
H-France Review Vol. 17 (August 2017), No. 146

Ruth Ginio, *The French Army and its African Soldiers: The Years of Decolonization*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017. xxviii + 250 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, and index. \$60.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-8032-5339-1.

Review by Elisabeth Fink, Hertford College, Oxford.

Despite the infamous *blanchissement* by French military officials during the Liberation of France and subsequent conflicts to try to reserve military glory for the white ranks of the French Army, West African soldiers are increasingly taking their place in the historical spotlight.^[1] The importance of African veterans' experience is attested to by the enduring references to Africans' "blood debt" to France, which became a rallying cry that helped Africans in Senegal's four communes to maintain their unique citizenship rights in the early twentieth century and which remains an enduring touchstone in the relationship between West Africa and France. Moving beyond the two world wars, the context in which the language of the "blood debt" has frequently been invoked, Ruth Ginio's *The French Army and its African Soldiers: The Years of Decolonization* puts African soldiers in the French army at the center of the rapid changes of the postwar years. It is a book of interest to scholars of French empire, the continuities and ruptures of colonial rule in West Africa, and the military and international history of decolonization. Ginio skillfully brings together much recent historical scholarship on decolonization in AOF with considerable new archival and oral history material from the French overseas colonial and military administration and from West African soldiers themselves.

The French Army and its African Soldiers looks at the *longue durée* of decolonization from a military vantage point. Building on key arguments about the goals of African political leaders in the postwar era by historians such as Frederick Cooper and Tony Chafer, Ginio emphasizes that for African soldiers, as for political and union leaders, independence only emerged very late as a political goal.^[2] She writes against the vision of the West African soldier as a sort of collaborator with French colonialism. Instead, she argues, when African soldiers were not conscripted or coerced as many were even after the notorious *deuxième portion* labor unit of the army endured past its legal abolition in 1950, soldiers enlisted for economic advancement and frequently saw their interests allied with the French state more than the Front de Libération National in Algeria or the Communists in Indochina. To understand why African soldiers eschewed independence as a goal, Ginio places them in the larger context of West Africa's changing relationship to France, as well as an enormous effort by the French Army that shaped not just the perspective of its soldiers but also, Ginio suggests, the course of colonial governance in AOF. She focuses on the army's intense monitoring of the morale of its personnel and the significant propaganda efforts it engaged in even beyond the military's ranks.

While emphasizing the repeated and fervent French assertions that French colonial rule was different from other colonial powers because of its modernization and liberalization, the book also foregrounds how African veterans managed to use these claims to their own advantage. Despite—or because of—the French military's ban on soldiers' engaging in politics and the veterans' organizations claims to be "above politics" (p. 196), veterans managed to make their weight felt politically in the colonial era and beyond. Ginio's

work suggests that the military bond, and the kinds of openings for claims-making it presented, helps us understand many African political choices during decolonization. Veterans' use of this French discourse helps explain one of the landmark successes of African political mobilization in the late colonial era: a 1950 equalizing of pensions between metropolitan and African veterans. That victory has been eclipsed in historical memory by the notorious 1960 law that led to the decline in the value of African pensions (p.197), but Ginio rightly underlines the enormous achievement of African veterans' claims.^[3] Understanding and measuring the reception of French propaganda is a notoriously difficult task, but Ginio's argument shows how the state's discursive choices created opportunities for Africans to seize.

Citing the robust bibliography on West African soldiers, Ginio carves out her historiographical space as writing about West African soldiers and the French army during the years of decolonization, with a focus on the French Army in West Africa and African soldiers who served in the wars of independence in Vietnam, Algeria, and, to a much lesser extent, in Madagascar.^[4] Her work also helps push the boundaries of work on AOF, by insisting on a broader analytical frame. The narrative, structured by the movements of African soldiers themselves, helps show West Africans' place in the larger landscape of Francophone decolonization. It also is a welcome addition to scholarship on the Algerian War that has focused on Algeria in North African, European, and international history and has not paid enough attention to the role of Algeria in West African history.

