

**FORGOTTEN WARRIORS:
THE AFRICAN COLONIAL SOLDIERS OF WORLD WAR II**

*Enlist today! Your country needs you!
Not for learning how to shoot the big howitzers
Or how to rat tat tat the machine guns
Or how to fly o'er peaceful countries
Dropping bombs on harmless people
Or how to fix a bayonet and charge at/The harmless workers of another clime
Your country needs you/For the rebuilding of your shattered homeland –
Your homeland ruined by exploitation/By the tyrants of foreign nations
Who would use you as their catspaw
While they starved you to subjection.*

— George Padmore, originally published July 28, 1939¹

Introduction

In the lead-up to World War II and during the war itself, more than one million African colonial soldiers fought bravely alongside Allied forces in the European, African, and Burma theatres, contributing significantly to the war effort. Padmore's poem highlights the exploitation of colonial subjects and presents themes of coercion, contribution, and neglect that are central to understanding the experience of Africans during World War II. Though historical narratives have often overlooked the circumstances surrounding their enlistment, military service, and post-war treatment, recent scholarship has begun to address these omissions.² The factors behind African colonial soldiers' enlistment remain a subject of debate. While some emphasize the economic benefits of military service, others highlight coercion, arguing that colonial authorities manipulated economic instability and governance systems to maintain recruitment levels.³ These perspectives are not mutually exclusive but instead reveal how coercion and opportunity were deeply intertwined.

While some steps have been taken to acknowledge aspects of African soldiers' wartime experiences, their contributions remain underrepresented in public memory.⁴ Gestures like French President François Hollande's 2013 release of French archival records about the Thiaroye massacre and the 2017 granting of French citizenship to a small group of surviving Senegalese Tirailleurs are marks of progress, but do not fully address decades of marginalization or the broader historical neglect of African soldiers.⁵

This paper examines the experiences of African servicemen in World War II, analyzing the factors that shaped their enlistment, the conditions they faced during service, and the post-war marginalization of their contributions. By analyzing first-hand testimonies, colonial records, and secondary sources, this essay demonstrates how coercion and economic necessity were intertwined in recruitment and how African soldiers' contributions were later excluded from dominant historical narratives.

Context Before World War II

The aftermath of World War I in colonial Africa (1919–1930)

In the period immediately after World War I, African colonial soldiers were immediately redeployed to enforce colonial interests and rebuild European nations. Following the Treaty of Versailles (1919), France stationed many of its colonial soldiers in the Rhineland, an area on the French border with Germany. Meanwhile, other European empires, including Britain, Belgium, and Italy, exploited African labor and resources to rebuild their war-torn economies. During the interwar period, British firms shifted from slave labor to the exploitation Africa's resources and labor within the continent. Companies dominated trade, forcing peasants into cash-crop farming under harsh conditions, ensuring high profits while maintaining control over African economies.⁶ Colonial officials reintroduced forced labor laws to keep plantations, mines, and industries

profitable despite the Depression-era economic crisis.⁷ Although statistics on recruitment from French and British colonies prove that African colonial soldiers had a major impact on the World War I effort, these soldiers were often regarded as expendable labor rather than as full members of the armed forces. Even during their recruitment, they were lured into fighting without truly knowing what they were fighting for. This pattern ultimately repeated two decades later in World War II.

Political, economic, and racial pressures in the interwar period

During the interwar period, colonial powers created economic and political conditions that left many Africans with no choice but to enlist in the war effort by the time World War II began. This was partly due to European powers denying African countries the right to self-determination after World War I and the concurrent exploitation of their resources. African economies under colonial rule were structured solely to extract raw materials for European markets while deliberately suppressing industrial development within the continent. Mining operations, agriculture, and export industries were controlled by European firms, and profits from African labor and resources were funneled directly to European financial institutions and investors. For example, over one-third of Congo's yearly economic production was extracted as corporate profits and compensation for overseas personnel.⁸

During this period, a small but growing African educated class began challenging colonial rule and advocating for self-determination. These individuals organized political movements and associations, laying the groundwork for future independence struggles. However, colonial authorities frequently met these efforts with repression and resistance, seeking to maintain control over their territories.⁹ As late as 1948, long after the interwar period, French officials stated at a conference led by General Charles de Gaulle that granting self-rule to their colonies was not part

of their plans, even in the long term. It was recorded in the conference proceedings that African territories would remain under French control, with any move toward independence rejected: “[T]he establishment, even in the distant future, of self-government in the colonies is to be avoided.”¹⁰

Having set the stage with decades of colonial rule, European powers left African communities economically vulnerable and politically dependent, making them a prime source of recruits as European powers reorganized their armies in preparation for future conflicts. European powers, including England, Italy, and France, began reorganizing and expanding their colonial armies during this period. These forces were usually composed of African soldiers under the command of European officers. Colonial administrations often utilized these troops for internal security and to assert dominance.¹¹ Belgium, for instance, maintained a peacetime army called the Force Publique that was composed of 18,000 African soldiers and used primarily used for internal security and control. During the Congo Free State period (1885–1908), the Force Publique was tasked with enforcing rubber quotas through terror and violence, including mutilations. The Force Publique as an institution endured and was mobilized during the war to fight for the Allies.¹²

