

Raffael Scheck. *Hitler's African Victims: The German Army Massacres of Black French Soldiers in 1940.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. xii + 202 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-85799-4.



Reviewed by Jeremiah Kitunda (Appalachian State University)

Published on H-Genocide (September, 2012)

Commissioned by Elisa G. von Joeden-Forgey (University of Pennsylvania)

A Tribute to Europe's African Retainers and Their Fate in the Twentieth-Century Rhineland

During the first half of the twentieth century the fate of Africa and Europe became intricately connected through the two bloody conflicts of 1914-18 and 1939-45. However, as one African adage goes, "until the lions have their own historians, tales of the hunt shall always glorify the hunter," and most histories of the two world wars focus on the European rank-and-file. The narratives of African retainers of Europe as victors and victims is overshadowed by the story of their European comrades, not because black soldiers' stories were inconsequential, not because their numbers and actions were insignificant compared to those of their fellow white comrades, but because history is by nature selective and subjective. Moreover, archival sources containing such narratives are only now becoming publicly available.

Anglophone readers especially are now lucky that Raffael Scheck presents to us an elaborate account of French black army units that were originally drafted in French West Africa and styled as *Ti-*

railleurs Sénégalais (Senegalese Riflemen). Benefiting from fresh data (using German, French, and English archives) and new perspectives, Scheck's excellent book, *Hitler's African Victims*, fills an important void in the historiography of African involvement in the Second World War.

Documenting an untold story of African soldiers and the price they paid to stabilize twentieth-century Europe, the book opens with a chilling narrative of the German army killing scores of African soldiers near the French city of Lyon on June 9 and 10, 1940. Scheck expands this single incident into a full-blown history of African troops serving in the French army and delves into the experiences of Afro-Europeans in general within the twentieth-century Rhineland.

One strength of the book lies in its provision of soldiers' individual names as well as pictorial and statistical analysis. Data on the black soldiers killed and their photographs add quality to the text and make it quite an appealing read. From the

pictures we can see the colonial mentality come to life again. One photo shows a group of black prisoners of war kneeling down before some towering German soldiers. Yet another shows a German guard posing with a West African and a North African prisoner, both shorter than the German guard. Height and size was crucial in the stigmatization of Africans. The Germans ensured that no short or lean German posed next to hefty and tall African soldiers, lest the comparison intimidate the German public.

What I see as most problematic in *Hitler's African Victims* is how Scheck chronicles and tries to understand those atrocities and racist statements made by the German army. The fourth chapter is especially important to the book's theme, given that it examines the fate of civilian Afro-Germans, whose presence in Germany predates the two World Wars and the massacres of POWs in question. Racism is at the core of Scheck's thesis. According to his interpretation, the massacres were the result of popular Nazi propaganda that Adolf Hitler launched in the 1940s based on old notions of black soldiers as mutilating savages and illegitimate combatants in European wars. Adopting as the basis of the German army's motivation and rationale concepts such as routinization, authorization or sanctioned murder, and dehumanization, Scheck contextualizes the massacres within the Nazification of the German army during World War II. The German army's massacres (of African combatants, civilian Afro-Germans, and other minorities at various stages of the conflict), all rationalized by racial prejudice, in Scheck's viewpoint, constitute war crimes. While Scheck is right that these atrocities are clearly war crimes, it is also important to consider other explanations for them; as one speaker said in a different context than that of this review, "sometime we are so sure of something that we don't need to see the evidence." [1]

While I agree with the Scheck's overall analysis, there are several missing links in the book and

numerous intriguing questions that demand further examination. Why did German officers feel justified condoning massacres of black POWs? What motivated the German atrocities against black soldiers of the French army? Why did Germans approach world affairs in the manner they did in the 1940s? Since some POWs died from starvation and we know the massacres coincided with economic depression, what was the region's food supply? Were such atrocities different from other war excesses or even inevitable in a war situation?

Scheck's analysis does not offer a complete picture of the origin of German racial prejudice against Africans nor does he consider the intractable economic and demographic puzzles that plagued the Rhineland in the early twentieth century. His picture of German racial prejudice considers mainly Nazi racism and only non-colonial European currents. What ought to have been made clear is the fact that the Nazi German activities were part and parcel of a trend at the time, a trend of state violence that was not uncommon in colonial world between the 1850s and 1950s.

Experts in Holocaust studies have traced the origin of the Holocaust back to the late nineteenth-century Anglo-Boer war in South Africa and the early twentieth-century German involvement in the extermination of the Herero and Nama ethnic groups in Namibia. If the emphasis has been on Nazi Germany as the worst villain, we reiterate here that evidence of colonial violence and prejudice against Africans by other European nations is now clear in popular books and film documentaries of Africa's colonial experience in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Regardless, Scheck neither gives the readers an opportunity to examine what the black men and their French officers did to their German opponents nor does he tie the massacres to reigning strains of European thought of the time that were separate from but related to Nazi racism. Historians will recall that certain pseudo-scientific argu-

ments had arisen across Europe to address issues of population growth and control.

