

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.



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Published on H-German (April, 2007)

That the German army engaged in a war of racial annihilation on the eastern front, first on a more limited scale in Poland, then as part of a massive genocidal campaign in the Soviet Union, has now become a widely accepted premise of the historiography on the Second World War. Up to this point, historians have often contrasted the racial war in the East and southeast with a war fought largely along conventional patterns on the western front, even though some of the eastern front's unrestricted violence eventually spilled over to the western front in the context of anti-partisan warfare. Raffael Scheck's important new study on the German massacres of black French soldiers thoroughly destabilizes our notion of a clear contrast between a racial war in the East and *Normalkrieg* in the West. Based on exhaustive research in French and German archives, he documents, for the first time in the English language, the murder of at least 3,000 West African soldiers fighting in the French army between May and June 1940. In light of the extremely high casualty numbers of *Tirailleurs Sénégalais* (out of 40,000 African soldiers engaged in combat with German forces, 17,000 were killed or reported as

missing-in-action), the actual number may be significantly higher. As he demonstrates in a painstaking reconstruction of individual incidents, most of these soldiers were executed by German forces after they had surrendered or even after they had become POWs in German captivity, in many cases after German forces had deliberately separated them from white French soldiers. As the author argues convincingly, the massacres of black soldiers on the Western front constituted the "missing link" (p. 11) between the more limited race war in Poland and its full-fledged version in the Soviet Union and the Balkans.

On one level, this book represents investigative history at its best. Drawing on French and Germany army records as well as on local French archives, the author succeeds in unearthing a hitherto largely forgotten, or repressed, aspect of the Second World War. The first chapter provides a detailed reconstruction of individual massacres in all of their local specificity and contingency. While it is not always easy to establish whether black soldiers were killed in combat or after they

had surrendered, the author succeeds in documenting a quite deliberate German practice of murdering wounded or captured *Tirailleurs Sénégalais* as well as, in some cases, their white officers. While the German military leadership did not issue a specific order regarding the treatment of black POWs, most massacres occurred on the explicit order or at least tacit approval of the German commanding officers. Some massacres were committed by highly specialized Nazi units, such as the Infantry Regiment Gross Deutschland or the *SS Totenkopf* Division, which had already been socialized into racist warfare in Poland or, as in the latter case, had been responsible for the worst atrocity against white soldiers on the western front, the murder of one hundred British POWs in May 1940. At the same time, the German treatment of black POWs also remained highly inconsistent. Some German officers actually prevented massacres of black POWs, and the conditions for black POWs in German captivity improved markedly in 1941, largely due to the German efforts to forestall the rise of anti-Vichy sentiments in France's African colonies.

Scheck's second and third chapters move from a descriptive to a more analytical approach. German atrocities against black French soldiers resulted, as the author argues, from a combination of long-term ideological training with more contingent "situational" factors. In line with the best recent literature on the Wehrmacht, Scheck highlights the crucial significance of Nazi ideology, and especially of racism, for explaining the conduct of German soldiers. He traces the genealogy of anti-black prejudice back to the German colonial wars in southwest and East Africa during the early twentieth century and then analyzes the evolution of these racial stereotypes in the context of debates about the use of black soldiers in European wars. The French deployment of *Tirailleurs Sénégalais* in the First World War and especially the presence of black troops during the French occupation of the Rhineland further mobilized anti-black racism in Germany. What made these racial

stereotypes so powerful was their association with illegitimate forms of warfare, as they manifested themselves in the German obsession with so-called *franc-tireurs* during the Franco-Prussian and the First World War. An intense Nazi propaganda campaign in the immediate context of the German attack on France in May 1940 reactivated and intensified these long-standing racist tropes by dehumanizing African soldiers as "savage" fighters who had committed numerous atrocities against Germans. Although this sustained propaganda campaign began after the initial massacres had already been committed, the author leaves no doubt that it functioned as ideological context and a virtual "authorization" for the murder of black POWs by Wehrmacht soldiers.

