

## Wartime Encounters, Diasporic Divides: African American and French Colonial Troops in the Great War

Jawad ELALAMI <sup>1</sup>; Taoufiq SAKHKHANE <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ibn Tofail University, Morocco.

<sup>2</sup> Ibn Tofail University, Morocco.

Email 1 : [jawad.elalami@uit.ac.ma](mailto:jawad.elalami@uit.ac.ma)

Email 2 : [sakhhane@yahoo.fr](mailto:sakhhane@yahoo.fr)

 1: 0009-0009-2703-8774

Received	Accepted	Published
25/01/2026	10/02/2026	28/02/2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63939/JAAS.2026-Vol9.N28.9-21>

Elalami, J., & Sakhkhane, T. (2026). Wartime encounters, diasporic divides: African American and French colonial troops in the Great War. *Journal of Afro-Asian Studies*, 9(28), 09-21.

### Abstract

*This article explores one of the least charted episodes of the Great War, in which race and diaspora intersected to shape the experiences of African American and French African troops and workers deployed to France during the global conflict. Using Brent Edwards's concept of "décalage" in the field of diaspora studies, this article examines African American narratives of the Great War to map the role of the people of African descent in the war, looking for the roots of "the chasm" that developed between people of African descent in their diaspora in France. The racial and colonial circumstances that brought them to the war in Europe, their reception by the French, and their views of each other offer new perspectives on the chasm that developed between them in their diaspora in France. This chasm gradually gave rise to different diasporas, characterised by a permanent décalage between people sharing the same race and descent.*

Keywords: *The Great War, people of African descent, race, diaspora, décalage*

© 2026, ELALAMI & SAKHKHANE, licensee Democratic Arab Center. This article is published under the terms of the **Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0)**, which permits non-commercial use of the material, appropriate credit, and indication if changes in the material were made. You can copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format as well as remix, transform, and build upon the material, provided the original work is properly cited.

## **1.Introduction**

The Great War presented an unprecedented opportunity for Americans, Moroccans, and other Africans to encounter one another on a large scale for the first time in history. The global conflict precipitated the massive movement and forced displacement of millions of people across all five continents. In France, where Allied Armies were garrisoned, European, African, Asian, and American troops and workers fought and collaborated against the Central Powers led by Germany. The Western Front in France became a sort of “Tower of Babel” a typical site of cultural and racial encounters between the ordinary, uncultivated masses who had never ventured beyond their native villages and hometowns, let alone encountered people from distinct parts of the world with different customs, races, and languages. The Great War was not just an armed conflict but also a site of cultural and racial interactions between a myriad of ethnicities and nationalities. During the war, cultural negotiations extended beyond the exclusive, narrow academic circles of travellers and scholars. The fresh and spontaneous encounter between the troops generated various narratives written by those who were part of it. Among these narratives, many were written by American soldiers and military personnel, detailing their daily lives on the frontline and describing the different races and nationalities they fought alongside or against.

Historically, the Great War narratives produced in the United States can be subdivided into two distinct categories. The first covers writings prior to the United States’ entry into the war in 1917. This category mostly comprises newspaper reports, personal narratives, and diaries of Americans who, in one way or another, individually joined the war in Europe before the official entrance of the American army. The second category encompasses the bulk of writings that began with the American entry into the War. In addition to the available historical archive of newspapers that used to provide the American audience with the daily exploits of the American army on the Western Front, there were also massive compilations of military reports, studies, official correspondence, diaries, memoirs, postcards, pictures, soldiers’ newspapers<sup>1</sup>, and personal letters. They were written by different interveners in the war, ranging from the highest ranks of the military staff and experts to the rank and file of the army. Workers, porters, nurses, doctors, ambulance drivers, canteen tenders, and many other Americans who were linked to the war also have a significant share of these writings. As the writers’ social and professional backgrounds vary, so do their academic and intellectual levels. While some texts and narratives are indeed challenging for the ordinary reader, as they are written by military experts and are full of military statistics, maps, and war strategies, other writings come from soldiers who were hardly familiar with writing and reading. These latter accounts are the most valuable, as they contain uncensored, fresh views and images of “the other” they encountered during the war.

