

H-France Review Vol. 10 (June 2010), No. 84

Dominique Kalifa, *Biribi: les bagnes coloniaux de l'armée française*. Paris: Perrin, 2009. 344 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. €21 (pb). ISBN 978-2-262-02384-3.

Review by Richard S. Fogarty, University at Albany, State University of New York.

In the preface to his 1890 novel *Biribi*, Georges Darien insisted that his description of life in the French army's penal detachments in North Africa "n'a point été composé avec des lambeaux de souvenirs, des haillons de documents, les loques pailletées des récits suspects [has certainly not been put together from bits of memory, shreds of documents, the sequined rags of dubious stories]." Darien wanted very much for his readers to know that he understood the horrific experiences that the novel described intimately in his flesh, not second-hand from rumors, stories, or documents, since he himself had been a victim. Hence his striking, if strange, description of life in these detachments as a prisoner's helmet, uncomfortable without a lining, that clung to the skins of condemned, even eventually "becoming" their skins, as the inmates both internalized and built up a (futile) defense against the horrors perpetrated upon their bodies and minds.[1]

Throughout *Biribi: les bagnes coloniaux de l'armée française*, Dominique Kalifa, a noted historian of crime and French society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, certainly does not ignore Darien's fundamental insight, always paying close attention to the human story at the center of the French army's "archipel punitif [punitive archipelago]." Yet Kalifa also knows that stories, representations, and documents can often reveal a great deal to the attentive and diligent researcher. He has applied his skills in this book to great effect, painting a vivid and detailed portrait of a dark corner in the history of modern France.

Kalifa's subject, though at first glance it may seem limited in scope, is actually quite significant and should interest a wide range of historians of France. First of all, according to Kalifa, between 600,000 and 800,000 men populated the archipelago of French army penal formations over the course of their long history (1818-1976, although the most important period corresponded precisely with the life of France's modern colonial empire, from the 1830 conquest of Algeria through formal decolonization in the 1960s). Second, and more important, the history of these formations intersects with some of the most crucial themes in nineteenth- and twentieth-century French history. In particular, anyone interested in understanding the central institutions of the army and colonialism, as well as crime and penalty, will profit from Kalifa's research.

Biribi, a name derived from a game of chance outlawed in France in 1837, was a slang term for penal battalions stationed in North Africa. Although no specific installation ever carried this appellation, Darien's novel made the word famous, and it has since served as the title of Daniel Moosmann's 1971 film based on Darien's work, as well as Kalifa's new history. Born under the Restoration, the French army's disciplinary structure developed over the course of the nineteenth century to embrace a variety of structures and units that housed men judged unsuitable to serve in regular formations. Some had committed violations of military discipline (often drunkenness on duty, or absent without leave), others had committed more serious offenses punished more formally by a court-martial, while others had committed more or less serious crimes in civilian life before their conscription, and thus could not serve

in regular units. Still others found themselves in disciplinary formations for having engaged in activities related to leftist politics and anti-militarism (although this last category attracted a great deal of sensationalist press coverage, Kalifa is careful to note that these men always constituted a small percentage of the overall population of Biribi). The *condamnés* served in a number of different types of formation, ranging from units that maintained their function as combat infantry, to labor battalions constructing public works, to installations that seemed to have little function other than inflicting suffering and pain on their inmates. Located almost exclusively in the colonies, these “*bagnes*,” or “penal colonies,” grew in size and importance to reach a peak in the 1880s and ’90s, then stagnated, with another spike in population during the Great War (when universal mobilization brought into the army thousands of previously discharged men whom commanders judged “inapt” to serve in regular units), then a long and slow decline from the 1920s to the dissolution of the last disciplinary units in the 1970s.

Incredibly rich in every sort of detail relating to these formations and the men who served in them, Kalifa’s book is very instructive for what it can tell us about important themes in modern French history, particularly under the Third Republic, when Biribi played its most conspicuous role. First, the author tells us a great deal about the emerging culture of republicanism and the army’s evolving relationship to it. For instance, one of the main factors fueling the expansion of penalty within the army was the gradual universalization of military service after 1870. As conscription reached more broadly across French society, it became more important for officers to separate “bad apples” from the rest of the army, to preserve, as they saw it, the integrity and fighting effectiveness of a now more civilianized force. Thus, Biribi is part of the story of the army attempting to come to terms with the Third Republic. The dramatic expansion of conscription in 1889 faced the army and its republican stewards with a seeming contradiction: men whose crimes in civilian life resulted in the loss of civil rights rendered them unfit to serve in the army could not, it appeared, thereby gain an undeserved privilege in being exempted from military service, but neither could they be incorporated into the regular army, spreading the contagion of indiscipline to other young recruits. Incorporation into penal formations was the solution, preserving both the republican imperative of equality expressed through universal military obligations and the military’s insistence on discipline and cohesion. One concrete result of this was that the famous *Bat d’Af* (*Bataillons d’infanterie légère d’Afrique*) grew in size with the influx of delinquents, but the status of these units as combat formations declined because the men in them were no longer “fortes têtes [hard cases]” whose indiscretions could be washed away and whose martial qualities could be restored by the purifying effects of active fighting. In short, these units devolved from *corps d’épreuve* to *corps de discipline*, from proving grounds to sites of punishment. Ultimately, one of the reasons it took so long to dissolve the army’s punitive archipelago, despite its scandalous reputation and doubts about its efficacy among even military authorities, was the need to reconcile the existence of republican universal military service with a desire to keep criminals out of the ranks. Because these penal formations were the notorious sites of abuse and egregious violations of human rights, it is ironic that, as Kalifa makes clear, the French Revolution of 1789 and the republican values that animated it created the need for a national army, and thus stimulated the army’s creation of disciplinary units—ironic, but not illogical.

