

Les Américains Noirs: Race and Racism in the U.S. and French Army during World War I

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Huddled at the trench's lip, eyes fixed upon the desolate moonscape beyond, anxious soldiers clutched their bayonet-fixed Nebil rifles as their hearts hammered against their chests. As the whistle's Harpie-like cry pierced the air, these troops charged across No Man's Land while German shells erupted all around them in a volcanic symphony. The enemy saw the men's French uniforms and dark skin, and believed they faced another company of France's feared West African shock troops. However, these soldiers were not African, nor were they French. These were African-American soldiers of the US Army's 93rd Infantry Division. Placed under the command of the French army in 1918 while still nominally a part of the AEF, these African-American troops had the unique experience of serving in two different armies from two different nations. Unlike their sister division, the 92nd, the 93rd tasted what they believed to be the fruits of equality long denied them in America. Moreover, the legacy of these African-American soldiers reveals far more than racial perspectives held by Americans, but also those of the French, especially when one considers their use of African colonials. Through the lenses of US black soldiers' wartime trials, the employment of black troops in both armies, as well as US and French racial perceptions, one beholds racism's sinister sneer upon the visages of both American and French societies.

In the spring of 1917, the Great War's churning vortex pulled the United States into the abyss of battle. The War Department called for a massive army, the likes of which had not been seen since the Civil War, and hundreds of thousands of men either volunteered or were drafted into the armed forces. Training camps sprang up all over the country, National Guard units frantically tried to fill their troop strength quotas, and the War Department applied itself to the daunting task of organizing this planned one-million-man army into divisions. In a startling deviation from the Army's racial past, two of these combat divisions were specifically designated as all African-American divisions. In 1898, the US Army listed 2,500 active-duty officers, only one of whom was an African-American, as well as a mere four all-black regiments. By World War I, two of these regiments were stationed in the western United States, one in Hawaii, and

one more in the Philippines, and had the War Department had its way, no African-American boot would have ever set foot on European soil. As historian Frank E. Roberts expresses in his work *The American Foreign Legion*, the War Department initially omitted any organized African-American units from their war plans, citing a lack of confidence in black men's ability to endure war's harsh realities. Unfazed, African-American community leaders and lobbyists applied tremendous pressure, eventually forcing the Army to execute an about-face on the matter. Originally favoring the raising of all-black volunteer pioneer (frontline labor troops) regiments, in the end, the US government finally acquiesced to the creation of the 92nd "Buffalo Soldiers" Division and the four regiments of the never-completed 93rd. So began their great war for democracy.¹

The war catapulted men from every corner of America, black and white, from their homes to faraway training camps in places upon which they had never before laid eyes. While many cantonments were located in the same region as the volunteers or draftees, many more required the green recruits to travel great distances. The trainees of the 15th New York, 8th Illinois, and the draftees of the future 371st Regiment of the 93rd division would all face this swirling upheaval as they uprooted to camps across the country. For the 92nd Division, their draftees occupied training centers stretching from Long Island, New York, to Camp Funston, Kansas. Still, despite the fact that these training assignments sent African-American men to unfamiliar places, a familiar and insidious entity followed them wherever they traveled. W. Allison Sweeney, in his 1919 book *History of the American Negro in the Great World War*, succinctly described this spectre when he declared that "the old feeling of intolerance; the disposition to treat the Negro unfairly, was yet abroad in the land." In fact, such intolerance embedded itself in the very deployment orders that spirited so many young African-Americans across such a vast territory. At the war's onset, the War Department officially mandated that black troops must comprise a minority of every base's population, therefore US Army cantonments had to maintain a 2:1 ratio that ensured twice as many whites were on base as blacks. Not surprisingly, such dispersions and ratios made any sort of cohesive training between all-black units extremely difficult; a handicap that would prove crippling for some units overseas. Furthermore, War Department bureaucrats anxiously realized that the official policy of

¹ Stephen L. Harris, *Harlem's Hellfighters: The African-American 369th Infantry in World War I* (Washington D.C.: Brassey's Inc., 2003), 12; Frank E. Roberts, *The American Foreign Legion: Black Soldiers of the 93rd in World War I* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2004), 27.

sending trainees to local training camps would violate the ratio-order by creating a large black population on southern bases, therefore, most black units were deployed to segregated northern camps so as to avoid fanning racist fires in the South. Indeed, for the men of the 92nd, and until they joined French forces the 93rd, Jim Crow's menacing glare bore down on the men's olive drab backs.²

Segregation's heavy hand kept a tight grip upon the Army's far-flung bases; in the North, and especially in the South. In the North, *de facto* segregation stood as the accepted norm in race relations, but in the South, long-standing prejudices gave rise to the *de jure* Jim Crow laws that dominated and repressed African-American life throughout the region. For green northern soldiers like Private Bruce G. Wright, their first battlefield was not in muddy European trenches, but in southern towns and cantonments.

