

Conscription and Maintenance of the French Colonial Empire in West Africa from 1857-1960

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Abstract:

Older historical accounts of the French colonial period, particularly surrounding France's 20th century objectives to civilize and economically exploit Africa, fail to capture the full breadth and complexity of France's late-colonial administrative strategies. To challenge the validity of traditional narratives, this essay utilizes the 1919 Conscription Act to examine how conscription was implemented within French West Africa's existing administrative framework during the pre-WWI era. From there, it analyzes how conscription of the Senegalese Tirailleurs evolved into a core theme of colonial administration during the interwar period and ultimately shaped the fate of French colonial empire after WWII. Given that no single colonial priority held uniform significance across all territories, it follows that a regionally specific priority, such as conscription in French West Africa, cannot be overgeneralized to all French colonies. In other words, current research paradigms and historiographic approaches to French colonial history must be adjusted accordingly to reflect this new truth. By uncovering alternative possibilities that have been suppressed within traditional narratives, the essay hopes to resolve the contradictions inherent in older accounts, thereby deepening our understanding of France's late-colonial administrative strategies.

Keywords: French colonialism, West Africa, West African conscription, Senegalese Tirailleurs, historiography, World Wars, colonial administrative frameworks, associationism

1. Introduction

"Are we to blame if the world around us has changed

and grown all out of recognition? Diplomacy used to be concerned with the Mediterranean and the Bos-

phorus; now it has to do with China and Congo [...] What used to be a European balance of power is now a world balance of power, and any country which does not wish to become less important must obtain as much new territory as our rivals are doing. It is through colonies [...] that we shall one day achieve your life's ambition."

— A young French officer's reply to an older general, from "Le maître de la Mer" by Eugène-Melchior de Vogüé *"Colonial policy was the daughter of industrial policy; it enriched states where capital abounds and accumulates, where the manufacturing system is undergoing continual growth, where export is an essential factor in public prosperity."*

— Jules Ferry
"There is a second point I wish to refer to; it is the humanitarian and civilizing question [...] The superior races have a right in relation to the inferior races. I say they have a right because they have a duty. They have the duty to civilize the inferior race."

— Jules Ferry on March 30th, 1885
As one of the world's dominant and influential colonial forces in Africa during the 19th and 20th centuries, the French Empire and its theories, rapid expansion, violent governance, and influence of several varied wars on the French colonial order, along with the empire's eventual dissolution, have endured as popular research subjects across the humanities and social sciences.

According to general historical narratives and traditional research paradigms, we could recapitulate the following cardinal dimensions of 19th and 20th century French colonization:

- 1) Territorial conquest
- 2) Administrative rule
- 3) Cultural and educational installations (Judge, 2005)
- 4) Exploitative economic interactions between metropolitan France and Indigenous zones (Merriman, 2007)
- 5) Bidirectional migration flows between metropolitan France and its colonies

Among those five dimensions, it could be said that both territorial conquest (1) and administrative rule (2) formed the fundamental political context for all analysis of the French colonies to build upon. To understand why specific conquest strategies and administration forms were implemented within this era, it is essential to analyze the empire's colonial objectives as well as the positioning of particular colonies in the empire. In sum, territorial conquest (1), cultural installations (3), and economic interactions (4) are considered the three main purposes of French conquest after 1871 in traditional historical narratives.

From a broader historical perspective, the three purposes mentioned above together create a distinctive colonial narrative for France compared to other great western pow-

ers. If we focus primarily on the paradigms of colonialism and its political-cultural contexts, Napoleon I's proclamation of "extending the revolutionary moral imperatives" beyond metropolitan France since the French Revolution, it would follow that France not just stop at civilizing Europe, but the entire world (Sasaki, 2005; Merriman, 2007). Napoleon I's proclamation would be later crystallized into the more concrete concept of the *Mission Civilisatrice* ("civilizing mission"), which signified France's comparatively unique justifications for colonialism relative to other imperial powers (though "civilizing barbarians" was served as a prevalent cause for colonialism in that era, it was still rare for the French to adopt such a paradigm).

If we focus specifically on metropolitan French history during the age of New Imperialism, we could say that French Republic had a special motivation for her late 19th century conquest: to cure the trauma of the 1870 war by proving her competence. The public opinion particularly emphasized that, "despite military defeat, France [had to] maintain its position in world affairs" and "only through colonial rule [could it] ultimately realize [its] national aspirations," which was mainly revanche for its lost territories (Agulhon, 1995). Moreover, contrary to the conventional perception of European great powers amassing vast wealth through colonial exploitation, French colonial ventures from the 19th century onward were likely economically counterproductive.

