Introduction

In June 1940, France crumbled under the German blitzkrieg. The roughly forty thousand Africans[1] in French uniform during the May–June campaign fought valiantly and died in droves during the brief and tragic Battle of France. German forces infamously committed war crimes against African soldiers who had surrendered, summarily executing approximately 3,000 of them immediately after fighting ceased.[2] Nazi propaganda reels mocked African prisoners and derided the French high command for using black combatants. Captured black troops, hailing predominantly from French West Africa, would spend much of the remainder of the war in prisoner camps, guarded first by Germans, then astonishingly as of 1943, by Vichy French guards.[3]

These events are well established, recounted by historians, some of the stock images shown and re-shown in documentaries starting with *The Sorrow and the Pity*. What seems less recognized is that only months after France's defeat, another army was raised in French Africa to fight the Nazis. In late August 1940, Charles de Gaulle's Free French seized

[1] Estimates vary: Julien Fargettas advances the figure of 40,000 Africans in uniform in France in 1940, but of 200,000 troops raised by France in Africa in total (most had not yet reached France at the time of the June 1940 defeat). Myron Echenberg mentions roughly 75,000 African forces in France in 1940. Julien Fargettas, *Les Tirailleurs Sénégalais* (Paris: Tallandier, 2012), p. 20. Myron Echenberg, *Colonial Conscripts: The Tirailleurs Sénégalais in French West Africa, 1857–1960* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1991), p. 88.

[2] Raffael Scheck, *Hitler's African Victims: The German Army Massacres of Black French Soldiers in 1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 53, 165.

[3] Martin Thomas, "The Vichy Government and French Colonial Prisoners of War, 1940–1944," *French Historical Studies* 25:4 (Fall 2002), pp. 657–92. Armelle Mabon, *Prisonniers de guerre "indigènes"* (Paris: La Découverte, 2010).

Cameroon and French Equatorial Africa (FEA), vast territories spanning from south of the equator to the Sahara. They promptly turned them into the first hotbed of French resistance. Free French Africa lent immediate credibility, legitimacy, manpower, and revenue to de Gaulle's movement in its infancy, when it was most fragile. It is the story of this improbable French military and institutional rebirth through Central Africa that I wish to tell here.

"With what rage anti-Gaullists of both the left and the right, the Communists and the Vichyites, relentlessly propagate the myth of a London Resistance. To both sides, I counter with the truth: Free France was African."[4] So claimed prominent Free Frenchman and ethnologist Jacques Soustelle in his memoirs. Indeed, in the fall of 1940, London offered Free France neither combatants, raw materials, territory, nor sovereignty. Territorially, Free France spanned from the Libyan border with Chad to the Congo River, and to the scattered small French territories of the South Pacific and India.[5] Without the support of these colonial holdings, what credibility, what international recognition, what counterweight to Vichy's legitimacy could a maverick general in London have mustered? While we now know in detail the motivations of Félix Eboué, the black Guyanese governor who rallied Chad to de Gaulle on August 26, 1940, not to mention the exploits of the French domestic resistance, the fate of the first Gaullist bastions of FEA and Cameroon has remained curiously overlooked, save for a handful of specialized French-language studies concentrating predominantly on Gabon and Cameroon.[6]

Between August 1940 and the summer of 1943, the heart of Free France was not located in London, as standard accounts would have us believe, but rather in Free French Africa. Instead of a beret-coiffed white *maquisard* in the Alps, the archetypal early French resistance fighter between

[4] Jacques Soustelle, *Envers et contre tout* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1947), p. 125.

[5] On the complicated rallying of New Caledonia and on Free France in the Pacific theater, see Kim Munholland, *Rock of Contention: Free French and Americans at War in New Caledonia, 1940–1945* (New York: Berghahn, 2005). On regime change in the rest of the French South Pacific, see Jean-Marc Regnault and Ismet Kurtovitch, "Les ralliements du Pacifique en 1940. Entre légende gaulliste, enjeux stratégiques mondiaux et rivalités Londres/Vichy," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 49, 4, 2002, pp. 71–90.

[6] Léon Modeste Nnang Ndong, *L'effort de guerre de l'Afrique: le Gabon dans la deuxième guerre mondiale, 1939–1947* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2011); Eliane Ebako, "Le ralliement du Gabon à la France libre: une guerre franco-française," PhD thesis, University of Paris IV, 2004; Léonard Sah, "Le Cameroun sous mandat français dans la deuxième guerre mondiale," PhD thesis, University of Provence, 1998; Jérôme Ollandet, *Brazzaville, capitale de la France libre: histoire de la résistance française en Afrique, 1940–1944* (Brazzaville: Editions de la Savane, 1980).