Wright enlisted in the Massachusetts National Guard on June 15, 1917, responding to his country's call with the same patriotic pride that swelled the chest of men both black and white. Despite the racial tensions, many men like Wright sought to take up the rifle in 1917 and join the crusade against Prussian militarism. One African-American newspaper entitled *The Age* captured this sentiment when it declared, "It does not mean that he should forget his just causes for complaint. It means that guided by hard, common sense and remembering all that this country justly owes him, the Negro will take up and perform the duty that falls to him." Reinforcing this belief, many African-Americans felt a burning desire to partake in "any war for the destruction of oligarchies which deny him the full-rounded citizenship he has won on every battlefield." However, such ardent patriotism slammed into the immovable object that was Southern racism. As a soldier in the all-black Company L, 6th Massachusetts Infantry, Pvt. Wright and his comrades drew an unfortunate training assignment that shuttled them to Camp Greene in North Carolina. In his diary, Wright observed that they were "the first colored soldiers seen south of the Mason-Dixon line in full equipment since 1865." Having been off the train for little more than an hour, the Massachusetts men clashed in their first engagement of the war. Referring to repeated fist fights between black and white troops, or as Wright called them, "the dirty crackers," it

² Robert H. Ferrell, *Unjustly Dishonored* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011), 4; W. Allison Sweeney, *History of the American Negro in the Great World War* (New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1919), 73, 92; Peter N. Nelson, *A More Unbending Battle: The Harlem Hellfighters' Struggle for Freedom in World War I and Equality at Home* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2009), 148.

was at Camp Greene that Pvt. Wright believed "the war began right then for us," and just like the 6th Massachusetts, the New York regiment soon felt Jim Crow's harsh sting as well.³

Having been denied by the Army for inclusion into the 42nd "Rainbow" Division because "black is not a color of the rainbow," the 15th New York arrived for training at Camp Wadsworth outside the town of Spartanburg, South Carolina. Ominously, before the New Yorkers ever saw the trains that would carry them southward, South Carolinians were howling with indignation at the prospect of black troops in their state. Congressman Sam Nicholls, SC, prophesied on the House floor that armed black and white troops would trigger open war in the United States. In a strange echo of Private Wright's observations, Southern opponents pointed out that the last time black troops marched in the South was in the Civil War, specifically referencing the Union Army's all-black 54th Massachusetts Regiment's blood-drenched 1863 battle against Confederate forces at Fort Wagner, South Carolina, as evidence as to what would happen should blacks and whites cross paths in a Southern cantonment. So rabid was Southern hostility to the notion of African-American soldiers that the Conscription Act of 1917 became the center of a political maelstrom as "bitter opposition which developed in its greatest intensity among the Southern senators and representatives" vainly aimed to derail the bill's passage. Adding fuel to the fire, many Southerners throughout the region maintained that black soldiers were traitors hell-bent upon fomenting an armed uprising at the behest of German provocateurs. As America's war machine gained steam, the racial stress fractures began to buckle.⁴

Just like Pvt. Wright, many New York soldiers found themselves battling their white countrymen before they ever saw a German, especially on guard duty. Often times, the African-American soldiers were purposely tasked with the mundane duty of guarding construction sites on base, which just as often resulted in knock-down scrapes between guards and white civilian construction workers who took offense at being searched by black soldiers. Historian Stephen Harris makes a compelling point by stating the Fifteenth's New York origins and skin color made them a

³ Tracy Lorvette Spencer, James E. Spencer, Jr., and Bruce G. Wright, "World War I as I Saw It: The Memoir of an African-American Soldier," *Massachusetts Historical Review* 9 (2007): 144; Harris, *Harlem's Hellfighters*, 82-83; Emmett J. Scott, "The Participation of Negroes in World War I," *Journal of Negro Education* 12, no. 3 (Summer 1943): 289.

⁴ Harris, *Harlem's Hellfighters*, 98, 114-117; Sweeney, *History of the American Negro in the Great World War*, 81.

convenient target for rabid white supremacists. To illustrate this point, Harris channels Spartanburg mayor John Floyd's declaration that Southerners were hardly threatened by black *southern* soldiers because "we understand them, and they understand us." It was northern blacks and their ideas of racial equality that prompted Floyd to complain that, "This thing is like waving a red flag in the face of a bull, something that can't be done without trouble." And trouble there was, sometimes to the point of inciting an intra-army civil war.⁵

Etched into his diary's pages, Pvt. Wright unequivocally labels his time at Camp Greene as the "war on crackers." This war raged well beyond Camp Greene's confines, as was the case at Camp Mills in New York. After a brief two-week stay marked by a constant barrage of race-related disturbances in South Carolina, the 15th New York received orders to return to their native state and conclude their training at the aforementioned Camp Mills. As fate would have it, though, some of Alabama's most irascible racists would too. The lineal heirs to the Army of Northern Virginia's 4th Alabama Infantry Regiment, the 167th Infantry Regiment's battle standards bore bullet holes from some of the Civil War's fiercest combat, from First Manassas, Sharpsburg (Antietam), Gettysburg, Chickamauga, to the banner's furling at Appomattox in 1865. Although the Civil War's guns had lain silent for 52 years, the embers that sparked that war still burned brightly in the Alabamians' hearts as they traveled northwards on a collision course with the Fifteenth. In fact, the regiment had such a ferocious racist reputation that General Joseph Wheeler, a former Confederate cavalry commander, abandoned the regiment to stateside service in 1898, believing them to lack any soldierly discipline, thus rendering them unfit to fight in Cuba. As historian Stephen L. Harris conveys in his chronicle of the 369th Infantry, these Alabamians frequently engaged in heated fist fights with black troops at Mills, especially the 15th New York, while employing intimidation tactics and hurling foul racial invectives whenever the opportunity arose. Brazenly attempting to institute Southern norms on Northern soil, the Alabama troops haughtily erected signposts throughout the encampment delineating which side was reserved for whites and which side was for "colored." Such actions reflected the Alabamians' condescending amazement at white New

⁵ Harris, *Harlem's Hellfighters*, 115-116, 118-119.

