

**“Among the Finest in the French Army” -
Evolving French Perceptions of Colonial Moroccan Soldiers in the First World War**

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Abstract

In the First World War, some 40,000 colonial Moroccan soldiers fought as part of the French Army. As infantrymen, the *régiments de tirailleurs marocains* served in every major French offensive along the Western Front and accrued an impressive combat record. This thesis examines the evolution of French perceptions of Moroccan soldiers between 1914-1918, and places particular attention upon the relationship between the French Army and Islam, the role and performance of Moroccan troops on the battlefield, and their treatment in hospitals where Moroccans renegotiated elements of the colonial racial and gender hierarchy. Over the course of the war, the Moroccan sharpshooters allayed the suspicions of their French officers and commanders and established a reputation for reliability and professionalism in warfare that influenced future generations of Moroccan soldiers for the remainder of the 20th century.

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Introduction

On a hot summer's day in August 1914, the French colonists of western Algeria beheld a fascinating sight. Columns of soldiers marched across the fertile countryside and through towns and villages towards the Mediterranean port of Oran as Europe girded itself for war. These men, clad in khaki with distinct red *chechias* on their heads, marched with discipline and left quite an impression as they intoned:

Men Moulay Idriss djina; Za rebbi taafou alina

(We come from Moulay Idriss; May God forgive our sins)¹

These were colonial soldiers from Morocco, recruited both as volunteers and as professionals from the army of Sultan Moulay Youssef, and they represented the first soldiers from the protectorate to embark on a journey to the metropole to fight in the First World War. Later known as the *tirailleurs marocains* or Moroccan sharpshooters, these men would navigate a series of complex relationships with their French commanders throughout the war that challenged pre-existing racial and cultural assumptions and prejudices, and ultimately forged an enduring legacy in the history of World War I and in the French military.

France had relied upon colonial soldiers to bolster the ranks of its army for decades by the outbreak of the Great War. Algerian *turcos* fought at Sedan in 1871, and *tirailleurs sénégalais* from West Africa fought in conquests across that continent as the French empire expanded in the late-19th century. However, real interest in training and equipping Africans for war increased after the 1910 publication of Charles Mangin's *La force noire*, which argued in favor of greater reliance on colonial soldiers to shore up weaknesses in French manpower due to

¹ Daniel Clément and Natalie Maillard, *La Brigade marocaine: septembre 1914, une meurtrière odyssée* (Musée 14-18, 2015), 17. This account was provided by Lt. Alphonse Juin, who served with the *tirailleurs marocains* in the opening months of the war.

a lower birthrate than their continental rival, Germany.² By 1914, the colonies in French West Africa and Algeria provided the majority of the 88,000 indigenous troops serving in the French army, but the conflict would draw in recruits from Indochina, Madagascar, Tunisia, and Morocco by 1918 with over half a million men under arms in total.³ Morocco, the most recent addition to the French empire in 1912 as a protectorate, contributed some 40,000 soldiers to the war effort, and the *tirailleurs marocains* would fight in the bloodiest and most infamous battles of the war all along the Western Front.⁴

French perceptions of their Moroccan troops at the outset of the war were rooted in racist and Orientalist beliefs towards men that were untested in European methods of warfare, and they were held in suspicion due to both their Muslim faith and their supposed lack of civilization. When the Ottoman Empire joined the Central Powers in October 1914, French fears of dual loyalty or a pan-Islamist revolt gripped French authorities, but in this atmosphere of doubt the Moroccan soldiers proved themselves to be exceptionally loyal and reliable. By 1916, fears over religion had largely been allayed, and in the first few years of the war the *tirailleurs* had also proven themselves on the battlefield. At the pivotal battles of the Marne and Verdun, Moroccan soldiers held the line under withering fire and demonstrated their offensive capabilities in capturing German positions. They developed a reputation for stoicism and rapid assaults, and consistently performed well despite incurring massive casualties. Finally, French attitudes were also challenged in hospitals and medical settings, where wounded *tirailleurs* argued for better treatment and had the opportunity to negotiate boundaries of race, gender, and sexuality.

² Charles Mangin, *La force noire* (Hachette et cie, 1910), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/ien.35556023379050>.

³ William T. Dean, "The French Colonial Army and the Great War," *The Historian* 76, no. 3 (2014), 480.

⁴ Driss Maghraoui, "The 'Grande Guerre Sainte': Moroccan Colonial Troops and Workers in The First World War," *The Journal of North African Studies* 9, no. 1 (2004), 6.

My own work draws on extant works and archival materials and attempts to collate the disparate threads and inquiries under a single analytical umbrella which follows the evolution of the relationship between France and the *tirailleur marocains* over the course of the war. The military contribution of Morocco overall in World War I was statistically smaller than most of France's other colonial possessions, but it had an outsized impact on the prosecution of the war and the development of colonial relations. Mentions of the *tirailleurs marocains* appear in French memoirs of the war penned by officers and enlisted men alike, and attest to the prowess of the Moroccans. The glories won by the 1st and 2nd RTM and the related Moroccan Division were ensconced in the triumphant martial records of both France and Morocco, and contributed to the continued service of Moroccan soldiers throughout France's empire in the decades preceding decolonization. The sacrifices of Moroccan sharpshooters in the First World War merit remembrance over a century later, and their place in the history of French imperialism deserves just as much recognition and interrogation as other histories of the war and modern France.

Historical Context

The establishment of the protectorate in Morocco followed a different path from France's other North African colonies, Algeria and Tunisia. While the latter two were accomplished by direct invasions, French influence in Morocco steadily increased over a number of years in the early 20th century. The first incursions were justified by France as protecting trade routes and the border of colonial Algeria with small military posts, until intervention in civil unrest in Morocco with relief columns soon became permanent fixtures. Having secured exclusive trade allowances by the end of the 19th century, France maneuvered for political favor in Morocco against Britain and Germany in the following decades. The Agadir Crisis of 1911 set the stage for the

assumption of French colonial control in Morocco, when the ambitious General Charles Moinier marched troops into the capital of Fez at the desperate request of Sultan Abd-al-Hafiz to quell unrest.⁵ These actions violated previously negotiated agreements, and in response a German gunboat steamed into the port of Agadir.⁶ When the diplomatic furor had settled and the outbreak of war avoided, France emerged as the principal European power in Morocco.

Rather than pursuing more direct colonial rule, the French preferred to govern through the existing *makhzen* bureaucracy, but wrested a large degree of executive control and power from the Sultan. When news spread in April 1912 of the Sultan's apparent capitulation to France, a nation of nonbelievers and colonizers, popular discontent boiled over in Fez. In particular, there the soldiers of the *makhzen* army revolted against their French supervising officers and mob violence overtook the city for two days. By the time the insurrection was quelled, a quarter of the city was levelled and dozens of Europeans and hundreds of Moroccans were killed.⁷ The mutiny had two other repercussions: the acting French ambassador Eugene Regnault and General Moinier as head of military forces in the country were both recalled, and Resident-General Hubert Lyautey was appointed to replace them; additionally, the weakened Sultan abdicated in favor of his scholarly but pliant younger brother, Moulay Youssef. The rebellious regiments were dissolved and accused ringleaders punished, after which unaffiliated soldiers were reincorporated on a volunteer basis as *troupes auxiliaires marocains* in the French colonial army.⁸ Hubert Lyautey thus assumed control of the protectorate and plotted a new course for France's latest addition to its colonies in the Maghreb.

⁵ Anthony Clayton, *France, Soldiers, and Africa*, 1st ed (Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1988), 88.

⁶ Moshe Gershovich, *French Military Rule in Morocco: Colonialism and Its Consequences*, Cass Series--History and Society in the Islamic World (F. Cass, 2000), 55.

⁷ Gershovich, *French Military Rule in Morocco*, 57.

⁸ Clayton, *France, Soldiers, and Africa*, 90.

Over the next few years, Lyautey would use Moroccan soldiers for garrison duty throughout the country, as well as in continued efforts at colonization of the Atlas mountains. These units were composed of a mix of French and Algerian officers, with French, Algerian, and Moroccan non-commissioned officers below them.⁹ When war broke out in 1914, some 6,000 auxiliary troops were sent to France to defend Paris. Lyautey was quick to offer up his five battalions of riflemen and squadrons of mounted *spahis*, and he extolled their training and the efforts of their officers in preparing the men in the years since the mutinies at Fez.¹⁰ His willingness to move several thousands of armed Moroccan soldiers out of the protectorate also served to diminish the chances of another mutiny, although he told the Minister of War Alexandre Millerand, “Once in France, they will constitute first class troops because of their bravery and discipline.”¹¹ In another communiqué he continued in this vein, stating, “They are marvelous. You will ask more of them from me.”¹² This pronouncement would prove to be true, as Lyautey soon needed to recruit replacements due to the astonishing casualties of the Moroccans in the first months of the war.

These recruits hailed largely from Arab populations in the lowland and coastal regions of Morocco, although Berbers fought for France as well.¹³ The vast majority of these men were poor peasants between the ages of 14-30, most were illiterate, and many did not even speak French.¹⁴ The major cities of Morocco such as Meknes, Fez, Rabat, and Casablanca all hosted recruitment centers, although most of the volunteers came from the countryside.¹⁵ A crucial

⁹ Clayton, *France, Soldiers, and Africa*, 262.

¹⁰ SHD, 7N 2122, *Maroc - Politiques et Opérations 1914-1915*, Lyautey to Minister of War Millerand, “12 Octobre 1914 communiqué.”

¹¹ Maghraoui, “The ‘Grande Guerre Sainte,’” 4.

¹² Gershovich, *French Military Rule in Morocco*, 172.

¹³ Clayton, *France, Soldiers, and Africa*, 262.

¹⁴ Maghraoui, “The ‘Grande Guerre Sainte,’” 9. See also Louis Barthas, *Poilu: the World War I notebooks of Corporal Louis Barthas, barrelmaker, 1914-1918*, 2014. The author recounts an episode when a Moroccan trooper heading to a field hospital was accused of desertion due to a failure in communication and racial prejudice.

¹⁵ SHD, 7N 2122, Lyautey to Minister of War Millerand, “12 Octobre 1914 communiqué”

aspect to consider in the recruitment of the Moroccan soldiers was their motivation for joining. Unlike the colonies of Algeria and Tunisia where conscription was implemented to feed the *impôt du sang* demanded by the metropole in the Great War, Moroccan soldiers were strictly volunteers. While the primary factor behind this ‘voluntarism’ was economic in nature which led to a reputation as ‘splendid mercenaries,’ appeals to the martial nature of Moroccans as well as on religious grounds brought in recruits too.¹⁶ “The Arab and Berber races constitute, like the French, warlike peoples,” noted a report from 1915 which highlighted the racial essentialism so prominent in French considerations of colonial soldiers.¹⁷

For the purposes of this inquiry, most of the attention and evidence will be pulled from the archives and analysis of the *tirailleurs marocains*. While the *spahis* were drawn from the same regions and backgrounds as the *tirailleurs*, their situation in the war differed due to their role as cavalrymen. On the Western Front they served as dismounted infantry where they were often kept in reserve, but they saw plenty of fighting in the Balkans and in the Levant later in the war. Elsewhere, in spite of its name and astounding record as one of the most decorated units of the entire French Army, the *Division Marocaine* only deployed actual Moroccan troops in the last months of the war, and so will only be mentioned sparingly. The *Régiment d’Infanterie coloniale du Maroc* or RICM also fought in some of the most prominent battles of the war, but was composed solely of troops of European heritage recruited in Morocco.¹⁸ The bulk of the 40,000 Moroccan soldiers that fought in the war fought as part of the 1st RTM, and so it will form the core from which the myriad service records, engagement reports, and daily briefings are drawn. The first Moroccan troops would enter combat outside Paris in the first desperate months of the war, when the fate of France hung in the balance.

¹⁶ See Gershovich for claims of adventure and martial pride and Maghraoui for examinations of poverty and religion.

¹⁷ Fogarty, *Race and War in France*, 80.

¹⁸ Dean, “The French Colonial Army and the Great War,” 497.

Sources and Historiography

The main body of primary sources this thesis draws upon are housed in the military archives of the *Service Historique de la Défense* in Vincennes, France. Sources accessed include routine reports filed by the colonial administration in Rabat, accounts of campaigns and engagements presented to the French General Staff, scribbled notes sent directly from the trenches, and even Arabic newspaper clippings and the correspondence of French cabinet ministers. The majority of archival files I accessed detail the events of the war between 1914-1916, while materials documenting 1917-1918 were either fragmentary or unavailable during my period of research.¹⁹ The available evidence is overwhelmingly from the perspective of the French, although occasional letters and proclamations from prominent Moroccan dignitaries appear. The documents provide an opportunity for rich source criticism of French conceptions of the Great War and their colonial holdings, and attitudes towards race, masculinity, and national identity. The perspective of actual Moroccan soldiers is more difficult to glean, and I have therefore leaned on the analysis of Moroccan historians in places to supplement my own critiques. For that reason this work focuses on the changes over time of French perceptions of the *tirailleurs marocains* and places these developments in the context of existing scholarship.

In recent decades, the history of the *tirailleurs marocains* was first covered in depth by Anthony Clayton in his 1988 publication *France, Soldiers, and Africa*. He traces the origins of French involvement in Morocco in the early 20th century through to decolonization in 1956, and although this survey is quite broad in nature, he provides great detail and archival evidence. Moshe Gershovich devoted a chapter to the formation and engagements of the *tirailleurs* in *French Military Rule in Morocco*, and they also figured prominently in Richard Fogarty's *Race*

¹⁹ These sources warrant further study to provide a more complete analysis of the Moroccan riflemen, but in this thesis I have relied on the secondary scholarship to account for such exigencies.

and War in France from 2008. These represent the most in-depth studies in English of the *tirailleurs marocains*, and focus on the military record and religious motivations of the colonial soldiers.

Mohamed Bekraoui and Driss Magrhaoui have published works in Arabic, French, and English on Moroccan troops in the First World War in the past two decades, and provided a much deeper analysis of the contribution of the Moroccan population to the war effort on the battlefield, in industrial labor, and agricultural commodities. Both are professors in Rabat, and Dr. Bekraoui in particular is a noted expert in the history of Moroccans in World War I. Finally, Bahija Simou, Director of the Royal Archives in Rabat, has also considered the role of Moroccan soldiers in World War I in her works as a military historian, with a focus on the links created between Morocco and the metropole in the decades that followed the war.

This thesis unfolds over three chapters which trace the deployments of the *tirailleurs marocains* throughout the war and the changes affected in French conceptions of the Moroccan regiment. The first chapter analyzes the dynamic between Muslims and the French military in the Moroccan context, as the French army relied upon thousands of Muslim North African soldiers but had a fraught relationship with Islam. The second chapter frames French attitudes towards Moroccan soldiers at the beginning of the war, and follows their service in the two pivotal battles of the Marne and Verdun. Finally, the third chapter goes behind the frontlines of the war to tease apart the complex and often conflicting relations between indigenous soldiers and medical staff which threatened colonial hierarchies of race and gender. The history of Moroccan soldiers in World War I represents a lesser-known chapter in studies of France, colonialism, and the First World War, especially when compared to West Africa and Algeria, and this thesis attempts to bring greater clarity and recognition to the subject in English scholarship.

Chapter One: “The Formidable Question of Islam” -

Moroccan Soldiers and Islam in the French Army

On the 27th night of the month of Ramadan in 1914, Sultan Moulay Youssef addressed a letter to the Moroccan troops stationed for the first time in France. In it, he declared Morocco to be a steadfast ally of France helping defend its honor against its enemies. He exhorted the indigenous soldiers to act as such:

You will demonstrate your qualities of courage, bravery, and daring in the heat of battle. You will prove to the enemy that you are worthy of the reputation you have earned during your previous campaigns. In you, the exploits of your ancestors shall live again, you will forge a noble reputation, and you will leave behind a glorious legacy to be handed down from generation to generation for posterity.²⁰

This proclamation bore significance on several levels. The Moroccan riflemen were volunteers, unlike the *tirailleurs* of Algeria and Tunisia, and Moulay Youssef appealed to the martial culture of their homeland to encourage them. Furthermore, while they fought under French officers and commanders, Morocco’s status as a protectorate meant that the soldiers marched under a red flag surmounted by a green star in the name of the Sultan. Finally, the Sultan represented the ultimate religious authority to Moroccans, and his declaration coincided with an auspicious night during Ramadan to reinforce the importance of the coming war in the eyes of Muslim soldiers. All of these factors would influence the manner in which Moroccan troops would serve in World War I, but none were as integral to the evolution of the relationship between France and the colonial soldiers as religion.

The religious convictions of North African troops were foremost among the anxieties of French authorities as thousands of men deployed from steamships to ports across France, and

²⁰ SHD, GR 7N 2103 *État d’esprit des troupes marocaines*, “Proclamation adressée par Moulay Youssef aux troupes marocaines servant au front français, le 27 Ramadan 1332,” 19 August 1914.

these concerns were only exacerbated when the Ottoman Empire joined the war against the Entente powers in October of 1914. Politicians in Paris corresponded frantically with the colonial Governor-Generals in Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria over the prospect of war with the Sublime Porte, and formulated plans to ensure the loyalty of their Muslim troops. As the war progressed from 1914 into 1915, the French General Headquarter's fears were allayed, and policies towards the North African Muslims evolved. This chapter will examine the perceptions of the French Army towards its Moroccan soldiers and their identity as Muslims, including efforts undertaken on the homefront in Morocco. In some respects, the French grouped all of their North African subjects together into a block of more "fanatical" adherents to their faith in comparison to the Muslim soldiers of West Africa. However, due to the centuries-old split between the Alawite Dynasty of Morocco and the Caliphate in Constantinople, the Moroccan soldiers represented a case apart and received different treatment from French commanders as such.

French intellectual curiosity regarding Islam developed throughout the Enlightenment movement of the 18th century, but initial fascination demonstrated by thinkers like Montesquieu had evolved into disapproval and objectification under the auspices of Napoleon's invasion of Egypt. Orientalist depictions of Arab and Islamic culture as decadent, fallen, and morally adrift prevailed, and such were the attitudes of many administrators and generals of the French Third Republic in the early 20th century.²¹ Moreover, Muslims of the Maghreb were seen to manifest a deeper adherence to Islamic teachings than West African Muslims, which led some French colonial commanders to brand them as fanatics opposed to European civilization.²² Lyautey, for his part, earnestly partnered with Sultan Moulay Youssef in his governance of Morocco and supported the religious and political power of local *caïds*, but even he viewed Islam as

²¹ Richard Fogarty, *Race and War in France: Colonial Subjects in the French Army, 1914-1918*, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 178.

²² Fogarty, *Race and War in France*, 170.

oppositional to the French colonial mission at times. In a report in October 1914 to Minister of Foreign Affairs Théophile Delcassé, Lyautey wrote that Morocco often presented surprises and setbacks, and that “This statement can even be extended to the whole of North Africa, where the formidable question of Islam, with its mysterious underpinnings and unlimited ramifications, is so full of unforeseen events.”²³ The French thus conceived of Islam as a challenge to their rule in North Africa and subsequently to their command of North African troops in Europe, and as a source of mystery as much as possible resistance.

Especially in the opening months of the war, the religious convictions of Moroccan soldiers presented an acute uncertainty to French politicians and officers alike. These anxieties fell into two general categories of internal and external threats to the combat effectiveness of the colonial soldiers. On the one hand, officials expressed racist and Orientalist conceptions about the fitness of North African troops overall and had to adapt policies within the army to accommodate the proper observations of Islamic traditions for soldiers in the trenches. On the other hand, these same generals and cabinet ministers fretted over soldiers’ willingness to fight and kill fellow Muslims or allies of the Sultan of Constantinople, and sought to generate support for their cause amongst Arab notables across the Muslim world in response. Thus, perceptions of Moroccan soldiers as Muslims represented a major element in French army planning as World War I developed, and impacted the way in which these men were trained, deployed, and treated behind the lines over the course of the war.