Although parliamentary debates and colonial propaganda clearly envisioned economic gain as a primary justification, the economic policies based on racial hierarchy—systematically privileging European settlers, while severely harming Indigenous economies—that were also constantly accompanied by perpetual unrest (from suppressing Algerian resistance pre-20th century to later conflicts in Morocco and the Levant), yielded surprisingly minimal profits (Piketty, 2021). In fact, colonial imports accounted for fewer than 10% of France's total raw material acquisitions from foreign sources by 1914 (Agulhon, 1995). It seemed that only the colony of Indochina and South Asian enclaves like Pondicherry would provide substantial profits to the French Empire (Judge, 2005).

From the occupation of Algiers in 1830 to the signing of the Evian Accords in 1962, French global conquest and domination persisted for over a century. Beginning with Jules Ferry's vigorous push for colonization and his mobilization of the French military machine to realize this vision, the traditional justifications of imperial competition, civilizing mission, and economic gain remained relatively persuasive throughout much of the second half of the 19th century.

However, when the hawkish rhetoric in parliament redirected France's primary focus back to continental warfare,

when the ambitious colonial bureaucrats confronted stubborn illiteracy rate in Indigenous regions, and when Duc de Broglie's admonishment about the colonial consumption of French state power became real problems, new government objectives and policy reforms were becoming urgently in need.

2. New Angle and Historiography

How can the shackles of conventional historical narratives be broken down to forge new pathways in understanding the past amidst traditional research paradigms? In my view, this begins with interrogating established narratives to identify their inconsistencies or logical flaws, and then delving deeper into historical records around these fissures. In this paper, I attempt this approach by questioning the validity of narratives surrounding France's colonial objectives to civilize and economically gain from Africa in the 20th century.

Take France's alleged "civilizing mission" as an example. When colonial rule was first established in Africa during the late 19th century, many French statesmen—most notably Jules Ferry—justified it with newly developed theories of "linguistic superiority" and "racial hierarchy" (Lunn, 2002; Judge, 2005). They advocated for the complete transformation and enlightenment of Indigenous populations, and, as French geographer Reclus claimed, one of colonialism's true values was turning "barbaric lands into human ones" (Judge, 2005). Yet within just over two decades of implementing colonial education, the "civilizing mission" faced different levels of failure across African territories.

In French West Africa, with a population of over 10 million, decades of educational efforts never raised literacy rates above 5% (Piketty, 2021; Judge, 2005). In Algeria, the heart of the French Empire, Muslim children's enrollment levels in colonial schools remained a mere 6% as late as 1929; and over 90% of educational resources were exclusively controlled by 10% of European immigrants (Judge, 2005; Piketty, 2021). In Morocco and Tunisia, where Islamic culture had already flourished for over a millennium, colonial education paled in comparison to modern schools run by local intellectuals (Judge, 2005).

With a more comprehensive understanding of the obstacles colonial education faced in Africa, I then ask: how did the French government respond to these setbacks? Did it persist on its original policies, make compromises and adjustments, or seek alternative solutions? Guided by these questions, I found that most of the archival materials regarding post-20th century French education in Indigenous African regions point toward a trend of compromise. Louis Hubert Lyautey, the highly respected French Resi-

dent-General in Morocco, championed and practiced "associationism," or a governing approach that respected Morocco's cultural distinctiveness and gradual development (Singer, 1991). The *École Coloniale*, one of France's key colonial institutions, adopted the motto "*Épousez le pays*" or "Adapt to the Indigenous land", emblematic of 20th century associationist ideologies (Judge 2005; Chailley, 1968). Meanwhile, the earlier colonial "assimilationist" approach came to be seen by many officials as utopian.

The new concession of "educational stratification," which blended pragmatism and realism, was fully articulated at the 1908 Marseille Colonial Conference: 80% of the colonial population would remain in traditional labor, 10% would be trained as grassroots collaborators, 7% would enter the bureaucratic system, and 3% would rise to the elite class (Judge, 2005).

This shift reflected a departure from rigid assimilationist dogma toward a more flexible, hierarchical, and associationist model of colonial governance (Crowder, 1968).

The same methodology was also applied later on to further examine the claim that "France sought economic gains in Africa"—some of my gists of which have already been outlined in the introduction (e.g., how France operated at a financial loss in most colonies).

Having revealed the dilemmas in French colonial governance in Africa since the first decade of 20th century, I will now situate these developments within the broader historical context of metropolitan France, examining how events in the colonies and the metropole interacted. By analyzing the French Empire as a whole, I aim to uncover alternative possibilities that have been suppressed within traditional narratives. The revised historical perspective may help resolve some of the contradictions inherent in older accounts, thereby deepening our understanding of France's late-colonial administrative strategies.

2.1 Conflicting narratives on West African conscription

In my view, one of the central themes of French history during the final six decades of large-scale colonial rule was the World Wars. For France, these conflicts were not only a shared national experience—shaped by earlier political legacies such as the Franco-Prussian War and imperial rivalries—but also pivotal events that drastically altered the nation's trajectory. France was eviscerated in WWI due to catastrophic casualties, and humiliated by German occupation. African colonial troops played a crucial role in both wars: they filled critical manpower shortages for France in 1917–1918 and formed the backbone of the Free French forces during the 1940–1944 wars of resistance and liberation. This connection led me to recon-

sider the relationship between post-1871 French nationalist revanchism and the deployment of African troops in WWI.