Yorkers tolerating "uppity blacks," which in turn led to an incident that nearly resulted in a fever-pitched battle on base.⁶

In late 1917, not long before the 15th New York received orders to embark for France where they would become the famed 369th Infantry, rumors swirled around the camp that the 167th Infantry planned to attack the black troopers in their barracks as they slept. Arming themselves with rifles and sidearms, the restless New York soldiers patrolled their barracks all night, and at one point, sentries crossed paths with 167th officers. Expecting the tension to erupt into a bloody cataclysm, the sentries quickly realized that these officers were conducting a patrol of their own, as they were "rounding up the ringleaders" responsible for hatching the insidious scheme. Luckily for all involved, no assault ever materialized, and by October 27, 1917, the Army had cut the Fifteenth's orders to sail for France. Still, such prejudices ran deep among Southern soldiers, and this would not be the last time this regiment, and others, would face such threats from their own countrymen. In a letter to a friend back home, one Southern doughboy in France could no longer contain his lamentations: "It certainly gets a Southerner's goat to see how the races mix up on this side." After recounting several instances of racial interactions, the young soldier warned that the situation "will be worse" when the African-American troops "and Southern soldiers get together over here." So it did, as the New Yorkers landed in France only to later come under attack from white troops. Many black veterans from the 369th recalled that while the regiment bivouacked with US Marines, the Marines not only continued the same racist barrage experienced stateside, but even went so far as to murder several black soldiers. Taking matters into their own hands once again, the soldiers organized "vampire patrols" that prowled the barracks in search of terrorizing Marines hell-bent on wreaking havoc. Armed and angry, the future "Hellfighters from Harlem" clashed with their roving foes and "exacted eye-for-an-eye." Faced with such spirited opposition, the murderous raids soon ceased, and once more, the New York regiment found itself on the move, this time to the French Army for combat service. Although race hatred physically manifested itself in these cases, there remained a plethora of ways that this elusive enemy reared its head, especially when the Army confronted the issue of advancing African-American officers.⁷

⁶ Spencer, Spencer, and Wright, "World War I as I Saw It," 144; Roberts, *The American Foreign Legion*, 17; Harris, *Harlem's Hellfighters*, 109-112.

⁷ Harris, *Harlem's Hellfighters*, 134-136, 160; "French Democracy Upsets Southern Newspaper Writer," *The Washington Bee*, January 19, 1918.

Echoing Mayor Floyd's cries, Colonel Herschel Tupes of the 93rd's 372nd Regiment ardently declared that, "racial distinctions which are recognized in civilian life naturally continue to be recognized in military life." According to Tupes, these "racial distinctions" included stymying any advancement for black officers, a policy practiced not only in the 372nd Regiment, but throughout the US and French armies. The principal weapon employed to effect this policy lay in the "efficiency board," which sought to eliminate incompetent and ineffective officers from command positions, and often times, these officers were black. Still, Tupes's quest was hardly a new one in the US Army, especially since many officers shared his views. In 1914, 14 Officer Training Schools operated in the Army, and not one admitted African-American candidates. Also, one uncovers the US Army's prevailing perception of African-American officers in the comments of Major General Alexander Hay, the 92nd Division's 184th Brigade's commander. Like so many officers of his era, Hay railed against African-Americans' supposedly stunted intellectual abilities, which he believed were directly linked to their racial heritage. According to Hay's rigid racism, not only did this prove white supremacy over the African race, but also reflected the rampant laziness and stupidity that made black Americans fit to command only the most menial of labor or pioneer units, and even then their competence and reliability remained highly suspect. Such attitudes died hard despite the reality, as evidenced by the 370th Infantry's composition. Among its troops were former draftsmen, chemists, mechanics, lawyers, doctors, and other college graduates from a variety of fields. In fact, these same troops left a profound impression upon Houston's white citizenry in the wake of the Camp Logan, Texas, race riots with their discipline and drill precision. Nevertheless, despite contrary evidence, the Army and War Department persisted in its institutionalized racism.⁸

Adopting the War College's *Personnel Re-organization*, the 92nd Division significantly culled any opportunities black officers might have had for advancement through the ranks. Specifically, this plan decreed that divisional headquarters staff, brigade commander's aides, adjutants, captains of engineering and artillery billets, as well as supply officer and HQ company commander positions would be closed to black applicants. While severely limiting the number of positions available to black officers,

⁸ Arthur E. Barbeau and Florette Henri, *The Unknown Soldiers: Black American Troops in World War I* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974), 128; Nelson, *A More Unbending Battle*, 149; Ferrell, *Unjustly Dishonored*, 93; Roberts, *The American Foreign Legion*, 21, 24.

the re-organization effort hid another career-stunting tactic. Because many of the forbidden billets required one to be a captain, this move virtually assured that for the duration of their service, African-American officers found themselves glued to the rank of captain, should they even make it to that grade. This plan, combined with the efficiency boards, dropped the percentage of black officers in the "Buffalo Soldiers" Division from 82% at the war's beginning to 58% by its end. Those lieutenants and captains who remained found it exceedingly difficult to train themselves and their units to any degree of efficiency, since repeated labor assignments siphoned them away from their actual duties. All of these tactics reflected the widespread belief that blacks' racial inferiority inhibited their ability to withstand the strain of command. So prevalent was this view that not even ordinary military courtesy was immune. When lower-ranking white officers came across any higher-ranking African-Americans, they often refused to salute, and in a humiliating reversal, some black officers were ordered to salute their white subordinates. However, as the Army's African-American regiments trickled across the Atlantic into France, a kaleidoscopic reality awaited them. While the hapless 92nd would remain in the American Expeditionary Force and endure more of the same, the 93rd's soldiers would fight shoulder-to-shoulder with the French, where race took on both similar and dissimilar roles that allowed it to stand apart from that experienced in the United States.⁹