---

<sup>1</sup> Soldiers’ newspapers were a common source of entertainment and news exchange between soldiers of the same army. They were produced by educated officers and contained entertaining stories, jokes, pictures, and carefully censored news of the war. They were distributed for free on the frontline. As Robert L. Nelson argues in his article, “Soldier Newspapers: A Useful Source in the Social and Cultural History of the First World War and Beyond,” *War in History*, Vol. 17, N. 2, (2010), pp. 167–191, soldiers’ newspapers were a famous genre of writing during the Great War.

Exploring the representation of French colonial soldiers in the war narratives written by Americans during the First World War, the difference between white Americans' and African Americans' views was glaringly evident and impossible to ignore. While white Americans' narratives generally view colonial soldiers with the usual racialised and stereotypical images and tropes, African American narratives provide a different mode of representation, reflecting a sort of racial and military affinity due to their similar skin colours and military service conditions. Both African American and French colonial troops were assigned inglorious, marginalised paramilitary roles or deployed as shock troops on the frontline. In the context of the Great War, the term "shock troops" had racial implications. Colonial soldiers were chosen as shock troops because they were expendable, and their appearance and colour instilled fear in their enemies. It also means they were expendable troops, or cannon fodder, in the war.

The encounter between African American regiments and French colonial troops highlights critical issues of race and war, the relationship between African Americans and their African ancestors, and the question of the African-descent diaspora in France. African Americans in France easily adapted to French society during the war and flourished in postwar France. They established renowned literary and artistic circles that became integral to French culture after the war. These black artistic and literary movements in interwar France became historically known as 'the Jazz Age'. On the other hand, French colonial troops from Africa had little effect on French culture and society after the war. They were quickly forgotten from French public life and culture as soon as they were demobilised and sent back to their native towns in Africa. Some African regiments were linked with infamous racial incidents and acts of rape during the war or in the German province of the Rhineland, which France occupied in the 1920s. Though they were brought to France as part of a French army raised in the empire, African troops' presence there was less remarkable than that of American soldiers of African descent.

The encounter between African Americans and French colonial troops in the Great War chronicles a critical moment in the diaspora of people of African descent. It highlights the origins of the ongoing questions regarding the different statuses of black people from America and the black people from Africa in the diaspora. African Americans easily integrated into French society, describing it as "colour-blind", free from racism and discrimination against people of colour. On the other hand, people from African colonies were granted a marginal position in French society, history, and memory, and were usually associated with negative memories and events of the war. This status has continued to shape the uneasy relationship of the African diaspora with France to this day.

While African troops left no significant written records of their experiences in France during the Great War, African Americans left numerous narratives, personal memoirs, and letters, which are now available online or in public libraries. Going through some of these war narratives, the question of why African Americans and Africans from French colonies have taken different paths in diaspora, even though they were both brought to France under similar conditions of racism and coloniality, will be highlighted. Using Brent Edwards's notion of "décalage" in the field of diaspora studies, I will argue that the geographical, historical, and cultural discrepancies are behind the

shaping of “the liminal space” and the emergence of an uneven diasporic relation between Africans and African Americans, causing an unbridgeable “chasm” between them in France.

## **2. African American views of colonial soldiers in France**

African American troops stationed in France faced similar racial discrimination and Jim Crow laws that they had been conditioned to back in the United States. While they answered President Wilson’s call to make the world “safe for democracy” with the hope that their loyalty and military service would secure racial respect and equality, they were faced with disrespect, discrimination, and mistreatment (Williams, C. L, 2010, p3). Chad Williams, a historian of African American participation in the Great War, argues that “the white supremacist realities of American democracy ... remained vividly present throughout the experiences of African American soldiers in France.” (Williams, C. L, 2010, p182) While in France, the American army replicated the American racialised structures that had been inflicted on African Americans back in the United States. African American officers faced defamation, and black labour troops endured systematic mistreatment. Segregation permeated all facets of the American military in France.

Fortunately for the African American troops, they were affiliated with the French army, which would provide training, armament, and equipment (Barbeau, A. E., Henri, F,1974, p112). This decision “to give away” the black regiments to the French solved the problems of the American army in France. First, the American white troops were under control again, as their recurrent disputes with black units had caused disturbing disciplinary issues on numerous occasions. Second, French demands for more troop supplies were met. The death toll had taken a substantial number of the French forces, and they no longer had the human resources to replace those who had perished on the battlefield. As the American army wasn’t yet ready to engage in battle, the French, by handling the black regiments, temporarily solved the problem of troop supplies.