²³ SHD, GR 7N 2122 *Maroc - Politiques et Opérations 1914-1915*, “Communiqué to Minister of Foreign Affairs Delcassé,” 16 October 1914.

External Pressures: The Threat of Holy War

Upon their arrival at Bordeaux in August 1914, the disembarked Moroccan soldiers made for an interesting spectacle in the bustling port in their drab uniforms contrasted by the bright blue and red military jacket and pants of their officers. Before they departed for Amiens by train, the *brigade marocaine*, or *chasseurs indigènes à pied* as they were formally known at the time, staged a parade through the city in full military dress with General Albert Ditte at their head riding a donkey.²⁴ Although all colonial soldiers were strictly segregated from the populations of the metropole, the arrival of so many thousands of troops prompted interest and gratitude from French citizens, and the soldiers were objects of both curiosity and affection in recognition of their sacrifice for the *patrie*. From Amiens the *brigade marocaine* made its way to the frontlines along the Ourcq and Aisne rivers where it would have its baptism by fire in the First Battle of the Marne. Even as casualties mounted in Europe and the colonial authorities in Morocco sought to increase the recruitment of soldiers and laborers for the war effort, the question of Islam weighed heavily on their minds. Lyautey in Morocco, Delcassé in Paris, and generals on the front lines in the Meuse all had to consider the faith of their Muslim troops and find a path towards accommodation in the midst of the bloodiest warfare they had ever encountered.

In the early months of the war, the principal concern of French commanders with Islam was not with their troops, but in regards to “Germano-Islamic action.” Collected in a folder titled *Dossier Panislamique*, a series of reports from Lyautey were dispatched to Millerand, Minister of War in October and November 1914. The threat of German agitation vis-à-vis Islamic populations concerned all three members of the Entente - France with its North African possessions, Britain with its Raj, and Russia with its various Turkic peoples. In a report sent only

²⁴ Daniel Clément and Natalie Maillard, *La Brigade marocaine: septembre 1914, une meurtrière odyssée* (Musée 14-18, 2015), 22.

a week before the Ottomans would enter the war on the side of the Central Powers, Lyautey explicitly tied agitation in French colonies back to Constantinople and fretted over the effects of a long and drawn-out conflict on the Muslim populations in Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco.²⁵ Further still, the Kaiser published a proclamation to the Muslim world urging revolt against their colonial rulers, and the Resident-General warned against remaining ‘extraordinarily careless’ in the face of these provocations. However, he ended his report with an affirmation of Sultan Moulay Youssef’s dedication to France, and suggested that he could shore up support amongst his subjects.

Only a month later at the end of November 1914, much had changed in the war. With the entry of the Ottomans into the war against the Entente, Britain’s Foreign Office and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs exchanged a flurry of panicked telegrams at the prospect of *jihad* erupting across their colonies.²⁶ However, in response to the machinations of the Sublime Porte, Sultan Moulay Youssef issued a letter that the French quickly and keenly passed on to Muslim soldiers at the front, providing eight copies in Arabic along with French translations. Above all, Lyautey stressed, local support and favor of the Sultan must be cultivated in direct opposition to the Turks. “The most powerful means of action at our disposal for this purpose is the maintenance of the religious prestige of Sultan Moulay Youssef, to whom the obedience of the populations of the Maghreb belongs,” he wrote.²⁷ Around the same time a Monsieur Piat, Consul General of France, toured the depots of recuperating North African troops in Aix and Arles and reported some startling findings in response to war with the Ottomans.

²⁵ SHD, 7N 2122, Lyautey to Minister of War Millerand, “Communiqué sur l’action germano-islamique,” 21 Octobre 1914.

²⁶ Fogarty, *Race and War in France*, 194.

²⁷ SHD, 7N 2122, Lyautey to Minister of Foreign Affairs Delcasse, “Sur la propagande germano-islamique,” 28 Novembre 1914.

On the same day that the Consul General spoke with sharpshooters in Aix and Arles, the Ottoman Empire attacked Tsarist Russia, and Britain and France declared war. This news was very troubling for the Muslim soldiers at the depots, although Piat was careful to note that it most affected the riflemen from Algeria and especially Tunisia. These soldiers had reportedly hesitated to fire upon Germans, who they considered to be “friends of the Sultan of Constantinople,” and they found it equally disturbing that Turkish troops might join combat against fellow Muslims.²⁸ The Consul General noted the particular efficacy of Germano-Turkish propaganda in North Africa in the years leading up to the war to ensure such favorable treatment from France’s colonial troops. There were reports of even more brazen attempts to coerce Muslim troops. In one shocking episode, a wounded Algerian rifleman encountered a German officer on the battlefield. The officer spoke kind but unintelligible words to the man, then stepped over to a wounded French non-commissioned officer. “The German brutally lifted him up, showed him to me, then, taking his revolver, shot him in the head. I understood that the Germans were acting this way to show us that they were not enemies of the Muslims and that they only wanted to harm the French.”²⁹ Such treatment perhaps spoke to Germany’s decades-long involvement in Ottoman industrial ventures or an affinity between the Germans and their Turkish allies, but it reinforced to the French authorities that their enemies were determined to sow doubt and division amidst their colonial troops by manipulating their faith.

Other soldiers at Aix and Arles reported still more encounters with Islamophilic German soldiers. A Moroccan *tirailleur* related to an Algerian lieutenant that Germans had shouted to him in Arabic, “Why are you fighting us? We are your brothers, we are Muslims like you.”³⁰ Despite the rather doubtful claims made by the German soldier in that situation, the Ottomans

²⁸ SHD, 7N 2103, “Piat Report,” 29 October 1914

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Fogarty, *Race and War in France*, 191.

did advise their German allies to resort to brandishing the Quran when confronting North African troops in an effort to stymie their advance or even persuade them to desert.³¹ These efforts to propagandize the Moroccan, Tunisian, and Algerian troops would come to a head when the Sultan of Constantinople issued *fatwas* against the Entente powers and exhorted all devout Muslims to join a *jihad* against Britain, France, and Russia.

Two weeks after joining the conflagration of the First World War, the Sultan of Constantinople issued a decree calling for holy war against the Entente. This move threatened to upend the Muslim world, and the Allied powers raced to control the spread of information. In December the Minister of Foreign Affairs received word from the Italian colony of Tripoli that the Sultan's decree had been affixed to the door of the largest mosque in the city.³² Reports sent from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the Quai d'Orsay to the Minister of War forwarded news from the French ambassador in Constantinople that some 50,000 brochures had been printed for distribution in Muslim countries 'governed by Christians.'³³ The brochures made claims for a panislamic movement, and spread from Ottoman lands through Egypt to the rest of North Africa.

Among the propaganda targeting colonial Muslim soldiers was the German newspaper *Al-Jihad*, which circulated from March 1915 onwards in several languages including Arabic.³⁴ In addition to such panislamic tracts, more direct religious decrees emanated from Constantinople too. In a report from June 1915, Lyautey described the various efforts by the enemies of France to influence their Muslim subjects, which included a sample and translation of the infamous 'Factotum Vert.' So-called because it was printed on green paper and emblazoned with a star and

³¹ Maghraoui, "The 'Grande Guerre Sainte,'" 3.

³² SHD, 7N 2103, Jousselin, Consul of France in Tripoli to Delcassé Minister of Foreign Affairs, "Proclamation de la guerre sainte," 12 December 1914. At the time, the Italians were not yet involved in the war.

³³ SHD, 7N 2103, Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Minister of War Millerand, "Mouvement Panislamique," 14 November 1914.

³⁴ Mohamed Bekraoui and Jean-Claude Allain, *Les Marocains dans la Grande guerre : 1914-1919*, (Commission marocaine d'histoire militaire, 2009), 135.

crescent moon, this declaration from the “Government of the Islamic Caliph” repeated the declaration of Holy War against the Entente Powers, and proclaimed it to be the duty of all believers and true Muslims.³⁵ This document also included detailed *fatwas* on the call to action of Muslim subjects of the British, Russians, and French, and included scorching condemnations of any who failed to defend the Caliphate. To counter these subversive and potentially explosive threats to their colonial sovereignty, the French leapt to drastic measures.

General Albert Moinier, who commanded the North African troops garrisoning Morocco for much of the war, firmly expressed the desire that news of the Turks’ proclamations be censored from the press of all Allied and even neutral countries. What’s more, the British and French collaborated to control the flow of pilgrims from Mecca.³⁶ While the French originally intended to prevent their subjects from reaching Ottoman territory by keeping them in Egypt, they soon realized that these efforts would cause a stir with the pilgrims’ families in North Africa, and this was unpopular with the British consul in Cairo. Instead, the French ministers coordinated with the Resident Generals in Tunis, Algiers, and Rabat to surveil the returning pilgrims for hidden dissidents. These exchanges demonstrate the French authorities’ fear at the prospect of war against the world’s predominant Muslim empire and their willingness to exercise colonial authority to maintain their grip in North Africa.

Throughout the winter of 1914 and into 1915, the French continued to fret about the potential of *jihad* affecting their Algerian, Tunisian, and Moroccan soldiers and subjects. However, they had by this time developed a more cogent strategy to counter Germano-Turkish propaganda and shore up the loyalty of their troops. As mentioned previously, Lyautey suggested to the politicians in Paris that the popularity and esteem of Sultan Moulay Youssef could do

³⁵ SHD, 7N 2122, “Translation of ‘Factotum Vert.’”

³⁶ SHD, 7N 2103, Minister of Foreign Affairs Delcassé to Minister of War Millerand, “Proclamation turque et pèlerinage de la Mecque,” 29 November 1914.

much to placate Moroccans and counteract any attempts by the Turks to destabilize the Protectorate. The Sultan would continue to send letters and declarations of encouragement to soldiers at the front like the one issued during Ramadan in 1914, and Lyautey ensured that these tracts were disseminated widely in Morocco and read at mosques to bolster support for the war.³⁷

In April 1915, a French intelligence officer reported on the activity of a Moroccan dissident active in the Spanish enclave in the North. Known as Raissouli, he had fought with tribes in the north of the country against the French before finding asylum with the Spanish, and now spread the word of an inevitable French defeat in the war at the hands of “his friend and ally, El Hadj Guillaume, Empereur d’Allemagne.”³⁸ Elsewhere in Morocco, reports filtered in that the Turks considered arming the ex-Sultan Abd-ed-Aziz and his followers.³⁹ As always, Lyautey emphasized the strength of his relationship to Moulay Youssef and the importance of maintaining his friendship. This was due in part to the rupture between Constantinople and Morocco and the leverage to be gained from that schism. “Morocco, on the contrary,” Lyautey writes, “has always shown an irreducible intransigence in ignoring the sultans of Constantinople, who had no Sharifian origins, and in recognizing no other spiritual sovereignty than that of the Sultan of Morocco, whom it considers the true representative of Islam in the world, as the direct descendant of the Prophet.”⁴⁰ The key to preserving the loyalty of the Moroccan soldiers in the face of war with their fellow believers and the propaganda from Berlin and Constantinople would be the central religious figure of the Moroccan sultan.

³⁷ Bekraoui, *Les Marocains dans la Grande Guerre*, 66.

³⁸ SHD, 7N 2122, Captain Huot to Resident General Lyautey, “February - April 1915 Note sur l’action Allemande au Maroc.”

³⁹ SHD, 7N 2122, “Dossier de la propagande panislamique,” 5.

⁴⁰ SHD, 7N 2122, “Dossier de la propagande panislamique,” 2. He continues, “This sentiment still persists; no native in Morocco believes that the fate of Islam is linked to the cause of the Sultan of Constantinople, and it is more important than ever, as you understand, to be careful not to give them any such idea. However, it cannot be denied that, since the Turkish Empire represents in their eyes the only Muslim state with any semblance of independence and significant power in the European concert of nations, they take a certain interest in matters concerning it.”

Thus far, the French authorities in both Morocco and Europe understood the religious convictions of the Moroccan *tirailleurs* to be a potential weakness, but as the war dragged on, they began to exploit it instead. Across North Africa, the French leaned on the notables of Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco to issue full-throated defenses of the colonial power, and even brought some of these political and religious figures to the rear of the fighting to encourage convalescing soldiers. From Algeria, Resident General Lutaud exercised his power in choosing imams to send to buoy the spirits of Algerian *tirailleurs*, but from Morocco, the Sultan was the sole religious authority and could not go himself.⁴¹ Instead, *caïds* and other urban notables like the Pasha of Casablanca toured the depots and hospitals behind the frontlines. As documented in a report to the General Staff in June 1915, Si El-Hadj Omar Tazi visited five different hospitals and congratulated the soldiers on their valorous conduct in the service of France, and consoled the wounded. In fact, the Pasha went so far as to address recuperating French soldiers as well, and wished them a speedy recovery alongside their Muslim comrades.⁴² Such efforts were so appreciated by the French commanders that some notables who performed these duties to boost morale and reinforce loyalty to the colonial regime were even granted the *legion d'honneur*.⁴³

Endorsements of the war effort were not only expressed in visits and meetings with French officials, however. Declarations of support poured into the offices of colonial authorities in November and December 1914. Even a former pan-Islamist from Morocco, now in exile in Cairo, voiced his support for France in opposition to the Turks.⁴⁴ From Berguent in *Maroc oriental* a letter was sent to Millerand, Minister of War declaring ‘sentiments of devotion’ and

⁴¹ Fogarty, *Race and War in France*, 188.

⁴² SHD, 7N 2122, Report to General Staff of the 17th Region.

⁴³ SHD, 7N 2103, “Au sujet du Chérif si Ibrahim des Rahmánya.” In this case, an Algerian leader and cleric.

⁴⁴ SHD, 7N 2103, Minister of France in Egypt DeFrance to Minister of Foreign Affairs Delcasse, “Lettre de Hamad Rifaat.” He previously wrote for and edited the pan-Islamist newspaper El-Hakk.

‘spontaneous elan’ from eleven *caïds* and scholars of the *ulama*.⁴⁵ With signatures in colorful inks and elaborate seals, the letter declared, “Vive la France! Vive la République! Vive l’Algérie, la Tunisie, et le Maroc!” in pursuit of victory with the total support of the Muslim communities of the colonies.

Also in December 1914, the religious brotherhoods of North Africa mobilized in support of the colonial power. The *al-tayyibiya* brotherhood of Wazzan thanked France for bringing “security and peace,” and hailed the empire for upholding a just universal human cause of liberty.⁴⁶ Only a few days later, the *sheikh* and leader of the Rahmanyia Brotherhood sent a letter to Raymond Poincaré himself. Though writing from Tunis, he spoke for his coreligionists in Morocco and Algeria as well in his address.

We, Mr. President of the Republic, are united in a single heartfelt desire to drive the enemy from France. The barbarians who have dared to trample on sacred French soil are my enemies, and we will do everything to annihilate them morally, politically, economically, and by force. We are proud to belong to greater France, and the enemy can rest assured that we will fight them to the very end without respite.⁴⁷

A few conclusions can be drawn from these messages of vigorous support. First, as has been widely documented by historians of the First World War, there was widespread support for the war in the early months amongst civilian populations which was coupled with the assurance of a swift victory. Second, the process of colonization in Morocco, while incomplete, was at least far along enough to bind the fortunes of the elite to the colonial power, and as such these men ardently supported their Sultan, the French, and by extension the *tirailleurs marocains*.

Elsewhere in Morocco, Lyautey related the return of another notable from a yearlong pilgrimage to Mecca, during which *caïd* Si Tayeb Goundafi was exposed to all kinds of Ottoman

⁴⁵ SHD, 7N 2103, Si Mohammed ben Mahmoud to Minister of War Millerand, “Lettre de 30 November 1914.” His full title was as follows: *Chevalier de la Legion d’Honneur, decore de la medaille militaire et officier d’Academie, Mokadem de la secte des Gedjania et ses adeptes, President de la Rachidia et ses membres du Maroc Oritenal*.

⁴⁶ Maghraoui, “The ‘Grande Guerre Sainte,’” 14.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

propaganda and coercion.⁴⁸ On his return journey from Mecca, the *caid* spent three months in Medina, and approximately a month each in Damascus and Beirut before exiting Ottoman territory via Alexandria and finally Marseille. Importantly, while in Mecca Goundafi was received three times by Sharif Husayn, a man whose clout and significance did not escape the French government. Sharif's son Abdallah met with Goundafi in Medina, and both family members related their bitterness at Ottoman control over the Hejaz, but remained uncommitted to the war efforts for the time being. During these travels the Moroccan notable was also visited by the Turkish authorities, and regaled with amusing tales of Turkish might - news that the Turks had conquered Moscow, that France and Britain were occupied by Germany, and even that Sultan Moulay Youssef had been replaced by the contender Abd-el-Malek.⁴⁹ This report was noteworthy not only for the unflagging loyalty of the Moroccan Goundafi to France, but also for the indications of privation in Ottoman territory and the discontent on the Arabian Peninsula which Britain and France would later stir to open rebellion.

By spring and summer of 1915, the initial fears of widespread holy war from the beginning of the war had mostly settled, despite the continued efforts of the Germans and Ottomans. New developments in the war threatened to once again stir the Muslim colonial soldiers though, or so the authorities feared. The expedition to the Dardanelles divided colonial authorities on the potential of the impact on North African troops and civilian populations. While the Ministry of War believed that their *indigènes* had by now proven themselves resistant to Turkish propaganda, Resident General Lutaud argued for a more careful approach and cautioned against sending Muslim troops to combat in Anatolia.⁵⁰ A report by the General Staff some

⁴⁸ SHD, 7N 2122, Resident General Lyautey to Minister of Foreign Affairs Delcassé, "Rapport sur le pèlerinage du Caid Si Tayeb Goundafi," 5 June 1915.

⁴⁹ SHD, 7N 2122, "Rapport sur le pèlerinage." Abd-el-Malek was another dissident who resisted French colonial authority in the mountains of northern Morocco and Algeria.

⁵⁰ Fogarty, *Race and War in France*, 195.

months earlier echoed these sentiments, and suggested instead the provocation of an Arab movement or uprising in Ottoman lands instead.⁵¹ Such an intervention even had a potential figurehead - Captain Khaled of the Algerian *spahis*, the highest ranked indigenous officer in the colonial army. He himself had argued in favor of deployment of his cavalry squadrons to Ottoman territory such as Anatolia or Syria.⁵² Ultimately, the decision was reached to rely on troops from West Africa or the metropole for the Dardanelles campaign, though North African troops would see action nearby in the Balkans and eventually in the Levant as well.

When Italy joined the war on the side of the Entente in May 1915, the news sparked joyous reactions from Lyautey, Sultan Moulay Youssef, and the bureaucracy of the *makhzen*. Due in part to their position as supporters of the French regime, the Sultan and his court also celebrated since they assumed that Moulay Youssef would be deposed in the event of a German victory.⁵³ Elsewhere, some news still managed to circulate in the cities and towns of Morocco in spite of French efforts to suppress the news of the enormous casualties taken on the Western Front so far, and morale on the home front sagged. With the news of Italy's intervention in the war, French and Moroccan officials alike rejoiced, especially after worrisome news about Turkish resistance to the Gallipoli landings and the rout of the Russians from Galicia.

