

The Ethnic Composition and the Participation of the Reorganized French Army in the Liberation of the Metropolitan France

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Although France suffered a crushing defeat in 1940 and was forced to sign an armistice, the war did not end for all French territories. In July 1940, General Charles de Gaulle created the Free French Forces in London to continue the fight against the Axis powers. The Allied invasion of French North Africa in November 1942 has changed the situation: the French North African government started to contribute to the Allied war effort and the French Army of Africa also joined the fight on the side of the Allies. In 1943, the two French forces have joined to form the French Liberation Army which took an active part in the fighting on the European theatre of operations. It fought successfully in Italy, during the liberation of the metropolitan France and in Germany. In a surprising way, more than half of the members of the French Liberation Army came from the French colonies. These soldiers were able to show a convincing performance on the battlefield during the fighting on the European theatre. Despite this, they were forced to undergo the so-called bleaching (*blanchiment*) during which they were replaced by metropolitan soldiers. This process created general discontent in their ranks, but their demonstration for more equitable behaviour was severely repressed by the French authorities.

[World War II; French Army; Liberation; Colonial Troops; Bleaching]

Introduction

The French army suffered a crushing defeat in 1940. On the other hand, its participation in the war continued thereafter thanks to the Free French Forces (*Forces françaises libres*) created by General Charles de Gaulle. Then, this activity reached a higher level after the French colonies in North Africa rallied to the Allies at the end of 1942 under the command of General Henri Giraud. The merger of two French armies of similar origins

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but with very different convictions was a difficult task. Despite this, a force was created in 1943 that was able to play an active role in the liberation of Europe.

As a result, French troops participated in the conquest of Italy and the liberation of France, and later in the invasion of Germany. It is also a little-known fact that many soldiers who fought for the French army were not French citizens. The new armed force was primarily based on colonial forces being composed mainly of native soldiers. They were supplemented by a significant number of nationals of other European and non-European nations. However, for various reasons, the French military command had already begun to “whitewash” (*blanchir*) these units upon the liberation of the mother country.

In my article, I will present the process of reorganization and deployment of the new French army. At the same time, I will try to reveal what motivated the French military leadership to relegate to the background, in the last months of the war, its soldiers who had played an important role in the victory.

The French Colonial Empire in 1939–1940

The French colonial empire was gradually built up from the early 16th century. French sailors explored the shores of the Americas on numerous voyages before the French crown officially began colonising the New World. As a result, large areas of the North American continent came under French rule during the 17th century, as did parts of the Antilles and Guyana in South America. At the same time, France also took control of small areas of West Africa, islands in the Indian Ocean and parts of India, laying the foundations for a global colonial empire. However, at the end of the Seven Years' War in the second half of the 18th century, most of these territories in North America, Africa and India came under British rule.² To aggravate the situation, in 1804 the island of Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) won its independence from mainland France after a long struggle.³ Consequently, the promising colonial construction process seemed to have come to a standstill.⁴

The great turning point came in 1830, when Charles X re-launched the colonisation of Africa with the invasion of Algeria, complemented

² B. PHAN, *Colonisation et décolonisation (XVII^e–XX^e siècle)*, Paris 2009, pp. 45–51.

³ P. SINGARAVÉLOU (ed.), *Les empires coloniaux. XIX^e–XX^e siècle*, Paris 2013, pp. 378–380.

⁴ J. FRÉMEAUX, *Les empires coloniaux. Une histoire-monde*, Paris 2012, pp. 70–71.

by French expansion in sub-Saharan Africa. The number of colonies then began to grow rapidly again during the Second Empire, when, in accordance with Napoleon III's ideas, not only did the earlier expansion in Africa continue, but new conquests were made in the Indian and Pacific Oceans (e.g. Madagascar, New Caledonia, Cambodia).⁵ Subsequently, the Franco-Prussian War gave a new impetus to expansion, as the heavy military defeat suffered in the course of the war demonstrated that France could only expand its territory in a colonial race, and that it could not compete with its rivals on the European continent. During the Third Republic, the expansionist processes that had begun earlier continued in both Africa and Asia, leading on several occasions to great power tensions (Fashoda, Agadir). By the beginning of the 20th century, colonial expansion had made France one of the major colonial powers.⁶