The Abyssinian crisis and the outbreak of World War II in Africa

For many Africans, the Second World War started when Italy invaded Abyssinia (Ethiopia) in 1935. Italy had significantly fewer African colonies to draw upon for labor than Britain and France, and this prompted their invasion of Ethiopia. This act of aggression not only showcased Italy’s imperial ambitions but also caused widespread confusion and panic in Abyssinia, illustrating the broader instability that colonialism brought to the continent during wartime. This invasion meant, first, that African soldiers were conscripted, and second, that the resources of the colony were exploited. According to Killingray and Plaut, Italy stationed a 60,000-strong army in

Eritrea (then an Italian colony), exploiting the colony's limited resources by placing over 40% of its 150,000-man productive labor force in arms.¹³ The colony's economic and productive capacity was severely diminished by conscripting such a significant portion of the male population into military service. This exploitation not only weakened the colony's ability to sustain itself but also demonstrated the colonial powers' disregard for the well-being and development of the colonies and their people.

When war formally broke out across Europe on September 2, 1939 (September 3 in Africa), many African civilians were alarmed by how quickly these distant conflicts changed their way of life. According to Robert Kakembo from Buganda (a Bantu kingdom within Uganda, a former British colony), "[t]he day war broke out, 3 September 1939, was an ordinary day, a day like today... Most tribes in East and Central Africa did not know what the trouble was about."¹⁴ Another soldier, Josiah Mariuki, a Gikuyu (a Kenyan tribe), recalled that "there was an ominous rumour that Hitler was coming to kill us all and many people went fearfully down to the rivers and dug holes in the bank to hide from the troops."¹⁵

These first-hand accounts emphasize the sudden and unexpected disruption of daily life. The day when war was declared was ordinary, but Mariuki's account captures the fear and confusion that gripped communities. All this confusion underscored the disconnect between African colonies and the European powers, as most Africans had little understanding of the global alliances that would soon draw them into another massive conflict. These experiences underline how distant yet deeply affected African communities were by the global conflict that would forever alter their perception of colonial powers and their role in world affairs.

Recruitment

In the years leading up to World War II, European colonial powers had already drained significant resources from their African colonies, but as war loomed, they needed more than resources—they needed soldiers. Weakened colonial economies, strained by high taxes, forced labor, and exploitative land policies,¹⁶ left many African men with no choice but to enlist in the war. The military often seemed like the only path to a better future.¹⁷ The promise of post-war benefits and an appeal to imperial loyalty were used to manipulate recruits, though these benefits rarely came. African soldiers enlisted during World War II for a combination of reasons, which included overt coercion, propaganda, economic necessity, and social pressures.

Direct coercion and force

Colonial administrators across Africa used a range of coercive methods to meet recruitment quotas. Chiefs in British colonies were required to supply a set number of men, under directives enforced by colonial officials, and chiefs who failed to meet these quotas faced punishments such as fines, loss of privileges, and removal from their positions. This created a situation where they were forced to comply, often against the will of their communities.¹⁸ For young men, the prospect of forced enlistment loomed large, as refusal could result in severe repercussions for their families or communities.¹⁹

Ebou Janha, a former Gambian soldier, recalls being taken by village elders in 1941 at just 22 years of age and being conscripted into the British army and sent to fight in a war he barely understood. He recalls that his chief chose him because of his physique and his stubborn attitude: he was tied up with ropes to stop him from escaping until he accepted that he was being forced to go to war. In Gambia, soldiers were conscripted under a quota imposed on local chiefs by the British colonial authorities. The chiefs were required to provide 30 recruits each month, and that

number increased to 75 in 1943. Recruits were sometimes conscripted by rounding up unemployed men in the capital city.²⁰

In other British colonies such as Nigeria and the Gold Coast (modern-day Ghana), recruitment depended heavily on local chiefs. Colonial administrators required chiefs to meet quotas set, but this often created tension within their communities. Chiefs who failed to deliver the required number of recruits faced harsh punishments such as fines, loss of privileges, or dismissal from their roles. These pressures strained relationships between chiefs and their people. For example, Killingray describes how many chiefs resorted to using fines, intimidation, and even imprisonment to meet quotas, making them deeply unpopular in their communities.²¹ In some cases, chiefs were placed in morally compromising positions. Oral histories from Nigerian recruits reveal how families sometimes viewed chiefs as collaborators in the colonial system, blaming them for the forced conscription of young men. This often caused problems within local communities, with some chiefs losing the trust and respect of their people.²² Local chiefs sometimes had people conscripted for personal reasons, and in one case, an illiterate recruit complained that his chief sent him to the recruiters with a letter saying he wanted to be a soldier because the chief wanted his girlfriend.²³

Deception frequently accompanied coercion in British East Africa. In 1943, at just 17 years old, Gershon Fundi, from Kenya, trusted a local administrator's offer of a communications job. Desperate for work, he reported to the assigned location, only to find himself in the military. "When I got there that's when I realised I was in the army," he said at age 91. He was barred from leaving, forced to sign a contract, and sent to Ethiopia and Somaliland as a signalman.²⁴ Such stories highlight the manipulation and exploitation that characterized British recruitment practices.

