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Race and the Republic

By Claire Miot

The colonial period was eager to classify races according to their biological and cultural dispositions for war. The prejudice would persist through the wars of decolonization.

Reviewed: Stéphanie Soubrier, *Races guerrières. Enquête sur une catégorie impériale (1850-1918)* (Martial Races: A Study of an Imperial Category (1850-1918)), Paris, CNRS Editions, 2023, 448 p., 26 €.

The republican racial paradigm

Though its history in Great Britain is well documented (thanks to Heather Streets's work[1]), the category of "martial races"[2] had yet to be studied exhaustively in the context of French colonialism.[3] Stéphanie Soubrier has now written such a study, in a book based on her dissertation. It methodically and meticulously traces the French military's construction of this "ethno-colonial category with an imperial scope" (p.15), from the conquest of Algeria in the 1850s to the trenches of the Great War. This

[1] Heather Streets, *Martial Races. The Military, Race and Masculinity in British imperial culture (1857-1914)*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2010.

[2] I have chosen to put the word "race" in quotes, but this choice has been the subject of a debate in the social sciences. See, for example, the discussion between Jean-Frédéric Schaub and Marie-Anne Matard-Bonucci in the journal *Alarmer* : https://revue.alarmer.org/note-sur-lhistoire-de-lusage-du-terme-race-le-point-de-vue-dun-historien/; https://revue.alarmer.org/de-lusage-des-guillemets-a-race-reponse-dune-historienne-a-un-historien/

[3] See the pioneering work of Vincent Joly "'Races guerrières' et masculinité en contexte colonial. Approche historiographique," *Clio. Histoire, femmes et sociétés*, 2011/1 (n° 33), p. 139-156.

category was used to classify and rank conquered peoples according to their allegedly warlike qualities based on both biological and cultural criteria.

These classifications, Soubrier argues, were created by European military officers who participated in colonial conquests and happened to be enthusiastic taxonomists (p. 115). Yet they were also required by their superiors, for supervisory purposes, to produce countless reports on the peoples upon whom France was imposing its rule. During the nineteenth century, anthropology and related disciplines, such as ethnography, were in full swing, particularly in colonial settings, and officers, as well as military doctors, had close connections to the scholarly milieus that produced colonial (pseudo) science. The influence went both ways. These representations, loaded with negative as well as positive stereotypes, were highly variable and malleable. They influenced without determining the recruitment and employment practices of native auxiliaries who, in the 1850s, accompanied the colonial conquest missions and later fought on the European front during the Great War.

By analyzing the genesis and often contradictory uses of the category of "martial races," Soubrier, along with other historians, has helped question the myth of a "color blind" republic, observing that "far from constituting an anomaly in French colonial policy" (p. 13), the use of "martial races" is deeply inscribed in the republican racial paradigm. Though the simple fact that there existed non-citizen soldiers does not undermine the republican project, it shows that the military was a deeply colonial institution that produced a "hierarchizing and differentiating" discourse (p. 13) at the very moment when, in the metropole, the principle of conscription, which sought to abolish whatever differences existed beneath the uniform, was emerging.

Soubrier also demonstrates that the category of "race," which may disorient French readers steeped in the universalist mindset promoted by the republic, is a "useful category of historical analysis,"[4] especially when studying the military as an institution in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This is particularly true given the frequency with which the term was used in the nineteenth century, including by actors in non-colonial settings to describe European populations. On this point, Soubrier convincingly demonstrates how crucial the imperial context is for understanding the category of "martial race." The 1870-71 defeat, which crystallized French anxieties about the degeneration of the French race and masculinity, promoted, thanks to the model of the Senegalese infantryman, a template of subaltern "indigenous

[4] Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1053–75.

masculinity," which also made it possible to cast the European conquerors who dominated them as heroes. Soubrier further sheds light on the hegemonic white masculinity of the officers who controlled and punished their men, as well as their men's wives, who often accompanied them. While the category of "martial race" was imperial, it was not exclusively colonial. Heather Streets has emphasized how, in the British case, the residents of the Scottish Highlands enjoyed an excellent military reputation dating back to the eighteenth century. Demonstrating that categories circulated between metropole and empire, as well as between empires, the French exalted the martial virtues of the mountain peoples of Kabylia while they were conquering Algeria, as they did of the Berbers during the "pacification" of Morocco.