Regarding this, I found two works particularly illuminating. The first was *The Last Cartridge* by Alphonse de Neuville (1873), a renowned French historical painter. A Senegalese rifleman and a Turco soldier in the center of the canvas caught my attention—despite the fact that no such African troops were present at the actual Battle of Bazeilles (part of the greater battle of Sedan). Given that *The Last Cartridge* was one of the most expensive salon paintings of the late 19th century, I began to speculate whether this detail reflected a broader colonial fantasy in post-1871 nationalist propaganda: the idea of “mobilizing African manpower” as a strategic asset (Bruchard, 2020). Much like the painting’s popularity, the notion of utilizing the Indigenous population likely gained traction in French policymaking circles by the end of the 19th century.

The second work was the pre-WWI French propaganda poster “*La Patrie en Danger*” (“The Fatherland in Danger”). Its implication was quite obvious: two French soldiers struggle to hold off five German attackers—increase the population, or be defeated. Indeed, the French Empire’s stagnant demographic growth since the early 19th century had deprived its dominant position in Europe, reducing it to a numerical disadvantage by 1914—from holding the position of the most populous continental nation during the revolutionary era to barely two-thirds of Germany’s population (approximately 41 million versus 67 million), ranking last among the great powers (Lunn, 1999).

In the era of mass conscription that began with the French Revolution and the Franco-Prussian War, manpower was arguably the decisive factor in warfare when military technology was relatively balanced. Some provident officers, such as General Charles Mangin, recognized that in a total war scenario, France risked being overwhelmed by Germany’s demographic superiority (Lunn, 1999; Schmitt, 2020). Pre-war debates on how to counter this disadvantage spawned numerous formal and informal proposals, among which “leveraging colonial manpower to bolster French forces” emerged as a key solution.

By the way, until 1912, French African troops were mainly volunteers—most famously the Senegalese *Tirailleurs* (established in 1857), alongside the *Turcos* (a North African Muslim infantry) and *Spahi* cavalry (Lunn, 2009). Debates over recruitment methods (voluntary vs. conscription) were often heated. Amid growing concerns over French demographic shortfall, a 1904 decree authorized forced conscription in colonies if volunteer quotas went unfilled (Schmitt, 2020). In 1907, General Mangin embarked on a fact-finding mission across North Africa

to assess colonial recruitment potential (Schmitt, 2020). Though a staunch advocate of elite African volunteer units, his findings led to the 1912 decree instituting a four-year draft for men ages 20–28 across French West Africa (excluding the Moroccan protectorate). Governor Ponty of French West Africa hailed this as a new phase in French colonial history.

Until 1958, French overseas forces were collectively designated *Troupes Coloniales* (“Colonial Troops”). In peacetime, these elite troops ranked among the French military’s most decorated and frequently deployed units. All military formations discussed hereafter fall under this umbrella. The colonial army’s composition varied dramatically by region—some garrisons were entirely European-led, while others consisted solely of Indigenous troops. For instance, coastal Algerian units included *Zouaves* (European troops that were adapted to North African style appearances), metropolitan French regiments, and the *Spahis*, whereas garrisons in French Sudan might comprise solely West African soldiers aside from officers.

Traditional nationalist historiography (e.g., Eugen Weber’s *Peasants Into Frenchmen*) posits that modern conscription fosters national identity, as it requires supporting infrastructure: railways for mobilization, compulsory literacy education, civic indoctrination (imparting history, politics, and the national language—key to forging a “citizen-soldier’s” patriotism), and public health systems to ensure recruits’ fitness. Yet pre-war French West Africa lacked all three. Even more striking is the near absence of European settlers—the empire’s privileged class, overwhelmingly urban, pro-government, and far more “French-identified”—only numbered ~18,000 in West Africa compared to 500,000+ located in Algeria.

Despite these seemingly insurmountable barriers, French West Africa (excluding settler-dominated Algeria) became the colony that provided the most conscripts during both World Wars and the interwar period as the largest and almost purely Indigenous colonial force, the *Tirailleurs Senegalese*.

In the following sections, I will use the 1919 *Conscription Act*—which mandated continued peacetime draft enforcement in French West Africa—as a dividing line to examine two distinct phases: (1) how conscription was implemented within West Africa’s existing administrative framework during the pre-WWI era and the War, and (2) how it evolved into a core theme of colonial administration during the interwar period until the collective independence of West African colonies in 1960, ultimately shaping the fate of French colonial empire after WWII.