The French-controlled colonies played an important role during the First World War. On the one hand, they contributed to the conquest of the German colonies, which was a major achievement, and on the other, they sent large quantities of munitions and labour, as well as large numbers of soldiers to the European theatres of war, which contributed decisively to the victories won there. It is estimated that more than 600,000 colonial soldiers served in the conflict, while more than 200,000 colonial workers were employed in French factories producing munitions.⁷ This contribution was significant in both quantity and quality, as is demonstrated by the fact that most of the medals awarded during the conflict were to colonial units.⁸

The victory in the First World War further increased the number of territories under French control. This was not the result of new military conquests, but of the peace treaties that ended the conflict, which allowed France to take control of former German and Ottoman possessions as mandates (Cameroon and Togo jointly with the British, and Syria and Lebanon separately). By 1936, with almost 13 million km² and 110 million inhabitants, the French colonial empire was the second largest in the world, behind the British. At the same time, its military importance was also decisive, as it accounted for a quarter of the available French military force. Moreover, the latter was even more important in qualitative terms,

⁵ A. CLAYTON, *Histoire de l'armée française en Afrique 1830–1962*, Paris 1994, pp. 75–90.

⁶ PHAN, pp. 107–110.

⁷ C-R. AGERON – C. COQUERY-VIDROVITCH – G. MEYNIER – J. THOBIE, *Histoire de la France coloniale 1914–1990*, Paris 2016, pp. 73–79.

⁸ P. MONTAGNON, *Histoire de la Légion de 1831 à nos jours*, Paris 1999, pp. 169–170.

as the colonial formations were generally made up of professional soldiers with considerable combat experience.⁹

Accordingly, the troops redeployed from the colonies to the defence of the motherland were heavily involved in the fighting in the spring and early summer of 1940. At the same time, notwithstanding, the colonial territories were left with only small, under-equipped and often reserve forces, which were not capable of fighting on their own.¹⁰ Nevertheless, after the armistice of 22 June 1940, the French forces stationed in the mainland were the most important, since the army in the mainland was limited to 100,000 men, while in the colonies much larger forces remained in arms. These were available in the following numbers and distribution. In total, we can therefore talk of more than 360,000 soldiers defending a very large territory and resource base, who, even with relatively few modern weapons, represented a major military potential.¹¹ The only question was who would command this armed force during the war, as another French leader had emerged to take control of the colonial – and, in the long term, the mainland – territories, in contrast to the Vichy-centred French State of Marshal Philippe Pétain.

The Partial Free French Occupation of the Colonial Empire

This challenger was a professional army officer, Brigadier General Charles de Gaulle, who flew to London on 17 June 1940 to continue the fight against the Axis powers, despite the French government's desire for an armistice.¹² He found full support from the British government, which recognised the Free French Movement as a political and military organisation representing French wartime interests.¹³ With only a few thousand members, Free France needed to consolidate its position, and the best opportunity to do so was within the French colonial empire. A few small colonial territories joined Free France voluntarily (New Hebrides, Chad, French Cameroon, Congo, Oubangui-Chari), while the rest were brought to its side over the next few years often with British military assistance.¹⁴

⁹ FRÉMEAUX, pp. 475–480.

¹⁰ CLAYTON, pp. 155–161.

¹¹ AGERON – COQUERY-VIDROVITCH – MEYNIER – THOBIE, pp. 314–316.

¹² Service Historique de la Défense (hereafter SHD) GR 4 P 1. Historique des Forces françaises libres, t. 1, p. 9.

¹³ Archives nationales (hereafter AN) 72 AJ 221. Accord Churchill-De Gaulle du 7 août 1940.

¹⁴ SHD GR 4 P 2. Historique des Forces françaises libres, t. 2, pp. 12–13, 23–24.

De Gaulle, facing reality, first concentrated on consolidating control over French territory in Central Africa and on 12 October he ordered the occupation of Gabon, which did not follow the example of the neighbouring French colonies and did not switch to the Allies. Thanks to the decisive action of the Free French troops, who had considerable combat experience, the campaign ended quickly on 10 November with the capture of Libreville and with few casualties (36 dead).¹⁵

In addition to the rapid capture of Gabon, the autumn of 1940 was marked by further minor successes as more French territories decided to join Free France. On 7 September the French Colonies of India, on 9 September the French Colonies of the Oceania and on 24 September the leadership of New Caledonia chose General De Gaulle's camp.¹⁶