The agency of the colonized

The term "martial races" (*races guerrières*) appeared with the creation of the first native military units during the lengthy conquest of Algeria. It spread with the conquest of Senegal, when in 1857 General Faidherbe created the Senegalese infantrymen units (*Tirailleurs sénégalais*). Yet as Soubrier notes, race seems to have been less a cause than a consequence of recruitment. In other words, it was often used as an after-the-fact justification of some groups' tendency to join the French military more readily than others. The Bambara--an ethnic group of colonial invention--were celebrated as a "martial race" less because of their intrinsic qualities than because of "their willingness to enlist as soldiers in the service of France" (p. 133). In this respect, Soubrier observes, officers were not fooled by the racial categories that they often used for political purposes.

Soubrier shows--and this is not the least of the book's merits--that this use of the term was neither the only nor the least contradiction resulting from the slippery category of "martial races." The term crystallized in the 1880s with the conquest of Sudan (modern-day Mali), during which the French observed the energetic fighting of their enemies, yet without seeing them as "martial races." Populations were deemed "martial" if they were not only inclined to fight, but to fight with discipline and loyalty in the service of France. In a similar vein, the French were wary of combatants in French equatorial Africa, Indochina, and Madagascar, where the Hova fiercely resisted the French conquest by waging a form of asymmetrical warfare considered non-glorious and cowardly by Europeans who were exhausted by such conflict, with which they had no experience back home. This is also the reason that Asian peoples were not

deemed martial. No doubt, Soubrier observes, these men were the object of racial and gendered stereotypes that perceived them as creatures deprived of martial virility, a concept being constructed back in Europe.[5] But more than anything, it was the colonized people's lack of loyalty that shaped how these classifications were constructed.

Aligning herself with an historiography that seeks to recognize the agency of dominated peoples in colonial settings, Soubrier makes a subtle yet precise case that the category of "martial races" was co-constructed by the colonized and colonizers. In French controlled Africa, one finds the "Gurkha syndrome," which had been identified in British territories by historians of the "martial races." As with some of the poorest ethnic groups in colonial India, notably the Gurkha, for whom military salaries were a major concern, some of the peoples of the French empire internalized and eventually embraced this martial identity in the pursuit of collective emancipation as well as individual interest. In some of the book's most innovative passages, Soubrier shows, for example, that in sub-Saharan Africa, the wages offered by the French military afforded men the possibility of paying a dowry (which was expected of the groom, not the bride), thus enabling their marriage strategies.

"Martial races" on the European front

Soubrier concludes her study with an analysis of the use of colonial troops on the European front during the Great War. This was, she observes, a genuine rupture, to the extent that the concept of "martial race" had hitherto been used in colonial wars, in territories outside of Europe. Charles Mangin paved the way when he argued in 1910 that such men could be used against Germany to make up for a persistent demographic decline. His argument met with considerable resistance, which ultimately disappeared in 1914. Soubrier, however, examines more familiar territory, blazed by the pioneering work of earlier scholars.[6] Yet this focus allows her to revisit controversial topics, such as the losses experienced by the Senegalese infantrymen. For

[5] Georges Mosse has shown how, with the generalization of conscription, a "military-virility" model became the norm. See George L. Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity*, Oxford University Press, 1998.

[6] See notably Marc Michel, *L'appel à l'Afrique. Contributions et réactions à l'effort de guerre en A.O.F. (1914-1919)*, Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, 1982. More recently, see Richard S. Fogarty, *Race and War in France. Colonial Subjects in the French Army (1914-1918)*, John Hopkins University Press, 2008.

Soubrier, the fact that the numbers do not clearly show an overrepresentation of Senegalese soldiers among losses does not invalidate the thesis that the military leadership used these men to spare French blood. They did so because Senegalese losses were considered less serious, but also because the category of "martial races" assumed that they were more resistant to pain and fear. The wartime experience vitiated these conceptions: before the onslaught of artillery, African soldiers experienced terror, faltered, and killed themselves, like their French comrades. Their reputation as shock troops, promoted notably by Mangin, was permanently damaged.