3. 1857—WWI

Although the Black soldiers depicted in *The Last Cartridge* are fictional, the military unit which the soldier was in was not an invention of the painter. Rather, it was the 1st Regiment of Senegalese Tirailleurs, established in 1857 by Louis Faidherbe, Senegal's governor during the Second French Empire. This force was a typical example of a voluntary army—or more accurately, a mercenary force. Recruitment methods included, but were not limited to: enlisting slaves and prisoners of war (who would gain freedom after joining the French army), voluntary enlistment by locals, soldiers from trading with neighboring tribal chiefs, and, in rare cases, forced conscription (Chailley, 1968).

Though commonly referred to as the *Senegalese Tirailleurs*, the unit was never composed solely of Senegalese soldiers (in fact, the number of Senegalese ranked third or lower in terms of regional origins). For this reason, I will refer to them as the “West African Corps” to better reflect their diverse composition.

Until the 20th century, the West African Corps operated primarily as a mercenary force: volunteers were drawn by bonuses, steady pay, and the extra spoils of war. Many of them were traditional warriors who made a living through military service. Throughout the 19th century, in French conquests and other conflicts in North Africa, West Africa, Madagascar, and Indochina, the West African Corps proved their ferocity and remarkable endurance in harsh conditions.

Subjectivity aside, many of the post-1870 French military campaigns in Africa and the Far East were highly risky: organized spontaneously by officers and adventurers (such as the infamous Francis Garnier) and often implemented by the hundreds or even thousands of troops. When metropolitan French troops were insufficient, the addition of a few hundred or thousand West African soldiers would dramatically bolster an army's strength. These forces frequently marched vast distances with limited supplies, attempting to defeat Indigenous forces many times of their size. Many West African soldiers, who were already experienced in military service, were well-suited to such high-risk operations (Lunn, 1999). Without their contributions, those late 19th to early 20th century trans-Saharan expeditions—as well as Colonel Marchand's famous Sudanese campaign—would have proven far more difficult.

As France extended her territories, the West African Corps grew in size. By the early 20th century, soldiers from Mali (French Sudan) outnumbered the Senegalese (Echenberg, 1975). To any colonial officer familiar with the region, the Corps' self-sustaining model—funding the army through wars, and incessantly bolstering the army through more

conquests—was a pragmatic adaptation to local conditions. High-ranking figures like Faidherbe and Mangin, as well as many junior officers, strongly advocated for maintaining the West African Corps as a volunteer-based force. However, as previously discussed, early 20th century concerns over France's demographic decline and Mangin's assessment of African conscription potential ultimately led the colonial government to institute mandatory draft policies in Africa during 1912.

From the perspective of popular colonial thought, conscription was not the most ideal choice for France. Some politicians feared that large numbers of African soldiers fighting alongside Europeans would develop aspirations for equal rights (Schmitt, 2020). Meanwhile, certain officers argued that imposing a modern conscription system on African troops would also necessitate providing them with a formal education—a direct challenge to the exemplary “pyramidal” African society structure envisioned at the 1908 Marseille Colonial Conference. (History, particularly WWII, would later prove this concern valid.)

Before WWI, West African conscription remained limited. But the war's course defied all the expectations of French people: thanks to the reinstated three-year universal military service law in 1913, commanders like Joseph Joffre believed the better-trained French army could decisively defeat Germany, who had only a two-year conscription term. However, their obsessive emphasis on aggressive tactics and fighting spirit—while neglecting modern strategy and equipment (a near-delusional stance, given the great lessons from the Boer War and Russo-Japanese War)—proved disastrous. During the 1914 Battle of Frontiers, French troops were mowed down under enemy firepower ten times superior to their own. Despite achieving a miracle at the Marne, by the year's end, French casualties approached one million. 1915 was another year of calamity: the French army, lacking sufficient firepower, spent the entire year battering itself against German fortifications to no avail.

1916 marked the finest hour of the French Empire: a battle-hardened army triumphed at Verdun and Somme, the bloodiest battlefields in the Great War. But the ten-month meat grinder of Verdun tortured 75% of French forces in the slaughterhouse. By 1917, after the failed Nivelle Offensive, French manpower reserves were completely exhausted (Lunn, 1999).

In reality, as early as 1915, the unexpectedly rapid depletion of troops forced the government to expand African conscription. In a hardly developed French West Africa, draft enforcement was brutal to Indigenous residents: masses fled to the British colonies of Nigeria and Ghana, prompting Governor-General Joost van Vollenhoven to repeatedly warn Paris of imminent rebellion (Schmitt, 2020;

Echenberg, 1975; Chailley, 1968). In 1915–1916, anti-conscription revolts erupted in Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso) and French Sudan. The French army crushed them and the conscription continued.

In 1917, Georges Clemenceau commissioned Blaise Diagne, the most renowned Senegalese politician, as High Commissioner for Recruitment. Leveraging Diagne's prestige and convincing promises that "this war will bring lasting peace," 60,000 West African soldiers were successfully recruited without further resistance (Echenberg, 1975). Partly attributed to Diagne's assurances, the final two war years passed without the large-scale revolts Volenhoven had predicted.