As the trickle of raw doughboys into France became a flood, AEF commander General John J. "Black Jack" Pershing sought to manage the mammoth task of constructing and employing a combat-effective force, while at the same time parrying incessant requests from Supreme Allied Commander Marshal Ferdinand Foch for US troops, especially African-American soldiers, to fill the gaping holes in his armies after nearly four years of brutal combat. These requests flummoxed the general, especially after British Secretary of War Lord Alfred Milner expressly rejected the US 92nd Infantry Division for a training assignment with the British Expeditionary Force, citing in an official letter to Pershing that "a good deal of administrative trouble would, I think, necessarily arise if the British Army had to undertake the training of a colored Division." Despite defending the "Buffalo Soldiers" as "American citizens" who have been organized into a combat division for use in France, and therefore he "shall not discriminate against these soldiers," General Pershing's views on the

⁹ Barbeau and Henri, *The Unknown Soldier*, 142, 146-148; Nelson, *A More Unbending Battle*, 149.

use of African-American combat troops seemed rather murky. Even Pershing himself bore a lasting reminder of the prevalent racial views held by white society; views that saw African-American men as being fit only for manual labor, thus the reason for so many black stevedore companies during the war.¹⁰

As a young officer, Pershing served with African-Americans in the segregated 10th Cavalry, a fact that contributed to his immortal moniker that historian Donald Smythe traced to its pejorative origins when Pershing served as a tactical instructor at West Point from 1897 to 1898. Known for suffocatingly strict discipline, Pershing clashed with many high-spirited cadets under his command who, upon finding out that he had served with black troops, combined the most vulgar appellation for an African-American with the nickname for John. As Smythe related, eventually "this became the more euphemistic 'Black Jack.'" Loath to reflect on this period of his life, the general later conceded that this name was born from his days as a West Point instructor. Nevertheless, Pershing stated in his 1931 memoir *My Experience in the World War* that despite holding "a favorable impression on my mind" of black soldiers dating back to his days with the Tenth, he immediately added that African-American troops could perform well *under the leadership of white officers*. This statement mirrored the same disdain for black troops' mental capabilities held by so many Army officers, especially after he claimed that black troops required too much training and attention, and therefore should be utilized outside the combat arms. As Pershing once declared: "Strong backs. Weak minds. Stevedores, not soldiers. That's all they were good for." In spite of his lack of understanding, Pershing seized upon this opportunity to, as the 369th's Colonel Charles Heywood described it, "pawn off" the 93rd's regiments to the French.¹¹

Although Pershing insisted that the 93rd's men "were anxious to serve with our armies," and that he made arrangements to have the rest of the division filled out, he unhesitatingly transferred the incomplete 93rd Division to the command of the French Fourth Army, where, in Pershing's words, "these regiments remained with the French to the end." By 1918, the French re-christened the New York guardsmen as the *369ème Régiment d'Infanterie U.S.*, or 369th U.S. Infantry Regiment, an appellation that

¹⁰ General John J. Pershing, *My Experience in the World War 2* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes and Co., 1931), 45, 46.

¹¹ Donald Smythe, "Pershing at West Point, 1897-1898," *New York History* 48, no. 1 (Jan. 1967): 48; Pershing, *My Experiences in the World War*, 117; Roberts, *The American Foreign Legion*, 52; Harris, *Harlem's Hellfighters*, 157-58, 178.

irritated the New Yorkers since any regimental designation greater than 200 referred to a draftee regiment, which they were not. In 1918, the 370th, 371st, and Pvt. Wright's 372nd would all follow the 369th into the trenches, physically transforming into French soldiers as they traded in their US Army gear for French equipment. As Colonel Heywood observed, "Oh, officially we were still the 369th US Infantry, but to all intent and purposes we were *français*." On the exterior, it appeared that Frenchmen lacked the racial prejudices that shackled white Americans' views. However, by descending into the same trenches as the 93rd Division, the role of race and its true nature in the French and US armies during the Great War began to emerge.¹²

When one scans the voluminous records handed down from 93rd Division veterans, one instantly recognizes their sincere belief that racism did not exist in the French army, since French civilians received these soldiers from a strange land with open arms and heart-felt gratitude. Emmett J. Scott, who served as Secretary of War Newton Baker's special liaison to the African-American community during the war, postulated in his 1943 article on African-American participation during World War I that the 93rd's assignment to the French army allowed for these African-American troops to escape "the traditional prejudices, sneers, and insults of those officials of American military units who looked with disfavor upon the employment of Negroes as combat troops." Private Bruce Wright, whose Massachusetts Guard company fought alongside the French as the 372nd Infantry Regiment, commented in his diary that the French soldiers, or "frog soldiers," stood in amazement at how rapidly Wright and his comrades grasped the intricacies of advanced infantry and weapons training. The 369th US Regiment's experience closely resembled Wright's, as the New Yorkers would "eat, dance, sing, march, and fight" shoulder-to-shoulder with the French in what the 369th's Colonel Heywood described as "absolute accord." In fact, W. Allison Sweeney boldly declared in his book chronicling African-Americans' World War I service that "The French *poilu* had not been taught that the color of a man's skin made a difference." These perceptions unnerved many an officer in the AEF. Although these regiments fought with the French Army, they were still American, and therefore still nominally under the American Expeditionary Force's aegis. It appeared that the 93rd might have slipped

¹² Pershing, *My Experiences in the World War*, 97; Roberts, *The American Foreign Legion*, 47-48; Harris, *Harlem's Hellfighters*, 177, 179, 181.