The confrontation of the Ottomans in particular worried the Sultan - not just for the reasons mentioned above to Millerand, but for the wider implications of the conflict.

Moulay Youssef focused particularly on the Dardanelles expedition, making no secret of his concerns about the comments circulating among the local population. Although fiercely protective of their religious independence from the Sultan of Constantinople, the Moroccans nevertheless considered Turkey the greatest political and military power in Islam and were well

⁵¹ SHD, 7N 2103, Report by General Staff to Minister of War Millerand, "Analyse au sujet des mesures propres à combattre l'action de la Turquie sur les populations musulmanes de l'Afrique du Nord."

⁵² Fogarty, *Race and War in France*, 194. He was a popular figure in the military since he was the nephew of an Algerian dissident and thereby represented the success of the French assimilationist colonial model.

⁵³ SHD, 7N 2122, Resident General Lyautey to Minister of Foreign Affairs Delcassé, "Guerre - Intervention d'Italie," 26 May 1915.

aware that, with its destruction, other Muslim states and communities would lose a moral and material support.⁵⁴

This episode suggests that regardless of the success in rebutting Germano-Turkish talking points and consolidating their control in the colonies, the French Empire and its affiliates were directly and existentially threatened by the prospect of Ottoman victory. For these reasons and others, by 1916 squadrons of Moroccan *spahis* were on their way to support Faisal, son of Sharif Husayn in the Hejaz.

Internal Reforms: Assurance and Accommodation

The French colonial authorities distinguished their West African and North African Muslim troops through a racialized and Islamophobic lens, supposing the West Africans to be less influenced by the Ottomans as rulers of the Caliphate due to competition with animism in the region and a greater cultural divide from the Turks. At the same time, they categorized the North Africans as more “fanatical” believers, and shaped their policies accordingly.⁵⁵ While some units of Algerian *turcos* fought in the metropole in the Franco-Prussian War, World War I saw the greatest number of Muslim colonial soldiers ever mobilized on French soil. Some measures of accommodation and accord thus had to be reached between the Third Republic and the Muslim soldiers prepared to give their lives in its name. Lyautey advocated for the Moroccan soldiers dispatched to France and objected to Moroccan troops being considered as cannon fodder, which threatened unrest in the colony and made poor use of the well-trained *tirailleurs*. On a related note, one of the most immediately salient issues raised by Muslim subjects was the

⁵⁴ SHD, 7N 2122, “Guerre - Intervention d’Italie,” 2.

⁵⁵ Fogarty, *Race and War in France*, 175-176.

interment of the dead and observation of proper religious rites in a war of unprecedented casualties and bloodshed.⁵⁶

As early as October 1914, Lyautey encouraged the Minister of War in one of his reports to facilitate proper burial techniques for fallen Muslim soldiers. This would not only alleviate the angst of fellow Muslim troops at the front, but also for their families back home. In fact, discussions were already underway in Paris and Millerand reminded French officials that Muslim soldiers were to be buried in a shroud as opposed to a coffin, in observance of their beliefs.⁵⁷ Still, the staggering death toll at the front often precluded such measures, and the reality of Muslim soldiers' burial in mass graves generated further distress in the North African colonies, according to Lyautey. Even when funeral rites were properly administered, the grave site could become a locus of contention between colonial troops and the imperial authority. At the depot in Arles in 1915, some Moroccan *tirailleurs* lamented the casualties suffered by their countrymen and the distance from their native soil, and wished that the present burial “be the last one of us interred here.”⁵⁸ As the war ground on, the French made greater and greater efforts to accommodate their North African troops in light of their enormous sacrifices, and Islamic obsequies were implemented alongside the celebration of holy days. By 1917 these policies had the desired effect, with a report from the depot for convalescents in Aix recording the favorable impression that an imam had left on recuperating soldiers when he performed his duties for dead and dying men.⁵⁹

Muslim holidays also played an important role in maintaining the morale and loyalty of colonial soldiers as they fought far from home. The war first broke out during Ramadan in

⁵⁶ SHD, 7N 2122, Resident General Lyautey to Minister of Foreign Affairs Delcassé, “Report,” 14 October 1914.

⁵⁷ Fogarty, *Race and War in France*, 184.

⁵⁸ Bekraoui, *Les Marocains dans la Grande guerre : 1914-1919*, 130-131.

⁵⁹ Fogarty, *Race and War in France*, 185.

Morocco, which led to some initial difficulties on the part of the French in finding recruits in the protectorate, although the situation soon changed.⁶⁰ By the winter of 1915, the realities of the war had become apparent to the General Staff, and the threat of German and Ottoman propaganda efforts loomed in their minds. When the Minister of War suggested in a communiqué to the General Staff of the Armée d'Afrique that Muslim soldiers should be allowed to celebrate the holiday of el-Mouloud, General Jean César Graziani eagerly agreed and passed the word along to his subordinates, with "all freedom be given to these soldiers to celebrate from sundown onwards," including additional rations when possible.⁶¹ The same holiday was also the occasion of spontaneous demonstrations in Rabat for loyalty to Sultan Moulay Youssef, which greatly pleased the French as an affirmation of the success of their colonial and military policies of accommodation.⁶²

Beyond holidays, Muslim troops were catered to in other ways to keep them at ease while at training camps and depots behind the front lines. Culturally appropriate food such as couscous and mint tea was made available, prayer rooms set aside, and alcohol forbidden on the premises of their camps. At Nogent-sur-Marne, a makeshift mosque was even built on the grounds of the encampment.⁶³ During the month of Ramadan in 1916, clerics from Algiers and Tunis issued guidance to soldiers on how best to maintain their fast while in the trenches and proclaimed allowances for those unable to do so, which were printed and distributed by French authorities to the men on the front.⁶⁴ When Eid-el-Kebir arrived in October, General Graziani once again granted permission for a day off for Muslim soldiers starting at sundown, and made sure to pass the information along to all Resident Generals in the North African colonies.⁶⁵ In some cases,

⁶⁰ Maghraoui, "The 'Grande Guerre Sainte,'" 8.

⁶¹ SHD, 7N 2103, "Note: Au sujet de la fête musulmane El Mouloud."

⁶² SHD, 7N 2103, "Note de General Graziani au Gouverneur Général de l'Algérie sur Mouloud au Maroc."

⁶³ Maghraoui, "The 'Grande Guerre Sainte,'" 8.

⁶⁴ Fogarty, *Race and War in France*, 186.

⁶⁵ SHD, 7N 2103, "Note au sujet des fêtes musulmanes."

though, these measures were only taken in direct response to Germano-Turkish accusations and reports filtering back to the French from prisoner-of-war camps in Germany, where Muslim prisoners were treated entirely differently from their French comrades.

In June 1915, Minister of Foreign Affairs Théophile Delcassé dictated a report to Minister of War Millerand on the subject of the treatment of Muslim soldiers, or more specifically Muslim prisoners-of-war. At this point in the war there were an estimated three thousand such prisoners held at a single camp in Germany near the town of Zossen, all of whom were subject to German efforts to cajole or coopt their loyalty. A mixed delegation of Egyptians and other North Africans were granted access to the camp where they witnessed the lengths to which German captors had gone to furnish the camp for their prisoners, which included kitchens and baths with plumbing as well as an entire mosque.⁶⁶ What's more, the Germans eagerly flaunted their friendship and courtesy for Muslims in publications disseminated by the Ottomans and by German consulates in North Africa. This news, once related back to French authorities, prompted a flurry of activity at the depots that served Muslim colonial troops, and at Arles, Aix, Tarascon, and Beaucaire, measures were taken to allow for greater religious observance to demonstrate France's commitment to its Muslim subjects.

In the years leading up to the outbreak of the war, Germany had cultivated a network of anti-French religious and political leaders across North Africa, and swiftly mobilized these men from the autumn of 1914 onwards. In 1915, *The Truth About the War of Faith* appeared in Berlin, written by the Tunisian author Muhammad Salih al-Sharif al-Tunisi.⁶⁷ While the book's burgeoning popularity educated the German public about the faith of their allies fighting against the Entente, it also encouraged independence for the author's home country. Al-Tunisi was even

⁶⁶ SHD, 7N 2103, Ministre des affaires étrangères Delcassé a Ministre de la guerre Millerand, "Rapport au Traitements des soldats musulmans."

⁶⁷ Maghraoui, "The 'Grande Guerre Sainte,'" 10.

a close friend of the Algerian dissident Abd-el-Kadr, and the writer went to the frontlines of the war as a premier propagandist where he penned pamphlet after pamphlet targeting the French North African troops.

In another instance, a lieutenant of the *tirailleurs algériens* deserted in April 1915 and contributed pamphlets and newspaper articles of his own to the German war effort. Rabah Boukabouya's text *L'Islam dans l'armée française* was published in Constantinople and widely disseminated by the Central Powers and castigated the French for their supposed lack of care for their Muslim soldiers.⁶⁸ Boukabouya cited luxurious baths and tropical African greenery which made the prisoners feel at ease while they could read the Koran and hadiths alongside Turkish instructors, and later claimed that any French attempts to cater to their Muslim soldiers was due to his writings.⁶⁹ Other than persuading North African soldiers to mutiny or desert the French lines, these efforts undertaken at the camps were aimed at actually recruiting men into Ottoman formations to spy on or even directly fight against Entente forces, but such efforts were almost always rebuffed.⁷⁰ These turncoat divisions only numbered a few hundred men at most, and when they were deployed in the Levant, almost all of them slipped back to British lines and surrendered.⁷¹

More threatening to the French were the possibilities of espionage and infiltration, especially from the Germanophilic Spanish Zone of Northern Morocco. In the extensive Huot Report, French intelligence services reported on arms smuggling, panislamist publications, and a German spy ring operating out of Spanish-controlled Melilla, all of which sought to manipulate

⁶⁸ Bekraoui, *Les Marocains dans la Grande guerre : 1914-1919*, 135-136.

⁶⁹ Fogarty, *Race and War in France*, 190. The camp was in Northern Germany so the presence of tropical greenery is doubtful, although there was apparently an outbreak of typhus.

⁷⁰ SHD, GR 7N 2103, Minister of War to Commissioner-General Lyautey, "Note on sending money to capture tirailleurs," 19 September 1915.

⁷¹ Bekraoui, *Les Marocains dans la Grande guerre : 1914-1919*, 137.

the Moroccan people against the French colonial authority.⁷² Moroccan and Algerian dissidents were in contact with agents of the Kaiser and received arms and money, but were ultimately unsuccessful in stirring anti-French sentiments. The efforts of the Germans and Ottomans did however force France to fully embrace its Muslim soldiers as defenders of ‘Greater France,’ and in turn the French argued that they were the true defenders of the Islamic faith. In a letter to Governor General Lutaud of Algeria on ‘French Intervention in the Orient,’ Minister of War Millerand accused the Young Turk movement of lying and leading faithful Muslims astray under the sway of German tyrants, and positioned the French as deliverers of the holy land and the stewards of Islam.⁷³ This grandiose language was obviously propaganda itself, but by 1917 the French authorities had implemented sweeping changes in the ways that Muslim troops in the *tirailleurs marocains* and other North African battalions practiced their religion while on the battlefields of France and Belgium and solidified the loyalty of their Muslim subjects in the metropole and in the colonies.

Conclusion

By the Battle of Verdun, French concerns over either suitability or reliability of its Muslim troops had subsided or been addressed through policy changes. Religious figures such as sheikhs and imams visited troops behind the lines and offered encouragement and relief in the

⁷² SHD, 7N 2122, “Huot Report on Germano-Turkish Propaganda Efforts.” German actions tapered off after an accused spy was caught and executed by the French in February 1915.

⁷³ SHD, 7N 2103. Ministre de la guerre Millerand au Gouverneur Général de l’Algérie Lutaud, “Communique à l’intervention française à l’Orient.”

face of “German barbarism,” and calls for loyalty to the French and to the Moroccan sultan were amplified. Initial fears of *jihad* were assuaged by the winter of 1915, and Germano-Turkish efforts to subvert frontline troops or compel prisoners of war to defect were largely unsuccessful. Meanwhile, intentional changes made to matters such as food and prayer, observation of holy days, and burial rites helped Moroccan troops to better withstand the intensity of combat in the First World War. Over the first months and years of the war, the *tirailleurs marocains* proved themselves on the battlefield and acquired a reputation amongst the French as dependable soldiers or even mercenaries, and garnered a host of honors from nearly every major engagement of the war. The French military’s concerns over their colonial soldiers’ fitness for combat due to their religion had thus been mollified, and they gained greater trust and reliability as shock troops as the major offensives of 1915 and 1916 began to take shape.

Chapter Two: “Swallows of Death” -

Moroccan Soldiers on the Battlefield

In late August 1914, the diversity of France’s empire was made apparent to the residents of the port city of Bordeaux. A camp full of canvas tents, cook fires, and supply-laden donkeys sprang up along the quai overlooking the water, and Arabic conversation, orders shouted in French, and even snatches of Berber dialects filled the air as transport ships disgorged their cargo.⁷⁴ These were the first Moroccan soldiers to set foot in France in defense of the metropole in the First World War, and they brought with them a complicated colonial history. As France’s most recent acquisition as a protectorate in 1912, Morocco represented a source of soldiers and manpower for the empire, but strife in the colony amidst ongoing efforts to subdue unrest led many officers in the French General Staff to regard the soldiers with suspicion. In the months and years that followed the initial disembarkment, another 35,000 soldiers joined their comrades to fight on French soil and established a proud record filled with citations for valor and determination as well as sacrifice. Between 1914-1918, the *tirailleurs marocains* expunged any doubts in their abilities as well-trained soldiers, and through their participation in all of the largest campaigns and offensives of the war, established a reputation of fearsome bravery and stubborn tenacity and came to be relied upon even up to the highest levels of French command.

One particularity of the recently-established protectorate’s military was that it was organized under and sworn to the Sultan Mouley Youssef and not to the French *Armée d’Afrique* or to the forces of the *Marine*. As such, the new regiments raised from the remnants of the previous indigenous *tabors* were named *chasseurs indigènes à pied* under the *troupes auxiliaires*

⁷⁴ Daniel Clément and Natalie Maillard, *La Brigade marocaine: septembre 1914, une meurtrière odyssée* (Musée 14-18, 2015), 19.

marocains, as opposed to the already-incorporated *tirailleurs algériens* or *tunisiens*. Within these formations, Moroccan troops were led by French officers at higher levels, with Algerian and Tunisian sub-alterns in the intermediate ranks.⁷⁵ These colonies were both older and could provide officers who spoke Arabic as well as French, and they were familiar with the hierarchies of the French military. While the position of *caïd-mia* was retained from the *makhzen* army as a captain-level rank, most Moroccan leadership was limited to non-commissioned officers as *moqqadems* and *maouns*, or sergeants and corporals respectively.⁷⁶ Due to the mutiny of 1912, the Moroccan colonial soldiers faced constant scrutiny and suspicion from the French General Staff and superior officers as the war unfolded, but this trepidation would give way to an eventual acknowledgement of the soldiers' professionalism and zeal.⁷⁷

The original Moroccan regiments of about 5,000 men were thus dispatched to the metropole in September 1914 as *chasseurs indigènes à pied* without any official reference to Morocco. As a protectorate, they could not technically fight under the French flag, and Sultan Moulay Youssef had not yet declared war against the Kaiser. Attached to the French 6th Army, they were still informally known as the *Brigade Marocaine*. These soldiers were dressed in khaki uniforms which distinguished them from the blue overcoats and red trousers of the French Army at the outset of the war, and instead of the brimmed *képi* they wore red *chéchias* wrapped in a khaki turban.⁷⁸ Command of the Moroccan Brigade was given to General Albert Ditte and divided into two regiments under Lieutenant-Colonel Touchard and Commandant Poeymirau.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Anthony Clayton, *France, Soldiers, and Africa*, 1st ed (Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1988), 262.

⁷⁶ Clement and Maillard, *La Brigade marocaine*, 3.

⁷⁷ Gershovich, *French Military Rule in Morocco*, 171.

⁷⁸ Driss Maghraoui, "The 'Grande Guerre Sainte': Moroccan Colonial Troops and Workers in The First World War," *The Journal of North African Studies* 9, no. 1 (2004), 5.

⁷⁹ Mohamed Bekraoui, *Les Marocains dans la Grande guerre : 1914-1919*, with Jean-Claude Allain, vol. 1 (Commission marocaine d'histoire militaire, 2009), 108-109. Poeymirau was injured early in the war and returned to Morocco where he served under Lyautey in maintaining order in the protectorate.

Hastily refitted, the men were sent by trains from Bordeaux where they disembarked to Amiens first, then went straight into combat in only a matter of days.

It was only after the bloody defensive battles along the Ourcq and the Marne when the *Brigade Marocaine* was nearly annihilated that surviving troops and subsequent reinforcements were refashioned in December 1914 into the *1er régiment de marche de tirailleurs marocains* (RTM), which would endure for the remainder of the conflict.⁸⁰ The following month, the *1er régiment de marche de spahis marocains* was established as a cavalry troop, but these soldiers primarily fought as reserve troops on foot, and saw much less combat on the Western Front than their *tirailleur* comrades. In 1917 they were redeployed to the Balkans and the Levant where they garnered numerous accolades and propagated the renown of Moroccans in combat.⁸¹

Once the Moroccan soldiers were reconstituted into the 1st RTM, they took part in the main two offensives in 1915 in Artois and Champagne. Here too, they made bold assaults at the cost of extreme casualties which further demonstrated their dedication to France. In the fierce fighting at the Butte de Mesnil, for example, 2,000 Moroccan soldiers were killed in just two weeks for little gain.⁸² In recognition of this sacrifice, President Poincaré of France and the King of Belgium visited the regiment while on parade to present an honorific flag. Elsewhere, the 1st RTM fought alongside the *Brigade Mixte* of General Klein, composed of a mix of metropolitan and Algerian troops. In October, the *tirailleurs marocains* distinguished themselves in Champagne when they penetrated so deeply behind enemy lines that they captured a German flag and destroyed artillery pieces, but had to retreat when French units on their flank came under counterattack and surrendered.⁸³

⁸⁰ Clayton, *France, Soldiers, and Africa*, 263.

⁸¹ Gershovich, *French Military Rule in Morocco*, 174.

⁸² Maghraoui, "The 'Grande Guerre Sainte,'" 6.

⁸³ William T. Dean, "The French Colonial Army and the Great War," *The Historian* 76, no. 3 (2014), 497.

During heavy fighting in June, the regiment took serious losses including many officers, but won commendations from the General Staff who recognized them as the *belle brigade* and *regiment valiant* in separate reports.⁸⁴ At the Somme, the regiment again suffered heavily with the loss of another 1,400 soldiers.⁸⁵ 1915 was the single deadliest year of the war for the French army, and the high number of casualties was reflected amongst the regiments of colonial troops as well. In 1916, the regiment was stationed at Verdun in a reserve capacity, but on numerous occasions saw intense combat in that pivotal battle which will be examined in detail later. At the outset of 1917, the 1st RTM was reassigned from the 48th Infantry Division to the 153rd for a renewed offensive along the Aisne river.⁸⁶ At the Chemin des Dames, the regiment performed admirably and won its second citation of the war.⁸⁷

By 1918, the success of the *tirailleurs marocains* up to that point and the bloody demands of the war meant that a second regiment of sharpshooters was created, this time seconded to the aptly named *Division Marocaine*.⁸⁸ This division was an amalgamation of colonial regiments pulled from Morocco at the outset of the war, but did not contain any actual Moroccan soldiers until the last year of the war. Although they fought under a striped red and white flag surmounted by a green crescent, the Moroccan Division was composed of two regiments of Algerian and Tunisian *tirailleurs*, one regiment of *zouaves*, and one regiment of the *Légion étrangère*.⁸⁹ Even before the 2eme RTM joined the ranks of the *Division Marocaine*, they too had earned a storied reputation for fierce offensive maneuvers as well as determination under fire, and won citations

⁸⁴ SHD, GR 25N 515, *Régiment de tirailleurs marocains 1914-1917*, “96th Brigade Colonel to Moroccan Regiment Colonel” June 17, 1915, and “95th Brigade to Colonel Auroux,” June 16, 1915.