4. Interwar Period (1919-1939)

4.1 Start of the domination

For the French Republic, the interwar period proved to be a precarious one. The four years of unprecedented carnage during the Great War drained France to exhaustion: this semi-industrialized and -agrarian nation, with the smallest population among world powers and virtually no natural barriers, had nevertheless shouldered the dual responsibilities of being the major Triple Entente land force and the biggest arsenal. During the 1919 victory parade, while fellow victors looked back at the extraordinary contributions made by France and marveled at its seemingly invincible military might, no one recognized just how feeble the nation had become beneath its glittering facade.

The war had cost France over four million male citizens—dead or maimed—effectively wiping out an entire generation of its young men. Lenin's characterization of France as "usurer-imperialism" no longer held true, for the post-war republic had deteriorated from being a top creditor to loathsome debtor. Four years of relentless German bombardment had devastated industrial infrastructure across northern France, dealing a killing blow to a nation already lacking robust industrial foundations.

Amid such tough circumstances, the French Army imperatively needed demobilization to revive the domestic economy. Yet the postwar order remained unsettled from Bavaria to Vladivostok, where new conflicts emerged simultaneously in vast territories. Allied nations looked to France—their presumed leader—to dispatch troops to hotspots and mitigate turmoil. The subsequent Paris Peace Conference failed to secure French strategic supremacy or lasting security; Marshal Ferdinand Foch warned that fatal threats would inevitably resurge.

Meanwhile, rampant conflicts afflicted the French colonial empire: the Zaian War against Moroccan tribes had already outlasted WWI itself, with rebels still active along

the Atlas Mountains; newly mandated Syria seethed with revolts and independence movements. In such turbulent times, weary warriors found no respite—though utterly exhausted, they could not yet lay down their arms.

France at that period was obsessed with post-war economic recovery and relentless overseas military engagements—a true dilemma. It was against this backdrop that West African soldiers once again took center stage in history. In 1919, Prime Minister Clemenceau approved a new Conscription Act (which also doubled as demobilization orders for metropolitan troops), instituting peacetime conscription across African colonies. All eligible men who passed physical exams were required to serve three years (Echenberg, 1975; Schmitt, 2020; Chailley, 1968; Mann, 2006).

The French colonial army downsized from its late-WWI peak of 600,000–800,000 soldiers to roughly 200,000 during the interwar period, with West Africa alone supplying 50,000 of its standing troops (as shown in Figure A1, Table A1, and Table A2 in the appendix, this figure divided soldiers into first- and second-portion: the former referred to those who scored higher in the physical exams; since soldiers in the "Second Portion" were actually assigned to serve as forced labors, the actual active-duty force hovered around 20,000). Given the incessant overseas campaigns of the 1920s—including intervention in the Russian Civil War (1919–21), the conquest of Syria (1920), the final stage of the Zaian War (1921), the Rif War involving 160,000 French troops (1924–25), and the Great Syrian Revolt (1925–27)—the West African regiments participated in every single one of these conflicts, often with exceptional contributions (Chailley, 1968). Apparently, the presence of West African Corps accelerated the progress of those wars. Given that the French government was often forced to draw over 50% of annual military expenditure for supporting those wars, it's no exaggeration to say that West African conscription played an extraordinary role in conserving French manpower and indirectly aiding economic recovery in the metropole.

Nevertheless, behind the glory of the *Tirailleurs Senegalese*, conscription inflicted severe—sometimes fatal—impacts on West African recruits, capitalists, merchants, and others (Lunn, 2002; Lunn, 2009). Three key issues stand out: as the conscription data table at the bottom reveals, only 5% of qualified men actually enlisted yearly (Echenberg, 1975; Mann, 2006). With such inefficiency, the process disrupted economies and negatively influenced families across all eight West African provinces. Additionally, annual peacetime conscription (often lasting months) deterred investment in a region that already lacked capital influx and natural resources. Entrepreneurs competed with the army for the finest laborers, while countless youth fled

to the neighboring British colonies. Moreover, the conscriptions almost exclusively targeted the lower classes. Though merchants and officials sometimes hid literate youth to preserve them, the Army consistently remained its monopoly on manpower (Echenberg, 1975).

The system also strained colonial governance. The poorly equipped local administrations had to prioritize conscription over public welfare to obey Paris' orders. The French military treated recruits with indifference, usually ignoring their basic rights (Koller, 2008). It wasn't until there was a 10% mortality rate among recruits, many of whom walked for days or weeks to barracks, before the army begrudgingly established transport services (Freydenberg, 1932). Second round conscripts were assigned to work in worse, near-slave like conditions—such as the constructions of Niamey-Bamako Railway—under lethal hazards.