In French colonies, most African soldiers and laborers were forced to join, except for a few who enlisted willingly,²⁵ such as young men seeking to prove their bravery, or Senegalese recruits seeking recognition as French citizens. While recruitment methods varied, coercion played a central role. Many African families had no choice but to send one son in order to meet quotas imposed by the colonial authorities, often making painful decisions to protect their households.²⁶ For example, Sera Ndiaye, a Senegalese recruit in 1916, recalls how he was chosen to serve by his so that his older brother could stay and care for the family.²⁷ French authorities regularly raided villages, forcing young men into military service and breaking up families. Ivory Coast veterans recount the hardships they endured. Djirigue Soro laments that “[w]ithout any warning, the French came to the village at night-they took us all away. There was no time to prepare for my absence.” Laqui Konde relates, “[w]e had to go. If you wouldn’t leave, they would gather all your family together and put them in prison.”²⁸

The scale of forced recruitment in the world wars drew comparisons to earlier systems of coerced labor. While European colonial powers had abolished legal slavery, they recruited more African people for war between 1914–1918 and 1935–1945 than were taken in any similar period of the slave trade. In fact, many Africans came to see this recruitment as a new form of slavery.²⁹

Propaganda and psychological manipulation

Colonial authorities reinforced this perception of recruitment as a new form of slavery using propaganda and psychological tactics to mask exploitation. These campaigns were carefully planned and adjusted to fit the concerns and values of different audiences, whether they lived in cities or rural areas. Propaganda emphasized ideas such as duty, loyalty, fear of Axis domination, and personal benefit to convince African men to join the war effort.

In cities, colonial authorities focused on the global importance of the war and the need to protect African communities. For example, British officials in Nigeria worked with leaders as Nnamdi Azikiwe (who later became the first president of the country after their independence from Britain) to promote the idea that enlisting would help stop the Axis powers from expanding and oppressing Africans. Azikiwe made speeches arguing that African involvement in the war was necessary to protect their future.³⁰ Large public events were another mechanism used to spread this message. In 1939, a rally in Lagos, Nigeria, attracted nearly 10,000 people.³¹ Traditional rulers and colonial officials gave speeches about the need to fight against Germany and Italy, emphasizing the danger of what might happen if the Allies lost. These events combined patriotic slogans with warnings and used fear and appeals to duty to persuade people. In French colonies, officials used similar strategies for their urban propaganda. Officials organized parades and public meetings and distributed posters and newsreels that celebrated the contributions of African soldiers. French propaganda often promised rewards such as pensions, education, and even French citizenship to recruits, though these promises were rarely kept.³²

Fear induced by propaganda was also used as a powerful motivator. In Kenya, recruiters warned villagers that if the Germans won, they would take over African lands and reintroduce slavery. This fear resonated strongly in communities where the history of the transatlantic and Arab slave trades was still fresh. Sergeant R. Moloi, a South African, enlisted “because I did not want to be a slave in this country; because these people told us that this enemy is a very bad enemy – he is a bad man – Hitler – when we can win this war we would be slaves, especially as black people.”³³ One Kenyan explains his reason for enlistment: “[W]e had been told that unless we joined up and helped the Government, Kenya would be occupied by Germans and Italians. To keep out these ‘monsters,’ and also to escape the boredom and difficulty of being unemployed in

Nairobi, I enlisted.”³⁴ These fear-based messages often left young men feeling they had little choice but to enlist.

Colonial propaganda in rural areas also appealed to cultural values such as masculinity and bravery. Recruiters presented military service as a way for young men to prove their courage and gain respect in their communities. They used songs and stories to celebrate soldiers as protectors and heroes. In Ghana, for example, local songs praised men who joined the war, linking their service to traditional ideas of honor and strength.³⁵

Propaganda was also spread through newspapers, films, and posters. In urban areas, cinemas played newsreels showing African soldiers fighting alongside Europeans, while posters depicted soldiers as well-dressed and respected members of their communities. Between January and June of 1940, the French Colonial Army in Senegal published *La Gazette du Tirailleur*, an anti-German news journal. “Mamadou s’en va-t’en guerre” (“Mamadou Goes to War”) was a comic strip published biweekly, and the adventures of its main character, a fictional African soldier, focused on wartime themes such as France’s military objectives, Nazi aggression and its ambitions in Africa, and the vital role Africans were expected to play in defending the French empire.³⁶ In East Africa, the colonial authorities published “*A Spear for Freedom*,”³⁷ a picture-book with short captions in English and regional languages showing how an African cattle-herder became a soldier in the British army. This tactic would have been effective for illiterate Africans and those who did not speak English, encouraging those distant from Europe to join a foreign war with little understanding of its purpose.

Colonial propaganda, alongside coercion, played a major role in recruitment. It was designed to address the specific concerns of urban and rural communities, using ideas of duty, fear,

and rewards to persuade African men to enlist. However, the promises made through propaganda were not usually kept, and this left many soldiers disillusioned. While propaganda was effective in securing recruits, it also contributed to the resentment and mistrust that led to anti-colonial movements after the war.