Ginio faces a familiar conundrum for those who work on this period, namely that sources largely come from the French military administration and the state, but she makes fine use of oral history and careful analysis of a wide range of sources from censored letters to parliamentary speeches, which keep the soldiers' perspective a forceful anchor in the story. This perspective, more than anything else, helps show the limits of the roles African veterans have been confined to in political discourse from the metropole and from anticolonial politics. In a powerful individual snapshot, she uses the testimony of one veteran's son to describe the ambiguous place in which many soldiers found themselves. The veteran was pushed into the French administration's special school for chiefs' sons, which ultimately set him on a track that led to being recruited into the army. Having served in Morocco and Algeria, he spoke disparagingly to his family of the FLN, but also did not like the French. The story of a man pushed into a military track but who reenlisted because of the enticement of a better pension shows the ambiguous position of African soldiers and the ill-fitting categories (like nationalism, anticolonialism, and collaboration) that have been forced onto them (p. 137).

Ginio carefully situates the changing military infrastructure, from military training facilities to parades to financial assistance for veterans, in the changing nature of colonialism after the Second World War. Chapters one and two provide an authoritative background, one of the clearest given its brevity, on changes to French administration in the wake of the Second World War while foregrounding the struggle between the French state, the military, and an array of African actors. Chapter three asks how new the French army really was in the postwar period, and places the army in the center of those debates, showing the ways it had to change and follow the postwar zeitgeist. How much, for example, did the officer corps need to be Africanized? As the book makes clear, the ambiguities of postwar reform allowed for plenty of conflict with and within French military command.

While the French army needed African troops to fight in Vietnam and Algeria, the focus of chapters four and five respectively, it was keenly aware of the dangers this posed to the state. Ginio shows the army's intense surveillance and its often paltry or (in the case of a proposed African cultural center in Vietnam, never enacted) attempts at increasing morale (pp. 94-95). In Algeria, Ginio shows the disjunction between the FLN's attempts to establish solidarity with West African troops and the French military command's fears about Islam. Interestingly, she shows that the FLN's propaganda was primarily political, not religious. She notes that "[t]he Algerian war was a crucial factor in the radicalization of West African trade unions and the student movements" (p. 116). Here unions, border-crossing students, and "occasionally certain African politicians"—not Islam—were the real threat for the state (p. 116-117). This

didn't stop commanders frantically connecting African soldiers' religious observance to their alleged susceptibility to sympathy for the FLN by categorizing Africans as "*fanatique*," "practicing Muslims," or "indifferent" (pp. 124-125). The military sponsored (and subsidized) African soldiers making the *hajj*, seizing on a unique opportunity to promote French colonialism. Ginio concludes that "the story of the military-run *hajj* exemplifies the new world with which French colonialism had to deal—a world in which mobility of people and ideas was easier and anticolonialism and Islam went hand in hand" (p. 134). The essential threat was political, and Ginio makes an important contribution to showing the connections between decolonization in different regions and some of the ways ideas and people mobilized across rapidly changing boundaries.

Chapters six and seven return to West Africa. Chapter six centers on debates within the army about how colonialism should change and what the consequences of those changes would be for the army, its structure, and its ability to defend the borders of AOF, most notably from the FLN. Ginio repeatedly invokes a West African distinction in the peaceful trajectory of its decolonization. Her assertion of the relative lack of violence in West Africa is motivated by a comparative view of the wars escalating in Vietnam and Algeria. While she does not deny the violence of French rule in West Africa, she does not examine it. Côte d'Ivoire in 1949-1950 is allotted only a sentence, in which it is characterized as "a brief stage of protest...during a practical and non-ideological alliance between the RDA and the French Communist Party" (p. 141). What this brush off misses is the short-lived but intense militarization of that conflict, with the army detaining and interrogating most adult men in certain villages in RDA strongholds. Ginio maintains that African soldiers did not feel much brotherhood with France's enemies in Vietnam (a conflict they saw as against Communism) or in Algeria (a conflict in which they saw themselves as fighting as French for France). She highlights, as well, the racism they faced. But what would soldiers' perspectives have been in fighting in a place like Côte d'Ivoire? Ginio makes intriguing conclusions about the place of fighting in Vietnam and Algeria in historical memory, which raises questions about the role of West African troops in AOF itself.

