

French West Africa and the First World War



Introduction

France had a proud revolutionary tradition, drawing on the values of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Citizens of the Republic stood equal in the eyes of the law and were considered part of the fellowship of people who collectively constituted France. Before the French Revolution (1789–1799), the king’s body stood in for France, and the people of France were the king’s subjects. But after the Revolution, French people understood themselves to be citizens who played a role in their own governance, not passive subjects. The tricky part comes in when considering the fact that this republic, by the time of the First World War, was also an empire with a global reach.

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Subjects and Citizens in French Senegal

The French imagined themselves to be the most civilized people on earth, and saw any people who came under their colonial rule as barbarians in need of France's civilizing influence. This attitude was expressed in the policy known as *La Mission Civilisatrice*, or the "civilizing mission." According to French law, most people under French colonial rule were not citizens of France. Instead, the vast majority were subjects (*sujets*). Colonial subjects had their own legal code called the *indigenat*—for the indigenous people. Under the *indigenat*, subjects did not have the same rights as those who were citizens. For example, colonial subjects could be (and often were) jailed without a hearing.

How could one become a French citizen? Early settlements on the coast of Senegal that came under French imperial control by the mid-19th century included St. Louis, Goree, Rufisque, and Dakar, also known as the Four Communes. African men born in the Four Communes, known as *originaires*, could qualify for French citizenship. This means that a select number of Africans living under French rule in French West Africa, if they were born in the right place, were actually not subjects, but rather French citizens—exempt from the *indigenat*, certain colonial tax and labor obligations, and enabled to vote for select offices.



Map of French Senegal, with the cities of the Four Communes – St. Louis, Goree, Rufisque, and Dakar

Key Terms:

French Senegal

Sujets

Four Communes

Originaires

Tirailleurs sénégalais

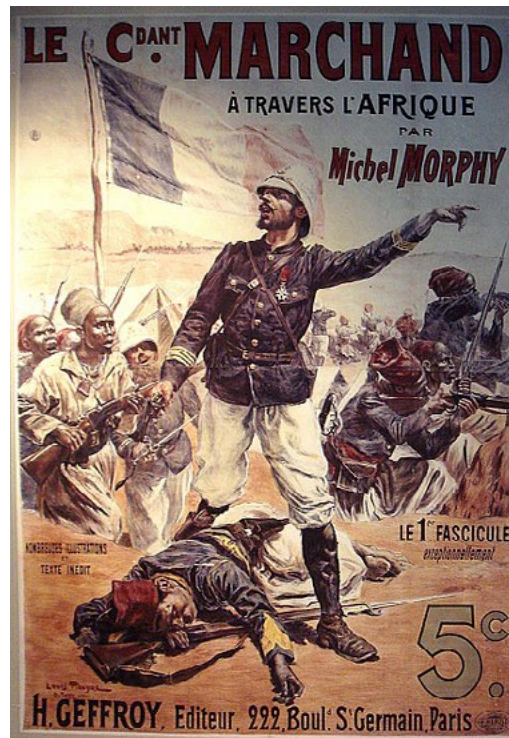
Western Front

Blaise Diagne

However, even for these individuals, there remained substantial limitations. Municipal officials often ignored or bypassed these rights, and at times French administrators worked to undermine them. Legal barriers, social inequalities, and discrimination persisted in both West Africa and France, and constrained the ability of residents of the Four Communes to exercise these basic rights. These questions, of who is and is not a citizen and what rights this status afforded a person, became highly relevant once the war began in 1914, and heavy battle losses ensued on the Western Front in Europe.

Colonial Soldiers and Recruitment in the First World War

The French colonial presence in West Africa in the 19th century was maintained and extended with the crucial contribution of African combatants. African men were recruited or forcibly included in the French colonial fighting forces. They were usually from low-status groups, including people who were enslaved within their existing communities. The first members of these forces were from the area near the Senegal River, which is how they came to be known as *tirailleurs sénégalais*, or Senegalese Riflemen. In 1910, the French Lieutenant Colonel Charles Mangin wrote about the potential for West Africa to be a supplier of large reserves of men in the service of the French Empire in *La Force Noire*, or “the black force.”



Tirailleurs Sénégalais under the command of Jean-Baptiste Marchand, 1898



Yora Comba, a 38 year old from St. Louis and lieutenant of the Tirailleurs Sénégalais, 1889

When the First World War broke out in 1914, there were approximately 31,000 West Africans in the *tirailleurs sénégalais*. While these soldiers were members of the colonial army, Africans who were citizens from the Four Communes on the coast of Senegal were members of the regular French metropolitan forces as *originaires*. After the French suffered catastrophic casualties on the Western Front after the Battle of Verdun in 1916, the French military accelerated its efforts to recruit soldiers from the West African colonies. That year, the French army saw an increase of roughly 59,000 West Africans.