⁸⁵ Clayton, *France, Soldiers, and Africa*, 263.

⁸⁶ Simou, “La Contribution marocaine à la première guerre mondiale,” 89.

⁸⁷ Gershovich, *French Military Rule in Morocco*, 173.

⁸⁸ Simou, “La Contribution marocaine à la première guerre mondiale,” 89.

⁸⁹ *Pages de gloire de la division marocaine* (Chapelot, 1917), <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k62914018>, 51-54.

in many of the same campaigns as the 1st RTM, including at the Marne, the Somme, in Artois, Champagne, and Verdun.⁹⁰

Only months after its incorporation, the 2nd RTM found itself embroiled in fierce combat around Soissons in June 1918, where the *tirailleurs* captured the village of Breuil at the cost of two-thirds of the regiment. In September, reinforcements in the 9th Battalion suffered 600 killed out of 1,100 in a German attack in the Vigne forest.⁹¹ A month later, they suffered an even bloodier toll in Champagne where the regiment took 1,400 casualties in a single day.⁹² These sacrifices were at least recognized by French high command, as the regiment won two citations in less than a year of fighting, and even presented the regimental flag in the triumphant Bastille Day parade in 1919.⁹³ This brief summary of the major engagements of Moroccan troops in the war demonstrates their capability and reliability in the harsh conditions of the First World War, and the totemic battles of the Marne and Verdun will be examined under greater scrutiny below to gain greater clarity in the evolution of French perceptions of their colonial troops during the war.

Battle of the Marne, 1914:

In early September 1914, the *Brigade Marocaine* found itself outside the village of Senlis. The various companies struggled to rejoin one another after spending the night prior marching through the forest, and rumors flew about that the Germans were approaching from the front and rear. In the stifling afternoon heat, German troops were spotted and subjected to enfilading fire from the Moroccans and their French officers as artillery pounded the village.

⁹⁰ *Pages de gloire de la division marocaine*, 61.

⁹¹ Maghraoui, "The 'Grande Guerre Sainte,' 6.

⁹² Simou, "La Contribution marocaine à la première guerre mondiale," 89.

⁹³ Gershovich, *French Military Rule in Morocco*, 173.

When more Germans approached, the Moroccans retreated in good order back to French lines.⁹⁴ This initial encounter impressed French officers in other regiments, with the indigenous troops complimented for their discipline, bravery, and hardiness.⁹⁵ Even the commanding officer of the brigade, General Ditte, spoke highly of the Moroccans and affirmed his trust in their abilities.⁹⁶ Soon, the brigade would have its true *baptême de feu* along the river Marne.

In early September, the First World War was still a war of movement. The German armies of von Moltke and von Klück repulsed the French at the Battle of the Frontiers and now rapidly advanced towards Paris. The French 6th Army, positioned near the town of Meaux along the Marne river, determined to halt the onslaught. On September 5, 1914 the two regiments of Moroccan *chasseurs à pied* were to march towards the villages of Neufmontiers and Penchard to prepare for a greater offensive on the following day, with few German troops known to be in the area. At 11am the Moroccan troops advanced towards Telegraph Wood, perched atop a hill overlooking the villages, while other companies moved into position in Neufmontiers.⁹⁷ They came under sporadic fire from the hilltop wood, and so split into companies and advanced steadily, firing in support of one another. Captain d'Ivry's men reached the summit first, "and the first units of this battalion launched themselves from the borders of the forest in a valiant bayonet charge," setting the German defenders to rout and capturing several artillery pieces.⁹⁸

At this point, however, the French supporting artillery of the 55th Division was dueling with German batteries a few kilometers to the west, and so the Moroccan charge was unsupported and soon subject to a counterattack. Coming under heavy German bombardment

⁹⁴ Clément and Maillard, *La Brigade marocaine*, 65.

⁹⁵ Clément and Maillard, *La Brigade marocaine*, 62. The commandant of the 4th battalion remarked that his soldiers had been on the march for almost a week at that point without a substantial meal, but they still fought in good order.

⁹⁶ Maghraoui, "The 'Grande Guerre Sainte,'" 5.

⁹⁷ SHD, GR 26N 858/3, *Journal de marches et opérations: 2eme Regiment de chasseurs indigènes à pied - Septembre 1914*.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

and the focused firepower of several reserve corps, the battalions of Moroccan troops were pushed back and forced to retreat, one by one. With the infantry of the 55th Division reluctant to move forward to cover the flanks of the Moroccans while under a furious bombardment, the initial swift advance into the wood nearly became an encirclement as the Germans surged forwards.⁹⁹ Still, the indigenous soldiers gave testament to their resolve and training and retreated in good order, with companies alternating falling back and providing covering fire to their comrades as they retreated over the open expanse of cornfields baked in the hot September sun. By the time the two regiments made camp for the nights at the villages of Charny and Villeroy to the rear of the front lines, some 19 officers of the *Brigade Marocaine* had been killed alongside a stunning 1,150 men.¹⁰⁰

Impressions of this first major combat test of the Moroccan troops were at first mixed. In his memoirs of the battle, Lt. Alphonse Juin stated that “the major mistake had been to commit the Moroccans based solely on their bravery and self-sacrifice, without providing them with the support of even a single field artillery group. This negligence was undoubtedly due to the assumption that there would be no encounter until the following day.”¹⁰¹ Juin’s account highlights both the performance of the Moroccan troops on the battlefield in the face of overwhelming firepower, as well as the lack of preparation from high command as the French desperately maneuvered to stall the rapid German advance. In his official report on the engagement, General Ditte also noted the lack of proper artillery support, and lauded the men for holding their positions for three hours before retreating in good order. However, he also

⁹⁹ Clément and Maillard, *La Brigade marocaine*, 78.

¹⁰⁰ Maghraoui, “The ‘Grande Guerre Sainte,’” 5.

¹⁰¹ Clément and Maillard, *La Brigade marocaine*, 91.

emphasized their readiness for renewed combat the following day, and lamented the losses of many officers of diverse ranks in the day's slaughter.¹⁰²

This episode reveals several factors that would affect the performance and record of the Moroccan soldiers throughout the war. First, they established their reputation for discipline and bravery under fire, as well as their capacity for courageous charges and their ability to maneuver as well as any metropolitan troops. The downside of such a reputation was that French commanders did not hesitate to commit them to the bloodiest fighting, safe in the knowledge that they could stoically bear enormous casualties.¹⁰³ Additionally, the *Journaux des marches et opérations* of the 1st and 2nd Regiments were far more concerned with the losses of the French officers than of the enlisted indigenous troops. Not only did this reflect elements of racism, the other effect was that the original colonial officers most familiar with the Moroccans were replaced, which led to Lyautey complaining in an official report of the callous misuse of his soldiers by unfamiliar officers.¹⁰⁴ With the fate of France on the brink, though, the Moroccans were again thrown into the fire to turn back the German advance along the Marne.

The following morning, the *Brigade Marocaine* took back Penchard, Neufmontiers, and the forest along the ridge with no casualties. This time they were ably supported by artillery companies seconded to their brigade, although German resistance was light for the most part as the enemy forces were shuffled around as fighting intensified in the east. The 1st regiment of the *chasseurs indigènes à pied* was tasked with supporting the 55th Reserve Division as they attempted to seize the village of Chambry, but both were repulsed by artillery fire of the heavy German 105mm cannons.¹⁰⁵ With the 2nd regiment recuperating from its astounding losses the

¹⁰² Clément and Maillard, *La Brigade marocaine*, 92.

¹⁰³ Clayton, *France, Soldiers, and Africa*, 263.

¹⁰⁴ SHD, GR 7N 2122, Commissioner-General Lyautey to Minister of War Millerand, October 1914.

¹⁰⁵ SHD, GR 26N 858/1, *Journal de marches et opérations: 1er Régiment de chasseurs indigènes à pied - Septembre 1914*.

day before, the 1st regiment bore the brunt of the casualties on the 6th of September with some 300 men killed, wounded, or lost.

On the 7th, the 1st regiment was now held in reserve in Penchard and the 2nd was engaged to support other regiments, including two battalions of zouaves. Most of the day passed uneventfully as French and German batteries exchanged fire overhead as the French pressed onwards towards the new objective of Varreddes, and the 2nd regiment summited several hills surrounding the town to preserve the flanks of other units. At 9 o'clock that night, however, they were caught by surprise by a German machine gun company. As they raked the Moroccan troops, the exhausted men broke and fled after two grueling days of battle with little respite.¹⁰⁶ This setback fortunately resulted in relatively few casualties, with only a few dozen killed or wounded, but it displays the immense pressures that the colonial brigade had been under that week. Lt. Juin recounts that Commandant Poeymirau reacted with fury at the lapse in discipline, crying "I no longer know you as my children!" This paternalistic attitude of French officers towards their colonial troops was typical of the period, and the racist portrayal of Africans as children endured throughout the war. Poeymirau soon softened upon recognizing the gaunt and haggard appearances of his men who, without proper provisions for several days, had subsisted only on scavenged beets and stringy rabbits.¹⁰⁷

By this time, the German armies under von Bülow and von Klück were in full retreat and the Moroccan Brigade advanced with the French 6th and 9th Armies over the banks of the River Marne. The Miracle of the Marne preserved Paris, and the colonial troops of the *Brigade Marocaine* played an integral part of the defense. In fact, the skirmish in Telegraph Wood and in Neufmontiers represented the furthest west that the German Army penetrated in its push to Paris,

¹⁰⁶ SHD, GR 26N 858/3.

¹⁰⁷ Clément and Maillard, *La Brigade marocaine*, 118.

and although they sustained heavy losses, the Moroccans held the line.¹⁰⁸ For their bravery and sacrifice, they received no small amount of praise from commanding officers. Lt. Juin wrote “regardless of the difficult experiences, both moral and physical, never have the Moroccans shown to be more confident than on this day of September 5th, which was a prelude to the big battle of the Marne, where they stopped the German advance.”¹⁰⁹ An officer at the headquarters of General Drude’s division of Algerian *tirailleurs* complimented the Moroccans on their bravery and ability as shock troops, a role in which they would specialize as the war progressed.¹¹⁰

Even Alexandre Millerand, Minister of War, remarked in a letter to Lyautey that the Moroccans had proven themselves to be excellent soldiers. “Disciplined in battle as well as in maneuvering, tough in attack, tenacious in defense of their positions to the level of sacrifice ... They gave the proof of their warlike qualities,” and ranked highly alongside the colonial African troops, “even among the finest in the French Army.”¹¹¹ General Ditte, overall commander of the brigade, spoke in similar terms of the soldiers. Describing the first assault on September 5th, he wrote glowingly:

The Moroccan riflemen, burning with desire to finally confront this enemy they had only seen from afar, eagerly prepared for battle and advanced rapidly. Despite a heavy fusillade and artillery and machine-gun fire, the village of Neufmontiers was taken and traversed. Two companies fixed bayonets, rushed into the woods, leaped into the enemy trenches, and after hand-to-hand combat, opened fire on the teams and wagons fleeing in haste. Success seemed assured.¹¹²

Lt. Juin affirmed that “the magnificent effort of the Moroccans over the course of operations have earned everyone’s admiration.”¹¹³ Tested in combat and standing firm in defense of France,

¹⁰⁸ Clément and Maillard, *La Brigade marocaine*. The map on page 100 shows the deployments and movements of both French and German forces along the Marne between the 5-10 of September, 1914.

¹⁰⁹ Maghraoui, “The ‘Grande Guerre Sainte,’” 5.

¹¹⁰ Clément and Maillard, *La Brigade marocaine*, 124.

¹¹¹ Maghraoui, “The ‘Grande Guerre Sainte,’” 5.

¹¹² Bekraoui, *Les Marocains dans la Grande guerre : 1914-1919*, 113.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

the Moroccan Brigade, though severely depleted, erased the memory of the mutiny in 1912 and soon found themselves deployed in every major action of 1915.

The costs of the victory at the Battle of the Marne were prohibitive for the Moroccans. While Lt. Juin estimated that no more than 700-800 of the initial 5,000 troops remained combat-effective by the end of September, careful analysis of the *Journaux des marches et operations* reveals more nuance. Juin's figure applied only to the 2nd regiment, but the total number across both regiments still barely reached 1,800.¹¹⁴ These excessive casualties were not unique to the colonial troops fighting in France in the early days of the war, as on September 4th General Joffre issued an ultimatum: "All efforts must be employed in attacking and repelling the enemy. A troop that can no longer advance must, at all costs, hold the ground it has conquered and be killed on the spot rather than retreat."¹¹⁵ Although the Moroccan soldiers gave ground when needed in the face of unrelenting artillery and superior enemy firepower, they retook it and held the line against any further German advance and helped guarantee the safety of Paris. In so doing, they proved themselves to their French commanders and earned their trust after the mutiny of 1912, and the 1st RTM would go on to fight at the forefront in many of the key battles and campaigns of the war where they earned a deadly reputation.

Battle of Verdun, 1916:

One battle and one name loomed large over every soldier fighting for France in 1916: Verdun. The medieval fortress city gave its name to a series of fortresses, bunkers, and gun emplacements that formed a bulwark against German incursion in eastern France. German general Erick von Falkenhayn launched a massive offensive against the fortified region in

¹¹⁴ Clément and Maillard, *La Brigade marocaine*, 228.

¹¹⁵ *Pages de gloire de la division marocaine*, 11.

February, 1916 which rapidly drew in thousands of French reinforcements and reserves to stem the tide of German advance.¹¹⁶ Over the next several months, the iconic Forts Douaumont and Vaux would fall to German attacks, dealing major blows to French morale and their defensive posture. However, the now famous phrase *Ils ne passeront pas* or “They will not pass” bolstered French determination to hold back the Germans, and General Mangin in command of the 6th Army intended to break the bloody war of attrition and materiel with colonial soldiers in the lead.

Ever since the embarrassing capture of Fort Douaumont by an intrepid German pioneer company in February 1916, French general staff planned to recapture the symbolic fort. With the operation staged for May, the 1st *regiment de tirailleurs marocains* received word in April 1916 that they would take part in General Mangin’s assault. An intelligence briefing from General Headquarters to the regiment detailed the specific defensive nature of this battle, the first since the race to the sea stabilized in December 1914. It also broke down the German countermeasures to French attacks, and so proposed a variety of new strategies for assaults by small units, larger companies, and entire divisions.¹¹⁷ By this point in the war, both sides had adapted the use of gas shells, and so the General Commandant in Chief of the Verdun Fortified Region (R.F.V.) advised the Colonel of the Moroccan Regiment on the use of masks in case of tear gas or asphyxiant bombardments, both of which would be common in the hellish conditions of Verdun.¹¹⁸ Finally, the regiment’s numbers had swelled thanks to Lyautey’s intensive recruitment efforts in Morocco throughout 1915, and so battalions of young recruits were brought in to replace the units of

¹¹⁶ William T. Dean, “The French Colonial Army and the Great War,” *The Historian* 76, no. 3 (2014), 497.

¹¹⁷ SHD, GR 25N 515, *Régiment de tirailleurs marocains 1914-1917*, “Note on the lessons to be learned from the Verdun affair,” 5 April 1916.

¹¹⁸ SHD, GR 25N 515, Grand Quartier General, 18 February 1916.

wounded veterans at the front.¹¹⁹ Thus prepared, the *tirailleurs marocains* were transported by rail to Verdun in April 1916.

The 1st RTM was composed of 4 battalions as part of the 96th Brigade in the 48th Infantry Division, with anywhere between 400-800 men in each battalion, depending on recent attrition and reinforcements from the protectorate.¹²⁰ In early May 1916, they worked alongside the 174th Infantry Regiment of the 95th Brigade to secure a section of trenches and redoubts between Forts Vaux and Douaumont in preparation for a larger assault. Even routine maintenance of trenchworks and transport hubs were subject to bombardments, as one unfortunate *corvée* unit discovered on the night of May 4, with 5 *tirailleurs* killed and another 8 wounded and evacuated.¹²¹ Still, preparations went ahead and on May 5 the 13th Company cooperated with the 174th in a night attack during which “it proved quite capable.”¹²² The following day, however, would bring a disastrous attack that set the plans of the general staff back by a number of weeks.

In a report filed on May 6 to General Bulleux of the 96th Brigade, Lt. Colonel Dubois of the 174th Infantry had scathing words for the Moroccan troops involved in a failed nighttime assault. Despite the assurances of the engineering company attached to the division, the flamethrowers meant to launch the assault all malfunctioned for one reason or another. After that, attempts to capture the German trenches met with failure. “The Moroccans, despite the fine example set by their leaders, displayed a pusillanimity and hesitation to leave the trenches that prevented them from achieving their objective. The same was true for the grenadiers of the 2nd Company of the 174th, who were threatened by a counter-attack on their right flank.”¹²³ Notably,

¹¹⁹ Bekraoui, *Les Marocains dans la Grande guerre : 1914-1919*, 115.

¹²⁰ SHD, GR 3H 362 *Déploiements et Transferts des Troupes Marocains*, Official Telegram from Resident General to General Staff, 14 October 1915.

¹²¹ SHD, GR 25N 515, Captain Tailhade of 13th Company to Battalion Commandant, 4 May 1916.

¹²² SHD, GR 26N 857/6, *JMO 1er Régiment de Tirailleurs Marocains 19 mai - 31 décembre 1916*.

¹²³ SHD, GR 25N 515, “Report on the operation executed on 6 May 1916.”

this Colonel placed the blame on the indigenous troops, but excused the efforts of their French officers.

In other sections of the line, the attack was more successful. One section of French grenadiers and Moroccan riflemen seized an enemy machine gun and 4 prisoners amidst particularly lively fighting, but had to retreat due to lack of support on either flank. In response to the abortive assault, General Bulleux suggested further testing of the flame-throwers, and claimed positive intelligence furnished by the captured German soldiers. More importantly, he offered this explanation in defense of the Moroccans' typical *élan*:

The Moroccans' attitude is surprising for anyone familiar with their usual impetuosity. I can only explain it by the fact that they were deployed at the last minute, in the dead of night. Their reconnaissance of the terrain and the target area was necessarily insufficient. In any case, they cannot be faulted for sparing their lives. All the company officers fell (except the captain, who was without command alongside the attack commander), and their losses amounted to three killed and 43 wounded – including the warrant officer – representing a third of their strength.¹²⁴

As commander of the 96th Brigade, Bulleux was more familiar with the efforts of the *tirailleurs marocains* and not only justified their failure to meet the mission objectives, but also highlighted a factor which plagued the regiment throughout the war: high casualties and loss of officers in their frontline engagements.

Other accounts by officers of the 1st RTM offered their reports of the battle as well. Captain Tailhade corroborated Colonel Dubois' plans to seize the German trenches with additional details on the breakdown of Moroccan squads and engineers ready to reinforce any captured trenchworks with sandbags and more grenades. However, he voiced concerns that the Moroccan grenadiers were too widely dispersed along the front, and that they had too little time to reconnoiter adequately. When a red flare went up at 1:30 am, German machine guns immediately opened up and flares of their own illuminated the contested land between trenches.