Jim Crow's grasp, but an official AEF document delivered to the French would extend its grasp deep into the trenches.¹³

Entitled "Secret Information Concerning Black American Troops" and delivered to the French command by the AEF Headquarters, this document sought to define and mold French relations with the 93rd's men by curtailing any opportunities for African-Americans to glimpse any sort of racial equality through the window of another culture. Its provisions proved especially draconian. Orbiting around the principle of *qu'elles ne gâtent pas les negres*, which translates to "do not indulge the blacks," French officers were not supposed to praise or encourage African-American troops serving with them in any way, nor were they to fraternize, engage in any non-military conversation, or even shake hands with the US soldiers. Furthermore, this "secret information" dictated that the French must recognize African-Americans' social/racial inferiority in the United States, as well as their poor mental capacity. Another glaring guideline mandated a strict segregation policy in order to neutralize any African-American threat to "mongrolize [*sic*] the white race." Anything less than full recognition of these precepts threatened to strike at the core of US national beliefs, thereby upsetting the social and racial order in America. After the French Army Command received these rules of engagement, it wound up in the hands of Monsieur René Boisneuf, who presented the list to the French Chamber of Deputies. In a fierce spirit of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, the Chamber roundly castigated the American document and proceeded to pass resolutions reaffirming France's undying commitment to human rights and freedom. Judging from this political display, and the 93rd's wartime recollections, one is led to conclude that the French in World War I were truly devoid of prejudice, especially when compared to their newly found American allies. However, more lies beneath the surface, for the fond memories that many African-American soldiers held fast were rooted not in egalitarianism, but in racism itself.¹⁴

Although the First World War was declared a war to "make the world safe for democracy," one must not forget that the Wilson Administration coined this term as a means of defining how the war related to Americans. In actuality, World War I was waged by European nations with vast colonial empires. Both Britain and France drew heavily upon the tremendous manpower resources of these empires, and since France

¹³ Scott, "The Participation of Negroes in World War I," 291; Spencer, Spencer, and Wright, "World War I as I Saw It," 149; Harris, *Harlem's Hellfighters*, 179.

¹⁴ Barbeau and Henri, *The Unknown Soldiers*, 114-15; Sweeney, *History of the American Negro in the Great World War*, 149.

possessed large swathes of northern and western African territory, it too dealt with the race issue just like the United States. Still, the role of race in the French Army and how it eventually connected to race relations between French and African-American troops serving in the trenches takes on a unique perspective that makes it both similar and different than racial perceptions in the United States.

Regarding its own colonial forces, France made special use of its African subjects, especially those from western Africa. These units, called *tirailleurs*, or "skirmishers," were comprised primarily of Algerians, Senegalese, Moroccans, and Sudanese, and boasted an extensive service record in the French Army by the time war broke out in 1914. Service in France's 19th-century colonial wars and the 1870-71 Franco-Prussian War forced the French to grudgingly acknowledge North and West Africans' combat prowess, but that hardly meant that the French held their African subjects on an equal footing -- quite the contrary, in fact. As Adriane Lentz-Smith writes in her book *Freedom Struggles*, the French were just as racist as their American counterparts; they simply went about it in a different way.¹⁵

French employment of African troops rested on military necessity, not egalitarian principle. Eventually, over 140,000 West African men served on the Western Front by war's end. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, France worriedly watched as its population declined while Germany's population surged, thus giving the Germans a definite manpower advantage should any war erupt between the two powers. When the war finally set Europe aflame, the French Army desperately needed troops by the winter of 1914. Out of an army of 2 million men, over 500,000 had fallen to German guns by New Year's Eve. Faced with such dire military exigencies, the French increasingly relied on colonial conscripts to help augment their ravaged armies. Nevertheless, as historian Joe H. Lunn writes, "*cette migration temporaire mis enforcée*" (this forced, temporary migration) to metropolitan France was both unprecedented and temporary, for not only was the French use of black troops a military necessity, but it was also justified by racial prejudices, some different, but

¹⁵ Emmett J. Scott, *Scott's Official History of the American Negro in the World War* (New York: Arno Press, 1919), 117; Harris, *Harlem's Hellfighters*, 180; Adriane Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles: African-Americans and World War I* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 103.

others all too familiar to many African-American troops fighting by their side.¹⁶

While the Americans debased African-American troops' fighting abilities based upon misguided perceptions of racial inferiority, the French actually used these perceptions to validate their argument in favor of using colonial soldiers. As has already been established, US Army officers believed that racial primitiveness made black troops unfit for combat, but in General Charles Mangin's 1911 treatise entitled *La Bête Noire*, the general argued that West Africans' primitively developed nervous system enabled them to be the perfect warriors; the idea being that stunted brains made Africans impervious to pain. Nevertheless, Mangin's ideas still unsettled many in the French military establishment, especially those who had commanded African colonial troops abroad. One such general, Charles Moinier, reflected many a French and American sentiment when he voiced his belief that Africans lacked the ability to adapt to modern warfare due to their allegedly backwards ways and delayed development. Others, like the former Madagascar forces commander General Louis de Forcy, declared that Africans exhibited poor marksmanship, discipline, and were too excitable to be effectively controlled, all of which echoed the countless American voices opposing the formation of African-American combat units in the United States. In the end, though, these racist reservations were shunted aside in order to address the French Army's dire manpower crisis. Even so, the spirit of *égalité* hardly penetrated the hearts of the French rank and file.¹⁷