Economic and social pressures

Beyond direct coercion, colonial authorities also exploited economic desperation and social structures to ensure high enlistment rates. High taxes, forced labor, and reliance on cash crops, such as cocoa, cotton, and ground nuts, made many communities dependent on the global market. When the war disrupted trade, economic conditions worsened. Unemployment rose, food shortages became common, and many families struggled to survive. Colonial authorities forced civilians to farm, mine, and build roads and railways. To meet war demands, colonial governments reduced what the locals could consume, raised taxes, and set quotas on how much should be produced, often using force when targets were not met. During World War II, surging African exports supplied food, minerals, and raw materials such as rubber, cotton, and metals needed for weapons. This production relied on forced labor and often caused food shortages and famine.³⁸

In these difficult economic conditions, joining the military seemed like the only way for many African men to earn a steady income. Soldiers were promised regular wages, food, and clothing, which were hard to come by in civilian life.³⁹ Recruits also learned new skills that could provide work for them even after the war had ended. In Kenya, higher wages and the social status that soldiers (*askaris*) enjoyed meant that there were always many who wished to join the King's African Rifles (KAR). Waruhiu Itote, a recruit, says that he had enlisted “[t]o escape the boredom and difficulty of being unemployed in Nairobi”, and Bildad Kaggia, a recruitment clerk, shares that “[t]here was no other employment in the district” and “[t]he army provided jobs which could

not be found in civilian life.”⁴⁰ In Nigeria, 16-year-old Isaac Fadoyebo was a typical case—he voluntarily signed up to be recruited without his parents’ knowledge “because the pay of one shilling per day was twice a school-teacher’s pay.”⁴¹ The inter-war period had created conditions that now forced many young men to choose enlistment in order to survive.

Colonial governments also used financial incentives to attract recruits. British colonies offered enlistment bonuses, though they were often small. For example, Nigerian recruits received a small payment upon signing up, along with promises of regular pay during their service. While these wages were low compared to those of European soldiers, they were still better than what many Africans could earn in their struggling economies. Brands concludes: “High wages, new clothes, medical care and food beyond what many unskilled workers could otherwise afford were thus chief incentives to join the army.”⁴² The African soldiers did their duties despite “the failure of the military to be bound by its promise of the prospect of higher pay for African personnel.”⁴³

Rather than operating independently, social pressure, economic necessity, and coercion reinforced one another, ensuring a steady supply of recruits for colonial armies. Social pressure played a big role in recruitment. Colonial governments worked closely with chiefs, elders, and religious leaders to encourage enlistment. They used their influence to persuade or pressure young men into joining. In many African cultures, military service was framed as a test of masculinity and bravery. Parsons refers to an example in Kenya where a man who refused to enlist was forced to dress in women’s clothes and walk in front of a crowd.⁴⁴

There were many reasons why African soldiers were recruited. Colonial powers employed both forceful tactics and promises of opportunity to meet their military demands, while some Africans saw enlistment as a way to earn money and escape severe poverty and seized the

opportunity for a stable income and a sense of purpose amidst widespread economic hardship. Combined with social expectations, these challenges pushed men toward military service as one of the few available options. It should be remembered that around 90% of British African colonial soldiers were not literate. Many were drawn from areas governed by indigenous authorities that operated outside the cash-based economy. As Killingray argues, these conditions created a body of soldiers who lacked personal autonomy.⁴⁵ This loss of autonomy, created largely by colonial rule, challenges the idea that enlistment was truly voluntary.

The Scale of Mobilization

Nearly one million African colonial soldiers served in the British military during the war. This included 320,000 East African soldiers from the KAR, 300,000 West African soldiers from the Royal West African Frontier Force (RWAFF), 130,000 non-European South Africans, and men from islands such as Mauritius and Seychelles. More than 200,000 West Africans risked their lives under British command, with even higher participation rates in East Africa. Approximately 325,000 East Africans served in the KAR and various military labor units.⁴⁶

For French forces, the scale was significant. From 1939 to June 1940, the French military called up approximately 300,000 North African and 197,000 West African men to join the war effort on the frontlines. About 63,300 West Africans saw combat in France in 1940 (before the Armistice in June 1940) in various capacities, including as front-line soldiers, support units, and labor forces. The collapse of Italian East Africa in 1941, following the British-led East African campaign, significantly disrupted the use of African soldiers by Italy, and many askari were either captured by Italian soldiers or disbanded.

Overall, the mobilization of African colonial soldiers during World War II was a massive and critical effort that highlighted their significant yet often underappreciated contributions. These staggering numbers demonstrate just how effective European powers were in their mobilization of African colonial soldiers, whether through coercion or more insidious means. But what were the soldiers' experiences like when they arrived at the battlefield, and how have their contributions gone so unnoticed?

The Realities of Military Service

Life in the ranks

For many young men in Africa, and specifically in British colonies, the Second World War was a time of adventure and opportunity. It was the first time many had worn boots or ridden in a motor vehicle. However, these novelties were quickly overshadowed by brutal treatment, discrimination, and the horrors of war. The experiences of African colonial soldiers revealed the deep injustices they endured both during the conflict and in its aftermath. Widespread discrimination, severe underpayment, and front-line hazardous posting during the war foretold how little the colonial powers would later value African veterans when the war ended.