Although the Central African territory under Free French control covered nearly three million square kilometres, it had a population of only six million (including 5,000 of European origin) and a low level of infrastructure.¹⁷ However, the acquisition of the region, which was called Free French Africa from the autumn of 1940, had many strategic advantages for both the Free French and Britain. A land link was established east-west across the African continent with British troops in Egypt, allowing supplies to reach the fighting units safely and by a relatively short route.¹⁸

In the meantime, a completely new situation had developed in the Eastern Mediterranean: in May 1941, Rashid Ali had launched an uprising against the British in Iraq.¹⁹ At the time, the Germans considered that French involvement would be useful in exploiting this unexpected event, and so they negotiated the use of French airfields in Syria and the transfer of weapons stored in the Syrian arsenals to the rebels.²⁰ In the light of these events, Churchill decided that French territory should be neutralised and on 20 May he ordered Operation Exporter, the occupation of the French Mandate areas of Levant.²¹ On 8 June, in the early hours of

¹⁵ A-P. COMOR, *L'Épopée de la 13^{ème} Demi-brigade de Légion Étrangère 1940–1945*, Paris 1988, pp. 114–118.

¹⁶ AN 72 AJ 238. L'origine du recrutement et des motivations des Forces françaises libres, pp. 5–8.

¹⁷ SHD GR 4 P 2. Historique des Forces françaises libres, t. 2, p. 20.

¹⁸ R. CHARLES, Les Forces aériennes françaises libres en Afrique, in: *Revue historique des armées*, 20, 1964, p. 122.

¹⁹ R. O. PAXTON, *La France de Vichy 1940–1944*, Paris 1973, pp. 117–118.

²⁰ B. LAMBAUER, *Otto Abetz et les Français ou l'envers de la collaboration*, Paris 2001, pp. 330–332.

²¹ COMOR, p. 140.

the morning, the attack on the French territories of Levant (Syria and Lebanon) began with the deployment of British and Free French Forces. The local French command requested a ceasefire on 9 July, and on 12 July the terms of surrender were negotiated in the town of Acre and ratified on 14 July.²² Subsequent British-Free French negotiations resulted that the territories concerned, and the captured military equipment have come under Free French control.²³

In addition to the military successes, an important step was the decision of other French colonial territories to join the Free French movement during this period. On 27 May 1942, the Western Pacific archipelago of Wallis and Futuna announced that it would join Free France.²⁴ On 28 November 1942, with British approval, the Free French Forces landed on the island of Réunion, whose leadership surrendered after three days of negotiations, adding another territory to the ranks of Free France.²⁵ The next to join was French Somaliland. The 1,500 members of the pro-Vichy garrison stationed there, led by Lieutenant Colonel Georges Raynal, left their designated posts on 27 November 1942, and joined the Free French Forces on their march to British territory.²⁶ At the end of December, these forces returned to the colony to march to Djibouti to overthrow the local leadership, which they did without firing a shot. As a result, by the end of the year the territory and its garrison of 13,000 men were under Free French control.²⁷

Madagascar was a special case among the French colonies. On 5 May 1942, the British forces carried out Operation Ironclad, a surprise landing operation to capture the island.²⁸ The military operations ended on 8 November with the surrender of the French garrison.²⁹ As a result of De Gaulle's decisive action, control of the island was handed over to the Free French Forces in November.³⁰

²² Y. GRAS, *La 1^{ère} D.F.L. Les Français libres au combat*, Paris 1983, p. 101.

²³ AN 72 AJ 220. Chronology of the Free French activities, pp. 12–14.

²⁴ AN 72 AJ 225. Aux Antilles (juillet 1941-avril 1944).

²⁵ J-L. CRÉMIEUX-BRILHAC, *La France Libre. De l'appel du 18 Juin à la Libération*, Paris 2013, p. 561.

²⁶ AN 72 AJ 225. Mémoire du lieutenant Eichenbaum, p. 8.

²⁷ AN 72 AJ 220. Chronology of the Free French activities, 30–31.; R. MAGGIAR, *Les fusiliers marins de Leclerc. Une route difficile vers De Gaulle*, Paris 1984, pp. 62–63.

²⁸ AN 72 AJ 238. Témoignage de l'amiral Paul Ortoli, pp. 64–65.

²⁹ E. Nativel, La « guérilla » des troupes vichystes à Madagascar en 1942, in: *Revue historique des armées*, 54, 1998, pp. 49–60.