1940 and 1943 was, in fact, black and hailed from Chad, Cameroon, or Oubangui-Chari (modern-day Central African Republic). Some of these early fighters volunteered; others did not. For a movement whose glory rested in part on the notion of personal and patriotic commitment, this revelation alone shifts our understanding of Free French ranks. In addition, histories of the Resistance teach us that the metropolitan French maquis only gained momentum in 1943; we also know from Jean-François Muracciole's work that between the fiasco at Dakar on September 25, 1940, and the end of 1942, Free France struggled mightily to recruit outside of its colonial holdings.[7] It is thus tempting to situate the lion's share of the first armed French resistance between the Sahara Desert and the Congo River. This of course, leads us to "rethink France from its colonies,"[8] a current historiographical trend, and already a pressing imperative of General de Gaulle's in 1940. Indeed, one of de Gaulle's first steps involved his June 1940 calls exhorting colonials to join him, if possible with their territories.

Has the story of Free French Africa really been forgotten? Aside from a few exceptions such as at the Mont Valérien memorial outside of Paris, one looks in vain for plaques or testimonials to FEA and Cameroon's contribution to the Free French cause. To be sure, recent histories have recognized the crucial role of French colonial troops in general during the twentieth century's two world wars. The topic, broadly conceived, even captured the public imagination with the release of Rachid Bouchareb's 2006 film *Indigènes,* dubiously translated into English as *Days of Glory*. A year later, Jean-François Muracciole, François Broche, and Georges Caïtucoli broke a taboo by asserting that "the majority of the Free French who saved the nation's honor in 1940 were not French citizens."[9] But even here, FEA and Cameroon's contributions remained largely underrecognized. Many a narrative, starting with Bouchareb's film, commences in 1943 with French North and West Africa's entry into the fray. This broken chronology has served to obscure another reality and memory: the tens of thousands of Chadian, Congolese, Cameroonian, Gabonese, and Central African soldiers in de Gaulle's camp since

[7] Jean-François Muracciole, *Les Français libres: l'autre résistance* (Paris: Tallandier, 2009), pp. 135–36.

[8] Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 22.

[9] François Broche, Georges Caïtucoli, Jean-François Muracciole, *La France au combat: de l'appel du 18 juin à la victoire* (Paris: Perrin, 2007), p. 149.

August 1940, who managed to wage battle against the Axis from early 1941 onwards.

My research reveals the extent of FEA and Cameroon's effort starting in 1940. Between 1940 and 1944, Free France recruited 17,013 Africans in these territories. One should add to this total the troops already on location in these regions when they swung over to General de Gaulle: 16,500 men according to Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac, 7,000 according to other estimates.[10] A possible overlap may exist between the two groups, for FEA and Cameroon rallied de Gaulle in August 1940. A small portion of the possible 33,513 total might therefore be counted twice. Allowing for this corrective leads me to a conservative estimate of 27,000 men in arms from FEA and Cameroon – either hailing from these territories, or already posted on them in August 1940. To be sure, this figure is lower than the number of Africans who fought in French uniform during the Battle of France in May and June 1940. But the fact remains that outside of the West Africans posted to FEA and Cameroon, West African troops found themselves out of combat between 1940 and 1943, either in prison camps in France or languishing in Vichy-controlled French West Africa. In fact, the figure of 27,000 men from FEA and Cameroon appears startlingly high when compared to Free French totals: estimates for the summer of 1943 place Free French numbers at approximately 73,000 broken into roughly 39,000 French citizens, 30,000 colonial subjects, and some 3,800 foreign nationals.[11] Given that other colonies like the French South Pacific also contributed men on top of FEA and Cameroon's 27,000 or more, the figure of 30,000 colonial troops in 1943 certainly needs to be revised upwards.

In other words, the Hollywood cliché of the average Free French soldier seems in dire need of re-writing. The actual diversity and cosmopolitanism of Free French ranks is surely more evocative than film can convey: in 1942, ethnic Sara men from Chad and Oubangui-Chari fought side by side with German Jewish and Spanish republican French foreign legionnaires in the Sahara. After traversing endless expanses of desert from their bases

[10] ANOM DSM 262, 3, table 4. The figure of 16,500 men appeared in Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac, "La France Libre" in Jean-Pierre Azéma and François Bédarida, eds., *La France des années noires* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1993), p. 194. Others subsequently took it up. See Philippe Oulmont, "Le haut-commissaire de l'Afrique française libre" in Philippe Oulmont, ed., *Larminat, un fidèle hors série* (Paris: L.B.M., 2008), p. 77, as well as Jean-Christophe Notin, *Leclerc* (Paris: Perrin, 2005), p. 108.