However, conscription objectively spurred some developments that later proved significant: alarmed by low qualified rates of physical exams and epidemics like leprosy and yellow fever, French government boosted health subsidies. In some areas, for instance, Côte d'Ivoire, medical budgets grew by 16.5% over 30 years. The 1918 founding of Dakar's medical school (staffed partly by Pasteur Institute doctors) brought epidemic control, infant care, and basic sanitation to West Africa (Héaut, 2006). To improve troop quality, France established the *École Spéciale des Sous-Officiers Indigènes* ("Special School for Indigenous Non-Commissioned Officers") and the *Écoles des Enfants de Troupe* ("Troop Children's Schools"), albeit with rudimentary curricula.

However, these "gains" came at a cost. The fledgling healthcare system, for example, drew too much attention and wasted resources on conscription exams, diverting attention from civilians needs (Schmitt, 2020). Bowed to the absolute priority and dominance of the conscription, the new medical system served as an potent reminder of colonial power.

Ultimately, the 1919 *Conscription Act* became the axis around which West Africa's politics, economy, and society revolved, no matter if they were willing to or not. Conscription was both a disrupting force and an unwitting catalyst for infrastructure.

After my analysis, I would like to post a further question: given the turmoil caused by mass conscription during WWI, why did the French government still insist on maintaining peacetime conscription? Although Van Vollenhoven's predictions of a large-scale rebellion against conscription never happened, his warnings about the economic stagnation and social suffering proved all too accurate, and "letting French West Africa support the war through economic contributions" was plausibly the more rational choice (Hargreaves, 1983). Similarly, had they

adopted Mangin's proposal of a smaller, elite volunteer force, could France have achieved comparable military effectiveness while minimizing damage to West Africa's economy and society?

I would say, from the French government's perspective, the calculus was different: firstly, after tens of thousands of West African soldiers endured the Aisne and Chemin des Dames massacres—a trauma further amplified by art, oral diffusion, and propaganda—confidence in voluntary enlistment evaporated. Less people were willing to sign up for a war in order to get considerable pay (Echenberg, 1975). Conscription numbers, in comparison, still held even during the mass desertions of 1918. The machinery of conscription, though brutal, delivered results without catastrophic failure.

Regarding the frequent resistance, some scholars pointed out that the logic adopted by West Africans (that peacetime resistance seemed equally futile since even wartime uprising failed) eventually resulted in their passive attitude, especially when the colonial elite—figures like Blaise Diagne—openly aligned with France (Echenberg, 1975; Buell, 1965). In other words, France adopted the most predictable choice.

4.2 Fundamental Structure of the French Empire: Conjoined Twins

Let me finally address the lingering question: how did the French government view the impact of peacetime conscription on West Africa's economy and people? From my perspective, economic considerations for West Africa ranked at best secondary in Paris' priorities. In other words, the colony of French West Africa was politically and economically oppressed in the racial hierarchy France created (Lunn, 1999).

This hierarchy extended beyond West Africa to Algeria and other "valued" colonies: 80% or more of Indigenous populations were deemed uncivilized savages, denied citizenship, and subjected to systemic exploitation by European settlers. Through an analysis of regional economic activities, wealth distribution patterns, and colonial-metropole trade relations within French colonies such as Algeria, Morocco, and West Africa, a prevalent wealth disparity emerges as a defining characteristic of these territories (Piketty, 2021; Huillery, 2014). This economic stratification created an insurmountable gap between the European settlers and Indigenous peoples (Piketty, 2021). Colonial administrations systematically implemented policies privileging settler populations, while native assets and rights were either arbitrarily expropriated for settler benefit or disregarded through institutionalized oppression (Huillery, 2014). Whether in the Maghreb or Indochina,

a minority of white elites controlled the vast majority of resources while being clustered in cities like Algiers, who were the main beneficiaries of French military protection and policies.

The economic lifeblood of the French Empire flowed exclusively between the homeland and industries of those privileged settlers, while the remaining native regions were systematically excluded from this circulatory system. For France, these marginalized Indigenous zones existed solely for resource extraction, whether for raw materials or for human labor. The purchasing power of local populations or investor interest in these areas were non-issues: so long as these “inferior” territories remained disconnected from the core imperial economy (e.g., the community comprising of France and the privileged areas in colonies), their poverty would pose no risk of creating middle-income traps or hindering metropolitan economic growth. Paris’ sole concern was preventing rebellion—within that constraint, any policy was permissible. With those discriminatory gaps as a divide, we could divide France’s overseas territories into two categories of privileged colonies and secondary dependencies, of which West Africa belonged firmly to the latter.

Compared to Indochina and North Africa, West Africa’s natural resources held little appeal for France. Cash crops like cotton and peanuts were seen as marginal bonuses at best (Echenberg, 1975; Huillery, 2014; Chailley, 1968). Moreover, West Africa had the lowest number of European settlers in the empire—all eight provinces were treated as secondary dependencies. This explains France’s insistence on peacetime conscription: manpower represented West Africa’s primary strategic value in its eyes. Once we comprehend this colonial positioning, French relentless militarization of West Africa, regardless of economic devastation, becomes logical. With the Great War over, France-privileged zones could focus on economic recovery while outsourcing military burdens to West Africa—whose troops, battle-hardened and proven, now doubled as the main force to suppress resistance across all secondary territories.