¹²⁴ SHD, GR 25N 515, "Report on the operation executed on 6 May 1916."

Without the torrents of fire from the flame throwers, the grenadiers and supporting Moroccan troops were swiftly cut down or forced back into their own trenches.¹²⁵

In another contestation of Colonel Dubois' report, Tailhade reported that a sub-lieutenant of the 174th remarked, "You should have seen the Moroccans' sortie, it was marvelous!" He concluded his report with the following analysis: "In summary, it wasn't a lack of enthusiasm on the part of the Moroccans, who were led by section commanders of undeniable drive and bravery, that led to the failure of this attack. What we lacked to succeed was surprise, an essential element in any war operation of this kind."¹²⁶ And, in another strident defense of the Moroccans, Lt. Colonel Maurice of the 1st RTM wrote "Under these circumstances, I believe that Lt. Colonel Dubois' criticisms of the Moroccans' attitude in this affair are, at the very least, exaggerated, and in any case, it would be unfair to blame them for the operation's failure."¹²⁷ In spite of the mission's failure, the *tirailleurs marocains* once again demonstrated their value as shock troops and bravery under fire, and had clearly gained the trust and admiration of their own commanding officers.

These first tentative efforts to reclaim captured trenches from the Germans were soon postponed altogether, as on May 7 the Germans opened up a ferocious artillery barrage that sent all French troops into dugouts and reinforced shelters. Commandant Poulet learned at Fort St. Michel that the Germans had launched an attack on their positions north and west of Thiaumont, and so the operation planned by the 28th Infantry Division and the 4th Moroccan Battalion was therefore pushed back by two weeks.¹²⁸ In the meantime, the 1st Battalion rotated from recuperation behind the lines to duties in *corvées* for transport, water, and trench repair at the

¹²⁵ SHD, GR 25N 515, Report by Captain Tailhade on the attack of 6 May 1916.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ SHD, GR 25N 515, Lt. Colonel Maurice, 1st RTM to General-Commandant, 96th Brigade, 10 May 1916.

¹²⁸ SHD, GR 26N 857/6.

front, where the omnipresent threat of enemy artillery reaped dozens of casualties.¹²⁹ One section of machine gunners saw continuous frontline action during these few weeks under the command of Captain Hugues. Between the Forts of Thiaumont and Douaumont, they endured days of intense bombardments and repeated German infantry assaults, leading their Captain to commend several for medals of honor and merit. “During these difficult days, the company proved itself worthy of the regiment despite the heavy losses suffered. The men remained in their positions, working tirelessly, following the example of their officers, and impressed the soldiers of the 249th with their good spirit and courage,” he wrote.¹³⁰ As usual, the Moroccans made a favorable impression on their officers and French comrades in their conduct in adverse circumstances. By the 21st of May, the general staff was once again ready to employ the Moroccan *tirailleurs* alongside French infantry regiments for a massed offensive to reclaim Douaumont.

In the original plans, the Moroccans were to be under the command of General Peillard, of the 28th Infantry Division. The planned attack on various German trenches would be in collaboration with troops of the 55th Brigade, and the Moroccan element of this attack was to cover the right flank by capturing the German flanking works in the trenches and the redoubt.¹³¹ In preparation of this assault, the French artillery consumed 447,000 shells between May 17 and 25, including 152,000 heavy artillery shells which represented a mass of some 7,000 tons.¹³² While the French guns pounded the Germans over the 22-24 of May, the *tirailleurs marocains* were held in reserve at the Anthouard barracks near the rail line, but various companies were detached each day for different assignments at the front. On the 22nd, Sub-Lieutenant Lombardini’s 15th Company moved up alongside companies of the 34th and 74th Infantry

¹²⁹ SHD, GR 25N 515, “Report on operations performed by the 1st Battalion from May 8-22, 1916.” By the 22nd, the battalion suffered 184 killed, wounded, and missing during their time manning the trenches in interminable rain.

¹³⁰ SHD, GR 25N 515, “Report by Captain Hugues on the engagement of the 1st Machine Gunners Company.”

¹³¹ SHD, GR 26N 857/6.

¹³² SHD, GR 26 N 107/2, *JMO de l'artillerie lourde du 3e corps d'armée 2 janvier-31 décembre 1916*.

divisions to hold a trench against German attacks, which resulted in 86 casualties.¹³³ Back with the rest of the battalion, constant bombardment kept men pinned in trenches and dugouts, and around midday a German attack necessitated another 100 men to reinforce the forward trenches with as many grenades as they could carry. By the evening, the demand for reinforcements was so dire that only a single platoon remained in reserve at the rear.¹³⁴

On the 23rd, evacuation of the wounded began in earnest, and elements of the 14th, 15th, and 16th companies repaired trenches and dugouts collapsed from the constant shelling. By 1:30 in the afternoon however, another German attack was underway. Captain Trinquet and his men of the 15th occupied some 600 meters of trenchworks and 200 meters of broken shellholes linking the French lines when they were flanked by a German assault. “The 1st and 2nd sections were thus completely decimated; Adjutant-Commandant Ligonnet was killed, and at that precise moment the first line along the ridge retreated in disorder,” the captain wrote.¹³⁵ Despite taking fire from three sides now as their supporting flanks fell back in a practically nonexistent trench less than 60 cm deep, the Moroccan troops retreated in good order. “The exemplary conduct of the men of the 15th Company ... demonstrated magnificent calm and bravery, executing all their movements with the utmost composure and without any disorder whatsoever,” Trinquet concluded in his report.¹³⁶ The remainder of the company, still held in reserves, rushed to the trenches at 1:50 to repulse this German counterattack with heavy machine-gun fire and the use of grenades. By 10:15 that evening, one lieutenant in the regiment had only 65 fighting men remaining out of 130 in his three sections.¹³⁷

¹³³ SHD, GR 25N 515, “Succinct report of Sub-Lt. Lombardini,” 22-26 May 1916.

¹³⁴ SHD, GR 26N 857/6.

¹³⁵ SHD, GR 25N 515, “Report of Captain Trinquet on the German counterattack,” 23 May 1916.

¹³⁶ Ibid. Trinquet himself was wounded in the head and in the arm, which bled badly enough to require evacuation.

¹³⁷ SHD, GR 26N 857/6.

The following day brought little respite. Although Commandant Poulet received word that his men were soon to be relieved, the 24th would see heavy fighting. The 16th Company, seconded to the 74th Infantry under Captain Lefebvre had been involved in heavy fighting to the east and had not made contact in hours. In the 14th Company, the enemy bombardment of their positions was so unrelenting that by their relief that evening there remained only a sub-lieutenant, two subalterns, and six *tirailleurs*. Regarding the steadfastness of the colonial troops, the surviving Sub-Lieutenant Bondis declared that the Moroccan troops exercised a mutual discipline amongst themselves, and “in difficult moments, they observe each other's gestures and attitudes, and it is largely the fear of appearing cowardly in the eyes of their superiors and comrades that compels them to adopt a bold and resolute stance.”¹³⁸ By the time the 14th Company was relieved late on the 24th, that discipline and determination resulted in 89 casualties, but the French lines held.

Elsewhere, Captain Deves of the attached company of *mitrailleuses* was tasked with his men to undertake a special operation on the morning of the 24th. When he reported to headquarters, the Captain learned that “the terrain lost yesterday will be immediately retaken by a frontal daylight attack.”¹³⁹ To make matters worse, this suicidal assault would lack any artillery support to soften the enemy trenches and emplacements. At 7:30am, the first wave of 30 men under Sub-Lieutenant Ben-Rachid leapt from their trench and made for a denuded tree halfway along the trench they aimed to reclaim. 10 meters from their target, rifle and machine-gun fire swept their ranks and pinned down the accompanying charge of the 34th Infantry company. Most of the Moroccans fell, and only a few reached their objective and were then isolated without support.¹⁴⁰ The second wave led by Captain Deves never left their trench, and so attempted to

¹³⁸ SHD, GR 25N 515, “Report of Sub-Lt. Bondis of 14th Company,” 22-24 May 1916.

¹³⁹ SHD, GR 26N 857/6.

¹⁴⁰ SHD, GR 25N 515, “Report of Captain Adjutant-Major Deves,” 24 May 1916.

storm along a perpendicular trench with grenades and bayonets, but came under heavy shelling. Unable to retreat or advance, by 1:00pm only 17 men remained of 65. Four hours later, that number was down to 10.¹⁴¹ When night finally fell, the few survivors made it back to the relative safety of the French trenches and dressing stations.

Fort Douaumont was not recaptured in late May, 1916. The *tirailleurs marocains* fought bravely and maintained good order, and while they repulsed several German attacks, they mostly served to spill their blood in defense of a few kilometers of ragged trenches. Commandant Poulet of the 1st RTM tallied up the losses of the disparate companies of his battalion in a report submitted on the 28th of May. Out of a total *effectif* of 588 soldiers and officers at the start of their deployment to Verdun, 307 were killed, wounded, or missing after little more than a week - an astonishing casualty rate of 52%.¹⁴² The surviving officers of the regiment were swift to nominate their comrades and their men for citations and awards, but the singular bloody destruction depleted the Moroccans for much of the rest of the year. General Mangin, who directed the broader offensive, elegized the men as such: "Poulet's battalion performed very well at Verdun, despite the deplorable conditions under which it was deployed by commanders foreign to the corps who had no understanding of the Moroccan's mentality or how to employ them in combat to maximize their effectiveness."¹⁴³ By this point in the war, it was evident that colonial troops fought best when led by officers known to them, who had knowledge of their culture and language and a shared experience of danger in the trenches.

Mangin's analysis echoed Lyautey's missive to the Minister of War in 1914 - that the Moroccan troops performed best under familiar commanders and officers, and markedly less-so otherwise. Indeed, Lt. Maurice complained in his report that the various companies of *tirailleurs*

¹⁴¹ SHD, GR 26N 857/6.

¹⁴² SHD, GR 25N 515, "Report of Battalion Commander Poulet of the RTM before Douaumont," 22-24 May 1916.

¹⁴³ Bekraoui, *Les Marocains dans la Grande guerre : 1914-1919*, 116.

were too split up and isolated from one another amongst the men of the 34th and 74th Infantry Divisions, which affected their overall performance in combat. Besides missteps committed at the tactical level, the sheer destruction wrought by the deluge of fire prevented any major gains at that point in the conflict, and battalion after battalion was ground to pulp defending Verdun. Physician-Major Madeleine reported that shells killed scores of men even after they had been evacuated to the medical station by stretcher-bearers, and that over the course of those three days in May he alone saw 162 men of the 1st RTM in addition to over 200 from the metropolitan regiments.¹⁴⁴ Again and again throughout the war, the Moroccans were subjected to staggering losses in short periods of time, and although they gained a reputation for heroism and unflagging *élan*, the high rate of attrition depleted the regiment of both experienced officers and veterans.

Ultimately, one Moroccan regiment would prove instrumental in the liberation and highly-propagandized recapture of Fort Douaumont, although it was the Moroccan Colonial Infantry Regiment (RICM) which seized the fortress alongside Senegalese and Somali *tirailleurs* in October 1916. In any case, France's empire was essential in maintaining pressure on the German invaders and staunching the tide of dead and wounded filling the battlefields and hospitals of France during the war. And while the Moroccan soldiers contributed mightily to two well-known battles at the Marne and at Verdun, they would continue to fight to great acclaim in 1917 and 1918. Some of the regiments' bloodiest days still lay ahead, as well as some of its finest glories. By the end of the war, General Mangin had once again taken command of the Moroccan regiments and delivered Paris, and their reputation as highly trained and reliable soldiers was solidified across the ranks of the French army, from *poilus* to generals.

¹⁴⁴ SHD, GR 25N 515, "Report on the functionality of the battalion's medical post," 21-24 May 1916.

Honors and Reputation:

The *tirailleurs marocains* garnered accolades and recognition from their French superiors from a very early stage in the war. While these officers maintained an air of unalloyed paternalism towards their Muslim troops, they still saw fit to sing the praises of the North African soldiers for their professionalism and conduct in war. One officer reported that:

Moroccan infantrymen are intelligent, skilled, courageous, and passionate warriors. They are resilient, sober, and good at marching. Although of difficult character, they are generally perfectly devoted to their leaders who speak their language ... They are better marksmen than the Algerians, and some of them are very good marksmen indeed.¹⁴⁵

This reputation as able soldiers served to elevate them in the eyes of the French, and although the Moroccans fought in far fewer numbers than the Algerians or even the Tunisians, their abilities were considered by some French officers to be superior. This perception of the Moroccans was echoed in an Arabic saying that typified North Africans, which claimed that “Moroccans are warriors, Algerians men, and Tunisians women.”¹⁴⁶ This statement clearly reflects prejudices in favor of the Moroccan, but was also reinforced over the course of the war in the conduct of the indigenous soldiers in certain cases.

The *tirailleurs marocains* also developed a reputation as effective and fearsome troops in the eyes of their metropolitan counterparts. In Henri Barbusse’s famous account of warfare in the trenches *Le feu*, Moroccan soldiers are referenced numerous times. In one encounter as the North Africans marched through the trench that Barbusse and his squad garrisoned, their apparent prowess is evident. “These are asked no questions,” he wrote, as the soldiers marched by under a red flag with a green crescent. “They command respect, and even a little fear ... They are going, of course, to the first line. That is their place, and their passing is the sign of an imminent attack.

¹⁴⁵ Bahija Simou, “La Contribution marocaine à la première guerre mondiale,” in *L’Empire colonial français dans la Grande Guerre: un siècle d’histoire et de mémoire*, Mémorial de Verdun (Paris, France) (Dacres éditions, 2021), 86.

¹⁴⁶ Richard Fogarty, *Race and War in France: Colonial Subjects in the French Army, 1914-1918*, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 78.

They are made for the offensive.”¹⁴⁷ Barbusse’s sentiments parallel those of French high command, who favored the Moroccans as line-breakers and shock troops over more static duty in trenches or sentry posts, and his comments clearly affirm them as born warriors in the eyes of the French.

An element of fear permeated the reactions of the French troops as the Moroccans filed by, tinged with awe at their record in close-quarters combat. “We talk over the characteristics of these Africans; their ferocity in attack, their devouring passion to be in with the bayonet, their predilection for ‘no quarter.’”¹⁴⁸ The Moroccans’ ability in warfare is here defined by a suggestion of savagery and distinct difference from the white troops. Upon their passing, one of Barbusse’s companions intoned that while “They’re real soldiers ... We’re just men.”¹⁴⁹ This passage serves to illustrate that while Moroccan troops earned recognition for their achievements in battle, their bloody-handed reputation still kept them firmly apart in colonial hierarchies of race and civility.

This attribution of a love for warfare and a propensity for violence was again repeated by witnesses to the *Brigade Marocaine*’s actions during the Battle of the Marne. Lt. Juin wrote of their eagerness to confront the enemy in the woods on the outskirts of the village of Penchard, referring to them as “demons in djellabas” as the Moroccans routed German artillery positions in fierce hand-to-hand fighting.¹⁵⁰ Not much later, an officer of the nearby 55th division described the charge of the *tirailleurs* as “fierce desert demons,” urged onwards by their French lieutenants wielding sabers amid a hail of bullets.¹⁵¹ These references immediately reveal an exoticized and

¹⁴⁷ Barbusse, Henri. *Under Fire*. With Internet Archive. J.M. Dent & Sons LTD, 1916. <http://archive.org/details/underfire0000henr>, 43.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Barbusse, *Under Fire*, 44.

¹⁵⁰ Clément and Maillard, *La Brigade marocaine*, 88. This was a reference to their traditional garb, which Juin would have been familiar with as a colonial officer.

¹⁵¹ Clément and Maillard, *La Brigade marocaine*, 92.

racialized portrayal of North African troops, even when paired with admiration of their zeal. On the other side, the Germans had a much simpler name for the *tirailleurs* they faced: *hirondelles de la mort*, or ‘swallows of death,’ referring both to the speed at which Moroccan soldiers surged forth to capture trenches, and to their eagerness for combat.¹⁵²

Finally, the Moroccan soldiers had by 1917 proven both their loyalty to France and their capabilities in combat. In the spring of 1917, the infamous Nivelle Offensive took place at Chemin des Dames, and the French suffered thousands of casualties as the meticulously planned attack faltered in the difficult terrain and hardened defenses of the Hindenburg Line. When mutinies erupted in the aftermath of the disaster, colonial troops displayed a remarkable degree of loyalty despite their own high casualties.¹⁵³ In fact, many colonial units were used to put down revolts by mutinous metropolitan troops. On June 6th 1917, the 2nd Battalion of the 74th Infantry Regiment disobeyed their officers and began marching out of the trenches en masse. While their commanders desperately tried to reason with the men, they were halted on the road by a combined force of Moroccan *tirailleurs* and mounted *spahis*.¹⁵⁴ While some soldiers were reluctant to surrender their weapons to the colonial troops, they ultimately did so without incident and the tense situation was defused. Moroccan soldiers had thus demonstrated their reliability on and off the field of battle, and deserved their reputation as steadfast soldiers earned over months and years of grueling warfare.

Early in the war, a French intelligence officer interviewing wounded soldiers at the Arles depot spoke with an Algerian *tirailleur* who suggested that should Muslim regiments receive Order of the Army citations, it would provide a valuable morale boost to colonial troops and

¹⁵² Clayton, *France, Soldiers, and Africa*, 263.

¹⁵³ William T. Dean, “The French Colonial Army and the Great War,” *The Historian* 76, no. 3 (2014), 510.

¹⁵⁴ Leonard V. Smith, *Between Mutiny and Obedience: The Case of the French Fifth Infantry Division during World War I*, Princeton Legacy Library (Princeton University Press, 1994), 187.

would instill further loyalty.¹⁵⁵ Approximately one year later, the 1st RTM received their first citation while fighting under the Fourth Army in Champagne. It read as follows:

Under the command of its leader, Lieutenant-Colonel Auroux, on October 16, 1915, at dawn, [the regiment] stormed and captured the second German position across a front several hundred meters wide; advancing in a single bound to a point more than a kilometer beyond, it bore down upon the enemy —surprised in their bivouacs —and inflicted heavy casualties upon them at bayonet point.¹⁵⁶

This citation of the Order of the Army showcased the characteristic assaults, bloody melee combat, and swift advances that the *tirailleurs marocains* gained renown for. During 1916, the regiment endured long months at Verdun with only a few engagements already covered above, but it was in 1917 that the 1st RTM again won accolades. In May they captured some 500 German prisoners while again piercing the second and third enemy trenchlines, this time led by the ominously named Lt.-Colonel Cimetière.¹⁵⁷ The regiment also won awards at the individual level as the war progressed, with both French officers and Moroccan soldiers recognized for valor and distinction under fire.

After some particularly difficult fighting in the 2nd Battle of Artois in June, the 1st RTM were relieved from frontline duty, and in August they were chosen to present their flag during a parade review to recognize their achievements. Alongside a squadron of *spahis*, a battalion of the *regiment mixte*, and several metropolitan units, two battalions of the *tirailleurs marocains* proudly presented their colors during the parade which marched from Compiègne to the village of Rethondes on August 23, 1915.¹⁵⁸ A month later, several members of the regiment were conferred the *Croix de Guerre* for their actions in Artois by the Commandant of the 35th *Corps d'Armée*.¹⁵⁹ Several officers and subalterns of the regiment won medals and *Croix de Guerres*

¹⁵⁵ SHD, 7N 2103, "Piat Report," 29 October, 1914.

¹⁵⁶ Bekraoui, *Les Marocains dans la Grande Guerre*, 357.