Yet has this category become obsolete, as Soubrier seems to suggest at the end of her book, when she concludes that "the conflict seems to have been a crucible in which the differences that Mangin posited between 'Black force' soldiers and the French *poilus* were blurred" (p. 398)? This is far from certain. Reading Soubrier's magisterial study, it is striking, to the contrary, to see how persistent the category of "martial races" was in the thinking of the French officer corps throughout the interwar period and up to the wars of decolonization. For example, Free French officers like Philippe Leclerc de Hautecloque, who were obliged to recruit in French Equatorial Africa in 1940 and 1941, deplored the inadequacy of their new soldiers. In 1944 and 1945, sub-Saharan African soldiers had to be withdrawn from the front for political reasons, but also because they were deemed unsuited for a winter war and, more broadly, for modern war as waged in Europe.[7]

Sub-Saharan African soldiers like the Senegalese infantryman were thus gradually replaced by Maghreb peoples, who topped the "martial races hierarchy" and were increasingly seen as good warriors, particularly the Berbers. The conquest of Morocco, in which the French military confronted fierce resistance from tribes in the middle Atlases, may have reinforced these prejudices. The historian Julie Le Gac notes that between 1942 and 1944, recruitment in Morocco was concentrated on predominantly Berber regions, where men were seen as weakly Islamicized, which presumably made them more assimilable.[8] Throughout the twentieth century, one sees the military's same ambivalent relationship with Islam. Soubrier argues that it

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[7] Report on the activity of the Forces Françaises Libres du Tchad in January and February 1941, April 5, 1941, cited by Géraud Létang, *Mirages d'une rébellion. Être Français libre au Tchad (1940-1943)*, doctoral thesis directed by Guillaume Piketty, Sciences Po Paris, 2019, p. 284. See, too, Eric Jennings, *La France libre fut africaine*, Paris, Perrin, 2014; Claire Miot, "Le retrait des tirailleurs sénégalais de la Première Armée française en 1944. Hérésie stratégique, bricolage politique ou conservatisme colonial," *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, 2015/1 (nº 125), p. 77-89.

[8] Julie Le Gac, *Vaincre sans gloire. Le corps expéditionnaire français en Italie (1942-1944)*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres/DPMA, 2013, p. 73-75.

also existed in the nineteenth century (p. 165 ff), even if Islam was increasingly seen by officers as contributing to discipline and cohesion, so long as it was not determined by religious middlemen not subject to the military hierarchy.[9]

This continuity--even if required constant readjustments--in the officer corps' mindset merits further exploration through a more in-depth analysis of the trajectories of relevant military officers across multiple conflicts: the colonial wars, European fronts, and the wars resulting from decolonization. The category of 'race' did not disappear during the Indochina war--if anything, the opposite is true. In that conflict, colonial soldiers were deployed starting in 1948, though military sources did not speak specifically of "martial races" (to the best of our knowledge). Rather, they mixed ethnic and national categories. The military command now seemed to favor a form of racial engineering, seeking an elusive balance between supposedly complementary ethnic groups with warlike qualities. Captain Soglo, for instance, concluded that "while the anticipated results were not achieved, it was because of the units' racial composition." In his view, "the military qualities of African soldiers are often very different depending on their origins" and the "the idea of spreading soldiers from French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa across units without taking their racial affinities into account does not seem the best solution," as it could create tensions within the ranks.[10] While Soubrier has shown how the category of "martial races" was originally conceived for and through colonial conquest, it should be acknowledged that European officials in Indochina deplored the fact that certain groups could not adapt to the asymmetrical warfare waged by the Vietminh. Thus a battalion commander serving in the 24th regiment of the Senegalese infantrymen concluded in late 1953 that "infantrymen will always be surprised and disoriented in an ambush or an attack in a rice paddy or in a street full of pleasant people whose attitudes deceive them, as they are trusting by nature."[11] These observations testify yet again to the richness and importance of Soubrier's book, which improves our understanding over the long term of the military and its relationship to "race."

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[9] See Claire Miot, "'Une police des âmes'? L'islam dans l'armée française en 1944-1945", *Revue historique des armées*, n°289, pp. 40-55; Miot, "The Officer for Muslim affairs in the First French Army (1944-1945): intermediary or agent of control?", in Raphaëlle Branche, Xavier Bougarel, and Cloé Drieu, eds. *Far from Jihad. Combatants of Muslim origins in European Armies in the 20th Century*, Bloomsbury, London, 2017, pp. 161-182.

[10] Report on the morale of African units, first semester 1953, by Captain Soglo, Bureau of African Affairs, GR 10H 420, SHD.

[11] Report of battalion commander Beaudenon, commander of the 1st Battalion of the 24e RMTS, December 1, 1953, GR 10H 363, SHD.

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