³⁰ AN 72 AJ 225. Témoignage du Général Legentilhomme, p. 6.

This success was compounded by news from the Caribbean at the end of June, as the French Antilles joined Fighting France on 14 July.³¹

As a result, by the end of 1942, all former French colonial territories except these under Vichy control in North and West Africa and Indochina, occupied by Japanese forces, were under De Gaulle's authority. The most important task was therefore to bring all the French colonial territories under joint control to build up a substantial land, air and naval force to fight on the Allied side.

The Reorganization of the French Armed Forces

Even before the end of the fighting in North Africa, discussions began on the creation of a French force with a large combat capability. The main obstacle was the division between the *Gaullists* and the *Giraudists*, but Anglo-Saxon leaders made great efforts to bridge the gap between the two camps. The two French generals were invited to a conference in Casablanca, Morocco, from January 14 to 24, 1943, to try to find common ground even though they had different views on several issues. Despite the talks between De Gaulle and Giraud on January 22, 23 and 24, no agreement was reached.³² The question of the equipment of the new force was nevertheless settled, with President Roosevelt committing himself to providing the new French army with sufficient modern weaponry, thanks to the almost unlimited capacities of American industry.³³ This was essential, because the French colonies, although rich in certain raw materials, did not have any large-scale industry and could not contribute to the equipment of the French forces.³⁴ During the discussions, General Giraud had initially agreed to create eight infantry divisions and five armored divisions. Because it would have taken a long time to arm and train them, and because of American concerns about their future effectiveness, a compromise was reached: finally, five infantry divisions and three armored divisions have been established.³⁵ However, due to organizational and training difficulties, only some of these units were still operational in 1943.³⁶

³¹ AN 72 AJ 225. Rapport du commandant Henri Tourtet.

³² F. BROCHE – J-F. MURACCIOLE (eds.), *Dictionnaire de la France libre*, Paris 2010, pp. 55–56.

³³ J-M. MARILL, Coloniaux et Français libres, deux destinées, in: *Revue historique de l'armée*, 56, 2000, p. 58.

³⁴ E. JENNINGS, *La France libre fut africaine*, Paris 2014, pp. 181–220.

³⁵ P. MONTAGNON, *La France dans la guerre de 39–45*, Paris 2009, p. 548.

³⁶ BROCHE – MURACCIOLE, p. 76.

In an attempt to resolve the tense situation between the two French generals, De Gaulle travelled to Algiers on May 30, 1943, to personally negotiate with Giraud. Although he was in a weaker military and political position, he was finally able to reach an agreement that served both the creation of a joint force and his own interests.³⁷ This led to the creation of the French Committee of National Liberation (*Comité français de libération nationale*) in June and the French Liberation Army (*Armée française de la Libération*) on August 1. The new political and military leadership, composed of the followers of the two generals, was forced to operate within this framework to create a new French army capable of contributing to the liberation of France and occupied Europe. Consequently, the French Fighting Forces (*Forces françaises combattantes*), the Free French Forces which had taken that name in 1942, and the Army of Africa (*Armée d'Afrique*), which had joined the Allies in November 1942 and included French military units stationed in the French territories of North Africa, ceased to exist in their previous form. Then, their best units had to be transformed into a single army with a high combat value during a few months.³⁸

The most important problem was the composition of the units, which had to be established from two bodies with very different numbers, training and, above all, convictions. On the one hand, there was a force of nearly 300,000 men according to General Giraud, which could be multiplied in a short time by the conscription carried out in the French territories in Africa.³⁹ Nonetheless, it was composed mainly of native soldiers, whose weapons were obsolete at the beginning of 1943 and who had almost no experience in modern warfare.⁴⁰ Therefore, most of these troops were not ready for combat. On the other side were the Free French soldiers of General De Gaulle, who followed their leader unconditionally. They had modern equipment and had gained combat experience in battles won and lost in various African theatres of operations, but their numbers were much smaller. The most reliable estimates put their numbers at 66,000 at most,⁴¹ while the number of soldiers serving in the most valuable units (the 1st and 2nd Free French Divisions), capable of

³⁷ F. BROCHE, *L'Armée française sous l'Occupation. La métamorphose*, Paris 2002, pp. 408–409.

³⁸ GRAS, pp. 246–249.

³⁹ MARILL, p. 59.