Stateside, the role played by West African soldiers on the Western Front was hardly lost upon the African-American press. Many black newspapers trumpeted the heroism of black West Africans as news from the front flew across the Atlantic in the years before the US entry into the war, holding such exploits aloft as evidence of Jim Crow's bold-faced lies. However, historian Chad L. Williams notes how the propagandistic impulses of the time drove many African-American papers to idealize the French Army, thus blinding them to the actual racial landscape in France. In his work *Torchbearers of Democracy*, Williams maintains that this romanticism obscured the fact that French racial policy toward its African

¹⁶ Joe Lunn, "'Les Races Guerrieres': Racial Preconceptions in the French Military about West African soldiers during the First World War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 34, no. 4 (Oct. 1999): 519; Harris, *Harlem's Hellfighters*, 180; Joe H. Lunn, "'Bons soldats' and 'sales negres': Changing French Perceptions of West African Soldiers during the First World War," *French Colonial History* 1 (2002): 1.

¹⁷ Lunn, "'Les Races Guerrieres,'" 521, 525.

subjects was nothing more than another means of justification for white supremacy that proved as insidious as Jim Crow. Williams writes how the French colonial aim was to "impart French culture onto Africans to convert them from savage ways." Williams reinforces his claim by linking this to Africans' wartime service. With the presence of so many North and West African troops, this allowed for the ultimate assimilation by "breeding a spirit of loyalty and civic obligation" to France. Colonel Edouard Réquin's reply to War Department Special Assistant Emmett Scott's wartime letter regarding the French desire for African-American troops illustrates this concept in luminous detail. Ensnared in a heap of praise for French colonial troops, Réquin, who served as the French military liaison in Washington, gushed to Scott of the racial harmony that had come about as a result of the war. Nevertheless, a close reading is not required to see the lop-sided nature of Réquin's praise. He proclaims that "just as we have delivered these black men from African barbarism, so we have given them civilization and justice." Once more, racism twisted what outsiders might have construed as a more egalitarian drive predicated on inclusion when the opposite actually held true. In reality, "the French authorities were in fact much more concerned about preserving the status of their white personnel," and therefore adopted many policies that would have led many African-American soldiers to believe that no national boundary or frontier could contain racism's ravenous rage.¹⁸

In late 1917 and throughout 1918, the 93rd Division thought that they had caught a glimpse of the promised land on French battlefields. While they filed passed French officers, little did they realize that these veterans of the slaughtering fields of Verdun and Champagne possessed little faith in African-American officers' abilities. Specifically, they held severe doubts concerning African-American officers' technical expertise and training. These doubts reached back to a prevailing feeling that permeated the French officer corps during the war and presented itself in a policy that directly mirrored US Army directives regarding African-American officers. Similar to African-Americans, African soldiers could acquire an officer's commission in the French Army, albeit climbing the ranks was a different matter. Just as the *Personnel and Re-Organization Plan* sought to shackle African-American officers to lower grades, so too did

¹⁸ Chad L. Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy: African-American Soldiers in the World War I Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 147, 150-51; Scott, *Scott's Official History of the American Negro in the World War*, 117; Richard S. Fogarty, *Race and War in France: Colonial Subjects in the French Army, 1914-1918* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 122.

French prejudices obstruct many aspiring African officers. *Officiers indigènes*, African officers, were incapable of wielding command authority over white troops, or so went the French military's established doctrine. A pervasive fear of non-white officers outranking white officers, which many believed would send the French racial hierarchy into a tailspin, led to the unwritten rule that if two officers, one white and the other non-white, came up for the same promotion, the white officer was virtually assured that promotion based solely on his race. As Richard Fogarty notes, this "prevented any true sense of respect or equality from developing." This connected to the greater French belief that native West Africans' primitiveness and uneducated status made them incapable of aspiring to, let alone entering, something as high-minded as the officer corps. This belief hardly limited itself to officers either.¹⁹

According to prevailing French attitudes, West Africans' war-like animalism and low regard for life, especially their own, tailor-made them for combat. In fact, German soldiers reportedly feared West African troops above all others prior to the American entry into the war. Favoring bayonet attacks and night raids, French West African troops' reputed savagery in battle froze the Germans' hearts in their chests, something the French government exploited to their own propagandistic advantage. Despite this, they enforced a strict segregationist policy, requiring West African troops to train in isolated training centers removed from French civilians, usually in the Midi or Gironde regions of southern France. Furthermore, like so many American voices, even Pershing's, French army manuals stipulated that African troops were only effective when led by white European officers. If these officers fell in battle, then the resulting cohesion loss would cascade into the unit's complete breakdown. Therefore, French military doctrine proclaimed in a document entitled "Notice sur les Sénégalais et leur emploi au combat" (Notice on the Senegalese and their use in combat) that a white French unit must be stationed immediately to the rear of an African battalion during an attack so as to "sustain them." The stipulations decreed in the "Notice" combined with the aforementioned French racist beliefs produced within the French Army the established formula for how to effectively use African soldiers: shock troops. Just as American racism attempted to relegate African-American troops to menial labor duties, in France, this same racism compelled French generals to hurl whole battalions of North and West African soldiers into the very maw of German machine guns. This

¹⁹ Harris, *Harlem's Hellfighters*, 179; Fogarty, *Race and War in France*, 98, 120, 123, 125.

phenomenon begets the question then as to why African-American troops serving with the French felt so liberated in their new surroundings. The answer proves to be paradoxically baffling and enlightening.²⁰

