the outskirts of Dakar, Senegal, which was then French West

Africa. The 500 ex-servicemen and German prisoners of wars' demands for equal pay and treatment resonated with West African elites like Lamine Guéye who co-opted their demands to push for full inclusion within France and with others who called for the creation of an independent nation.[5] By 1960, Senegal inaugurated Léopold Senghor, a veteran and former German prisoner of war, as president of the country in 1960.

Scholarly debates on the links between African veterans and nationalist movements of the 1950s and 1960s are bifurcated into two key perspectives. The dominant view contends that the Second World War transformed African servicemen in powerful ways that led some of them to participate in anticolonial movements. Scholars such as George Bennett, Ali Mazrui, and Eugene Schleh argue that African war veterans returned home with new ideas gained from interacting with other colonial soldiers or drew inspiration from Indian anticolonial nationalists.[6] With a new sense of confidence and a worldly perspective, African veterans of the Second World War repeatedly challenged colonial assumptions of European superiority. Moreover, David Easterbrook, and Myron Echenberg show how nationalists in Kenya and Senegal co-opted veterans' demands into their own political agendas.[7] And in doing so, they show how African ex-servicemen of the Second World War were one of several interest groups to inform the trajectory of decolonization across the continent. In sum, this perspective is the favored position on African war veterans and a nationalist movement, which is often relayed to students in modern Africa history textbooks.[8] However, a growing number of political and military historians of Africa insist that it was highly unlikely that these ex-servicemen took an active part in the independence struggles. Historians G.O. Olusanya, Richard Rathbone, Simon Baynham, Rita Headrick, Hal Brands, and David Killingray insist that educational and ethnic differences prevented the formation of a coherent interest group with a shared political agenda.[9] On the contrary, these scholars insist that veterans were concerned more about social prestige, employment opportunities, or territorial politics than anticolonial nationalist arguments.

African involvement in the Second World War was crucial to the British Empire. British colonial officials recognized this fact. A 1945 Colonial Office memorandum summarized their contributions as follows:

> *African soldiers beat Italians out of Somaliland and Abyssinia, defeating the best Blackshirt battalions…They defended British West Africa from attack from the Vichy territory, helped take Madagascar, and went to the Middle East as Pioneers and to the Far East to fight Japan.*[10]

In recent decades, the French government has publicly recognized the West and North African contributions to the war, which had officially downplayed in the immediate aftermath of the war.

To draw attention to the African role in our examination of the Second World War in a world history classroom, I have divided the essay into two parts. First, I summarize the use of African colonial soldiers in the First and Second World Wars. Then, I describe how my inclusion of Africa and African involvement in the war globalizes the conflict in distinctive ways. Finally, I conclude with an addendum of source material related to the subject.

African Colonial Soldiers in the First and Second World Wars

European use of African colonial soldiers predates their participation in the Second World War. France had the longest history, as the French military had drawn upon its colonial subjects. In North Africa, colonial soldiers fought in the Crimean War (1854-6), Italian War (1859), and the Franco-Prussian War (1870). One historian estimates that 324,000 Algerian, Moroccan, and Tunisian combatants fought in the European theatre of war. Although formed to serve as a colonial force in 1857, the tirallieurs sénégalais, translated into English as Senegalese Rifles, soon were sent to fight in European conflicts in the 1890s. During the First World War, the French military conscripted between 134,000 and 175,000 West and Central Africans to fight against the Germans.[11] In oral histories, these ex-colonial fighters recounted their service as a "tax in blood."[12] Serving either in all black or racially mixed regiments, these sharpshooters were often used as "shock troops" and participated in the major Western front battles at Marne, Ypres, Somme, Verdun, and less numbers fought in Gallipoli and the Balkans.[13]

By the Second World War, the French conscripted 100,000 Africans from Mauretania to Niger between 1939 and 1940. The bulk of these conscripts (including some few volunteers) served in France and the others remained in the French West and Central African territories. Within two years, France had recruited another 100,000 soldiers in the Free France army.[14] From the First to the Second World War, French West African combatants grew from 3% to roughly 9%, according to one historian.[15] In 1940, the tirallieurs sénégalais in both black and mixed infantry divisions were deployed to southern France. They battled against German Wehrmacht in its bloody and ultimately successful campaigns to capture France that summer. After the Fall of France, some 20,000 French West and Central African soldiers became POWs in Germany. After a year in prison, many were transferred to work in camps called frontstalags to assist with mining and arms manufacturing outside occupied France.[16] The most famous French West African POW was Léopold Sénghor, the founder of the Négritude movement and future first President of Senegal in 1960.[17] Most of French West African POWs remained incarcerated until the liberation in 1944.