⁴⁰ C. BACHELIER, La nouvelle armée française, in: J-P. AZÉMA – F. BÉDARIDA (eds.), *La France des années noires. De l'occupation à la Libération*, Paris 2000, pp. 250–252.

⁴¹ J-F. MURACCIOLE, *Les Français libres. L'autre Résistance*, Paris 2009, pp. 36–37.

operating effectively in the European continent against German forces, did not even reach 20,000.⁴² The fact that most soldiers serving in both forces regarded each other with mutual resentment and sometimes even hatred did not make the task of military management any easier.⁴³ In this complex and contradictory situation, a compromise had to be found to avoid new conflicts between the two sides and at the same time contribute to the creation of a French army with high fighting value.

On the Free French side, two old and proven formations played a vital role in the new army: the 1st Mechanized Infantry Division was created from the 1st Free French Division, and the 2nd Armored Division was based on the 2nd Free French Division, so in theory they made up a quarter of the new force.⁴⁴ Though, since there were not enough technical and armored troops available in the Free French ranks to form the second one, a large part of the division was filled with units transferred from the Army of Africa. The remaining divisions of the new force were created using only forces stationed in North Africa, and thus, despite their former affiliation, they clearly constituted the majority of the Liberation Army. These included the 2nd Moroccan Infantry Division, the 3rd Algerian Infantry Division, the 4th Moroccan Mountain Division, the 9th Colonial Infantry Division, and the 1st and 5th Armored Divisions.⁴⁵

In parallel with the reorganization of the land forces, the air force was also reformed and, in general, faced the same problems as the army. A unified, combat-ready force had to be created from units with different equipment, training, experience, and beliefs. In addition, the French general staff was forced to accept that units equipped with U.S. war materiel would be deployed under Allied command to the European theatre of operations. Following this agreement, the transfer of aircrafts accelerated, and the Anglo-Saxon powers accepted the French proposal to create a French Air Force of 600 aircraft and 33,000 men by July 1944.⁴⁶ General René Bouscat, from the Army of Africa, was appointed to head it, while General Martial Valin, former commander of the Free French Air Force,

⁴² MARILL, p. 56.

⁴³ GRAS, pp. 246–247.

⁴⁴ J. DELMAS, Le général Koenig d'El Alamein à Alger, août 1942–mars 1944, in: *Revue historique des armées*, 58, 2002, p. 83.

⁴⁵ F. BROCHE – G. CAÏTUCOLI – J-F. MURACCIOLE, *La France au combat de l'Appel du 18 juin à la victoire*, Paris 2007, p. 454.

⁴⁶ P. FACON, L'armée de l'Air nouvelle: du corps expéditionnaire au projet d'Air Force française (1942–1945), in: *Revue historique des armées*, 48, 1992, pp. 72–74.

was only given the position of Deputy Chief of Staff of the Air Force. The reason for this was the difference in manpower: the Free French Forces had only seven aircraft units, with a rather varied combat value, and less than 4,000 men at the time of the merger, while the troops of Bouscat had 25 aircraft groups and more than 20,000 men, although their equipment was rather obsolete, and the personnel was poorly trained. Between June 1943 and August 1944, these groups received modern weapons, while nearly 10,000 people were trained in their use. Joint training and deployments quickly forged bonds among soldiers from different backgrounds, enabling the new air force to participate effectively in air operations in the European theatre in the years to come.⁴⁷

Reorganizing the navy was also a major challenge because of the costly and time-consuming construction and repair of the surface units that made up the navy. The new fleet commander, Rear Admiral André-Georges Lemonnier, had a difficult task ahead of him in creating a unified force.⁴⁸ The African Navy had 30,000 men and large ships with greater range, while the Free French Navy had only 5,000 men and mostly small surface units. U.S. and British weapons supply and modernization were a great help, and by mid-1944, the French Navy had 100 modernized warships and 140 new-build ships.⁴⁹ The renewed French Navy resumed the fight against the Axis powers with great determination and played its part in major operations throughout the remainder of the war.⁵⁰

The Ethnic Composition of the Armed Forces

Despite their different origins and identities, the new French forces show many similarities, one of the most striking of which is the fact that they had a very large number of non-French citizens in their ranks. At first glance, this may seem surprising, for one might reasonably assume that this force, whose primary objective was the liberation of the occupied homeland, was composed almost exclusively, or at least overwhelmingly, of French nationals. Notwithstanding, the reality of the situation belies this logical assumption, since this force was made up, particularly in the ground units, of a very high proportion of colonial soldiers and volunteers of foreign nationality.