Ginio's analysis of the army in West Africa instead privileges the army's relationship to civilian authority and, especially, debates about colonial governance. Psychological warfare played a role in trying to bind Africans to France, even without a war to show the need to win over "hearts and minds" as in Algeria. She delves profitably into several debates among army officials about the constraints of defending AOF and how the army would need to respond in the face of changes including the 1956 *Loi-cadre* (framework law) establishing territorial and budgetary autonomy within AOF.

The focus on soldiers and veterans highlights the stakes of independence. Ginio shows just how much veterans had on the line, given that their entire agenda and so many of their hard-fought gains were predicated on a discourse of equality between African and metropolitan soldiers. Contextualized by her careful work showing the basis for a veterans' agenda in AOF, Ginio shows why at the time they felt compelled to come out for a "yes" vote to stay under French rule and join Charles de Gaulle's new French Community in the referendum of 1958 and advocate for at least some form of association with France.

Ginio could perhaps have followed the trajectories of individual soldiers after independence, besides a rather quick cursory description that some headed off into the civil service and the armies of independent nations while "others did not" (p. 201), but instead she focuses on the legacies of decolonization for postcolonial governance, which are considerable. Remarking on the roots of the military coup d'états and juntas that proliferated across West Africa by the mid-1960s, Ginio points the reader toward the May 1958 crisis when the army threatened a coup. While de Gaulle took power in a relatively calm way, "the military contempt toward civilian administration in Algeria and the official governments of the Fourth Republic had certainly impressed some of the African officers serving at the time" (p. 176). While the French established military academies, Ginio argues that the most important legacy for postcolonial Africa were the French roots of military juntas and coup d'états that would dominate much of West African governance after the tricolor came down.

The focus on the continuities between the late colonial and early independence era allows Ginio to account for French actions. In the West African context, the decision not to intervene was as consequential as active military interventions. Her suggestion that the French decision not to intervene in a 1963 coup because its leader, General Christophe Soglo, was a trusted veteran who had served in the French army is compelling. The conclusion about the legacies of the French army for the region underscores the importance of the material. Most significantly, *The French Army and Its African Soldiers* provides an innovative analysis of the late colonial years with incisive discussion of their legacy, enriching a growing field of scholarship. Ginio's important new book insists on West Africa's (and West Africans') dynamic place within the French empire and synthesizes new research to show the importance of the army and African soldiers and veterans in the course of decolonization.

NOTES

[1] Among others, Eric Jennings, *La France libre fut africaine* (Paris: Perrin, 2014) and Gregory Mann, *Native Sons: West African War Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006) covered this well.

[2] Tony Chafer, *The end of empire in French West Africa: France's successful decolonisation?* (Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, 2002); Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945-1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

[3] The law was overturned in 2011, which was, as Ginio explains, too late for many of the veterans it would have affected.

[4] Myron Echenberg, *Colonial Conscripts: The Tirailleurs sénégalais in French West Africa, 1857-1960* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1991); Richard Fogarty, *Race and War in France: Colonial Subjects in the French Army, 1914-1918* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); Mann, *Native Sons*; Sarah Zimmerman, "Living beyond Boundaries: West African servicemen in French colonial conflicts, 1908-1962," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California Berkeley, 2011).

Elisabeth Fink
Hertford College, Oxford
elisabeth.fink@hertford.ox.ac.uk

Copyright © 2017 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172