

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-War (April, 2009)

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## The Unknown Massacres: Black French Prisoners in 1940

Historically speaking, the Holocaust, and the Nazi mass exterminations and atrocities committed in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union between 1939 and 1945 have always received more attention than other crimes that took place during the Second World War. For instance, a long-forgotten fact was the various massacres of African French war prisoners during the German invasion of France in May and June 1940, when German soldiers randomly executed black *Tirailleurs Sénégalais*. Raffael Scheck, professor of modern history at Colby College, recently wrote on this in *Hitler's African Victims: The German Army Massacres of Black French Soldiers in 1940*. This book presents an interesting account of these events, and provides a fair analysis of the causes and motivations of the perpetrators. In four detailed chapters, Scheck presents an overview of the massacres of black French Colonial Troops, the number of victims (1,500 to 3,000), as well as the military events that led to them. In order to illuminate the motivations that led the German invaders randomly to murder so many black war prisoners, chapters 2 and 3 give an overall analysis of a prob-

lematic that seemed unanswerable in this particular case: why did this happen? Chapter 4 takes a look at the implications of such events, and it integrates those atrocities into the gradual barbarization process of the German Wehrmacht that took place between 1939 and 1945.

In 1940, the French army included more than 100,000 black French soldiers from France's African colonies, mainly Senegal, Mauritania, and Niger. More than 75,000 of them served in France before and during the German invasion; the rest of them served guard duty in the various colonies. As the Wehrmacht panzer divisions swept across France in May-June 1940, some of those black French soldiers (about 40,000 of them), mainly organized in black regiments or mixed units, were engaged in fierce combat against German soldiers. About 10,000 black soldiers were killed, some wounded, and others taken prisoner during the French debacle. Scheck states that between 1,500 to 3,000 black French prisoners of war were massacred throughout the campaign, either during or after combat. Generally speaking, *Tirailleurs Sénégalais* were treated differently from other war prisoners by the

victorious army. The existence of a well-implanted anti-black racism and stereotypes among the German soldiers frequently resulted in the black French troops being separated from other prisoners of war. Fear of *coupes-coupes* (a hand-to-hand weapon used by the *Tirailleurs Sénégalais* that German soldiers considered a treacherous weapon), latent desire for revenge because of German losses, or simple racism, resulted in random massacres of black French war prisoners by members of the Wehrmacht.

The author's investigation of what caused the slaughters is also interesting. Scheck gives a precise account of those situational factors and links them well to ideological ones, stating that racist Nazi indoctrination and stereotypes must be fully integrated into the chaotic context of fighting in order to explain the massacres. He remarks that there were no clear governmental or military orders authorizing such criminal behavior toward specific groups of prisoners of war in 1940. In fact, many of those atrocities were committed by heavily indoctrinated elite Wehrmacht, or Nazi military units like the SS Totenkopf, or the *Gross Deutschland*. Those troops were already (or would be, along with others, later on) held responsible for racist behavior and excesses, as well as mass murders during May-June 1940. Scheck avoids overall generalization on what happened to those prisoners by discussing the random character and inconsistency of the massacres. Readers quickly understand that not all black French war prisoners were executed, and that some German or French officers even managed to prevent such events from occurring. In fact, the treatment of imprisoned black French soldiers actually improved after the May-June 1940 campaign, especially in prisoner of war camps.

By linking such events to the absence of guidelines issued by the German army on the treatment of black war prisoners, as well as with situational factors, the author brilliantly integrates the singularity of such atrocities in a concept of an informal "race war" waged by the Wehrmacht during that specific event. First observed in Poland after September 1939, and culminating with Barbarossa and the Holocaust later on, this "race war" was part of a gradual process of barbarization and nazification of the German army that took place throughout the conflict. By differentiating the two types of warfare conducted by the German army in the West and in the East, Scheck smoothly integrates the massacres of those prisoners into the larger context of Nazi crimes, thus giving us anything but a short-lived historical interpretation of the behavior of German soldiers during the May-June 1940 campaign.

In fact, the author successfully integrates the concept of Nazi racist warfare in the German western campaign, an idea that typically has not been assessed by traditional military history. He thus proposes an interesting, and new interpretation of German warfare excesses during World War II.

Scheck's overall assessment of the construction of anti-black prejudices and stereotypes in Germany with linkage to the May-June 1940 massacres is precise and well contextualized; he understood exactly how to integrate this long-existing racism into the events' causes. Wanting to assess the evolution of racist behavior in Germany, the author goes back to the early 1900s, namely to the time of Wilhelmian German colonialism in West Africa, providing context for the development of racist behavior toward black Africans. According to Scheck, important German anti-black racial stereotypes were linked to the use of *Tirailleurs Sénégalais* in the French army during World War I, and of black French soldiers in the Rhineland in the 1920s. In his view, racism was well integrated in Germany before and during the Third Reich, and had been frequently employed by Nazi propaganda after the outbreak of the Second World War. Thus, it explains the May-June 1940 massacres.

Even though the author cites some important sources for assessing the German behavior that led to such atrocities, the analysis of the motivations and psychology of the Wehrmacht and SS perpetrators could have gone deeper. Despite a contextualization of a "Kelman and Hamilton" model (p. 6), which suggests psychological patterns of authorization-routinization-dehumanization leading to massacres, this particular approach still presents some methodological limits, especially on questions of whether authorization and dehumanization allowed such atrocities in the World War II context. The methodologies used to assess the sociology and psychology of perpetrators could have been broadened to include specialized literature on the behavior of Nazis or Wehrmacht members. This would have offered an even better analysis of the situation. As well, more emphasis could have been put on the memory of those slaughters. Although it would have been difficult research to accomplish, the memory of survivors would have been an interesting theme to investigate.

Despite this criticism, Raffael Scheck offers us a valuable piece of historiography. This book is, and will remain, an impressive investigation into French and German archival records. In fact, it is difficult to criticize such a well-written example of proficient historical work.

Scheck's book stands as a major reference for the historian interested in the events related to those massacres, as well as an interesting exploration of the ideology and mentality of the German Wehrmacht during the French campaign of May-June 1940. The integration, and comparative analysis of those atrocities in the broader con-

text of Nazi warfare methods is remarkable, and should be read by any scholar of Nazi war crimes or of World War II. In fact, this new evaluation of the Wehrmacht and Nazi behavior is also a valuable contribution to the history of blacks and Nazi Germany.

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**Citation:** Yannick Cormier. Review of Scheck, Raffael, *Hitler's African Victims: The German Army Massacres of Black French Soldiers in 1940*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. April, 2009.

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