One such soldier, Eusebio Mbiuki, was shipped to Burma in 1944 to fight the Japanese Imperial Army for the British. He described appalling conditions, including rampant disease and the constant presence of death. “We started fighting the Japanese straight away,” says Mbiuki. “While we were looking for each other there would be gunfire. Then we would run towards it. It was really rough.”⁴⁷ Similarly, 96-year-old Mzee Gichanga Kibicho recounts how soldiers like himself were conscripted and forced to carry heavy loads. Another veteran, 98-year-old Joseph Hinga, shares memories of brutal treatment by British officers during the Burma campaign: “We used to be whipped with a whip made out of rhino hide... We used to be tortured to show that we

were lesser men.” Mbiuki echoes these experiences: “They beat us, they beat us a lot. Our bodies became so swollen from the beating. They would beat us and slap us a lot...they were told to beat you, to really beat you.” Rules around discipline and punishment often targeted African soldiers more harshly than their white counterparts, and in the view of these veterans, this abuse arose from systemic racism.⁴⁸ As Killingray put it, it was based on “the idea that child-like people needed to be schooled and disciplined with physical force, the stick or whip was convenient, instant and closely related with the offence... It was, so its advocates argued, readily understood by Africans; coming from societies that inflicted brutal punishments on offenders, Africans clearly recognized, and indeed expected, physical abuse as the reward for misdemeanors. And in any case, it was argued, they had an ability to bear pain, ‘which the primitive African does not feel.’”⁴⁹

They also endured more direct racism, such as that described by a Takoradi veteran from Ghana that he experienced from the British: “In the army, the white people were not treating most of us well. They were kicking us, calling us 'you black monkey', and so forth... We didn't like the way they were treating us, especially when we went to Burma and all those places.”⁵⁰ This treatment was part of a larger pattern of discrimination that devalued African soldiers even as they were relied upon in war.

While in the army, their pay was also less than a European of the same rank. The British authorities in the Gold Coast (now Ghana) admitted that Europeans were paid higher wages but justified the lower pay for Africans by claiming it was still better than the average earnings of civilians in the Gold Coast. They argued that, with food and housing provided by the army, African soldiers enjoyed a higher standard of living compared to civilian workers, essentially comparing their wages to those of African laborers. In addition, while the pay for Africans remained the same, Europeans received increases during the war.⁵¹ Similarly, in South Africa, white soldiers were paid

twice as much as the soldiers who served in the Cape Coloured Corps and the Indian and Malay Corps and were paid even less.⁵²

Nigerian soldiers also faced significant inequities during their service. Colonial officers often prohibited the soldiers from wearing proper footwear, forced them to salute white civilians, and paid them considerably less than British or Indian soldiers. Additionally, they were excluded from officer ranks due to the colonial belief that Nigerians lacked the refinement required for leadership. These policies were particularly frustrating for educated soldiers who enlisted during World War II and expected more respect.⁵³

Sometimes, the situation for colonial soldiers was so dire that it led to mutiny. As General Sir William Platt, who controlled East African Command in December 1941, reported, “[t]here have been numerous incidents in almost all Somali units, and some amongst Somali personnel attending courses at Command School. They have generally taken the form of refusal to obey orders, sit-down strikes, shouting, desertion with weapons, untrustworthiness as guards, collusive theft, occasional stone throwing and drawing of knives...”⁵⁴ These acts of defiance reflect the unbearable conditions these soldiers endured.

Battlefront involvement and impact

These experiences reveal the disproportionate sacrifices African soldiers made in securing Allied victories. Despite being conscripted under harsh and often discriminatory conditions, their involvement was crucial to the Allied war effort, and their contributions, though frequently overshadowed by narratives centered on European soldiers, were vital in shaping the outcome of one of the most significant conflicts in history.

French colonial soldiers, often referred to as *tirailleurs*, were a critical component of French military forces during World War II. Recruited from mostly West Africa, these soldiers were key in campaigns such as the Battle of France in 1940, the Battle of Bir Hakeim in 1942, and the Provence landings in 1944. They also played major roles in the Italian campaign (1942–43) and the liberation of southern France. Tirailleurs faced racial discrimination and were often sent to the most dangerous frontline positions by the French.⁵⁵ As stated above, from 1939 to June 1940, the French military called up approximately 300,000 North African and 197,000 West African men to join the war effort on the frontlines. About 63,300 West Africans saw combat in France in 1940.⁵⁶ Without these tirailleurs, it is unlikely France would have survived for as long as it did. The French recruited 179,000 tirailleurs, and some 40,000 were deployed to Western Europe. Many were sent to bolster the Maginot Line along France's border with Germany and Belgium during the German invasion of 1940, where many were killed or taken prisoner. After the fall of France, others served in the Free French army in Tunisia, Corsica, and Italy and in the south of France during the liberation.