In his response to Special Assistant Scott, Colonel Réquin concludes his evaluation of French colonial soldiers with a marked contrast with the soon-to-arrive African-American forces en route to France that raises the brow of the discerning eye. After explaining that, despite their combat skills, African troops were devoid of any hint of civilization, the French colonel finishes by assuring Scott that these soldiers are "men who cannot be compared from this point of view with colored Americans." Herein lay the dramatic divide in not only French and US racial perceptions, but also between West African and African-American troops' experiences among Frenchmen during the First World War. "Les Américains Noirs", or "the black Americans," as black US troops were sometimes called, were seen by the French in a vastly different light than French colonial Africans, and geography proved to be the key element in their reasoning. Algerians, Moroccans, and Senegalese hailed from Africa, a land Frenchmen had understood to be a savage and primitive continent. In fact, most Frenchmen had never seen a black man, as evidenced by their repeated action of rubbing black soldiers' skin to see if its dark color would rub off. Nevertheless, the image of the savage and uncivilized African stood foremost in Frenchmen's' minds. As one West African ruefully recalled, "the French thought we were cannibals, [even though] we never ate anybody." However, African-Americans were, first and foremost, Americans. According to French perspectives, the trans-Atlantic slave trade that spirited so many across a vast ocean and condemned so many to a lifetime of bondage in America actually spared African-Americans the "uncivilizing" stigma of being African. Because their ancestors were removed from Africa and had been acculturated to American/Western ways for several centuries, African-Americans stood a step above Africans in the French cultural and racial order. In a twist of irony, the main reason for African-Americans' marginalization in American society proved to be the main reason for their relative acceptance in French society. This same irony even seeps into African-Americans' view of West Africans, thus leading one to some surprising revelations.²¹

²⁰ Lunn, "'Bons soldats' and 'sales negres,'" 2, 5; Roberts, *The American Foreign Legion*, 51; Lunn, "Les Races Guerrieres," 529-31.

²¹ Emmett J. Scott, *Scott's Official History of the American Negro in the World War*, 117; Joe H. Lunn, "'Bons soldats' and 'sales negres,'" 3, 10; Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy*, 164.

There does exist one final note on this point that merits mention, and that is African-American soldiers' perceptions of the West Africans with whom they served. Ironically, many black US troops thought along the same lines as the French, especially when it came to the concept of African savagery. Although many black US veterans remembered French colonials as fierce and effective fighters, many believed that West African troops fashioned war trophies from the remains of slain Germans. One popular rumor that passed from one man to another was the West African "practice" of fashioning human ear necklaces, and that West Africans were ruthlessly bloodthirsty and culturally backwards. One aspect that exaggerated this belief lay in the language barrier between the two. Most colonial Africans spoke no French, or at best a pidgin French forced on them by Frenchmen, and no English. By contrast, the men of the 93rd US Division stood in high esteem, since "The French folk like the colored boys, and felt highly honored at the way the latter learned French," declared the Chicago-based newspaper *The Broad Ax*. Furthermore, they could not fathom a person not being able to speak English. As one 93rd doughboy so eloquently put it, he could not understand how a man could not "speak United States." Such similarity in perceptions between African-Americans and French make for a damaging case against US racist beliefs, since black US troops were so American, there existed an immense cultural and linguistic chasm separating them from their racial cousins. Nevertheless, both shared a common history of marginalization in their respective societies, and in spite of all this, both groups, especially the untried regiments of the 93rd Division, acquitted themselves well in combat; some might even say they covered themselves in glory.²²

As the reader has already gleaned, the doughboys of the 92nd and 93rd Divisions battled hard against discrimination, and as the war reached a crescendo in the summer and fall of 1918, these African-American soldiers engaged both racism and the Germans in deadly combat. In order to gain as complete a view as possible of their combat trials and tribulations, one must take stock of the battles endured by both divisions.

In the American Expeditionary Force's combat chronicles, the "Buffalo Soldiers" of the 92nd Division bear the tarnished reputation of being total failures. The reasons stem from the Meuse-Argonne Campaign from September 25-30, 1918, a campaign which greatly taxed the extremely green and untested AEF in its entirety. Assigned to be the lynchpin

²² Ibid., 176-78; "Colored Soldiers Overseas 'Making Good,'" *The Broad Ax*, November 16, 1918.

between the US 77th Division and the French Fourth Army, elements of the 92nd undertook a mission fraught with disaster before it ever began. Devoid of adequate maps, communications, artillery support, and constantly harassed by German fire, the Buffalo Soldiers conducted a series of confusing and sometimes disastrous retreats and advances that saw some of their number break. Numerous white officers in the US Army cited the 92nd's troublesome performance as evidence of their inferiority as combat troops and as a validation of their long-held racist views. As always, the truth proved more complicated.²³

With many white officers at the helm of the 92nd's battalions, it goes without saying that the supply and liaison issues, the poor communications, the lack of wire cutters to cut through the German barbed wire, all of these mistakes fall on their shoulders. One unit that nearly collapsed during the attack, the 2nd Battalion, 368th Infantry, highlights this perfect storm. Its white commanding officer, Major Max Elser, a lawyer by trade, failed to establish contact with his companies, moved his command post, from which he was always absent, without notifying his subordinates, did not know where his men were located, and even got lost during the course of the action. All the while, he gave contradictory orders that caused some companies to advance and others to retreat. It is worth noting that Major Elser's command became so disoriented from confusion and German fire that a superior removed Major Elser from command on the spot after he suffered a nervous breakdown at the front. The 2/368th's chaotic combat cacophony stands in stark contrast to the 1st Battalion, 368th Infantry, which managed to achieve its objective.²⁴

A career white officer with plenty of experience commanding large bodies of men, Major John N. Merrill encountered the same problems as the other luckless battalions in the 92nd Division. Still, by a combination of military know-how and force of will, he pushed his men to victory. After coercively acquiring adequate wire cutters for the job, Major Merrill maintained personal control over his unit, and unlike Major Elser, actually led from the front. Organizing his men into cohesive formations and effectively reconnoitering the battlefield, Major Merrill and the 1st Battalion not only withstood German shells, but pushed the enemy out of the village of Binarville, which the French had originally intended to seize. Still, Major Merrill's coup hardly dampened the flaring racist flames.