Unlike the French, the British gingerly recruited Africans to fight in their European military campaigns. These units were small and designed to protect colonial borders and territories for the British Empire. For instance, the Royal West African Frontier Force had 8,000 volunteers who were responsible for the protection of British

West Africa in the years leading up to the Second World War.[18] During the Great War of 1914, African colonial soldiers fought nearly exclusively in Africa except for West African combatants in Mesopotamia. Historian David Killingray claims the reasons are clear. First, the British were more reluctant to use conscription as means of growing an army. Next, the one million Indian imperial soldiers provided a ready supply of combatants paid for by the Indian taxpayers. And finally, British racial chauvinism generated aversion to African soldiers fighting Europeans, even enemies.[19] The British initially held this position on the eve and during the Second World War. By 1940, however, imperial policy had changed. In that year, nearly a half million West and East Africans from the British Empire entered the war; some would fight in African, Asian, and European theaters of war.

The year 1940 was a critical turning point for these African soldiers in the Second World War. Due to Germany's occupation of France and the Vichy government's collaboration with the Nazi regime, British officials grew concerned about the security of its West African territories like the Gold Coast, which was surrounded on all sides by French colonies. Moreover, Italy's alliance with Germany and Spain cut off the Mediterranean as an important supply route. In its place West Africa became a hub.[20] British colonial officials and military officers now looked to recruit Africans to serve in a variety of roles: laborers, technicians, and even combatants. Some Africans volunteered to join the military often attracted to employment. One historian explained, "Africans became telegraphists and radio operators. They also became carpenters, electricians, bricklayers, blacksmiths, tailors, cooks, and truck drivers."[21] Some African servicemen gained tremendous technical skills in electrical and mechanical engineering [Figure 1].

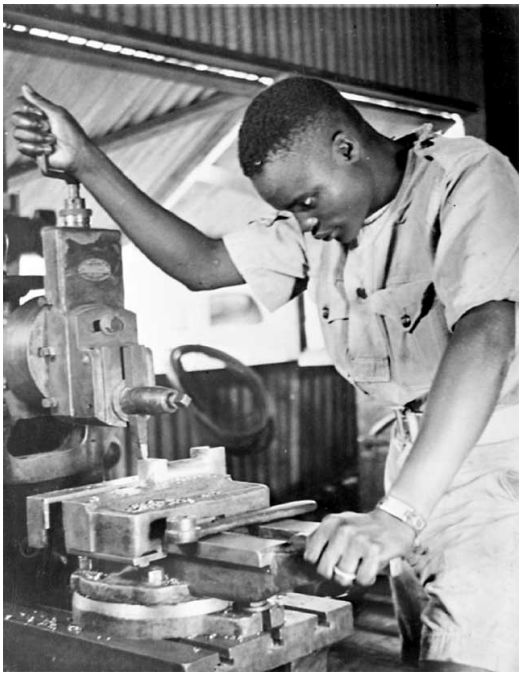

Figure 1. An East African at Air Repair Base, 1943. (Courtesy of the Imperial War Museum)

Others took advantage of educational opportunities. As one veteran recalled, "In those days there were certain privileges with the army. You could take correspondence courses at half the rate. They had a big library. The army was the place for an ambitious young man." Some like Sierra Leone RAF NCO John Henry Smythe fought for ideological reasons. His sense of racial consciousness had been ignited when his teacher had given the pupils an opportunity to read Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. "And we saw what this man [Hitler] was going to do to the blacks, if he gets into power…he attacked the British and Americans for encouraging the blacks to be doctors and lawyers and so forth. It was a book that would put any black man's back right up and it put mine up."[22] Many more were simply coerced and tricked into the war effort. By 1942, Britain had sent Africans to military campaigns in Ethiopia, Eritrea, British Somaliland, Madagascar, Ceylon, and Burma. Many of the British African forces did not return home until 1947.