African colonial soldiers' role in the British Army should not be taken lightly either. Under General Sir George Giffard, the RWAFF expanded from 50,000 in 1941 to 100,000 in 1942 and to 150,000 by 1945.⁵⁷ These colonial soldiers participated in key World War II campaigns across various theaters, including the pivotal Battle of El Alamein in North Africa. Ironically, despite serving as central roles in campaigns such as El Alamein and Bir Hakeim, they were largely absent from later victory parades and historical narratives.⁵⁸

African colonial soldiers played a critical role in the Burma campaign during World War II. This campaign involved intense battles in the British colony of Burma (now Myanmar) as part of the China–Burma–India theater, often called the “Forgotten War.” These soldiers were part of

the British Fourteenth Army, known as the “Forgotten Army,” which fought in harsh jungle conditions in 1944 and 1945 with little recognition back in Britain. About 120,000 African soldiers, mainly from British East and West Africa, were sent to Burma in 1943. Their ability to adapt to the monsoon climate was an advantage, as they suffered fewer illnesses than European and Indian troops.⁵⁹

West African soldiers, primarily from the RWAFF, were central to the successes of the Burma campaign. The 81st and 82nd divisions achieved major victories. The 81st division captured strategic locations such as Mandalay and Myohaung, while the 82nd division played a key role in the Third Arakan campaign, capturing Dalet Chaung and Tamandu in early 1945, despite suffering heavy losses. Together, these divisions pushed Japanese forces back and helped secure Allied positions in the region.⁶⁰

Nigerian troops were among those who fought against the Japanese in Burma, enduring tough jungle conditions and proving themselves in some of the hardest battles. One account described their success, saying, “Many of the soldiers came from technologically very backward groups – most were illiterate on recruitment. Yet they fought with modern weapons against a fanatically brave enemy in strange and appalling conditions with such success that both the Japanese enemy and British commanders had the highest regard for them.”⁶¹ Their achievements were praised by Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, the Supreme Allied Commander in Southeast Asia, who led the fight against Japan in the region. After the fall of Rangoon, Mountbatten said, “You have won the race for Rangoon and beaten the monsoon as well as the Japanese.”⁶² Nigerian soldiers overcame huge challenges and earned respect for their courage, adaptability, and vital role in the Allied victory.

Nigerian soldiers also showed incredible skill and bravery, especially in the East African campaign. In East Africa, the 23rd Nigerian Infantry Brigade, made up of the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd battalions, played a major role in defeating Italian forces. They defended the Mabungo bridgehead, captured an entire Italian battalion, and took thousands of prisoners. Their efforts helped liberate Addis Ababa and led to the capture of 10,000 Italian soldiers in Dire Dawa.⁶³ British African forces “enjoyed overwhelming success” in the Ethiopian campaign, taking Addis Ababa in two months, during which time they covered an average distance of 76 miles per day.⁶⁴

In many cases, African soldiers were placed directly on the front lines, often becoming the first to be shot while protecting the European men. They were given minimal training and equipped with substandard supplies compared to their European counterparts.⁶⁵ Even as they proved their effectiveness in combat, they were consistently denied equal treatment and recognition.

Disparities in the treatment of African prisoners of war

German forces subjected African colonial soldiers, primarily from French West Africa (Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger), to especially brutal treatment during their captivity in World War II. These soldiers fought for the French colonial army in units such as the 24th Regiment of the Senegalese tirailleurs and were captured during the 1940 Battle of France. Near Cavillon, German soldiers executed wounded African troops on the battlefield. As Édouard Kouka Ouédraogo, a soldier from Burkina Faso, recounts, “The wounded are finished off on the field.” He describes how guards killed African soldiers on sight and beat others with rifle barrels. During forced marches, guards placed African soldiers at the back of the columns, behind white French and North African troops, and regularly denied them food and water. Those who slowed down or tried to drink from puddles were shot.⁶⁶

While all POWs suffered harsh conditions, the Germans treated white French soldiers less violently. White prisoners lived in the barracks, but guards left African prisoners in open fields with no shelter. Joseph Julien Dache, a white French POW at Romilly-sur-Seine, describes how African soldiers were left exposed, saying, “The camp, if it can be called that, was a lawn surrounded by barbed wire... There was no shelter.” Guards ridiculed African soldiers, associating them with barbarism, and used propaganda to justify their mistreatment.⁶⁷ In June 1940, as Nazi forces advanced through France, African soldiers, mainly from Senegal, were captured alongside French troops. Influenced by racist propaganda, German soldiers viewed them as inferior. While white POWs were sent to camps, Senegalese riflemen were often separated and executed, including at the Chasselay Massacre, where they were machine-gunned by German tanks.⁶⁸ Survivors were held in *Front-Stalags* (German labor camps largely in north-eastern France), and faced starvation and forced labor to prevent so-called “racial contamination.”⁶⁹ This violence due to race highlights how racism worsened the hardships African soldiers faced, both as colonial troops and as prisoners of war.⁷⁰

After the War—Betrayal and Discrimination

Demobilization

Despite their crucial contributions to the war, African colonial soldiers returned home and faced systemic discrimination, receiving much less compensation for their efforts than their European counterparts. This reflected the racial inequalities of colonial rule. Many African soldiers returned home expecting fair treatment, pensions, or land grants. Instead, they found unemployment and minimal support.