[11] Muracciole, pp. 36–37; François Broche, Georges Caïtucoli, Jean-François Muracciole, p. 149.

in Chad, men united in their common demonization by Hitler confronted Erwin Rommel's forces head on.

This brings us to FEA's important strategic role. In 1941, then Colonel Leclerc used Chad as a base from which to attack Benito Mussolini's Libya. Free French Africa also brought de Gaulle legitimacy, territories, and subjects, making Free France not just a movement but also a government. De Gaulle readily recognized this. He wrote that in 1940, "in the vast expanses of Africa, France could rebuild its army and its sovereignty."[12]

If Free France was African, I should underscore from the outset that Africa was not free. Indeed, forced labor redoubled under Gaullist rule, coerced military recruitment as well. Gaullist Jurist René Cassin and Governor Félix Eboué clashed on the topic, the former fearing that Free France might be accused of slavery-like practices. The overriding imperative of waging war on the Axis was used to justify many a sacrifice and many a violation of Free France's own ideals.

The rallying of FEA and Cameroon in August 1940 would later be mythologized, the event earning the French revolutionary designation of "three glorious days." But at the time, the change triggered much turmoil. Prior to the war, 90 percent of FEA and Cameroon's exports had gone to continental Europe, the vast majority to France. That market was now closed. The region's economy was entirely redirected into the British imperial orbit. There too the stakes were high. The archives show that administrators and corporations never managed to overcome their differences, in the gold and timber sectors most notably. The Free French episode in Africa reveals much discord in a time of imperial reordering.

A skeptic might counter that Free France's military saga, at least, is known down to its last details. Admittedly, Free France's first victories are renowned. So too are the colorful details of Philippe Leclerc's meteoric ascension, as he added colonel's stripes to his uniform to facilitate Free France's seizure of Cameroon on August 27, 1940. Likewise in France, the "Kufra oath" remains legendary in military circles: Leclerc's pledge in the Libyan desert that he would never relent until the liberation of Strasbourg. All the more reason to reexamine this history through African and colonial lenses. For in the memoirs relating these early Free French exploits, as in histories of the Free French movement, Africans and Africa appear at once ubiquitous and invisible. Most relevant memoirs tend to specify the name of each fallen white soldier, followed by a figure,

[12] Charles de Gaulle, *Mémoires de Guerre* (Paris: Plon, 1954), Vol. 1, p. 89.

usually much higher, reflecting anonymous African losses. Free France's Africanness has seldom been foregrounded.

One of my objectives involves recovering African voices, actions, roles, and conditions. Not merely for soldiers, but also for truckers, miners, chiefs, porters, workers, seamstresses, orderlies, rubber collectors, all of whom played a role in Free France's African history. My goal is to measure not only how Africans contributed to the Gaullist cause, but also the ways the war and Free France mattered to Africans. How? Firstly by naming African workers, civilians, and military personnel whenever possible – a seemingly modest aim, but a significant one in light of how rarely this has been done to date. Next, by tapping into a panoply of sources to reconstitute prevailing conditions in Free French Africa. I have utilized letters, telegrams, reports, logs, journals, and memoirs, of course, but also pictures taken by titans of photography like George Rodger and Germaine Krull. Finally, whenever possible, I have attempted to recover African voices. The task proved less challenging that I first feared, for African testimonies and grievances abound in legal and military files. One must admittedly place such evidence in context and account for filters, self-censorship, and questions of transcription, literacy, intermediaries, scribes, and so on.

While I make limited use of some interviews conducted by historians in the 1980s, I have not undertaken my own oral history. Indeed, surviving African soldiers from this era are now in their nineties; non-commissioned officers (hereafter NCOs) over a hundred years old. Average life expectancy does not help: in Chad it stands at 48.9 years, in Cameroon 50.6, in the Republic of Congo 54.27, and in the Central African Republic at 46.9 years, before the current civil war.[13] The French press reported in 2011 that Joseph Djemakangar, the last surviving African combatant from the 1941 Free French victory at Kufra, had passed away.[14] What is more, even if I had arranged interviews with members of the next generation, this project's chronological sensitivity, its focus on shifts and breaks over a short four-year period, its political, social, and military focus all render pertinent, reliable, and sharp testimonies virtually impossible to gather seventy-five years on. Methodologically and intellectually I also reject the notion that oral history should

[13] World Bank data, available online.