African participation in the world wars placed them in one of the most devastating conflicts in the twentieth century. Whether conscripted or recruited African colonial soldiers in the Second World War acquired a number of new skills and experiences that many had hoped to translate into new realities during peacetime. I join previous scholars who conclude that the Second World War radicalized some African veterans who partook directly and indirectly in anticolonial nationalist movements. In addition to showing the important African dimensions of the Second World War, world history practitioners and students have an opportunity to understand the social and political conditions on the eve of African decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s.

Lesson Plan

Every semester I teach a course titled "The West in the Modern World" at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. The course examines the Western world's interaction with non-Western nations from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries. This class is one of three required history courses that form a part of the institution's core curriculum. Each instructor constructs the course to their own taste but all of my colleagues invariably cover the Second World War. As a historian of Latin America and more generally, race and the black experience worldwide, I look for opportunities to insert and introduce midshipmen to these sidelined voices and underexposed experiences.

The Second World War is one of several conduits to accomplish this task. Fortunately, the student body of the Naval Academy is already a captivated and knowledgeable audience on that topic. Much of the enthusiasm from midshipmen centers on U.S. naval involvement in the epic battles of the Second World War such as the Battles of Midway and Iwo Jima. To broaden our coverage of the Second World War, I have designed a few lessons that explore the experiences of African soldiers in the Second World War and the impact of their post-war activities on African independence

movements. The goal is simple. I seek to draw much needed attention to the role of Africa and Africans in this global conflict.

At the start of the unit, I explain to my students that we must answer these three overarching yet interrelated questions: why did the Second World War begin, what made it global, and how did the conflict affect the lives of combatants and non-combatants worldwide? From open discussion, I quickly learn that my students understand the Second World War as a purely American-European-Asian conflict, and that the significant national actors were Germany, the United States, Japan, Soviet Union, and Great Britain. Other players and places are insignificant to these nations. To broaden such a perspective, I include Africa and African participation in the war as an opportunity to expand the historical narrative and to provide them with exposure to new actors who appear later as part of in our study of decolonization. To accomplish this objective, I give the students the following homework in preparation for the next class session.

For the past few semesters, I have asked that my students listen to a 23-minute radio broadcast titled "Africa's Forgotten Soldiers," which the BBC World Service originally broadcasted in 2009.[23] This radio program includes firsthand accounts of a number of African veterans of the Second World War hailing from Nigeria to Zimbabwe to Kenya. Listening to these men recount the reasons they joined the war as well as discuss their wartime experiences helps to better engage students. Embedded in the ex-servicemen's personal narratives are questions about military conscription, imperial belonging, racial and proto-nationalist consciousness, racial discrimination in the military [Figure 2]. Since this assignment is completed at home, I expect students to come prepared the following class period to discuss the questions listed on the handout [Appendix A]. Drawing on the radio documentary, my students examine not only the wartime experiences of African veterans but also explore the ways African participation in the Second World War could become a radicalizing experience.

Figure 2. 81st West African Division and Indian Colonial Soldiers in Burma, 1943. (Courtesy of the Imperial War Museum)

After we have used the questions on the handout to guide our discussion of the radio broadcast, I then prepare my students to examine early African ex-servicemen's responses to the Second World War. To demonstrate the newfound confidence of many African Second World War veterans, I show them a film short titled L'Ami Y'a Bon (2004) from Rachid Bouchareb, a French film director of North African ancestry.[24] Since it is only nine minutes at length, I am to later engage the students into a discussion. This deeply captivating mostly silent film short narrates the conscription of tirallieurs sénégalais to the Second World War and their wartime experiences. It focuses on a French West African farmer who responds to the call to join the war. Then, it moves from his recruitment to his arrival in southern France and onto combat. There is a brief yet poignant scene where Bouchareb displays a sense of cross-racial fraternity between these French West Africans and their European counterparts when the African protagonist carries the body of a mortally wounded French soldier to the barracks in the fighting of 1940. The viewer also learns that German occupation of France turned many of France's African soldiers into prisoners of war. The film ends on December 1, 1944 when tirallieurs sénégalais who had been German POWs refused to demobilize from Camp de Thiaroye until they had received their full salaries and pensions. Bouchareb presents a fictional dramatization of the shooting. Without showing the shooters, we see the film's unnamed protagonist as one of the thirty-five veterans gunned down.[25] A lengthier and equally powerful film is *Le Camp de Thiaroye* (1988), which was directed by Senegalese filmmaker and Second World War veteran Ousmane Sembene.