¹⁵⁷ Bekraoui, *Les Marocains dans la Grande Guerre*, 358. Lt.-Col. Auroux had been promoted to higher command of the regiment at this point and saw less front-line action.

¹⁵⁸ SHD, GR 25N 515, "6th Army General Staff: Ordre Particuliere No. 581," 19 August 1915.

¹⁵⁹ SHD, GR 25N 515, "Note du Service from 48th Division General Staff," 9 September 1915.

during the aforementioned assaults in Champagne in October, 1915, although due to the miserable conditions of the roads after unremitting rain, there was no parade this time.¹⁶⁰

The combat record of the *tirailleurs marocains* was one distinguished by impressive feats and bloody sacrifices, and acknowledgements for these traits accrued steadily throughout the war. Although French commanders originally distrusted the Moroccan troops as potentially mutinous and unprepared for warfare in Europe, the colonial soldiers proved themselves repeatedly and forged a reputation for stalwart defense and lightning attacks. While some officers treated them as mere mercenaries, their professionalism and training impressed many others and they came to be relied upon as premier shock troops. This reputation for combat effectiveness was colored by prejudice at times, but by the end of the war the Moroccans were often judged the equivalent of white French units or near enough, and their reliability saw them fight in every major campaign and offensive of the war. The cost of this prestige was the constant diminution of the regiment as huge casualties were inflicted, followed by replenishment by fresh reinforcements from the protectorate. In the next chapter, the status of wounded *tirailleurs* will be examined away from the frontlines, where notions of race, gender, and sexuality figured more prominently than demonstrations of courage.

¹⁶⁰ SHD, GR 25N 515, "Note pour les deux régiments from 48th Division General Staff," 29 November 1915.

Chapter Three: Medicine, Miscegenation, and Mistreatment

In a comprehensive intelligence report submitted on July 14, 1915, Interpreter Officer 1st Class Reymond described in detail the state of morale among the North African colonial soldiers in the French Army. The intelligence officer visited five cities in the south of France where Algerian, Tunisian, and Moroccan soldiers were stationed at depots and hospitals where they recuperated from wounds and illnesses sustained in combat. Eleven months of appallingly bloody modern warfare had taken their toll on the men, and he related the following anecdote on the subject of the Moroccan *tirailleurs* and their state of mind. “The enthusiasm that existed at the outset has vanished,” Reymond wrote. “One no longer sees—as was once the case—men queuing at the office door to request the privilege of being sent into combat.”¹⁶¹ This brief episode provides a window into the experience of Moroccan soldiers in the French Army behind the front lines, and offers a hint as to the racialized perceptions of these soldiers by their French officers. Seen as born warriors and capable shock troops, Moroccans were typified alongside West African soldiers as inherently warlike and suitable for combat. At the same time, their lack of sophistication in the eyes of the French necessitated intense oversight by officers and other organs of the French administration, both on and off the battlefield.

The French Army enforced a rigid hierarchy between its officers and soldiers, and these divisions were stronger still in the units of colonial troops. French officers often assumed a paternalistic role, encouraging the loyalty and devotion of their supposedly childlike charges with strict discipline and displays of valor on the battlefield. North Africans, like the *tirailleurs sénégalais*, were prized for their martial qualities and hardiness in warfare. Behind the lines,

¹⁶¹ SHD, GR 7N 2103, *L'État d'esprit des Marocains et des militaires indigènes*, “Report by First-Class Interpreter Officer Reymond of the Army of Africa on the State of Mind of Indigenous North African Soldiers”, 14 July 1915.

however, the French had to contend with the exposure of the ‘young’ colonized races to the decadence of French culture through prostitution, alcohol, and tobacco. In hospitals, female nurses often initiated relationships with recovering colonial soldiers, which sparked intense fears of miscegenation and a loss of status of White Europeans among French commanders and politicians. While the French acknowledged their dependence on the colonial *impot du sang* to stem the tide of German advances, they were reluctant to forfeit the racist colonial hierarchy of power and control as hundreds of thousands of West African, Indochinese, and North African men flocked to the metropole to work, fight, and die for France.

Some six months after the war began, French officials were spurred to action to ensure stability and control in their North African colonies in the wake of the enormous casualties incurred as the war of movement concluded and trench warfare predominated on the Western Front. In a letter to an Algerian Deputy, the Ministry of War issued a series of recommendations to stem the spread of rumor and panic in the colony. They encouraged more letters be sent home to provide accurate information for loved ones in the place of gossip, although these messages would invariably pass through a French military censor and were intended to disseminate “stories and images among the general public that portray the indigenous troops in a favorable light.”¹⁶² These measures were also put in place to monitor the mail and morale of Moroccan *tirailleurs*, although since most of the soldiers were illiterate they were already dependent on the interpreter-officers or visiting imams to compose their letters home. A far more serious policy governing wounded and convalescent soldiers was advanced between December 1914 and January 1915, when the Minister of War Alexandre Millerand made the impactful decision to

¹⁶² SHD, GR 7N 2103, “Response from Ministry of War to Deputy Lucien Millevoeye,” 8 January 1915.

restrict almost all wounded North African soldiers from returning home on leave to cease the spread of panic and defeatism in France's colonies.¹⁶³

The implications of this policy were myriad. First, hospitals and depots had to be established in the metropole to house wounded and recovering North African soldiers. Then, these care facilities had to be staffed with doctors, nurses, interpreters, and administrators. Finally, the French had to contend with the dissatisfaction of the colonial troops, many of whom were maimed and now barred from returning home to their families. These facilities were set up across the Midi in France to take advantage of the gentle climate, with depots in Aix, Tarascon, Beaucaire, and Arles, where the Moroccans were quartered. Hospitals soon became points of contact between men from the colonies and French women in the form of nurses, which upset traditional colonial structures of gender and race. Convalescent soldiers also contested their economic power, demanding proper wages and remunerations for their service and sacrifice from the French administration. Hospitals therefore represented an important locus of negotiation of colonial power through sexual, economic, and racial relations for Moroccan soldiers in France.

Hospital Treatment:

The early months of World War I were devastating for the *tirailleurs marocains*. While they performed well under fire to great acclaim at the Marne, by the end of 1914 their numbers were reduced to a handful of the original recruits who disembarked at Bordeaux in August of that year. Lyautey referenced the dour reports that filtered back to the protectorate in October, which told of “the enormous losses the Moroccans are said to have suffered,” and letters from riflemen bearing the grim news that “only fifty men per company remain standing.”¹⁶⁴ This early report

¹⁶³ SHD, GR 7N 2103, “Alexandre Millerand, Ministre de la Guerre a Monsieur le General Commandant de la Région au sujet de congés et permissions des militaires indigènes de l’Afrique du Nord,” 12 December 1914.

¹⁶⁴ SHD, GR 7N 2122, “Governor General Lyautey to Minister of Foreign Affairs Delcassé,” 14 October 1914.

underlined two principal concerns that would come to dominate how French officials handled the war away from the trenches, with a complex system of censors and surveillance put in place in France and its colonies to monitor correspondence from soldiers, and a network of hospitals and care stations prepared to house the thousands of indigenous casualties from the increasing bloodshed at the front.

Due to the intensity of the war and the disfigurement of many surviving soldiers, French officials worried about the potential destabilizing effects of having such wounded veterans returning home on leave. Governor General Lyautey fretted that such sights, in addition to impacting the families of the soldiers, would “make an unfavorable impression on the population.”¹⁶⁵ As such, thousands of wounded Moroccans were sent instead to Aix and Arles to convalesce throughout the war. When Monsieur Piat, a Consul General, toured the depot in Aix in October 1914, he noted the distress of the North African soldiers who were forbidden leave, especially among Algerian and Tunisian *tirailleurs* who knew that French units drawn from the colonies easily secured trips home. In response, the senior physician at the Aix hospital suggested that “no distinction should be made between French and Arab convalescents and that it would be fair to keep them all in France until circumstances allowed for the repatriation of the Arabs as well.”¹⁶⁶ Whilst an indication of equitable treatment with White French soldiers, the intention behind this suggestion seems to have been to quell the dissatisfaction of Arab troops, as no alteration was made to policies granting leave to wounded indigenous soldiers.

Earlier that month, the Minister of War clarified these policies in a circular distributed to the generals commanding the interior regions of France, including the Military Governor General

¹⁶⁵ Mohamed Bekraoui, *Les Marocains dans la Grande guerre : 1914-1919*, with Jean-Claude Allain (Commission marocaine d’histoire militaire, 2009), 130.

¹⁶⁶ SHD, GR 7N 2103, “Monsieur Piat, Consul General of France to Monsieur Delcassé, Minister of Foreign Affairs,” 29 October, 1914. Also referred to as the “Piat Report.”

of Paris. He stressed the importance of attaching interpreter officers to each military hospital housing North African soldiers, fluent in Arabic and able to transcribe letters for the wounded men. The dual nature of this position was made clear: “His role is to offer counsel to the indigenous soldiers, inquire into their needs, and convey these requirements to the command. He is also tasked with dispelling false rumors,” as well as drafting private letters to soldiers’ families.¹⁶⁷ French officials clearly recognized the importance of maintaining the morale and health of their colonial soldiers, but also needed to maintain control over them and their perceptions of the war. However, on a more equitable note, the Minister of War stressed that the facilities set aside for colonial soldiers should not deviate in quality from those serving French troops.

Although these hospitals are primarily reserved for them, a certain number of wounded or sick soldiers from metropolitan troops will also be admitted there; this is to ensure that indigenous soldiers—hailing from our colonies or protectorates—may observe, at all times, that they receive the same care and are treated with the same solicitude as the soldiers of the mother country.¹⁶⁸

These declarations illustrate the degree to which the French were aware of the importance of the treatment that their colonial troops received, and further demonstrate the centrality of hospitals as locations where the inherent inequalities of empire were renegotiated and stretched.

Moroccan *tirailleurs* also made use of their time away from the front lines to agitate for proper financial compensation. When corresponding with their loved ones through interpreter-officers, they sought to ensure proper payment reached their families. From the outset of the war, this was a principal concern of the indigenous soldiers at the depot at Aix, as corroborated by Piat, the Consul General. He wrote, “All the married riflemen wanted to be sure that their families were regularly receiving the compensation promised to them at the beginning of the war. They made no secret of the fact that the thought of their wives and children living in

¹⁶⁷ SHD, GR 7N 2103, “Circular issued by Alexandre Millerand, Minister of War,” n.d.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

poverty was intolerable to them.”¹⁶⁹ As the Moroccan troops were composed of volunteers, many in their ranks were poor peasants enticed by the prospects of high pay and a military career, so proper remuneration was of paramount importance to them.

However, while the average wages of a *tirailleur* may have been an improvement over what they might have expected from their farms and villages in Morocco, they were still not equivalent to those of White troops. In fact, Moroccan soldiers in France were paid at the same rate as those in service of the Sultan back home, and still paid for their rations out of their salary. For a *tirailleur* 2nd Class, the lowest of the rank and file, this amounted to 1.25 francs a day, of which they paid 0.35 fr. for food while a French soldier only had to pay 0.22 fr.¹⁷⁰ To boost morale, French authorities eventually began distributing free tobacco to soldiers, as their meager wages were insufficient. By 1918, though, parity in benefits and compensations had improved. The bonus allotted to new recruits from Morocco was increased from 60 to 90 francs for a contract serving four years, familial allocations were provided on an equal basis to those of French soldiers, and financial benefits on the same level as those granted to Algerian and Tunisian soldiers had been granted, although without the guarantee of a state pension.¹⁷¹

While recuperating at the depots, soldiers also advocated for their comrades interned in German prisoner-of-war camps. Multiple interpreter-officers filed reports on the demands for appropriate wages to be paid to imprisoned soldiers, which were duly passed along to French officials in the Ministry of War.¹⁷² In one case, sergeants Mohamed ben Mohamed and Haddi ben Fatmi even wrote to the interpreter-officer at Arles requesting transmission of funds for some 75

¹⁶⁹ SHD, GR 7N 2103, “Monsieur Piat, Consul General of France to Monsieur Delcassé, Minister of Foreign Affairs,” 29 October, 1914.

¹⁷⁰ Bekraoui, *Les Marocains dans la grande guerre*, 132.

¹⁷¹ Driss Maghraoui, “The ‘Grande Guerre Sainte’: Moroccan Colonial Troops and Workers in The First World War,” *The Journal of North African Studies* 9, no. 1 (2004), 10.

¹⁷² SHD, GR 7N 2103, “Letter from Command of the Cavalry Depots of Tarascon and Beaucaire, and of the Moroccan Troops Depot of Arles,” 9 August 1915.

Moroccans soldiers of the 1st Battalion of the RTM interned along with them at the Zossen POW camp in Germany.¹⁷³ In these cases, French authorities seemed eager to compensate their captured soldiers as they feared German propaganda efforts, and so the commanding Colonel of the Arles depot expedited the request for payment to be transmitted to the imprisoned men via the Red Cross of Switzerland. Although discrepancies in payment remained yet another racial barrier between colonial and French troops during World War I, moves toward more equitable wages were made to satisfy wounded soldiers as a measure of gratitude for their service to the metropole.

One boundary that French politicians and commanders sought to maintain at all costs, however, was the racial separation of non-White colonial troops and the population of French women. With over half a million men from the colonies serving in France throughout the war, this veritable flood of imperial subjects posed a serious threat to the status of French hegemony in the metropole. Even as renowned generals such as Joffre, Mangin, and Lyautey extolled the praises of colonial soldiers in defense of French soil, the imperial hierarchy was shaken by the stark reality that France had to rely on its colonies to fend off the German invasion. What's more, in many towns and villages throughout France, North and West African troops were greeted by parades and throngs of grateful French citizens who celebrated the men as the saviors of France.¹⁷⁴ Since reinforcements from across the empire played a visible and critical role in preserving French sovereignty, the image of French military might was thus challenged during the First World War, and challenges to racial norms had major implications during the interwar period around issues of citizenship and immigration.

¹⁷³ SHD, GR 7N 2103, "Letter to Interpreter-Officer of Moroccan Troops at Arles (France)," 6 July 1915.

¹⁷⁴ Daniel Clément and Natalie Maillard, *La Brigade marocaine: septembre 1914, une meurtrière odyssée* (Musée 14-18, 2015), 41.

At the hospitals where colonial troops were treated for all manner of injuries, from neurasthenia to shrapnel to symptoms of poisoning by gas, the narrative of European superiority over the “younger” races of North and West Africa was further challenged. Attended by White French nurses and outside the strict confines of the military, indigenous soldiers established friendships and relationships with their caregivers that turned the gendered colonial order on its head. While suspicion from male authorities of lewd or unbecoming behavior was often turned towards working-class women newly employed as *munitionettes* in factories or to poor soldiers’ wives and widows, in hospitals the white French nurses came mostly from middle- and upper-class backgrounds.¹⁷⁵ In other ways, hierarchies of white supremacy were reinforced in the hospital setting. Due to the highly patriarchal nature of medical care overseen by male doctors, some of these bourgeois women nurses asserted their class and racial privilege instead through a sense of ownership, or “maternalism” as it were, over nonwhite troops under their care. Frequently “infantilized or objectified,” wounded North and West African soldiers were thus recategorized in the balance of race and gender even as they bled and died for France.¹⁷⁶

In order to exert control over these indigenous troops, the same interpreter-officers who translated the private letters of the Algerian, Tunisian, and Moroccan *tirailleurs* and communicated their needs to military commanders also served as intelligence agents, monitoring the morale and moral health of their charges. Interpreter-Officer Reymond, mentioned earlier, submitted a lengthy and detailed report on the activities of the North African *tirailleurs* across the hospitals and depots of the Midi in 1915 which revealed some of the deep-seated anxieties rooted in race, gender, and power. Reporting on Algerians recovering in a hospital in Aix,

¹⁷⁵ Susan R. Grayzel, “Morale, Morality and Sexuality,” in *Women and the First World War*, Second edition., Seminar Studies (Routledge, 2024), 69.

¹⁷⁶ Alison S. Fell, “Nursing the Other: The Representation of Colonial Troops in French and British First World War Nursing Memoirs,” in *Race, Empire and First World War Writing*, ed. Santanu Das (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 167.

Reymond accused the nursing staff of treating the men with “excessive benevolence,” which, paired with a lack of “discipline or supervision during their stays in medical facilities,” gave the soldiers a sense of independence that was entirely undesirable in the eyes of French commanders.¹⁷⁷ Such concerns were common among French commanders, with an officer of the *tirailleurs sénégalais* worried that nurses were spoiling the soldiers which led them to develop “pretensions and arrogance.”¹⁷⁸ In the colonial mindset, even small kindnesses were enough to upset the balance of power and the status of European prestige.

In the same section of his report, Reymond goes on to critique the far more grave implications of liaisons that extended beyond mere benevolence. He first castigated the Muslim soldiers in the depots over their backwardness for their “peculiar conception of women as mere beasts of burden or objects of pleasure.”¹⁷⁹ This prejudice against nonwhite men was held in opposition to the valorization of French women in polite society, where “the nurse had become the ultimate female role model for middle-class women seeking a patriotic role in wartime Europe.”¹⁸⁰ Still, the status of both whiteness and masculinity were under threat when some nurses entered into illicit relationships with men from the colonies. Without singling out any nurses in particular, Reymond referred to “sexual favors bestowed upon the *tirailleurs* by some of their nurses and other compatriots—acts of “kindness,” then, that wounded our national pride.”¹⁸¹ He makes it clear here that sexual acts between white French women and North African men were direct threats to French prestige, and such liaisons would remain a thorn in the side of French authorities over the course of the war in spite of their protests and proscriptions.

¹⁷⁷ SHD, GR 7N 2103, “Report by First-Class Interpreter Officer Reymond of the Army of Africa on the State of Mind of Indigenous North African Soldiers”, 14 July 1915. Hereafter “Reymond Report.”

¹⁷⁸ Fell, “Nursing the Other: The Representation of Colonial Troops in French and British First World War Nursing Memoirs,” 163.

¹⁷⁹ SHD, GR 7N 2103, “Reymond Report,” 14 July 1915.

¹⁸⁰ Fell, “Nursing the Other: The Representation of Colonial Troops in French and British First World War Nursing Memoirs,” 161.

¹⁸¹ SHD, GR 7N 2103, “Reymond Report,” 14 July 1915.

Fears of hypersexualized African men differed in the French perspective depending on which cultures the men were drawn from. Great effort was put into depicting black Africans of the *tirailleurs sénégalais* as simple, well-meaning children, whereas the North Africans were judged somewhat differently due to their religion.¹⁸² For example, Muslim troops were assumed to be polygamists and philanderers due to the customs and ease at which divorce could be secured under Islamic law in North Africa.¹⁸³ Even so, in Interpreter-Officer Reymond's travels between hospital depots, he observed different behaviors between the Algerian, Tunisian, and Moroccan *tirailleurs*. Concerning the Moroccans, he accorded them a greater level of discretion regarding their "hospitable welcome from the local women," alluding to the relations between the soldiers and the local female population. He went on to report that "It is quite certain that the Tunisian *tirailleurs*—as well as the Moroccan *tirailleurs* and the *spahis*—received the same care and kindness as the Algerian *tirailleurs* in the hospitals where they were treated."¹⁸⁴ In this case it is unclear whether he meant "kindness" as a euphemism for more incongruous acts, but it evidently still rankled the sensibilities of male French authority.