⁴⁷ AN 72 AJ 238. Témoignage de l'amiral Philippe Auboyneau, pp. 34–37.

⁴⁸ MONTAGNON, *La France*, p. 548.

⁴⁹ P. MASSON, *La Marine française et la guerre 1939–1945*, Paris 2000, pp. 416–417.

⁵⁰ CRÉMIEUX-BRILHAC, pp. 930–931.

The Free French Forces numbered about 66,000 soldiers, but about 10 percent of them were part of the metropolitan resistance, so the maximum number of soldiers in combat units was approximately 60,000. However, recent research on the subject clearly shows that the number of colonial soldiers among them was about 30,000, or about 50% of the fighting forces. It should be noted that these numbers are only estimates, as most of them did not volunteer for service. In general, they were ordered by their commanders to join the Free French Forces, almost automatically, and thus did not sign an application form, making it difficult to identify them later. In addition, there were approximately 3,000 foreign nationals who signed up to fight for the Free French.⁵¹ They were mainly motivated by anti-fascist sentiments, so it is not surprising that the Spaniards (480 people) and the Poles (270 people) were the largest national contingents, but my research also proves that the number of Hungarians was about 150, which is relatively large when compared with the numbers presented above.⁵² Overall, almost half of the people serving in the Free French Forces were not French citizens.⁵³

Most of the new force was formed by the Army of Africa, which did not participate in operations between the armistice of June 1940 and the end of 1942. Nonetheless, it also experienced a period of turbulence that had a fundamental impact on its strength and ethnic composition. After the outbreak of World War II, this new army, with its extensive experience in colonial combat, grew to a total of 340,000 men by enlisting a large portion of the mobilizable population.⁵⁴ The number of soldiers of North African origin in its ranks is estimated at 240,000, so that about 70% of the African army was composed of people from the ranks of the local population.⁵⁵ In the entire French colonial empire, about 80,000 people were deployed in the continental theatre of operations in 1940, of which 68,500 were part of the Army of Africa, which suffered significant losses, about 30%, during the German offensive.⁵⁶

By virtue of the armistice with the Germans, the colonies remained under the authority of the French government, which was allowed to

⁵¹ MURACCIOLE, pp. 36–37, 50–51.

⁵² BROCHE – MURACCIOLE, p. 1390.

⁵³ E. JENNINGS, *La France libre fut africaine*, Paris 2014, p. 11.

⁵⁴ AGERON – COQUERY-VIDROVITCH – MEYNIER – THOBIE, pp. 313–314.

⁵⁵ C. METZGER, *Le Maghreb dans la guerre 1939–1945*, Paris 2018, p. 75.

⁵⁶ D. LORMIER, *C'est nous les Africains. L'épopée de l'armée française d'Afrique 1940–1945*, Paris 2006, p. 24.

maintain a small force to protect them. This force was steadily increased as the war situation in North Africa developed, reaching 140,000 men between 1940 and 1942. This number was reduced to 116,000 during the fighting with German-Italian forces but increased rapidly when mobilization began. In 1944, the North African region deployed 176,000 French citizens, 150,000 Algerians, 85,000 Moroccans and 46,500 Tunisians, which illustrates the predominance of soldiers of foreign origin. The overall picture, even though, shows an even greater colonial superiority, as Black Africa, Madagascar, and the West Indies contributed an additional 113,000 men to the French force, so 394,600 colonial soldiers served alongside about half as many Frenchmen, thus about two-thirds of this force was of non-French origin.⁵⁷

We can therefore observe that the French Liberation Army was composed, alongside French citizens, of many soldiers born in the colonies and foreign nationals, whose fighting qualities obviously varied, but without whom the army would have been only a symbolic force.