²³ Barbeau and Henri, *The Unknown Soldiers*, 150-51, 153.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 155-57.

Historian Robert Ferrell writes that the AEF command used the Argonne battle "as a rationale that black troops require white officers," when, in reality, "the basic problem of command was the incompetence of white officers" like Major Elser. Even more damning were the lasting effects this battle would have after the war. Even though only one regiment out of the entire division, the 368th, engaged in combat, the US military brass enshrined this as the failure of the entire experiment of employing black troops in battle. Conveniently, the Army dismissed the all-white 35th Division's similar performance in the Argonne as a matter of poor supply and liaison, thus preserving white supremacy's façade. As a result, no all African-American divisions would be formed in the future until the Army relented in 1944 with the re-constitution of the 92nd Division in World War II. While the 92nd bore the undeserved stain of defeat, the 93rd's regiments' battlefield actions would coat them in a wall of Croix de Guerre and Distinguished Service Crosses.²⁵

In a complete about face to his own beliefs, war correspondent Irvin Cobb marveled at how well the 93rd's men adjusted to the war's rigors. In fact, Cobb and his cohorts did not initially believe that African-Americans had really engaged the Germans, since "we had grown accustomed to thinking of our negroes as members of labor battalions working along lines of communication." Cobb even addressed the notion that black troops broke under combat's strain when he wrote that if that were to be the truth, then "the representatives of the dark races that come from America are the exceptions to the rule." Through their own trials at the front, the 93rd proved to be just as fierce as any competent unit in any competent army.²⁶

There is perhaps no greater illustration of racism's fallacies in World War I than the outstanding performance of the 93rd Infantry Division on the Western Front. All four of the African-American regiments received the regimental French Croix de Guerre, as well as a total of 365 individual Croix de Guerre. Perhaps the most famous example lies in the account of Private Henry O. Johnson. Manning an observation post with another soldier, the men came under fierce German fire. Using only the ammunition and grenades at hand, as well as a bolo knife, Pvt. Johnson managed to defend his wounded comrade while engaging the Germans in a brutal fight, even though Pvt. Johnson's own laconic

²⁵ Ferrell, *Unjustly Dishonored*, 16, 35-40; Barbeau and Henri, *The Unknown Soldiers*, 153.

²⁶ Irvin A. Cobb, *The Glory of the Coming* (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1918), 283-84, 302.

recollections do not always conjure up images of the battle's ferocity: "I was still banging them when my crowd came up and saved me and beat the Germans off. That fight lasted about an hour. That's about all. There wasn't so much to it." While Pvt. Johnson considered such actions as just another day at the front, the French bestowed upon him the Croix de Guerre with Gold Palm, thus making him the first US soldier of any skin color to receive that honor in World War I. In another sector, Pvt. Bruce Wright's 372nd Regiment once held off a Prussian Guards unit for five days before counter-attacking across a river to seize the town of Monthois. The regiment drew special attention in a citation penned by the French Fourth Army commander, General Gaylet, who hailed the "irresistible and heroic rush of the colored American regiments," and that "The most formidable defenses, the strongest machine gun nests, the most crushing artillery barrages were unable to stop them." In the face of such tenacity, German troops dubbed the African-American soldiers "hell-fighters," or "Black devils." Even though the Germans did not believe African-Americans to be as ruthless as West Africans, they feared them nonetheless, describing them as "more scientific and more dangerous fighters" because they fought with "precision, fought like veterans." These actions can only illustrate the bravery exhibited by the 93rd's soldiers, for they hardly do justice to the numerous accounts of valor referenced by American and French officers, and even their German foes. Contrary to the popular beliefs of the time, African-Americans fought just as hard and just as well, sometimes better, than white soldiers.²⁷

In conclusion, the First World War reflected race and racism's profound role and impact in early 20th-century America and France. In a sense, both countries' experiences in the war reflected how much had and had not changed, as both establishments sought to preserve their own particular version of racial hierarchy amidst the violent winds of change wrought by World War I. Just as the war shattered Europe's empires, so too did it challenge the very racial conceptions conservative orders in America and Europe sought to uphold, thus laying the foundation for even greater tumult and transformation in the mid-20th century. Nevertheless, for the African-American soldiers who bore the unique distinction of marching under two flags, the war not only revealed the fighting prowess, endurance, and determination of a people fighting a two-front war for the

²⁷ Harris, *Harlem's Hellfighters*, 197-202; Sweeney, *History of the American Negro in the Great World War*, 146, 149; Spencer, Spencer, and Wright, "World War I as I Saw It," 160-61; Roberts, *The American Foreign Legion*, 190; Scott, *Scott's Official History of the American Negro in the World War*, 277.

eradication of tyranny abroad and at home. It also reflected the underlying racial conceptions in France that shaped African-Americans' experiences abroad, as well as revealing the reality of early 20th-century French race perceptions. Still, nearly one hundred years later, with their deeds carved in history's stone tablets, the African-American men of the First World War now stand abreast of their ancestors in the pantheon of black soldiers who proudly donned their country's uniform from Union blue to olive drab.