Elsewhere in sources provided by nurses of their accounts of wartime service we find Moroccans objectified for their sexualized, exotic bodies. One account by British aristocrat Lady D'Abernon, serving as an anaesthesiologist in France at the time, described a group of Moroccan patients as such: "They were immensely strong men ... of remarkably fine physique. They compare very favourably with Algerians."¹⁸⁵ This passage displayed a curious blend of physical attraction and fascination along with an ethnographic interest, which became a common feature

¹⁸² Grayzel, "Morale, morality, and sexuality," 77.

¹⁸³ Richard Standish Fogarty, *Race and War in France: Colonial Subjects in the French Army, 1914-1918*, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 207.

¹⁸⁴ SHD, GR 7N 2103, "Reymond Report," 14 July 1915.

¹⁸⁵ Fell, "Nursing the Other: The Representation of Colonial Troops in French and British First World War Nursing Memoirs," 167.

in the wartime memoirs of French nurses. In another nurse's diary, West African troops were frequently noted to bear ritual scars and personal *fetiches*, but commentary on a Moroccan soldier focused instead on his demeanor and physique. At a Red Cross hospital in Arras, Nurse Emmanuel Colombe described a wounded *tirailleur* as "being particularly muscular, a handsome chap, one might say ... During the operation, which was very painful, not a word from him. His large sad eyes didn't move, his expression remained impassive. They have great courage."¹⁸⁶ This account in particular moves beyond typical stereotypes of Muslim soldiers and betrays a real interest in the plight of the Moroccan, with Colombe's comments encompassing an appreciation of the soldier's body and an admiration of his stoicism.

Officials in the Ministry of War attempted to address the threat of miscegenation or *métissage* by isolating colonial soldiers as much as possible, keeping them confined to barracks and camps outside of French cities and towns where officers could keep a close eye on them. There, opportunities to go on leave were restricted and passage to the surrounding towns were limited.¹⁸⁷ Even in these situations, illicit contact sprang up between local women and colonial soldiers. For example, at a hospital for indigenous troops established in the *Bois de Vincennes* outside Paris, an Interpreter-Officer complained of the lax security and ineffective fencing surrounding the facility. In a letter to the military leadership of Paris, he wrote:

As the *Jardin Colonial* is enclosed solely by light fencing that opens out on all sides onto the *Bois de Vincennes*, external influences are constantly exerting a disturbing effect on the morale of the wounded Muslim soldiers undergoing treatment at this medical facility—to say nothing of the very frequent unauthorized departures of a large number of these men, who are enticed away by women of ill repute, nor of the alcoholic beverages clandestinely smuggled in through the barriers.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ Fell, "Nursing the Other: The Representation of Colonial Troops in French and British First World War Nursing Memoirs," 168.

¹⁸⁷ Grayzel, "Morale, morality, and sexuality," 77.

¹⁸⁸ SHD, GR 7N 2103, "L'Officier Interprète Hennecart a Monsieur le Général de Division, Commandant la Place de Paris," 12 June, 1915.

Here, the frustrated officer sought to combat several issues affecting the *tirailleurs* all at once. He mentioned an Arabic-speaking woman who visited the compound and spoke secretly with the recuperating soldiers, and blamed her without evidence for inciting some minor episodes of misbehavior and indiscipline. More serious were the soldiers slipping away for access to brothels and alcohol, as these twin vices exposed the “backward natives” to the decadence and moral rot of metropolitan French society.¹⁸⁹

Ultimately, French officials settled on a handful of policies to address issues of potential *métissage* and related challenges to the colonial hierarchy that enshrined French power. First, complex systems of surveillance were established to monitor the correspondence between indigenous *tirailleurs* and the colonies. In Marseille, for example, a secret office was established under Monsieur Galthier, an *officier-interprète* attached to the 15th Regional Division to collate and read mail sent to and from North African soldiers.¹⁹⁰ Not wanting to be too overt in reading and censoring the mail even in wartime, the French instead encouraged soldiers to use open-faced postcards instead. This method also made it easier for them to intercept photographs of French women sent by soldiers to friends and family back home, so as to maintain the reputation of white European women. These operations even caught letters sent from French women to their North African lovers, including one who had gone so far as to learn to write in Arabic, and another who married a Tunisian *tirailleur* and planned to leave the metropole with him. Such writing was judged by French officials to indicate cases of feminine “hysterical folly.”¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁹ Maghraoui, “The ‘Grande Guerre Sainte’,” 19.

¹⁹⁰ SHD, GR 7N 2103, “Monsieur Piat, consul général de France à Monsieur Delcassé, ministre des Affaires étrangères,” 29 October 1914.

¹⁹¹ Fogarty, *Race and War in France*, 215-218. The Frenchwoman eventually learned that the man already had a wife in Tunis!

In Arles, Interpreter-Officer Reymond also reported on intercepted mail, this time sent by the nurses of the depot hospitals. In this case though, French fears of women's temptations seem to have been allayed. Reymond described that:

The Moroccan *tirailleurs* do not appear to have been swayed by letters from women —primarily nurses—which, though very numerous initially, have since decreased significantly. These letters generally spoke of love or extolled the bravery and service of the *tirailleurs* to such an extent that the men were led to believe they alone had saved France. The same inducements mentioned above—urging them not to return to the front—were present, as were the same offers of clandestine correspondence channels to Morocco; however, the tone of the Arabic correspondence destined for Morocco remains very positive.¹⁹²

This section of the report lent credence to fears of morale eroding in the face of sexual contacts with French women, as some women supposedly encouraged soldiers to shirk their duties.

Another interpretation of these messages is that perhaps nurses felt guilty about healing colonial subjects who sacrificed for France only for them to be sent back to the front. Additionally, the narrative of colonial soldiers delivering France from the German onslaught also appeared here, challenging notions of French military superiority. In either case, Reymond satisfactorily relayed the fact that Moroccan soldiers seemed unmoved by these exhortations and remained focused on their duties.

Other measures were taken to alleviate pressures behind the lines by July 1916. At Arles, a *foyer du soldat marocain* was inaugurated to host celebrations and provide leisure to Moroccans, including games of cards and the board game *dames*.¹⁹³ Elsewhere, Moorish cafes were established to alleviate the homesickness of North African troops, and Moroccans were provided with rations of couscous and mint tea in their barracks.¹⁹⁴ Finally, two significant changes were made to enforce racial and gender separation. Officers from the Army as well as envoys from the Ministry of War interceded with nurses to help the civilians understand the

¹⁹² SHD, GR 7N 2103, "Reymond Report," 14 July 1915.

¹⁹³ Bekraoui, *Les Marocains dans la grande guerre, 1914-1918*, 131.

¹⁹⁴ Fogarty, *Race and War in France*, 137.

particular *mentalités* of the *indigènes*, which were, in the eyes of the military, unsuitable recipients of the tender mercies of the nursing staff. Officer Reymond, again, provided the following instruction: “To apprise nurses of the dangers inherent in their enthusiasm—however sincere—for our Muslim soldiers; to enlighten them regarding the latter’s military prowess, but also regarding their moral character, which is—alas—deplorable.”¹⁹⁵ By placing the blame for any sexual relations on the rapacious appetites of the North Africans, French officials sought to maintain the delicate honor of French women.

Finally, to that end, *bordels militaires de campagne*, or BMCs were set up behind the lines with nonwhite prostitutes to cater to the needs of colonial soldiers.¹⁹⁶ Such establishments were common among the columns of the colonial army in the deserts of Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco, but by importing them to the metropole racial boundaries could be preserved and the sexual needs of Muslim soldiers attended to. These official brothels also allowed the authorities some amount of control over the spread of venereal diseases, even going so far as to have the *Académie de médecine* issue guidelines to soldiers on the subject.¹⁹⁷ Overall, these solutions were implemented somewhat piecemeal, and never fully resolved the issues at hand. Hospitals for injured Moroccan soldiers retained their importance as liminal zones that challenged established racial and gender hierarchies of contemporary French society through contact between indigenous men and white French women. They also gave the Moroccans leverage when negotiating questions of morale, payment, and proper treatment with French commanders due to their obvious status as veterans, often missing limbs, which forced the French to offer concessions in recognition of their suffering and sacrifice.

¹⁹⁵ SHD, GR 7N 2103, “Reymond Report,” 14 July 1915.

¹⁹⁶ Catherine Phipps, “Between Metropole and Colony: Bordels Militaires de Campagne in Colonial Morocco and France in the Twentieth Century,” *French History* 37, no. 3 (2023), 260.

¹⁹⁷ Grayzel, “Morale, morality, and sexuality,” 71.

Racism in the Ranks:

On the eve of the First World War, France's empire stretched from the shores of South America to tropical islands scattered across the Pacific Ocean, encompassing territory in North, West, and Equatorial Africa in between. Methods of recruitment differed across the empire, with some in the colonies flocking to recruitment posts to volunteer as in Morocco, others called up as part of public conscription as in Algeria, and still others press-ganged by local chiefs on behalf of the French as in Guinea. Once under arms, these *militaires indigènes* were incorporated into a variety of units and regiments across the army, but one commonality was the presence of white French officers. Following a policy of *encadrement* or "bracketing," native soldiers were surrounded and commanded by white French officers, from squad sergeants up to adjutants, colonels, and captains. This system emphasized the prowess and superiority of the French at all times and fostered deeply embedded racism in the form and function of the army.

In 1910, then-Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Mangin wrote his influential treatise *La force noire* to advocate for the expansion of the colonial army by recruiting Africans into its ranks. To answer France's falling birthrate in comparison to the ever-growing Teutonic population across the border, Mangin argued that by recruiting West African soldiers who were naturally warlike the French could match their adversaries and civilize the less advanced African races at the same time.¹⁹⁸ His work resulted in a heated debate that touched on the French military, society, and politics, with over 4,300 articles published on the matter by 1914.¹⁹⁹ As the war dragged on into 1915 and French casualties mounted, recruitment in the colonies began in earnest to bolster the troops in the trenches. With hundreds of thousands of nonwhite soldiers moving into France, though, the authorities saw a need to temper the image of Africans in the metropole to reassure

¹⁹⁸ Joe Lunn, "'Les Races Guerrières': Racial Preconceptions in the French Military about West African Soldiers during the First World War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 34, no. 4 (1999), 519.

¹⁹⁹ Fogarty, *Race and War in France*, 21.

civilian populations. Thus, the assertion emerged that colonial troops had been assimilated and civilized into “grown children,” ferocious in battle but dependable and loyal to the French.²⁰⁰

From the beginning of the war, the French officers leading the *tirailleurs marocains* interacted with them in the typical paternalistic fashion of the commanding *officier africain* with his *indigènes*.²⁰¹ While the commandants, captains, and colonels of the *Brigade Marocaine* and subsequent *Régiment de marche de tirailleurs marocains* applauded their soldiers’ ability to maneuver, march, and fight ably, they were also quick to denigrate any apparent mistakes or lapses in discipline. Colonel Poeymirau, for example, exploded at his men when they retreated from heavy German machinegun fire outside of the village of Varedes in September, 1914. “I no longer know you as my children!” he cried.²⁰² In this moment, the Colonel expressed his frustration and possible shame as a father would, chastising his soldiers for their sorry performance, though he soon apologized after recognizing the difficult extenuating circumstances in which the battalion found themselves.

Another commander who led the Moroccans from their arrival in France, Colonel Auroux was promoted to that rank in September 1914 when his commanding officer was evacuated away from the front with a sudden illness. He went on to lead the 1st RTM throughout the war and won several citations and awards for showing courage and initiative under fire, and generally spoke highly of his colonial troops in reports to the general staff. However, in one dispatch from September 1915, he reserved some harsh words in his marching orders. Auroux gave specific instructions on how the troops were to form up four-abreast with shouldered rifles, and then ended with this cutting remark: “We are not on Moroccan trails but in a European war, which

²⁰⁰ Ruth Ginio, “French Officers, African Officers, and the Violent Image of African Colonial Soldiers,” *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 36, no. 2 (2010), 61.

²⁰¹ Despite the appellation, this officer was a European who served in Africa and was not himself African.

²⁰² Clement and Maillard, *La Brigade Marocaine*, 118.

demands discipline and precision.”²⁰³ His casual association of Morocco with indiscipline is juxtaposed by his emphasis on the import and gravity of a “European war,” and also suggests a reprimand for troops that had been found lacking. Due to Colonel Aurox’s familiarity with the regiment and the duration of his command, it is possible that this rebuke was directed at a batch of recently arrived recruits for the regiment to replace casualties.²⁰⁴

The other principal expression of French officers’ paternalism towards their troops was evident in their belief that the morale and capabilities of the soldiers would collapse in the absence of their preferred leaders. In his report on the morale of the *tirailleurs marocains*, Interpreter-Officer Reymond noted the waning enthusiasm among the Moroccans to go into battle. He identified the reason for this shift in mien as the heavy casualties suffered both by the men and by their French officers. He wrote:

It is well known that the *tirailleur* harbors an exclusive attachment to the specific officer he knows personally; this bond is so strong that one often sees our native troops enlist specifically to serve under the command of —say —Captain X, while refusing to serve under any other captain. Deprived of their customary leaders, they are left feeling disoriented and adrift.²⁰⁵

This sentiment was also echoed in reports submitted by Resident General Lyautey and other officials familiar with the Moroccans. Absent these analyses was any question as to the performance and reliability of similar French units when pinned down under fire without their officers, but it seems that judgement was reserved for colonial soldiers.

The importance of French officers leading indigenous troops was once again emphasized in the Piat Report from the Arles Depot in October 1914. Despite the attempts to sway the loyalty of the Moroccans by the Germans and the Turks, Consul General Piat wrote that “if we have retained enough influence over our Muslim troops to make them fight for us without

²⁰³ SHD, GR 25N 515, *Régiment de tirailleurs marocains 1914-1918*, “Cahier 6 July - December 1915: Note de Service,” 23 September 1915.

²⁰⁴ The 1st RTM took part in heavy fighting in the 2nd Battle of Artois the preceding June and suffered many losses.

²⁰⁵ SHD, GR 7N 2103, “Reymond Report,” 14 July 1915.

faltering, we owe it solely to our officers whose bravery is the object of admiration and enthusiasm from their soldiers.”²⁰⁶ While it is true that French officers were known for their often suicidal bravery, the report accentuated these characteristics to explain the devotion shown by colonial troops who were often assigned puerile attributes. As Allison Fell wrote on the subject, “even in the patriotic representations of French *tirailleurs*, *spahis*, or *goumiers* as loyal, brave and/or essentially childlike, tensions remained, arguably reflecting the inherent instability of the white European masculinity through which such images were filtered.”²⁰⁷

Races Guerrières

Turning once more to General Mangin’s *La force noire*, we find the ways in which the French categorized the different groups of colonized peoples spread across the empire. In Africa in particular, the French considered many to belong to the so-called *races guerrières*, or warrior races.²⁰⁸ This term was generally applied to North and West Africans, although there were often differentiations made along ethnic lines; Moroccans were considered more warlike than Tunisians, and the Toucouleur and Mandingue peoples of West Africa above their neighbors.²⁰⁹ These groups were held in opposition to the *races non-guerrières* which in the eyes of the French were better suited to support roles behind the front lines, which primarily consisted of Malagasy and Madagascan men as well as the Indochinese.²¹⁰ These arguments were largely based on offensive principles of biological essentialism and racism which reduced nonwhite men to mere tropes of sexuality, laziness, thirst for blood, and reverence for authority. However, as Mangin

²⁰⁶ SHD, GR 7N 2103, “Piat Report,” 29 October 1914.

²⁰⁷ Fell, “Nursing the Other: The Representation of Colonial Troops in French and British First World War Nursing Memoirs,” 161.

²⁰⁸ Charles Mangin, *La force noire* (Hachette et cie, 1910), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/ien.35556023379050>.

²⁰⁹ Lunn, “‘Les Races Guerrières’: Racial Preconceptions in the French Military,” 523.

²¹⁰ Fogarty, *Race and War in France*, 25.

and other French generals argued, many of these soldiers had been suitably assimilated into French civilization by the time of the Great War, and even displayed a degree of proper “French fury” when going into battle.²¹¹

Due to the pressing need and intensity of the war, indigenous soldiers of all kinds ended up participating in the fighting, but over the course of the war the French came to prize both the *tirailleurs sénégalais* as well as the *tirailleurs marocains* above others as premier shock troops and line-breakers. Just as these two groups of colonial soldiers were recognized for their fearlessness and skill in hand-to-hand combat by the French, they were feared by the Germans. Propaganda and racial stereotypes proliferated among German soldiers and in the German press, and the Senegalese and Moroccans were accused of the decapitation and mutilation of their enemies.²¹² While not quite so overtly racist and visceral in his appraisal, General Henri Bonnard echoed those sentiments when equating North and West Africans in their propensity for close-quarters fighting, where “their savage impetuosity with the bayonet” would send enemy forces reeling, and that “they would have no rivals when it is a matter of delivering the final shock.”²¹³ As such, Moroccans were identified in both foreign and domestic publications in distinct racial terms which celebrated their abilities as soldiers but denigrated their intelligence, sophistication, and humanity.

Similar racial stereotypes of Moroccans were evident amongst the rank and file of the French army, the *poilus*. In a passage from *Le feu*, Henri Barbusse related the passing of a company of Moroccans:

Some of those diabolical images in yellow wood or bronze or ebony are serious of mien, uneasy, and taciturn. Their faces have the disquieting and secret look of the snare suddenly discovered. The others laugh with a laugh that jangles like fantastic foreign instruments of music, a laugh that

²¹¹ Ginio, “French Officers, African Officers, and the Violent Image of African Colonial Soldiers,” 62.

²¹² William T. Dean, “The French Colonial Army and the Great War,” *The Historian* 76, no. 3 (2014), 506.

²¹³ Ginio, “French Officers, African Officers, and the Violent Image of African Colonial Soldiers,” 64.

bare the teeth.²¹⁴

The *tirailleurs* are first described in racial terms relating to the color of their skin, which marked them as distinct from the white French soldiers as did the “diabolical” allusion to the supernatural and the malign. The description then juxtaposes the inherent deadliness of the Moroccans with an Orientalist comparison to exotic music, both of which again separate them from the French soldiers they encounter in the trenches. Finally, at the end of this section Barbusse describes the pitiless behavior of the Moroccans in combat, with *poilus* pantomiming the action of bayonetting captured Germans, at which point a turbanned sharpshooter turned, and laughingly agreed ““Cut head off!””²¹⁵ This passage illustrated the unease that metropolitan soldiers felt when confronted by colonial troops, whose alterity was brought to the forefront by their apparent penchant for violence and limited ability to speak French.

Another side effect of the practices of racial essentialism as applied to the *tirailleurs marocains* was in the nature of their deployment on the battlefield. As described above, French commanders insisted upon their own importance when leading indigenous troops into combat and exaggerated the confusion and helplessness of colonial soldiers without proper guidance, but there were at least some cases when assaults stalled and got bogged down when the officers were killed, and other times when Moroccan troops struggled under unfamiliar commanders. Some in the French general staff attributed these faults to a natural preference for Moroccans to hunt and pursue their enemies as out on the *bled* or plains of their country. Deprived of this kind of warfare and stuck in miserable trenches, the Moroccans were perceived to lack “the selfless stoicism that enabled white French soldiers to endure such a long and terrible conflict.”²¹⁶ Other

²¹⁴ Henri Barbusse, *Under Fire*, with Internet Archive (J.M. Dent & Sons LTD, 1916), 43.

²¹⁵ Barbusse, *Under Fire*, 43.

²¹⁶ Fogarty, *Race and War in France*, 80.

more concrete obstacles affected the soldiers' suitability for the slow attrition of war in the trenches.

