



**Paul Garson.** *African Colonial Prisoners of the Germans: A Pictorial History of Captive Soldiers in the World Wars.* Jefferson: McFarland, 2016. 216 pp. \$49.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4766-6545-0.

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In both World Wars, the Allies recruited and trained large numbers of African troops, enabling the Germans to kill, capture, and photograph those same troops. Author Paul Garson has collected and published many of these images in *African Colonial Prisoners of the Germans: A Pictorial History of Captive Soldiers in the World Wars* (2016). Although the majority of photographs fit the title, especially concentrating on French West or Central African soldiers—the so-called Sénégalais Tirailleurs—as well as North Africans in German hands, the book’s scope is greater than that. We also see prewar and interwar depictions of French African soldiers, usually friendly, by French photographers and illustrators. In a couple cases we see Indochinese rather than African prisoners. We see Emperor Haile Selassie and proud Ethiopian troops under arms in 1935 and 1941. We see Eritrean troops under Italian command. There are also Germans in black-face pretending to be Africans. In addition to ordinary photographs, media include postcards, postage stamps, magazine covers, brochures, paper tokens, one record album, and several toy soldiers.

Garson has selected his photographs with an eye to his main argument, stated at the outset in his preface: “The fate of African colonial soldiers during the World War I and II [sic] was inextrica-

bly linked both to European imperialism and its racist foundations. Measured as a currency of blood and lives lost, the recruits served foreign masters who regarded them as a manpower resource available for consumption just as those same foreign masters had extracted other raw materials from their African colonies” (p. i). He reminds us that these images are “two-sided,” engaging the unseen photographer as well as his target.

Preceding the images is a sixteen-page introduction. Garson discusses the origin of French colonial troops, their service in World War I, German anti-black racism, the treatment of African soldiers at German hands in WWII, and African soldiers fighting for Belgium, Ethiopia, and Italy. The last section briefly describes the shabby treatment African soldiers received in the wake of WWII. Anti-black racism is the constant theme, and not only on the part of the Germans. The French brought African troops to Europe to offset France’s relative manpower weakness against Germany, but refused to promote any of them above the rank of sergeant or to pay them as much as French white troops. On the positive side, as we read in the captions, French civilians organized to bring relief to African POWs. The attitude of Germans, who faced African soldiers in battle, was worse. Before WWI, Lothar von Trotha

issued his infamous extermination decree dooming Herero rebels and their families in today's Namibia to die in the desert. In 1940, German soldiers, who themselves traded rumors of African atrocities, sometimes refused to make prisoners of the Sénégalais Tirailleurs, massacring them instead. They particularly objected to their enemies using a long knife—the coupe-coupe—as if being stabbed or sliced were somehow more unfair than being shot or blown to bits. During both world wars German propaganda depicted African soldiers as primitive savages, chimpanzees, or gorillas. Sometimes German men liked to have fun by painting their bodies dark brown and dressing as mock African warriors. This delight carried over even to the postwar period, when young men in East Germany were still having “Cameroon” parties.[1] Photos of POWs with their captors, however, are harder to read in this way. In the captions Garson does what he can with facial expressions and body postures to infer the attitudes of subjects on both sides. His suggestion that the Germans picked out Africans as especially exotic beings to photograph or to be photographed with seems sensible. The book has some small errors. First, it says that Martin Luther translated the New Testament in the Veste Coburg citadel at Coburg in 1530, but in fact he did so during 1521-22 at the Wartburg near Eisenach (p. 62). [2] The error may have come from a Wikipedia article on Coburg. That city is referenced in the book only because it has the profile of an African man (St. Maurice) on its coat of arms, so Martin Luther need not have come into it at all. Second, Garson says that the German electorate cast 92 percent of its vote for the Nazi Party due to racial animosity, according to some (uncited) researchers (p. 50). In fact, the highest vote share the Nazis received before 1933 was 37 percent (July 1932), and even in the violent election of March 1933, when Hitler was chancellor and his party benefited from emergency powers, they received only 44 percent.[3] Only during the dictatorship, when competing parties were banned

and balloting was not secret, could the Nazis boast of vote percentages of 88 percent or more. [4] Third, Carson attributes the origin of the word “sabotage” to resistance by French forced laborers under Nazi occupation, said to have thrown their wooden clogs (*sabots*) into the machinery, but according to the Oxford English Dictionary online, “sabotage” first appeared (in English) during the French railway strike of 1910, not WWII (p. 142). Fourth, there are typos on pp. 138 and 164, and some material in the caption on p. 189 is repeated on the next page. Unfortunately, there are also more serious flaws. The photographs all come from the author's personal collection containing, he says, three thousand items, but nowhere does he give their provenance or explain how he acquired them. The introduction and captions contain no footnotes or endnotes, reducing their value to researchers who might want to follow up his references. Furthermore, the bibliography on p. 205 is surprisingly short. It does contain the most relevant works on Nazi Germany's relationship with black POWs, Afro-Germans, and other victims who were of African descent, and there are two books on France's West African soldiers, but the book would have been much richer had Garson also consulted and cited literature on colonial photography, images of Africa and Africans in Germany, and the Western “colonial gaze”—the European tendency to literally see non-Europeans as primitive and underdeveloped. Some examples would include Malek Alloula's *The Colonial Harem* (1986), *Colonialist Photography: Imag(in)ing Race and Place*, edited by Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson (2002), Anne Maxwell's *Colonial Photography and Exhibitions: Representations of the “Native” and the Making of European Identities*, Peter Martin's *Schwarze Teufel, edle Mohren* (1993), and Henning Melber's *Der Weißheit letzter Schluß: Rassismus und kolonialer Blick* (1992). I mention the last two works because Garson's captions indicate that he can read German. The bibliography should also have included works on topics that Garson has raised

in the introduction, such as the 1904-05 war in German southwest Africa and the career of Blaise Diagne. In a couple of places the book goes well off topic. Despite a famously excellent performance in the 1936 Olympics, Jesse Owens (pp. 60-61) does not belong here. A caption addressing a postcard showing a white French nurse with an African soldier summarizes the Russian Revolution, merely because the card happens to have the same date that Grigori Rasputin was assassinated. Some words about medical care of colonial troops would have been more fitting. Nonetheless, the book is certainly a starting point for its topic. The author demonstrates an eye for rank and insignia in analyzing the photographs and has familiarized himself with the French army at the outset of WWII. In fact, there is a useful appendix containing an order of battle, with colonial units in boldface type. Since Garson has many other images he has not yet shared, perhaps we can look forward to an expanded edition or successor work.

#### Notes

[1]. Josie McLellan, *Love in the Time of Communism: Intimacy and Sexuality in the GDR* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 151-52, 162-64.

[2]. James M. Kittelson and Hans H. Wiersma, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 134-36, 187-89.

[3]. Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 293, 340.

[4]. Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich in Power* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), 109-111, 637.

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