Senegalese Riflemen with decorated flag, showing Blaise Diagne in upper right, along with Generals Faidherbe, Mangin, and Marchand, July 1919

Colonial subjects (not citizens) were recruited from Senegal and its surrounding areas of French West Africa (*AOF–Afrique-Occidentale française*)—what is today Upper Volta, Guinea, Niger, and Mali—and were enlisted in the *tirailleurs sénégalais*. French colonial subjects from Morocco, Algeria, Indochina, and Madagascar also fought in the war. While some military units were stationed in African colonies, many of these soldiers fought on the Western Front, as well as on the southeastern European Dardanelles campaign and in the Balkans.

The 161,000 Senegalese Riflemen who joined the colonial army during the First World War did so either by recruitment or by forcible conscription. Throughout the war, French

officials would often ask villages to supply quotas of enlistees. Some volunteered, for a variety of reasons—to satisfy or serve their family, assert their dignity, to see combat, to prove their manhood, or because everyone in their age cohort was going and they felt they had no choice but to go along. Others, however, were fearful of what recruitment might mean. Some actively resisted, and many fled the conscriptors who swept through French West Africa. At times, recruiters would show up and find an entire village empty of its young men.

Others believed that service in the war might lead to greater rights. In 1914, the first Black Deputy in the French National Assembly had just recently been elected from the Four Communes. His name was Blaise Diagne. Diagne was a forceful advocate for both the *originaires* and *tirailleurs sénégalais*. In 1916, he convinced the French Parliament to introduce a law requiring residents of the Four Communes to provide military service. By extension, the law clarified the civic status of *originaires*—they were and would remain French citizens, and their legal and voting rights would be secured. Thereafter, Diagne supported military recruitment efforts and helped organize campaigns throughout Senegal.



Senegalese Riflemen embark for the front, 1915

During a brilliantly successful six-month recruiting tour of French West Africa in 1918, Diagne attempted to reduce fears and present military service as a duty—both in exchange for enhanced rights and as a vehicle for securing more extensive rights in the future. Aware of the law passed in 1916 and the status of *originaires*, some *sujet* villages demanded similar rights in exchange for service. Diagne

convinced people to sign up by promising that if they served in the war as *tirailleurs*, afterwards the law might change and they would gain French Citizenship, along with all the rights and privileges attached to that status. In the spring and summer of 1918, over 63,000 more West Africans joined the French military, with nearly a quarter of new recruits being considered “volunteers.” While many were still conscripted, the campaign far surpassed the expectations of French officials. It also attached far more meaning to the war for both *originaires* and *sujet* than had been the case before.

Experiencing the First World War

The experience of leaving their homes in West Africa, whether it was from one of the Four Communes or one of the villages across all of the AOF, was first characterized by sailing north across the Atlantic Ocean to a port city in southern France. In the 1980s, historian Joe Lunn conducted interviews with surviving veterans of the conflict, who conveyed the sense that these boats were not unlike the slave ships of the earlier trans-Atlantic colonial era. Would they ever come home again?



Les Tirailleurs sénégalais traversant une ville The Senegal sharp-shooters walking across the town

North African soldiers (likely Moroccans) march through village in Europe, 1914-1918

Upon their arrival, the Senegalese Riflemen saw significant combat in Europe and were organized separately from the *originaires*. *Originaires*, although considered part of the regular French army, had their own French West African battalion and their material conditions were far better than those of the *tirailleurs*. Scholars such as Joe Lunn and Richard Fogarty have argued that the Senegalese Riflemen, believed by French officials to be members of a particularly “martial race,” were deployed as shock troops, taking the brunt of German assaults on the Western Front.



Pennant of the 43rd battalion of Senegalese riflemen bearing the inscription Douaumont, 1916

Over the course of the war, nearly 140,000 *tirailleurs sénégalais* were sent to the Western Front. There, they fought in some of the most well-known battles of the war, including the Battle of the Somme in 1916. That same year they participated in the Battle of Verdun, including the recapture of Fort de Douaumont—a vital

defensive position—from German forces in October. *Tirailleurs sénégalais* also fought at Chemin des Dames in the spring of 1917, an attempt to launch a massive offensive that French officials hoped would end the war. Wet trenches, cold, dug-in German forces, and delays caused the offensive to fail and resulted in high casualties.