Many of the *tirailleurs* spoke only limited French, and while they were taught a limited series of commands and some basic French, they were largely dependent on non-commissioned officers and other intermediate commanders to translate and communicate orders. This system broke down during reconnaissance missions at night as soldiers crept silently from listening posts towards enemy redoubts and trenchworks, but often came under fire when their presence was discovered. In one instance, a Malagasy patrol at night mistook a French officer for an enemy, and while interrogating him noisily came under intense fire from the Germans, which killed and wounded many of them.²¹⁷ Another time, a French sergeant leading a squad of six *tirailleurs marocains* and their indigenous *maoun* or corporal came under attack, and when the Frenchman was shot, the North Africans retreated back to their trench without attempting to rescue the man or recover his body.²¹⁸ In both cases the colonial soldiers were sternly disciplined, but situations like these added to the general consensus among French commanders that while the Moroccans and other colonial troops were suited for fast-paced aggressive actions, they were unprepared and unaccustomed to more "European" methods of warfare which required endurance and patience.

In spite of the limitations described by French commanders, imagined or otherwise, Moroccan soldiers demonstrated a high degree of loyalty and reliability while at the front, which French officers contrasted with other North African troops. In a report from June 1915, Colonel Sarton du Jonchay of the *spahis algériens* cavalry squadrons complained of "undesirables" and "malingerers" at the depot of Beaucaire where the *spahis* were stationed while away from the

²¹⁷ Dean, "The French Colonial Army and the Great War," 504.

²¹⁸ SHD, GR 25N 515 *Régiment de tirailleurs marocains 1914-1918*, "Note au sujet de la reconnaissance du 2 sur Conde," 3 December 1914.

front.²¹⁹ To avoid spreading cases of indiscipline or acts of resistance, the colonel suggested sending the Algerians to Morocco instead on garrison duty, which would allow more Moroccan troops to be rotated to the front. General Graziani of the General Staff also spoke in favor of the unshakeable fidelity of the *tirailleurs marocains* in a note dispatched to Lyautey in Rabat, where he proclaimed “the absolute loyalty demonstrated thus far by all Moroccan military personnel—a loyalty surpassing that of any other Muslim troops.”²²⁰

The origins of this laudable adherence to the French cause was however attributed to the Moroccans’ supposed simple and childish nature. As the most recently subjugated population in North Africa, the French viewed the Moroccan troops as less civilized than the Algerians and Tunisians, although more prepared to accept centralized authority due to their loyalty to Sultan Moulay Youssef. Interpreter-Officer Reymond, when comparing them to the other North African subjects, wrote:

The Moroccans —though but recently conquered —have, despite their rugged nature, preserved intact that sense of absolute obedience which their Muslim faith demands of the believer toward his leader, whose authority is derived from God. Admittedly, they do not analyze these sentiments, yet it is indisputable that they submit to them unreservedly.²²¹

The French perceived the Moroccan soldiers as transferring their deference for authority from their traditional leaders to French officers, which elevated their status further in the eyes of the colonial power. Sifting through this evidence, several tensions emerge in French racial depictions of the *tirailleurs marocains*. At once barbaric and primed for combat, they were considered as dependent on French leadership and guidance like children reliant upon a father. Utterly loyal, they were deemed unsophisticated due to their Muslim faith and fealty to their Sultan. And underneath these surface-level assumptions, the most disquieting tension of all: the French had to

²¹⁹ SHD, GR 3H 362 *Déploiements et Transferts des Troupes Marocains*, Dossier 1915, “36th Army Corps, On the subject of the Auxiliary Algerian Spahis,” 14 June 1915.

²²⁰ SHD, GR 7N 2103, “Note to Commissioner Resident-General of Rabat,” 12 February 1915.

²²¹ SHD, GR 7N 2103, “Reymond Report,” 14 July 1915.

rely on such indigenous soldiers to maintain their position on the Western Front in the face of German aggression, revealing a weakness at the heart of the empire.

Regardless of the origins of their perceptions, the French came to view the Moroccan riflemen as dependable soldiers and especially capable shock troops, placed at the vanguard of assaults and offensive campaigns. Although some Moroccan soldiers might have relished this role, the two regiments of *tirailleurs marocains* suffered enormous casualties in numerous battles along the Western Front, winning glory and acclaim at a staggering cost. One scholar writing in 1926 tallied some 40,000 Moroccan troops as having served in World War I, and tallies of men killed vary between 9,000 and as many as 12,000 dead, due to jumbled sources.²²² With a mortality rate of approximately 26%, the Moroccans paid more dearly than the Algerians, the largest group of North Africans deployed in the war with a comparative mortality rate of 15%, and just edged out the sacrifices of metropolitan soldiers at 24%.²²³ These figures can be interpreted to show French callousness for colonial troops on the one hand, or perhaps an eagerness to make use of robust warriors on the other. They were, in the words of Resident-General Lyautey, *mis à toutes les sauces* or “put in all the sauces” across the front, and paid dearly.²²⁴

The other legacy that followed the *tirailleurs marocains* after the war was unfortunately a racial one. In 1919, the 10th Army of General Mangin occupied the German Rhineland, which included 35,000 colonial soldiers. Preeminent among these was the Moroccan Division, which had won citations and victories at every major battle of the war, and from 1918 onwards included the 2nd *regiment de tirailleurs marocains* alongside regiments of Senegalese, Somali, and

²²² Maghraoui, “‘La Grande Guerre Sainte’,” 7.

²²³ Bekraoui, *Les Marocains dans la Grande Guerre*, 128.

²²⁴ Fogarty, *Race and War in France*, 79.

Algerian troops.²²⁵ The German populace and press reacted with horror at the imposition of nonwhite troops over ethnic Germans, due in part to the widespread propaganda during the war of barbaric violence enacted by the Moroccans and Senegalese. Racism against the North and West African soldiers was driven to a fever pitch, and the episode was labeled *die schwarze Schande* or “the Black Shame.”²²⁶ However, while there were about two dozen cases of sexual assault prosecuted against colonial soldiers, these incidents occurred far less frequently than with white French soldiers occupying the Rhineland. Not only were the North African soldiers stationed there subject to extremely strict discipline, but the hunger for vengeance against the German people was largely absent among the colonial troops.²²⁷

The *tirailleurs marocains* played an integral role in the defense of France during the First World War, and they were recognized by the French for their skill and hardiness in battle. These perceptions were heavily influenced by contemporary racist imagery of African men though, and Moroccans were treated sometimes as savages motivated by base instincts and at others as faithful children. In hospitals these racial stereotypes became especially fraught when the wounded men interacted with white French women, which pitted the social mores of French society and fears around femininity against the very real human connections established across racial and gender lines. When caring for the wounded Moroccans, the French also had to reckon with the sacrifices these men made for France, and often bowed to their protestations and made efforts to improve their quality of life. Thus, interactions between French and Moroccans were just as important off the battlefield as in the trenches and led to greater changes after the war.

²²⁵ Clayton, *France, Soldiers, and Africa*, 103.

²²⁶ Dean, “The French Colonial Army and the Great War,” 507.

²²⁷ Clayton, *France, Soldiers, and Africa*, 103.

Conclusion

Tirailleurs Marocains after WWI

After the slaughter of the First World War abated, the men of the 1st and 2nd *regiments de tirailleurs marocains* had to adjust to the new realities of peacetime. Even as demobilization began for metropolitan units, the Moroccan soldiers were kept in service with elements of the 2nd regiment rotated home to maintain security and garrison outposts in Morocco as early as December 1918.²²⁸ As these troop movements got underway, the world was also in the grip of the influenza epidemic and public health officials made sure to screen *tirailleurs* before and after their voyages between Morocco and France. Additionally, vaccinations for the flu and for typhus were administered to soldiers to shore up immunological defenses against this new microbial foe.²²⁹ The Moroccan sharpshooters were not only bound for their home country, though, and several battalions were instead deployed in the occupation of the Rhineland in 1919. The intensely racialized and propagandized aspects of this occupation were covered in previous chapters, and although there were cases of sexual assault, these were generally exaggerated to terrify the German populace. In another situation, Moroccan soldiers fired upon rioting German civilians in one instance in 1920 in self-defense, but in both cases the soldiers were held accountable.²³⁰ In contrast to these troubling circumstances, in France Moroccan troops were rightfully honored for their contribution to the war in the Bastille Day parade in Paris in 1919,

²²⁸ SHD, GR 3H 362 *Déploiements et Transferts des Troupes Marocains*, Chief of General Staff to Director of Health Services in Rabat, 3 January 1919.

²²⁹ SHD, GR 3H 362, Inspector General Braun, Director of Health Services in Morocco to Lyautey, 27 December 1918.

²³⁰ William T. Dean, "The French Colonial Army and the Great War," *The Historian* 76, no. 3 (2014), 507.

where the 2nd RTM earned the prestige of presenting their flag alongside their metropolitan comrades.²³¹

Another important consequence of the war was the creation of a military school in Morocco to prepare and train indigenous officers to lead their own troops in the *tirailleurs* and *spahis* regiments of the French colonial army. First proposed by Lyautey in 1918, the Dar el-Beïda school in Meknes opened for enrollment in 1919 and soon became known as “the Moroccan Saint-Cyr.”²³² As treaties with the defeated central powers were settled in the months and years following Armistice Day, the French Army relied heavily upon colonial soldiers to occupy former belligerent nations such as Turkey and Hungary in addition to Germany, all of which included battalions of Moroccan troops. More importantly, France quickly moved its forces into the new mandate territories of Syria and Lebanon, and Moroccan *spahis* and *tirailleurs* formed integral units of the armies occupying and subjugating these lands in the name of French imperialism.²³³

Two major events of the 1920s drew the units of Moroccan infantry and cavalry into colonial conflicts: the Rif War in northern Morocco from 1925-1927, and the Great Revolt in Syria in the same period. The Rif was a mountainous region in Spanish Morocco along the northern coast that Spain had never truly subjugated, and after losing many of its overseas colonies to America in 1898 and remaining neutral in World War I, Spain sought to exert its dominance as a fading colonial power. When its inexperienced military began its push into the rugged mountains of the Rif in 1921, a charismatic and tactically astute chieftain named Abd el-Krim rallied thousands to his banner and inflicted a series of devastating defeats on the

²³¹ Moshe Gershovich, *French Military Rule in Morocco: Colonialism and Its Consequences*, Cass Series--History and Society in the Islamic World (F. Cass, 2000), 173.

²³² Bahija Simou, “La Contribution marocaine à la première guerre mondiale,” in *L’Empire colonial français dans la Grande Guerre: un siècle d’histoire et de mémoire*, Mémorial de Verdun (Paris, France) (Dacres éditions, 2021), 92.

²³³ Anthony Clayton, *France, Soldiers, and Africa*, 1st ed (Brassey’s Defence Publishers, 1988), 104-105.

Spanish. Somewhat inevitably, when Abd el-Krim declared an independent Muslim republic and extended his influence to the northernmost tribes under French influence, conflict exploded.²³⁴

Abd el-Krim's Rifian forces were initially successful against French border outposts, with isolated blockhouses and patrols cut off from resupply and whittled down, and they even deployed captured Spanish artillery against the French, which shocked the European soldiers. Once French generals reacted to the rapid gains made in the early months of the war, however, superior French numbers, armaments, and technology pushed the Rifians back into their own territory, and then worked with the Spanish to encircle the fledgling Republic and eventually negotiated the surrender and exile of Abd el-Krim.²³⁵ Many colonial units fought in the two-year campaign to stabilize the northern border of the protectorate, including Algerians, Senegalese, Moroccans, and the celebrated *Regiment d'infanterie coloniale du Maroc*, or RICM. By this time the 1st and 2nd RTM had been reorganized into the 61st and 62nd *régiments*, and their numbers swelled with an additional six regiments by 1927.²³⁶ The final consequence of the Rif War was the ouster of Lyautey, who was out-maneuvered by political opponents in Paris and sent Pétain to replace him, which ended over a decade of colonial administration by the aging Commissioner-General.²³⁷

On the other side of the Mediterranean, the Great Revolt in Syria ignited in 1925 when overbearing and inept French military administrators interfered in the matters of the Druze people in the rolling hills and valleys of southern Syria. Discontent spread to the major cities, and fullscale rebellion soon swept Damascus. The 1st regiment of *spahis marocains* served in the Levant during this period, and won awards for their bravery while heavily outnumbered. In

²³⁴ Gershovich, *French Military Rule in Morocco*, 125-128. Lyautey himself viewed the conflict as inescapable.

²³⁵ Gershovich, *French Military Rule in Morocco*, 141. The RICM was the regiment responsible for the successful recapture of Fort Douaumont in WWI, and eventually included some companies of actual Moroccans in its ranks.

²³⁶ Clayton, *France, Soldiers, and Africa*, 263.

²³⁷ Clayton, *France, Soldiers, and Africa*, 105. Once back in Paris, though, Lyautey hosted Sultan Moulay Youssef in his first state visit to the metropole and the two maintained a strong relationship.

particular, the dashing cavalrymen were known for leading bold charges into hostile armed villages and against mounted Druze tribesmen.²³⁸ Here as in the Rif, the French suffered initial setbacks and defeats, but by adapting the tactics from more cumbersome and heavily armed columns to more responsive skirmish forces supported by aircraft they slowly regained control over the cities and countryside. Six battalions of *tirailleurs marocains* fought in the revolt, with reinforcements arriving in 1926 once the situation had largely stabilized in Morocco.²³⁹ The end of the rebellion was characterized by particularly brutal repression of local populations, with the French employing the same bloody-handed tactics honed in North Africa.

Finally, the hard-won legacy of the Moroccan *tirailleurs* and *spahis* of the First World War played an important but ill-fated role at the outbreak of the Second World War. In 1940, roughly 83,000 Moroccan troops were deployed in France, and were unfortunately directly in the path of the German *blitzkrieg* through the Low Countries.²⁴⁰ Attesting to their professionalism and to the example established in the bloodiest battles of the previous World War, the 1st, 2nd, and 7th RTMs fought doggedly against superior German armor and air support, giving ground slowly as they retreated back into France after an initial push into Belgium. In a sad episode illustrating the mismatch in technology and preparation, several companies of *tirailleurs* fixed bayonets and charged advancing German tanks in a last doomed heroic charge.²⁴¹ Around Luxembourg, the 1st Brigade of *spahis* earned the equally impressive and morose moniker of *le seul invaincu de la débacle* in honor of the fighting retreat they conducted, while the 3rd Brigade of *spahis* fought to the last man against German armored companies.²⁴² To the last, Moroccan soldiers demonstrated their bravery, grit, and reliability in combat, a reputation which sustained

²³⁸ SHD, GR 34N 495 *Régiment de marche de spahis marocains*, “Historique du Régiment 1918-1934.”

²³⁹ Clayton, *France, Soldiers, and Africa*, 112.

²⁴⁰ Gershovich, *French Military Rule in Morocco*, 185.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*

²⁴² Clayton, *France, Soldiers, and Africa*, 177-178.

them from the bloody years of 1914-1918, through the interwar period of colonial warfare, and up to the disaster of 1940 and eventual liberation of 1945.

Final Thoughts

As the last addition to France's empire in the Maghreb, Morocco in 1914 was not fully conquered, with much of the countryside and mountainous regions still independent of French rule. Even in the major cities, the army of the Sultan launched a mutiny against their French officers only two years earlier in 1912. But when war erupted in Europe in August 1914, the Sultan Moulay Youssef lent his support to Commissioner-General Hubert Lyautey and several battalions of mounted and infantry soldiers marched first to coastal ports to be deployed into the heartland of France against the forces of the Kaiser. As with other colonial soldiers, the *tirailleurs marocains* were subject to all manner of racial prejudices on behalf of their French superiors, who also viewed the soldiers' religiosity as typical Muslim fanaticism. This overall air of paternalism and distrust extended to medical facilities behind the front lines as the war settled into the war of trenches and attrition along the Western Front, and Moroccan troops were kept segregated from the French populace as much as possible.

In each of these situations, though, Moroccan troops pushed back on the assumptions and perceptions of French officers, commanders, and politicians. When the Ottoman Empire joined the war on the side of the Central Powers, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the General Staff panicked at the prospect of hundreds of thousands of their Muslim troops revolting or joining a pan-Islamic movement against the colonial authority. These fears were soon allayed however, when almost all North African troops rejected Turkish ploys to sway their loyalty, and the Moroccans in particular rebuffed the efforts of the Sublime Porte and remained devoted to their

own Sultan instead. When French officials altered certain policies related to burials, observation of Muslim holidays, and even the diets of Moroccan troops in response to religious advocacy from the soldiers, they demonstrated a willingness to evolve their treatment of Muslim troops alongside their understanding of the soldiers' loyalty and reliability.

The capabilities of the *tirailleurs* were further demonstrated on the battlefield. The first 5,000 Moroccan troops in France were swiftly deployed along the Marne in 1914 to stabilize the front as the Germans rapidly advanced towards Paris, and although they paid a shockingly high price to do so, they repulsed the Germans and displayed their bravery and discipline under fire. Throughout the war this reputation was enhanced. In Champagne and Artois the *tirailleurs marocains* participated in the major offensive campaigns of 1915 and bled alongside Frenchmen and other colonial troops, becoming known for both lightning attacks and stoic defense in the face of jarring losses. In 1916 the Moroccans fought in another totemic battle, this time at Verdun. While the attempt to reclaim Fort Douamont was unsuccessful, the *tirailleurs* fought in the same crucible as white French troops and garnered further recognition for their efforts. Like the *tirailleurs sénégalais*, the Moroccans' martial prowess was often acknowledged through a distinctly racialized lens, but by proving themselves on the field of battle, they established a record of conviction and valor that saw Moroccan soldiers deployed in all of France's wars of the 20th century.

Outside of combat, hospitals developed as another crucial locus of renegotiation of colonial tropes and power dynamics between the French and their Moroccan subjects. Fears of sexual activity between white female nurses and male North African soldiers prompted harsh rebukes from French commanders and bureaucrats, and the men were kept apart from French towns and villages as much as possible. At the same time, the French were aware of the debt they

owed to their indigenous troops, many of whom were maimed or sick with pulmonary diseases, and so put in place policies to appease the men and keep them satisfied. These efforts included accountability for soldiers' remuneration including POWs, access to traditional food in place of French rations, such as substituting mint tea for wine, and visits from Moroccan notables and religious figures to boost morale. In this sphere, French attitudes and perceptions of the *tirailleurs* as sexually rapacious and eager to shirk their duties developed into an acknowledgement and even appreciation of their loyalty amidst intense suffering and hardship and treated them more equitably due to their role in defending France.

The relationship between French officers and commanders and Moroccan soldiers was therefore one that evolved over the course of the war. From a place of suspicion and mistrust rooted in racial stereotypes and the recent uprising against the French military, French perceptions shifted as Moroccan soldiers demonstrated steadfast courage and capability under fire, making a name for themselves in the process. Wariness of their Islamic faith gave way to accommodation and uneasy acceptance, which culminated after the war in the creation of the Great Mosque of Paris in 1926 in recognition of North African soldiers' efforts and sacrifices. In hospitals, fears of miscegenation and the rupture of colonial hierarchies of power demonstrated the leverage that wounded indigenous soldiers could wield and resulted in improvements to quality of care and acquiescence to some of the soldiers' demands. The greatest legacy of Moroccan troops in World War I was created on the battlefield, though. Fewer in number than other *tirailleurs* from Algeria, Tunisia, or French West Africa, the Moroccans of the 1st and 2nd RTM carved out a distinctive name for themselves as shock troops on par with the *tirailleurs sénégalais* and became a core element of French colonial armies and engagements for the remainder of the 20th century.

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