The refusal to pay African veterans their promised wartime wages was not only an administrative failure, but also an example of racial inequalities embedded in colonial military

structures. Demobilization typically involved a small war gratuity or severance, but records reveal that African veterans received far less than their white counterparts. For example, there is evidence that African soldiers were paid nearly three times less than white British soldiers. Records show significant pay disparities and broken promises to African veterans, highlighting enduring colonial injustices. African veterans sometimes received demobilization payouts up to 80% lower than those given to white soldiers. Soldiers returning to places such as Kenya, Nigeria, and Senegal often did not receive their promised benefits, and some sources say their pensions were only a fraction of what Europeans of the same rank were paid.⁷¹ When African colonial soldiers returned home to their countries of Nigeria and Kenya, their war gratuity was nearly three times less than white British soldiers, since they were black. In 2019, Losh revealed a document from the British National Archives confirming that inequality was a part of the colonial government's official policy in paying the African soldiers the least compared to others.⁷² This mistreatment after the war was not incidental but part of an official colonial policy.

When Private Mbiuki, who fought for the British in Burma, finally returned to Kenya, he discovered that even though all discharged soldiers were entitled to a war gratuity, British policy stated that someone of his ethnic background and colonial status should be paid less than a white soldier. As a private, he could earn only three and a half shillings for each month he had served. In contrast, a white soldier with the same rank would get 10 shillings—nearly three times more. “They should have known how much we had helped them,” says Mbiuki. “We were abandoned, just like that.”⁷³ “I only get 5,000 Congolese francs (around five euros) per month in war pension. This is unworthy of someone who has fought for the interests of Belgium,” laments veteran Albert Kunyuku, a former Congolese corporal in the Belgian colonial army.⁷⁴ The racial pay gap and

inadequate post-war support reflected the colonial government's broader disregard for African veterans.

Following the war, the colonial government also failed to fulfill its promises to Nigerian ex-servicemen. Many veterans received inadequate pensions or no employment assistance, leaving them to face widespread unemployment. The skills they gained during their service were often irrelevant to civilian life, further compounding their difficulties. By 1947, there were over 43,533 unemployed Nigerian ex-servicemen out of a total of 100,099 who had served during the war. This means that nearly 43% of Nigerian ex-servicemen were still unemployed by 1947, two years after the war ended. “The brave new world they had fought for, had very easily faded into a rotten world of unemployment and frustration” shared Mokuwugo Okoye.⁷⁵

In late 1944, the French military forced African soldiers returning from France and from German prisoner of war camps to return their American-issued uniforms before being sent back to their communities in French West Africa. This policy left the soldiers poorly dressed and humiliated as they reintegrated into civilian life. These soldiers, many of whom had fought for France or endured imprisonment during the war, were denied the dignity of keeping their uniforms, which symbolized their service and sacrifices. In contrast, white French soldiers were allowed to retain their uniforms. This highlights the racial inequality within the French colonial military system.⁷⁶

The 1944 Thiaroye massacre is one of the most horrifying examples of this injustice and is one of the darkest chapters in the history of African colonial soldiers.⁷⁷ Senegalese tirailleurs, who had risked their lives for France, peacefully protested at a military camp in Dakar when they were denied the wages they had rightfully earned. What followed was an act of brutal repression. French

forces, determined to crush their dissent, unleashed violence upon these unarmed veterans, murdering dozens in cold blood. Biram Senghor, 82 years old one of the sons of the victims, laments, “These White men threw away Black men like they were nothing.”⁷⁸ Despite their service, many African veterans faced violent repression, as seen in the Thiaroye Massacre, where dozens were killed while demanding fair pay. The massacre is a reminder of the inequality African soldiers faced after the war and how far colonial powers would go to maintain their control.

In some cases, West African soldiers from Nigeria, the Gold Coast, Sierra Leone, and Gambia endured humiliating delays upon their return home. While British officials claimed “shipping difficulties” were the cause, a deeper analysis reveals that political and strategic motives were the root cause of the delays. African troops were treated as expendable and given lower priority than their British and Commonwealth counterparts. Instead of honoring their sacrifices, the British military forced them to remain abroad for post-war tasks such as clearing debris and occupying territories in Asia and the Middle East. These soldiers, praised by Japanese forces as “the best jungle fighters” during the Burma campaign, were denied a timely return home. These delays and their treatment reflected the systemic racial discrimination they faced.⁷⁹

The delayed return of African troops was also partly due to political fears. Britain worried that thousands of trained, frustrated ex-soldiers returning to West Africa’s tense, nationalist atmosphere could spark unrest. To avoid this, the government aimed to slow their return while tightening control over colonies and adjusting its decolonization plans. Colonial governors feared these veterans could intensify anti-colonial movements and destabilize British rule.⁸⁰ Beyond political concerns, African soldiers’ contributions were ignored both economically and historically, deepening post-war frustrations that contributed to independence movements.