The Liberation of the Metropolitan France

Using the first units deemed combat-ready by the French military command, a large unit was created on May 18, 1943. Initially known as Army A, and later as the French Expeditionary Corps of Italy (*Corps expéditionnaire français d'Italie*), it was deployed in Italy as part of the U.S. Fifth Army. This 112,000-man corps actively participated in the fighting between November 1943 and July 1944, distinguishing itself in several offensive operations (such as the battle of Monte Cassino and the capture of Elba).⁵⁸

Parallel to this series of operations, and even before the major landings in France, the reconquest of territories belonging to the metropolitan France began. Corsica had been under Italian occupation since November 1942, but after the Italian armistice of September 1943, the former Italian occupation forces, as well as the local French resistance, turned against the German troops stationed on the island. In response to this unexpected situation, the French command, which could not rely on the Anglo-Saxon allies in the area due to the depletion of their forces, dropped about 6,000 troops by submarines and small boats on the island during September. This contingent, along with the local French resistance

⁵⁷ AGERON – COQUERY-VIDROVITCH – MEYNIER – THOBIE, p. 341.

⁵⁸ MONTAGNON, *La France*, pp. 575–582, 598–614.

and Italian soldiers who had defected, succeeded in liberating Corsica on October 4. According to French administrative logic, the occupation of the mainland island marked the beginning of the liberation of France.⁵⁹

However, only a small French unit participated in the Normandy landings in June 1944, alongside a very powerful Anglo-Saxon force. Only the Kieffer Commando (the 1st French Marine Rifles Battalion), composed of 177 men and commanded by Lieutenant-Commander Philippe Kieffer, actively contributed to the operation, which began on June 6.⁶⁰ It would be followed on August 1st by the 2nd French Armored Division, which distinguished itself in the fighting in Normandy and in the liberation of Paris and the north-east of the country.⁶¹

On November 21, 1943, the B Army was created, which would later be renamed the 1st French Army. This 250,000-strong armed force continued to grow and by the summer of 1944, it included all French corps except the 2nd Armored Division stationed in England (including the French Expeditionary Corps in Italy, which was redeployed in July 1944). This army carried out the Provence landings on 15 August 1944 and liberated a large part of southern France. At the same time, the 2nd Armored Division participated in the liberation of the French capital, so that French units advancing in both directions could unite in September, and then, together with Allied troops, continue to drive German troops out of France and then begin the occupation of Germany.⁶²

Even if this military participation was not decisive for the outcome of the war, the Allied powers recognized the contribution of the new French force to the victory. It was in recognition of this effort that General Lattre de Tassigny has signed the document of the German surrender in Berlin on May 8th, 1945, and General Leclerc had accepted the Japanese surrender on the battleship Missouri on September 2nd, 1945.⁶³

The Importance of Colonial Participation and the “Bleaching” of the Troops

Based on the data on the ethnic composition of French forces presented earlier, it is not surprising that the number of colonial soldiers in operations was also extremely high. Of the approximately 72,000 soldiers

⁵⁹ BACHELIER, p. 254.

⁶⁰ V. TROUPLIN, *Dictionnaire des compagnons de la Libération*, Bordeaux 2010, p. 564.

⁶¹ E. BERGOT, *La 2^{ème} D.B.*, Paris 1980, pp. 43–263.

⁶² AN 72 AJ 221. Le général Leclerc, par le colonel Repiton-Préneuf.

⁶³ BROCHE – MURACCIOLE, pp. 77–79.

deployed in the Tunisian campaign of 1942–1943, just over 50,000 were of North African origin.⁶⁴ 60 percent of the 112,000 expeditionary force soldiers in the Italian campaign were also of North African origin, and their mountain warfare skills were crucial to victories in difficult terrain.⁶⁵ The situation was similar for the quarter of a million French soldiers who landed in the south of France in August 1944, more than 60 percent of whom were of colonial origin.⁶⁶ Historical research proves that these soldiers not only represented a significant proportion of the French army in terms of numbers, but that they also had a high combat value, contributing significantly to the successes achieved on the battlefield.⁶⁷

Despite all these feats of arms, in the fall of 1944, the French military command issued an order that sub-Saharan (i.e. black) soldiers serving in the First Army were to be relieved and removed from the front line. This decision affected some 20,000 members of the 1st Mechanized Infantry Division and the 9th Colonial Infantry Division. This order was justified by the challenges of the impending winter, which the Black African soldiers would not have been able to face.⁶⁸ Notwithstanding, this explanation does not appear to be legitimate. Since the pre-combat performance of the evacuated soldiers and the post-combat performance (in winter weather conditions) of the African soldiers remaining on the battlefield were very convincing. The withdrawn soldiers were gradually replaced by new French recruits from the metropolitan France. Hence the process later called “bleaching”, whereby coloured personnel were relieved by white volunteers. It seems that the real reasons were different. The French administration wanted to ensure that colonial soldiers did not mix with the local population. On the one hand, to avoid possible incidents due to cultural differences. On the other hand, to avoid that the ideologies of the metropolitan France (establishment of democracy, self-determination, civil rights, etc.) exerted too much influence on the colonial soldiers

⁶⁴ B. RECHAM, *Les musulmans algériens dans l'armée française, 1919–1945*, Paris 1996, pp. 236–240.