The service of *tirailleurs sénégalais* was not limited to the Western Front, either. From February 1915 to January 1916, *tirailleurs* also served in the Dardanelles campaign against the Ottoman Empire. Though playing a key role in the initial landing, they suffered heavy casualties, and were periodically redeployed to regions of the Balkans throughout the rest of the war. Wherever they served in Europe, the use of West African soldiers in offensives meant that their casualty rates were high, and often disproportionately so compared to their French counterparts. Of the 134,000 French West Africans who fought in Europe, an estimated 30,000 of them lost their lives.

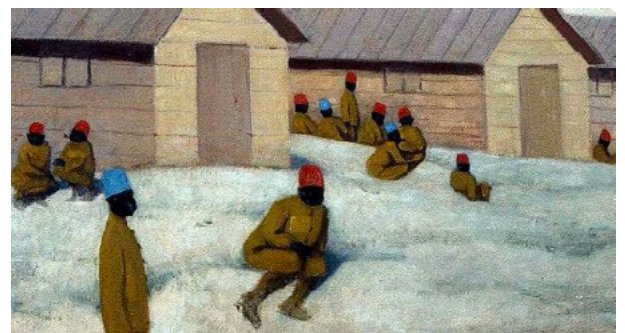


Review of tirailleurs by General Guillaumat in Greece, 1918

Throughout the war, *tirailleurs sénégalais* also faced the psychological distress of combat, and had to learn how to follow commands in a simplified version of French used in the military. During their service they also interacted with white soldiers and commanders, experiencing simultaneously both racism and a strict form of militarized, republican egalitarianism. The majority of African combatants from both West Africa and North Africa were

Muslims, and French military authorities had policies regarding how to properly observe Muslim burial procedures and dietary laws, supply imams, and allow for the observance of holy days including the month of Ramadan. The motivation for these policies came from wanting to maintain the morale of the Muslim colonial conscripts, fearing that they could be wooed over to support the Ottoman cause, since it was the only Muslim state among the major belligerents. For Senegalese soldiers themselves their faith and pride in their ethnic heritage often served as a source of strength through the horrors of battle.

Because they were unused to the harsh winters of northern France and Belgium (where the fighting on the Western Front occurred) French military authorities also saw to it that colonial conscripts from Africa would take leave in camps established for them in the south of France, in a practice called *hivernage*, or wintering. When on leave, they walked the streets of French towns such as Marseilles or Nice, encountering French civilians. At times, they drank coffee, greeted townspeople, made friends, visited prostitutes, and sometimes even found work—as in the case of Ndiaga Niang, who worked in a bakery in the town of Faviere. Senegalese soldiers could be met with curiosity by French civilians, and sometimes even celebrated for their contributions to the war effort. However, encounters with French people were also often characterized by racism and discrimination.



Painting by Felix Vallotton, providing a desolate glimpse into a wintry camp at Mailly, in central France, where African men prepared to go to the front, 1917

Conclusion

By the war's end, some 192,000 *tirailleurs sénégalais* had served under the French flag, and more than 134,000 of them fought in Europe. Roughly 30,000 of these soldiers died during the First World War, and many more were wounded. The circumstances that brought them into the war varied widely, as did their motivations. Particularly for those who served in Europe, the conflict also brought many occasions for cross-cultural contacts both in the military and while on leave.

As much as these experiences varied, so too did the views of veterans who returned to Senegal after the war's end. As a result of Blaise Diagne's efforts, *originaires*' civil status was secured in 1916, and some veterans also felt that the broader dynamics between French officials and colonial subjects had changed as well. But, while some veterans expressed pride in their service, others felt feelings of exploitation and anger and many felt little had changed. The promises made to *tirailleurs sénégalais* went unfulfilled—mass citizenship was not granted. By taking a look at the interviews provided—with Momar Cisse, Ndiaga Niang, and others—we can learn more about their experiences and their reflections on the significance of the war.



Muslim area of the national cemetery in Amiens (Saint-Acheul), with a soldier from the 45th regiment of the tirailleurs sénégalais, killed in the Battle of the Somme

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The Senegalese Riflemen with decorated flag. In medallions: General Faïdherbe, Blaise Diagne, Generals Mangin and Marchand, *Le petit journal*, July 1, 1919, CC BY-SA 4.0 G. Garitan, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Le_petit_journal_1_juillet_1919_75509.jpg
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Muslim area of the national cemetery in Amiens (Saint-Acheul), October 2008, CC BY-SA 3.0, Claude Villeteuse, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Amiens_St_Acheul_Carr%C3%A9_musulman_de_la_n%C3%A9cropole_nationale.jpg