[14] Marianne online, April 9, 2011 (http://www.marianne.net/blogsecretdefense/Joseph-Djemakangar-un-tirailleur-de-Koufra-s-eteint_a217.html). While the article does not explicitly state that Djemakangar was the last African survivor of the battle, I deduce this (perhaps wrongly) from Daniel Nevot's claim of being "the last survivor of Kufra."

be mandatory for conducting African history when it is patently not for other historical fields.

This is not to suggest that my approach is somehow militant or an example of what Frederick Cooper terms "doing history backwards." Instead of calling for a redress in African pensions,[15] my objective is to re-center Free France in Africa. I also have opted to focus largely on practices rather than representations. Nor am I intent on simply projecting French categories of resistance and collaboration onto Africa. Instead, it is the centrality of Africa to Free France that I attempt to reconstitute in this book. I posit the Africanness of Free France on a number of levels: the Gaullist troops engaged at Kufra (1941) and in the Fezzan (1942–43) were overwhelmingly African. Free France's territorial legitimacy stemmed almost entirely from Equatorial Africa and Cameroon; indeed, Brazzaville served as the movement's official capital from 1940 to 1943. Likewise, Fighting France's fiscal and mining assets and other natural resources were predominantly African. If General de Gaulle's regime moved its capital to Algiers in 1943, and thereafter North and West African troops did begin to play crucial roles, the fact remains that for the first three years of its existence, Free France had been tethered to sub-Saharan Africa and built on it.

I will largely steer clear from one of the best-known events held in Brazzaville late in the war, as it is mostly peripheral to the story of Free French Africa. The Brazzaville conference of 1944 has often been depicted as an attempt at colonial reform, or even a step toward decolonization. Admittedly, the event did introduce, and in some cases confirm, a significant reformist spirit. But mostly the conference looked to the postwar, and marked above all a break with the war period that concerns us here. I will therefore raise it in the epilogue while avoiding teleological temptation. Here I also break with current practice, which involves mentioning Free French Africa only at its extremities, which is to say at its inception in August 1940 and then once more at the 1944 Brazzaville conference.[16]

This book draws its sources in numerous archives including holdings in sub-Saharan Africa, long overlooked by historians of World War II. The national archives of Cameroon in Yaoundé and of the Republic of

[15] Cooper, *Colonialism*, p. 18. For examples of militant histories centering on the question of pensions, see Charles Onana, *La France et ses tirailleurs: Enquêtes sur les combattants de la République* (Paris: Duboiris, 2003); Bakari Kamian, *Des tranchées de Verdun à l'église Saint-Bernard* (Paris: Karthala, 2001).

[16] For an example, see Paul-Marie de la Gorce, *L'Empire écartelé, 1936–1946* (Paris: Denoël, 1988).

Congo in Brazzaville both yielded valuable material. Archival partitioning during decolonization saw France take so-called *fonds de souveraineté*, while African nations retained *fonds de gestion*. Consequently, some of the most fecund material for social history has remained on location.[17] This said, archives in France also proved crucial for this study, even shedding light on the earliest Free French period marked by a relative lack of documentation because of its high degree of improvisation. I relied especially on the extraordinarily rich collections at the French colonial archives in Aix-en-Provence. The Centre d'histoire et d'études des troupes d'outre-mer (CHETOM) in Fréjus and the military archives in Vincennes revealed much about troop conditions. Also very useful were a bevy of sources in Paris, most notably the archives of the Ordre de la Libération and those of the de Gaulle and Leclerc foundations. So too were the high commissioner to Free French Africa fonds held at the diplomatic archives in Nantes. Several collections in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany helped flesh out the picture. Indeed, foreign Free French volunteers like Hassoldt Davis, Germaine Krull, George Rodger, and Dudley Harmon left remarkably insightful visual and textual testimonies on Free French Africa. Together, these varied sources allowed me to weave together a study at the intersection of the histories of Africa, empire, and World War II.

Free France largely rested and depended on Africa. Africans shaped it and it affected them. Over the next three parts, I will expose the many forms of this relationship: in matters of legitimacy, with respect to military affairs, and the extraction of natural resources. Finally, in the epilogue I shall turn to questions of memory and its uses in the postwar.

[17] Jean-Pierre Bat, "Les archives de l'AEF," *Afrique et histoire* 7, 2009, pp. 301–11.

PART I

FREE FRANCE'S AFRICAN GAMBIT