With these two sources--one primary and one secondary--students are able to draw conclusions and raise questions about African participation in the Second World War. Generally, students make three significant conclusions. First, African involvement in the war ranges from conscription to commitment to end worldwide fascism to seeking better educational and employment opportunities. Second, many African colonial subjects had limited direct contact with Europeans and their wartime experiences had brought them in contact with racial chauvinism. In some cases, but not all, African veterans increasingly questioned the social order of empire and colony. And third, wartime experiences as combatants, technical and skilled military laborers led many African veterans to believe that they were to have secure postwar employment opportunities. In absence of perceived fair and equitable distribution of postwar pensions and benefits, some African ex-servicemen across the continent insisted that their wartime contribution be fairly compensated.

Moreover, students also raise a number of useful questions. What specific wartime experiences were most likely to radicalize African veterans of the Second World War? Were these experiences different from their father's or uncle's participation in the First World War? Some questioned the role of colonial social and political climate in influencing the role veterans played in nationalist movements. For example, why did the Accra Riots of 1948 occur in the Gold Coast and not Nigeria or Kenya? Finally, some students share the criticism of several historians disregard veterans' demands to the military as a form of nationalist politics, which generates questions about the scope of nationalism and political activity.

While we may leave the topic with more questions than answers, it is apparent to my students that Africa and Africans played a strategic role in the Second World War. Neither the continent nor its people stood on the sidelines as Europeans and Asians engulfed themselves in a vicious conflict. In turn, Africans gained new experiences and skills that they hoped would translate into economically secured livelihoods. Too many of them returned home without stable employment or access to land. African veterans' calls to the colonial governments to fairly compensate them often resulted in tragedy as seen in the Camp Thiaroye massacre of 1944 and the Accra Riots of 1948. These two violent episodes often link African war veterans and the struggle to end empire in Africa, which allows students to envision the potential affect the Second World War not only had on Europe, the United States, or Japan. But, it also touched the not so distant shores, lands, and people of the African continent.

Available Resources on African Veterans of the Second World War

Primary Sources

Autobiographies and Memoirs

Mandambwe, Reverend John E.A. and Mario Kolk, *Can You Tell Me Why I Went to War? A Story of a Young King's African Rifle*, Zomba, 2008. The most recent memoir from an African veteran of the Second World War.

Fadoyebo, Isaac and David Killingray. *A Stroke of Unbelievable Luck*. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1999. An account of a Nigerian Second World War veteran who served in Burma.

Itote, Waruhiu. *'Mau Mau' General*. Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1967.

Kakembo, Robert. *An African Soldier Speaks*: The Livingstone Press, 1947.

Nunneley, John. *Tales from the King's African Rifles: A Last Flourish of Empire*. Surrey: United Kingdom; Askari Books, 1998.

Images and Paintings

Felix Valloton, *Soldats sénégalais au camp de Mailly* (1917), RMN-Grand Palais

Radio Broadcasts

Africa's Forgotten Soldiers, BBC World Service Documentary, November 13, 2009, http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/documentaries/2009/11/091112_fridaydoc_africasforgottensoldiers.shtml

Ghana's War Veterans and the 1948 Accra Riots, BBC World Service Documentary, March 7, 2014, http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01t10s9

Secondary Sources

Film Adaptations

Le Camp de Thiaroye, DVD, directed by Ousmane Sembene and Thierno Faty Sow (1987). An African perspective on the 1944 massacre at Camp Thiaroye.

Indigénes (Days of Glory), DVD, directed by Rachid Bouchareb (2007).

L'Ami Y'a Bon (The Colonial Friend), DVD, directed by Rachid Bouchareb (2005; included in the DVD set for Indigénes).

Novels and Fictional Accounts

Bandele, Biyi. *Burma Boy* (Johnathan Cape, 2006). A fictional coming of age account of a Nigerian youth who served in the Second World War fighting in Burma.

Appendix A

Unit Topic: African Experiences in the Second World War

Homework: Listen to BBC radio documentary titled "Africa's Forgotten Soldiers"

Instructions: Please listen to the 23 minute broadcast and prepare to discuss the following questions in class.

1. What motivated colonial Africans to join the British in the Second World War?

2. How did British imperial officers treat African enlisted men?

3. What kind of work did they perform?

4. How and why did India serve as model of inspiration for African colonial soldiers during the Second World War?

5. Why did the interactions with other colonial forces and African American servicemen radicalize many enlisted Africans, and with what consequences after the war?