The second theme Kalifa explores is the social and cultural context of crime and penalty. *Biribi* paints a vivid portrait of the world from which inmates came and which they created in the disciplinary formations, as well as the attitudes and assumptions that led some observers (often journalists, activists, and artists) to romanticize this world’s inhabitants while deploring their fate, and others (military officers and the larger bourgeois culture to which they belonged) to see in Biribi a confirmation of their worst social fears and cultural anxieties. As a historian of crime in the Belle Époque, Kalifa is a reliable guide to “le Milieu [organized crime],” “la pègre et les bas-fonds [the criminal underworld and the dregs of society],” and the shady characters and “mauvais garçons [criminals, akin to Mafia ‘wiseguys’]” who populated this world both in fact and in the fiction and imagination of writers, singers, and bourgeois moralists. Sensationalist interest in the army’s own version of this underworld, whose inhabitants often hailed from crime-ridden neighborhoods in cities like Paris or Marseilles, was of a

piece with this late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fascination with crime and punishment. Kalifa notes that the intensification of the use of and public interest in military penalty coincided with waves of fear and fascination with crime in wider French society. The population of the army's penal underworld was in fact made up largely of men from the urban working class, precisely the "classe dangereuse" elites of the Belle Époque most feared. The views of French officers mirrored this broader attitude, partaking of current discourses on degeneration and race, the criminology of Cesare Lombroso, and fears of mass politics. Louis Combe, a military doctor who studied the men of the *Bat d'Alf*, conjured these fears vividly: "Hier, ils étaient des apaches, des anarchistes, de professionnels de l'antimilitarisme et du vol, des dévoyés haineux de la société bourgeoise, des contempteurs de toute moral, des insoumis, des souteneurs, manieurs de 'surin' et faiseurs de 'merlingues'... Aujourd'hui, ils sont soldats [Yesterday, they were Apaches (gangsters), anarchists, professional antimilitarists and thieves, delinquents filled with hatred of bourgeois society, men contemptuous of all morality, shirkers, pimps, knife-handlers, pickpockets [?]. Today, they are soldiers." (p. 267). Finally, Kalifa makes clear how the French army's approach to penalty ran parallel to republican policies. For instance, severity receded during the early 1900s when the republic wanted to show itself generous to those showing signs of rehabilitation, but increased after 1910 when repression of criminality became a higher priority in the broader culture (see pp. 150 and 155). The army was, however, always in accord with unchanging republican severity toward those who violated the social pact.

The third, and in some ways most dominant and most interesting theme about which readers will learn a great deal in this work is the relationship between French military penalty and the colonial empire. Biribi did not, in fact, exist as any particular place bearing that name, but everyone knew exactly where it was—it was in Africa, North Africa to be precise, and primarily Algeria. Algeria was a place to get rid of undesirables, and the political troubles of the nineteenth century intensified this attitude and practice. By 1860, North Africa was decisively the home of the French army's "bagnes," which were now irretrievably "*coloniaux*." In part, the location in North Africa represented a hope that these men could be redeemed and regenerated through work and colonial combat. However, this was also the unforgiving land that provoked "*le cafard*," a mysterious depressive malaise that rendered even otherwise healthy men weak, impotent, and neurasthenic, prostrate under the merciless sun and heat in a desolate, harsh landscape of rocks and arid sands. And the location of these installations in the colonies allowed harsh practices and abuses to flourish that could not have taken root in the metropole. Africa itself seemed to authorize abuses, since, it was imagined, it was a place regulated by different laws and principles, perhaps no laws at all. Thus, the links between Biribi and the empire embodied the contradictory functions of French military penalty: "régénération et relégation, exclusion et rédemption, rachat et répression [regeneration and exile, exclusion and redemption, deliverance and repression]" (p. 119). In some ways, too, penal formations embodied an inversion of the colonial order, from the placement of the military prison of Algiers in an old slave market, to the use of colonial subjects in uniform (West and North African *tirailleurs*) to guard, and perhaps abuse, their condemned French charges. Words from Arabic and the colonial context came to define key aspects of the disciplinary experience, from *gourbi* to describe the squalid encampments, to *caïds* among the prisoners who ruled their small corners of the carceral universe. Finally, if the empire left its imprint on Biribi, Biribi's notoriety and black reputation reflected back upon the colonies and colonization itself to paint a sordid picture of France's activities outside the hexagon, "une vision noire de l'Empire [a black view of the Empire]" (p. 57), "l'Afrique terre du bagne, de l'exil et des tortures [Africa, land of the penal colony, exile, and torture]" (p. 287). Biribi was, therefore, an integral part of a "habitus" that linked "indissociablement l'armée coloniale, la terre d'Afrique et la violence [inseparably the colonial army, the land of Africa, and violence]" (p. 288), a thread that stretched from the violence of the conquest that began in 1830 to the torture that marked the end of the French presence in the 1960s.