5. WWII to Independence (1940-1960)

Once WWII broke out, the conscription system in French West Africa had become vastly more efficient than during the previous conflict after two decades of interwar refinement. Though barely nine months passed between France’s declaration of war and its metropolitan surrender, French West Africa had already mobilized 100,000 new recruits by May 1940—before Germany’s invasion—joining the existing 50,000 standing troops deployed to European battlefields (Lunn, 2002). The influence of West Af-

rican soldiers within their local communities had reached its zenith, while their reputation across the French Empire reached an unprecedented height during the Free French resistance. These forces fought relentlessly throughout the six-year war, contributing over 200,000 soldiers (including another 100,000 recruited after Operation Torch), emerging as one of the key driving forces behind French liberation.

The war dramatically strengthened the collective identity and rights consciousness of West African soldiers. From Equatorial Africa to the Rhine, their sacrifices fueled demands for “equal rights for equal sacrifice,” reigniting the interwar veterans’ pension movement with new intensity (Schmitt, 2021). In 1944, as Allied forces swept across France, General Charles de Gaulle deliberately sidelined African troops from the final offensive to emphasize European participation in the liberation (Headrick, 1978). Meanwhile, these decorated West African veterans were reportedly housed in squalid repatriation camps while awaiting return to Africa (Headrick, 1978; Schmitt, 2021). That same year, at the town of Thiaroye near Dakar, 1,300 West African soldiers revolted for unpaid wages and were then brutally suppressed by French forces, leaving 35 dead and as many wounded (Cooper, 1996; Freydenberg, 1932). Most scholars viewed the Thiaroye massacre as utterly unacceptable to West African troops at the time; some argued it caused an irreparable rupture between them and France, though this seems overstated given their continued cooperation in later decades (Chailley, 1968; Buell, 1965). Regardless, the cumulative grievances of 1944 plunged Franco-African military relations to their lowest point.

This crisis presented an opportunity: much like the circumstance during the interwar period, France now needed to pacify West African soldiers to secure their loyalty in maintaining colonial order. By 1945, after nearly three decades of communal interactions through the active and veteran, West African troops had achieved unprecedented unity and strength. With French West Africa’s population consisting almost entirely of Indigenous people (aside from the 18,000 European administrators and few expatriates)—and its military reflecting this demographic—French colonial rule was actually hinged on the West African Army’s allegiance. Their support guaranteed stable control; their unified opposition could have ended French dominion overnight. Decades of training and institutional prioritization had transformed the West African Army into the continent’s most formidable force. As the ultimate enforcers of colonial military power, these soldiers now possessed the leverage to confront France on equal footing. For the French government, the postwar instability—such as the deteriorating situation in Indochina—still required

the support of West African troops. However, by this time, it had become virtually impossible to insulate Indigenous soldiers from the influence of egalitarian movements or independence waves (Schmitt, 2021; Ginio, 2017). France had no choice but to make concessions, at least enough to satisfy the requests of West African soldiers, if it hoped to maintain the status quo.

Even before the war ended, de Gaulle had invoked the contributions of African soldiers to French liberation at the Brazzaville Conference, advocating for equal rights for Africans (Schmitt, 2021). Key among these was the abolition of the *Code de l'Indigénat* (“Code of Indigene-ship”)—the discriminatory legal framework that enforced forced labor in Indigenous territories—along with all forms of forced labor, including the notorious second-portion work system in West Africa. The 1946 Constitution marked a major victory for West Africans: the *Loi Houphouët-Boigny* (“Houphouët-Boigny Law”) fulfilled the promises of Brazzaville, while the *Loi Lamine Guèye* (“Lamine Guèye Law”) abolished second-class citizenship, legally granting equal status to all colonial subjects. (Though in practice, Africans still faced discrimination and fewer rights than metropolitan citizens, the electoral freedoms guaranteed by laws undeniably fostered a more autonomous “French Union”).

This shift toward greater autonomy in West Africa was not solely driven by the political legacy of Black troops. From a societal perspective, the French government’s deliberate courtship of West African soldiers directly advanced civil rights—such as the 1950 *Code du Travail* (“Labor Code”), which mandated equal pensions for colonial and metropolitan veterans (Schmitt, 2021). France demonstrated more sincerity than before: as early as 1948, an official commission led by Henry Laugier began investigating the conditions of nearly 200,000 West African veterans, paving the way for pension reforms (Schmitt, 2021). These measures also served as a symbol for other social movements, including labor strikes and student protests. Meanwhile, interwar investments in education and healthcare accelerated, and the *Code du Travail* extended basic social protections to formal workers in former colonies for the first time.