⁶⁵ P. GAUJAC, *Le Corps expéditionnaire français en Italie*, Paris 2003, p. 31.

⁶⁶ J. FRÉMEAUX, Les contingents impériaux au cœur de la guerre, in: *Histoire, économie et société*, 23, 2004, p. 223.

⁶⁷ S. WEISS, L'engagement des troupes nord-africaines et coloniales dans le Sud-Ouest de la France en 1944–1945, in: *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, 65, 2013, pp. 143–152.

⁶⁸ C. DE GAULLE, *Háborús emlékiratok*, Budapest 1973, p. 504.

living in fundamentally different circumstances.⁶⁹ In addition, arming the newly recruited French was a major problem since the Anglo-Saxon allies did not provide the French forces with new supplies of arms during the liberation struggle. This was partially solved by the transfer of weapons from the withdrawn colonial forces.⁷⁰

The unspoken fears of French military and political leaders were partially confirmed, as several incidents occurred among the African soldiers who were withdrawn. Some were due to the treatment of the authorities (insufficient rations, poor equipment, refusal to pay, etc.) and others to the condescending and isolating behaviour of the metropolitan population. This negative discrimination led to many incidents between colonial soldiers and French residents. The colonial soldiers rightly felt that they should be treated in the same way as metropolitan soldiers for their service in France.⁷¹ Many African veterans released from captivity refused to obey because they had not received their rightfully claimed salary for the duration of their captivity, which led to reprisals by the French authorities.⁷²

One of the most serious atrocities took place in Thiaroye, Senegal, where 1,280 colonial riflemen were stationed after being released from captivity and demanding payment of their back wages. Local authorities responded with armed force, killing 35 and wounding 48, according to official reports, but the death toll was probably much higher.⁷³

It is important to note that the colonial territories, which had played a major role in the defence and liberation of the mainland, rightly claimed the gratitude of French political leaders, which was expressed in mass demonstrations in Algeria during the May 1945 celebrations marking the end of World War II. French authorities again responded with the use of armed force, resulting in thousands of deaths (the exact numbers are the subject of considerable debate, as illustrated by the fact that the most

⁶⁹ WEISS, p. 153.

⁷⁰ C. MIOT, *Le retrait des tirailleurs sénégalais de la Première Armée française en 1944. Hérésie stratégique, bricolage politique ou conservatisme colonial?*, in: *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, 32, 2015, pp. 77–86.

⁷¹ FRÉMEAUX, *Les contingents impériaux*, p. 228.

⁷² A. COUSIN, *Retour tragique des troupes coloniales. Morlaix-Dakar, 1944*, Paris 2011, pp. 44–55.

⁷³ C. ONANA, *La France et ses tirailleurs. Enquête sur les combattants de la République*, Paris 2003, pp. 189–190.

extreme estimates place the death toll between 1,000 and 45,000). This confrontation was effectively a precursor to the war of independence in Algeria that would follow a few years later.⁷⁴

Summary

The reorganization of French forces was a long and difficult process hampered by external and internal factors. Nevertheless, in 1944, a well-equipped and relatively large army was committed to the liberation of metropolitan France, the majority of which was made up of soldiers from the colonial territories. Although it was not this force that won the victory, as this was essentially achieved by the Anglo-Saxon allies, it contributed in a modest way. This participation was recognized by the great powers through a series of political gestures at the end of the war.

However, the behaviour of French leaders regarding colonial soldiers was controversial. They were heavily relied upon to win the war, but on the eve of victory, their services were renounced, and they were not rewarded. The soldiers in the colonies were rightly offended by this, yet their demands were not only ignored, but their protests were met with the utmost severity. The long-term consequences of this insensitivity, even though, jeopardized the future of the entire colonial empire, and French political leaders paid a heavy price for their short-sightedness.

⁷⁴ CLAYTON, pp. 189–190.