Readers will find Kalifa an instructive guide to these themes not only because of the depth of research and corresponding detail he is able to mobilize, but also because it is clear that he is a careful and attentive historian when it comes to questions of methodology. He admits that the task of

reconstructing and analyzing the world of Biribi is difficult because the very extremity of the experiences make them seem unreal. On the one hand, however, he surmounts such problems in part by not always attempting definitively to separate fact from fiction in the testimonies of *disciplinaires* and crusading journalists. Instead, he also consults official military sources, reading them perceptively to discover how they reveal information that even the writers did not necessarily intend to convey. On the other hand, while Kalifa is sensitive to the sentimentalization of Biribi by the press, writers, poets, and the public, he also knows that despite their romanticism, sensational tales of Biribi are important cultural artifacts. Nonetheless, he strives to add to an analysis of these a serious attempt to uncover the social reality of life in these penal formations. Kalifa's ability to move easily between these two poles of cultural and social history constitutes a real strength of the book. He also recognizes that, despite their extreme experiences and the seeming inaccessibility of their world, the men of Biribi were "hommes parmi les autres [men like any others]" (p. 284), and so he depicts their world with sensitivity, even sympathy, but without illusions. This is particularly evident when the author turns to the important subject of sexuality, particularly homosexuality, among the prisoners, a topic hedged round with formidable taboos, silences, and prejudices, even as it was integral to the experiences of the men. Kalifa notes that the often formalized sexual relationships among the men were "une sorte de parodie des relations hétérosexuelles [a sort of parody of heterosexual relations]" (p. 260), and he unpacks the complex ways in which they embodied the realities of violent power relationships and attitudes toward gender, while sometimes even (if not, perhaps, all that often) involving real feeling and tenderness.

Biribi, then, is engagingly written and full of insightful analysis of both French military penalty itself and the wider implications of the subject for French social and cultural history during the period. I can offer only two mild criticisms. First, one of the most arresting aspects of the book is its cover, which features a haunting photograph of a *disciplinaire*, arms and torso covered with tattoos, staring with empty, colorless--perhaps even menacing--eyes directly at the viewer. Kalifa also describes in the text a number of dramatic images, including sensational illustrations of abuses like the *crapaudine* that accompanied the articles of crusading journalists who publicized the horrors of Biribi. However, none of these are reproduced in the volume, which is a shame. Illustrations would have helped make more tangible the events Kalifa describes (as well as making tortures like the *crapaudine* more understandable).

Second, the book's organization does not always convey the material in the strongest and most comprehensible way. By examining the cultural representations--in literature, journalism, political debate, and even poetry and music--of Biribi first, then moving on to describe the overall institutional architecture of the army's punitive archipelago, then finally focusing on the social context and experiences of the men who populated this universe, Kalifa is able to culminate his work with what Darien would agree is the most important aspect of the whole phenomenon: the lives and sufferings of the *disciplinaires*. However, this also confuses chronology. The book first traces the movements that helped bring notoriety and, eventually, an end to the abuses in these formations, and only then moves on to describe the history of these formations themselves. A more or less exact chronology of Biribi, its creation, rise, and fall, appears only in the middle of a nearly 300-page narrative. It might have been more logical to describe the genesis and nature of the French army's penal formations, then the kinds of experiences their inmates endured, finishing with the various attempts to bring this world to light and end its horrors, as well as the various ways Biribi worked its way into French culture. This would also infuse the narrative with greater drama, the kind that Adam Hochschild used so well in his *King Leopold's Ghost*, which first describes the horrors and abuses in the Belgian Congo, then paints a vivid picture of the various crusading efforts to end them.[2]

These are, nonetheless, cavils, and Kalifa has produced a work that is important and instructive. The very first line of Darien's novel might serve as a fitting summary of this second *Biribi*, written more than a century after the first: "Ce livre est un livre vrai. *Biribi* a été vécu [This book is a true story. *Biribi* was lived.]"[3]

NOTES

[1] Georges Darien, *Biribi* (Charleston, South Carolina: BiblioLife, 2008), p. 7.

[2] Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Heroism, and Terror in Colonial Africa* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998). No matter what one thinks of Hochschild's judgments as a historian of the Belgian Congo, he is a master storyteller.

[3] Darien, *Biribi*, p. 7.

Richard S. Fogarty
University at Albany, State University of New York
rfogarty@albany.edu

Copyright © 2010 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 redistribution/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 re-publication 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