6. Conclusion

In each section of this work, I have sought to demonstrate how conscription was intrinsically interwoven with, and mutually shaped by, the broader tapestry of French colonial history. As revealed in section 3, the notion of “conscription [being the most] primary utility of French colonies” was never the product of some grand design. Even if *The Last Cartridge* was written before Jules Ferry’s

impassioned speeches, the idea that the “African Army Corps” existed as a latent concept in the French public opinion is merely confirmed. We could only conclude that the West African Corps had the potential to rapidly evolve when historical circumstances demanded. This potential crystallized through early 20th century debates and Mangin’s research, ultimately flourishing under the pressures of WWI.

Yet a crucial nuance must be grasped: while the narrative of my essay positions conscription—which began to thrive in the interwar period—as the central force reshaping West Africa’s administration, society, and economy (displacing traditional colonial justifications like “civilizing missions” or economic exploitation), readers must be very careful to extrapolate this conclusion to other French colonies. Through Section 4.2, I expose the French Empire’s fundamental schism (its “conjoined twins” structure) to argue that no single colonial priority held uniform significance across all territories.

This schism, often overlooked, has skewed prior scholarship toward overgeneralized analyses of French colonial policy. By contrast, this study highlights how a regionally specific priority (conscription’s dominance in West Africa) illuminates a larger truth: while “conscription as administrative priority” manifested primarily in West Africa, it remains a vital lens for understanding French colonial reign—precisely because no universal factor exists. Colonial history demands we identify and analyze multiple regionally potent elements to gradually uncover its layered complexities and possibilities.

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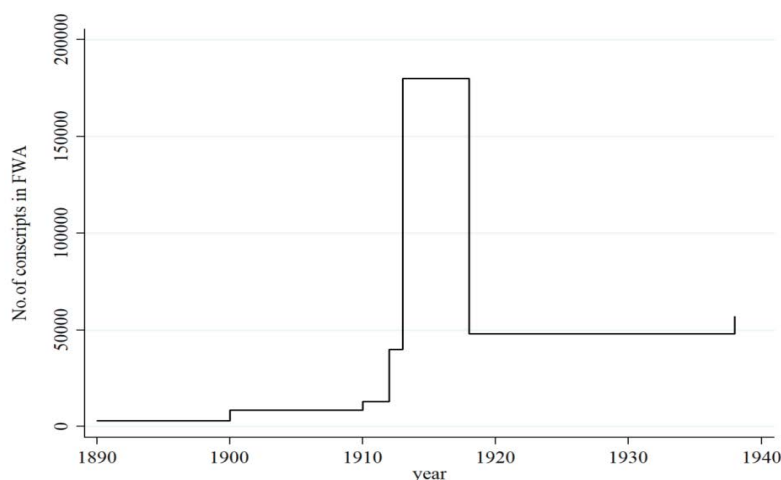
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Appendix

Figure A1

Recruitment in French West Africa from 1890 until 1939



Note. Own figure based on information provided by Echenberg (1991).

Table A1*French West Africa Conscripts from 1910-1929*

Year	Potential Conscripts	Men Actually Examined by Draft Boards	Conscripts Drafted	Volunteers Enlisted	Total Incorporated	Draft Dodgers	Second Portion (Reserve)	Medical and Other Exemptions and Deferments	Recruits as % of Total Potential	Recruits as % of Men Actually Examined
1910					2 450					
1911					800					
1912					8 315					
1913					8 000					
1914				3 574	29 742					
1915				4 436	34 655					
1916					51 913					
1917					13 831					
1918			53 481	9 229	62 810					
1919					37 600					
1920		73 404	18 461	4 734	23 195	none	none	50 209	—	.316
1921		53 491	10 043	1 909	11 952	none	5 661	35 878	—	.223
1922		70 419	7 732	2 498	10 230	none	9 177	51 012	—	.145
1923	113 856	105 000	7 538	3 212	10 750	8 856	15 950	78 300	.094	.102
1924	126 033	109 352	6 540	3 364	9 904	16 681	23 932	75 516	.079	.091
1925	139 851	114 802	8 115	2 758	10 873	25 049	24 602	79 327	.078	.095
1926	184 908	148 583	10 850	2 098	12 948	36 325	27 921	107 714	.070	.087
1927	187 340	146 302	9 649	2 313	11 962	41 038	28 713	105 627	.064	.082
1928	203 511	163 183	10 369	2 357	12 726	40 328	30 883	119 574	.063	.078
1929	217 081	178 390	9 184	4 443	13 627	38 691	26 456	138 307	.063	.076

* This table and those which follow have been compiled by the author from statistics found in the *Archives de l'Afrique occidentale française*, Dakar. The general reference is to *Fonds Moderns* in the following series : 2G, 4D, 5D.

Note. From Freydenberg (1932).

Table A2*Recruitment in French West Africa in 1926*

Men on list	188,455
Men examined	148,776
Unfit or exempt	107,748
Absentees	39,679
2nd Portion	28,391
1st Portion	10,539

Note. Data from Echenberg (1991), 59.