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Notes

[1] I appreciate the thoughtful feedback that I received from Marc J. Gilbert, the anonymous reviewer, Donald Wallace, Richard Ruth, and Rebecca Shumway. Their feedback greatly improved the quality of this essay.

[2] This account has been frequently recounted in numerous monographs on decolonization, especially in the case of the Gold Coast. See David Killingray with Martin Plaut, *Fighting for Britain: African Soldiers in the Second World War* (Chippenham: James Currey, 2010), 215-216.

[3] Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 253.

[4] Ibid, 248-249.

[5] Gregory Mann, *Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 117.

[6] George Bennett, *Kenya: A Political History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 112; Ali Mazrui, *Towards a Pax Africana: A Study of Ideology and Ambition* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967), 162; Eugene Schleh, "Post-service careers of African World War Two Veterans," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 6:2 (1968), 203-220.

[7] David Easterbrook, "Kenyan Askaris in World War II and their Demobilization, with Special Reference to the Machakos District," in *Three Aspects of Colonial Kenya* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University, 1978): 27-60; Myron Echenberg, "Tragedy at Thiaroye: the Senegalese soldiers' uprising of 1944" in *African Labor History* (Beverly Hills, CA, 1978): 109-128.

[8] Roland Oliver and Anthony Atmore, *Africa since 1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[9] Meyer Fortes, "The Impact of war on British West Africa," *International Affairs* 21:2 (Apr. 1945): 206-219; G.O. Olusanya, "The Role of Ex-Servicemen in Nigerian Politics," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 6:2 (Apr. 1968): 221-232; Richard Rathbone, "Businessmen in Politics: Party struggles in Ghana, 1947-1957," *Journal of Development Studies* 9:2 (1973): 391-402; Rita Headrick, "African Soldiers in World War II," *Armed Forces & Society* 4:3 (May 1978): 501-526; Killingray, David, "Soldiers, Ex-servicemen, and Politics in the Gold Coast, 1939-50," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 21:3 (1983): 523-34.

[10] Ashley Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), 171.

[11] Figures differ on the exact number of tirallieurs sénégalais in the First World War, see Ruth Ginio, "African Silences: Negotiating the Story of France's Colonial Soldiers, 1914-2009," in *Shadows of War: A Social History of Silence in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Efrat Ben-Ze'ev, Ruth Ginio, and Jay Winter (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 140; Myron Echenberg, " 'Morts pour la France': The African Soldier in the Second World War," *Journal of African History* 26 (1985): 363.

[12] Joe Lunn, Memoirs of the Maelstrom: *A Senegalese Oral History of the First World War* (Portsmouth, NH: Heineman, 1999), 39.

[13] Christian Koller, "The Recruitment of Colonial Troops in Africa and Asia and their Deployment in Europe during the First World War," *Immigrants & Minorities* 1&2 (Mar./Jul. 2008): 119.

[14] Ginio, "African Silences," 141.

[15] Echenberg, "'Morts pour la France,'" 364.

[16] To learn more about the 1940 massacres of French West African prisoners of war in Nazi internment camps, see Raffael Scheck, *Hitler's African Victims: The German Army Massacre of Black French Soldiers in 1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[17] To read a refreshing analysis on how his Second World War experience shaped Senghor's writing, see Babacar M'Baye, "Cosmopolitisme et anticolionalisme dans quelques poemes de Leopold Sedar Senghor pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale," *Migrance* 39 (Premier Semestre 2012): 79-92.

[18] Headrick, "African Soldiers," 503.

[19] Killingray, *Fighting for Britain*, 5.

[20] Headrick,"African Soldiers," 503.

[21] Ibid, 505.

[22] Killingray, *Fighting for Britain*, 52-53.

[23] Martin Plaut, "Africa's Forgotten Soldiers," http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/documentaries/2009/11/091112_fridaydoc_africasforgottensoldiers.shtml

[24] Rachid Bouchareb also has a feature length film centered on North African participation in the Second World War called *Indigénes* (i.e. the English translation of the film is *Days of Glory*), which was released in 2006.

[25] One historian notes that there were roughly fifteen recorded French West African soldier protests ranging from complaints about food, pension, housing, and access to women between 1944 and 1946. See Echenberg, "'Morts Pour la France'" 375.