Recognition

These troops returned home expecting fair treatment and respect but instead received little recognition. This treatment amplified the frustration that contributed to independence movements across Africa.⁸¹ Although sporadic monuments and belated apologies emerged, the broader narrative still overlooks why Africans enlisted in the first place and how deeply colonial systems buried their sacrifices. The deliberate omission of black colonial soldiers in leading the liberation of Paris on August 25, 1944, starkly highlights the lack of recognition for their contributions. Despite making up 65% of the Free French forces, West African tirailleurs were replaced by white soldiers, often from North Africa and even Spain, on that day to ensure the division was seen as “whites-only.”⁸² Allied commanders, including British and American leaders, aiming to present the liberation as a symbol of white European unity, supported this decision. This exclusion erased the contributions of African soldiers and perpetuated systemic racism. Issa Cisse, a former French colonial soldier, reflects on this betrayal: “We were forced to go to war... France has not been grateful. Not at all.”⁸³

Epilogue: 60–80 Years After WWII

World War II became a turning point for African colonial soldiers, creating a shared sense of injustice that later fueled anti-colonial movements.⁸⁴ The war exposed the deep contradictions of colonial rule, as African soldiers who fought for European powers were later marginalized and mistreated. The Thiaroye massacre and the broader exploitation of African troops became lasting symbols of colonial oppression and systemic racism. While some political leaders have begun offering apologies and symbolic compensation, families continue to demand greater recognition. The need for inclusive memorials, enriched educational programs, and deeper archival research remains critical for honoring the sacrifices of these overlooked heroes of World War II. In 2024,

French President Emmanuel Macron, for the first time, officially recognized the killing of West African soldiers by the French Army in 1944 as a massacre in a letter addressed to Senegalese authorities.⁸⁵

France has also formally recognized the contributions of Senegalese tirailleurs. These soldiers played a crucial role in liberating southern France during Operation Dragoon in 1944 but faced decades of discrimination, receiving lower pensions and delayed citizenship. In response, the French government has now equalized pensions and granted honorary citizenship to surviving veterans. France's acknowledgment of their sacrifices as essential to France's freedom, marks a broader effort to address colonial injustices.⁸⁶

The experiences of war significantly altered how African soldiers viewed themselves and the colonial system. Fighting alongside white soldiers and witnessing white privates in lower ranks dismantled the long-held belief in white superiority. Many veterans returned with a heightened sense of racial equality and confidence in their own abilities. Some played a crucial role in the political evolution of their countries at the time of independence. Many new nations' armed forces were led by former colonial soldiers, and some rose to power through coups or populist political movements. Examples include Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire,⁸⁷ Gnassingbé Eyadéma in Togo,⁸⁸ Sangoulé Lamizana in Upper Volta (Burkina Faso),⁸⁹ Ahmed Ben Bella in Algeria,⁹⁰ and Léopold Sédar Senghor in Senegal.⁹¹

However, not all ex-servicemen had a political impact. In Nigeria, for instance, they failed to exert influence as a unified group due to divisions along regional and tribal lines. The presence of multiple, fragmented ex-servicemen's organizations further weakened their collective power. Poor leadership and a lack of direction from nationalist politicians also reduced their political

significance.⁹² In contrast, Ghanaian ex-servicemen played a more prominent role in the nationalist struggle. Unified under fewer organizations, they received direct support from leaders, such as Kwame Nkrumah, who used their grievances to fuel the independence movement. The lack of similar leadership and unity in Nigeria limited the political influence of returning soldiers.

Although some governments have made efforts to acknowledge African veterans, their contributions remain largely absent from mainstream World War II histories, school curricula, and national memorials. Media investigations by outlets such as *Al Jazeera* and *The Guardian* have uncovered ongoing disparities, yet these revelations have prompted little meaningful change.

Stories of individuals such as Isaac Fadoyebo and Eusebio Mbuiki serve as reminders that African soldiers' sacrifices are deeply woven into the global history of World War II yet remain largely unrecognized. As many former colonial soldiers transitioned into leadership roles in military and political movements, their service shaped the future of their nations, influencing the post-colonial landscape.

Conclusion

African colonial soldiers were largely recruited through coercive methods, and even those who “volunteered” did so under severe economic and social pressures. Once enlisted, they served bravely in the European, Burma, and North African theatres but were systematically underpaid, disrespected, and marginalized upon returning home. Despite their indispensable role, these troops seldom appear in grand World War II narratives or victory parades. This omission exposes the racial biases of colonial military structures. The story of African veterans underscores the profound contradictions of empires demanding loyalty while denying equality. Even a century later, the role of African colonial soldiers is underrepresented in historical narratives. For example, *The Penguin*

History of the Second World War, a comprehensive 1,315-page volume, fails to mention the contributions of African colonial soldiers to the Allied war effort even once.⁹³

To fully acknowledge their sacrifices and rectify this historical oversight, several steps are necessary, including continued research into colonial archives, oral interviews with surviving family members, integration of African soldiers' perspectives into World War II scholarship, more comprehensive memorials, and thorough education programs. These efforts are crucial to illuminating the stories of these "forgotten heroes" and addressing the historical imbalance that has long overshadowed their contributions. Only through such comprehensive measures can we properly honor the legacy of men who were compelled to fight in a war they scarcely understood under powers that never fully respected their humanity or sacrifice.

Endnotes

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