The crucial significance of ideology notwithstanding, the author is also careful not to confuse "words" with "acts." Most black POWs were not murdered by German soldiers, and certain situational factors were necessary to transform ideological pre-dispositions into a practice of racist murder. One such factor consisted of the attempt to exert revenge for alleged mutilations of German soldiers by African soldiers with their *coupe-coupes*, forty-centimeter-long knives that served as traditional combat weapon of the *Tirailleurs Sénégalais*. While these accusations were not entirely spurious, they were grossly inflated by German propaganda. Fueled by a fear of bodily disfigurement emanating from the First World War, German soldiers often mistook wounds resulting from close combat or even caused by firearms as the result of deliberate mutilation. As a result, the mere discovery of a *coupe-coupe* among black POWs could serve as the trigger for a massacre. Interestingly, memories of the First World War contributed to the radicalization of warfare on the western front, whereas the presence of older officers appears to have, at least occasionally, exerted a moderating influence on the eastern front. [1] Another situational factor that contributed to massacres consisted of close combat with African units, which often resulted from the French

army's "hedgehog" tactic of staying behind German lines and attacking the German army from the rear. Ironically, rumors of a German "take no prisoners" policy toward black soldiers often increased their extremely determined and tenacious resistance. Angered by intense fighting and heavy losses at a moment when the war in the West seemed already won, German units often took revenge on wounded or captured African soldiers.

"Situational" and "ideological" factors, as the author argues convincingly, cannot be neatly separated but often worked in tandem. Racial stereotypes distorted the perceptions of German soldiers, thus leading them to interpret African soldiers' tenacious fighting as a sign of their inherent "deviousness" while deeming the same behavior of French white units as an honorable fight for the "fatherland." Interestingly, the author frequently notes massive "fear" and also "anger" as one motivating factor in German atrocities. Here, it might have been possible to expand his already quite nuanced analysis and to ponder the emotional context of engaging in extreme violence. In many cases, it appears that it was not a sense of strength, but rather the perception of weakness and vulnerability, that led German soldiers to commit atrocities against black soldiers.

The author's last chapter assesses the larger implications of these massacres for the history and memory of Nazi Germany and the Second World War. The book is part of a growing literature on the small yet important presence of Afro-Germans in Nazi Germany. It is the first study, however, that places Nazi anti-black racism in the military context of the war on the western front. The author also exposes the low priority French authorities assigned to the postwar prosecution of these war crimes. While he largely exonerates the French military leadership from responsibility for the massacres themselves, Scheck maintains that a greater effort to communicate and publicize these incidents, combined with the threat of

reprisals against German POWs, might have served as a deterrent to German forces. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the book reinserts the western front into the progressive Nazification of the Wehrmacht. As Scheck demonstrates persuasively, the war in the West by no means represented a rupture but rather served as "an integral part of this process" (p. 151).

There is little to criticize in this excellent study. In light of the massive historiography on the Second World War, it is quite an achievement in itself to document a largely forgotten episode of this huge conflict. Yet this book not only rescues from near historical oblivion the fate of African soldiers on the Western front, it also offers a comprehensive and convincing analytical framework to explain German massacres. The book is also well written and tightly argued. As in many recent studies of German perpetrators, it would have been interesting to learn even more about the perspective of the victims, although the source basis appears to be rather limited here. Still, this impressive study represents essential reading for anybody interested in the history of the Second World War, Nazi Germany, and racist violence in the twentieth century more generally. If the significance of a new monograph can be measured according to the extent in which it compels us to revise our standard narratives, then this study succeeds brilliantly. The volume will certainly force me to modify my lectures on the Second World War. While it still seems important to maintain a distinction between the scale of racist warfare in France and in Poland, the story of the progressive Nazification and radicalization of the Wehrmacht now needs to include rather than exempt the western front. As this study also makes clear, African soldiers fighting in the French army need to be added to the millions of victims of Nazi Germany's racialized warfare in the Second World War.

Note

[1]. See, for example, Theo Schulte, "Korück 582," in *Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der Wehrmacht*, ed. Hannes Heer and Klaus Naumann (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1995), 323-343.

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Citation: Frank Biess. Review of Scheck, Raffael. *Hitler's African Victims: The German Army Massacres of Black French Soldiers in 1940*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. April, 2007.

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