German relationships with black soldiers and Afro-Germans are better contextualized within the broadly disseminated nineteenth-century Malthusian population theories, Hegelian idealist philosophies, Darwinist evolutionary reasoning, and the flowering of eugenics, all which found their expression through German colonial experience in Africa between the 1880s and 1910s. During the European colonial expansion to Africa, these lines of thought denied the existence of African civilization, moral maturity, and humanity. Although the number of Europeans that went into the colonial frontier was small, especially in Germany, their role in creating racial prejudice and sowing the seeds of genocides in Europe and North Africa are clearly notable. No wonder concentration camps as a concept and practice among Europeans began in Africa, where the victims were subjected to excessive abuse and massacres, and their remains packaged in boxes for shipment as trophies to European universities and display facilities. The story runs into volumes of examples across Africa. Perhaps the story of one Chief Mkwawa of the Hehe people of central Tanzania illustrates this story. After he committed suicide to avoid capture in 1898, the Germans took his head to Bremen Museum, where it was later retrieved from among more than two thousand other African skulls. The Here demand for the return of their king's head was enshrined in article 14 of the 1919 League of Nations treaty. The skull of chief Meli of the Mount Kilimanjaro Chagga people is still the subject of diplomatic correspondence between Germany and Tanzania. The remains of the famous Sara Baartman, sarcastically known in Europe in the nineteenth century as the "Hottentot Venus," were returned to South Africa and buried on Women's Day in 2004 after over two hundred years in Britain and France as a "scientific" object. The Namibian National Museum has a popular research project on this matter and abounds with pictures and postcards that the Germans left behind of vic-

tims who were decapitated, their skin taken off, and their cleaned heads shipped to Germany as trophies or scientific objects. It is common knowledge within Holocaust and African studies that the African colonial frontier was the herald of the 1940s genocide in Europe, and thus Scheck's narrative should have been placed in that context.

Scheck acknowledges that colonial Germany was instrumental in establishing notions of black soldiers as illegitimate fighters, that is, soldiers not protected by the rules of civilized warfare, but he stops short of saying that the colonial experience itself was buttressed by the above-mentioned discourses of eugenics, Malthusianism, and Social Darwinism. With the outbreak of the Second World War, the Nazis galvanized stereotypical images of Africans generated by earlier intellectuals to legitimize mass killing of black soldiers in the French army, projecting black soldiers as demonic, barbaric, and rapacious subhumans. With a desire to reestablish the German colonial presence in Africa, the German press published popular writings that capitalized on this. Manfred Sell's 1940 influential publication on black migration to the West, *Die Schwarze Voelkerwanderung*, echoed early nineteenth-century Hegelian idealism, which postulated that "the black man had never built anything of cultural or economic value except under foreign coercion" (p. 82).

German attitudes towards black POWs are better explained in terms of either changes within German command or attempts to entice Africans to the German side. Germany's endeavor to reassert her imperial presence in Africa, contrary to Scheck's view, was neither to counter the U.S. threat nor to prevent defection of French colonies to General De Gaulle's camp. The main objective was to make good the losses of the First World War and regain access to vital raw materials like oil resources in Africa, which hitherto the Allied forces had exclusively exploited.

Paul Yegin's famous book and film documentary series, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil*,

Money, and Power (1991), illustrates this point. Hitler's intention was to capture the oil fields of Cameroon and northern Africa, then strike eastward into the Middle East, and further afield into the Caucasus Mountains and the Russian oil fields. Conquering these lands, which held raw materials integral to the success of German industry and the war effort, Hitler hoped would ensure Germany's source for raw materials and cheap labor.

There are also practical issues that can explain the unfortunate developments in the Rhineland in the 1940s. Since the Germans could not secure African mercenaries to counterbalance the rejuvenated French force, killing African soldiers in the French army or protesting against their deployment in Europe was a strategy to drain French human resources. The Germans understood the intractable difficulties the French faced in replenishing those resources; that is, deploying African troops was a cumbersome process involving mobilization in remote African villages, conscription, and long ground and sea transfers within Africa and between Africa and France. Part of that process would have to be repeated once the troops landed in Europe.

Anxieties around the convergence of economy and demography have always forced societies around the world to respond in many violent ways. German policies between the 1840s and 1940s were a direct response to economic and demographic frustrations, reminiscent of seventeenth-century England's practice of creating "dunghills whence to cast her undesirables" to the colonies and comparable to France's response through excessive colonial exploitation and recruitment of African soldiers to make good her shortfalls in military service and human resources. In a way of conclusion, Germany's particular form of racism, which is Scheck's core argument, was a result of a convergence of decades of schooling in the pseudo-sciences of nineteenth-century Europe, years of violent colonial expansion and practice in Africa, and the economic and

demographic frustrations in that country before the Second World War.

Note

[1]. Ruth Mace, "Conservation Biology: Overgrazing Overstated," *Nature* 349 (January 24, 1991): 280-281.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-genocide>

Citation: Jeremiah Kitunda. Review of Scheck, Raffael, *Hitler's African Victims: The German Army Massacres of Black French Soldiers in 1940*. H-Genocide, H-Net Reviews. September, 2012.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31854>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.