The transfer of African American regiments to the French was a successful story. The French approach to deploying black troops was radically different from the American methods. France had accumulated considerable experience in dealing with black soldiers from Africa and had no reservations about letting them fight side by side with its white metropolitan troops. As the American army’s initial plan to use African Americans mainly in paramilitary activities didn’t work, they were “exiled” to the French army, which used them as combat troops. African American units welcomed their transfer to the French army, viewing it as a liberation rather than an exile (Slotkin, R. 2005, p136). France granted them “the honour” of being combat soldiers rather than labour battalions, which the American army had denied them. African American regiments fought alongside French metropolitan and other colonial African troops on equal terms for the rest of the war.

Satisfied with their new combat duties under the French army, African American troops viewed France as a colour-blind country with no discriminatory views about people of colour. The African American troops viewed their treatment by the French as an advanced form of racial egalitarianism compared to the treatment they received back in the United States or from the American army in France. However, their views were based more on self-centred rhetorical arguments than on historical knowledge of French colonial and racial realities. In their search to challenge the racial

system of American society, they used the experiences of African troops in France to expose the racial structures of American culture. However, their views were informed and shaped by their social and political realities within American society, rather than by a genuine interest in the French treatment of African people and colonial troops. They devoted particular attention to the recruitment of African soldiers by the French army to highlight the distinction between France and the United States on questions of racism and equality between races. By adopting this attitude, African American soldiers and activists back in the United States refrained from examining France's imperialistic and inherently contradictory historical relationship with people of African descent. They viewed the presence of African troops in Europe as additional proof of France's commitment to racial egalitarianism, overlooking the fact that the French coercively conscripted these soldiers to fight in a war they had no stakes in.

African American newspapers played a crucial role in perpetuating the myth of a colour-blind France. Several stories about French colonial servicemen appeared in African American newspapers, presenting France as a Western nation where black people played a significant role in defending "the motherland". African soldiers were used as a source of racial pride and also to criticise American racial society that prevented black Africans from having equal opportunities to contribute to the war effort: "Whenever and wherever black soldiers are placed, they fight with the same steadiness and intelligence as white soldiers", and France was the only Western nation "that appreciates this fact and makes the most of it." (*New York Age*, 1914, sep 3).

Published pictures of African soldiers fighting in Europe played a key role in the African American activists' campaign against racism and segregation. They served as visual proof of black people's effective role in defending the motherland side by side with other white troops. They also sparked global racial pride by emphasising the black troops' military prowess and courage. A caption accompanying a picture of colonial soldiers published in a black newspaper conveyed this sense of pride and manhood: "These Stalwart Men are Relied upon for their Courage and Valor." (*Chicago Defender*, 1916, April 22). Feelings of pride and valour are also reflected in another picture, which was similarly captioned: "These Brave Troops Have Meant Much to the French in Their Success Around Verdun." (*Chicago Defender*, 1916, June 3).

In addition to the racial pride they invoked, the pictures were living proof of black people's martial heroism, valour, and sacrifice, especially for those who couldn't read. The pictures refuted the racialised and civilisationist construction of the African peoples, emphasising their essential humanity. They demonstrate not only the combat capabilities of black people but also the human dimension of their experience by capturing them eating, relaxing, and socialising. They appeared not as primitive savages, as white racialised narratives of the war tried to depict them, but as people possessing fundamental humanity that transcended racial differences. A picture showing wounded African soldiers with a white soldier sunning on the balcony of a luxurious hotel in Paris had special connotations in the context of the American racial system that put African Americans on a lower ladder in comparison to white citizens (*Chicago Defender*, 1916, July 22). While black people were enjoying their lives in Paris like any white French citizens, without segregation or discrimination, African Americans were being abused, lynched, and segregated all over the United States. Other pictures published in the African American press also depict African soldiers operating complex

war machines. Through such images, African American activists were trying to refute racialised propaganda that claimed people of colour lacked the inherent mental capacity to operate modern war machinery.

However, despite the apparent pride in African troops, the pictures were framed within a specific ideological and political context. They served as a critique of the American racialised social and military structures by comparing them to the “egalitarian” and “colour-blind” France. What the pictures didn’t frame was also important. They were published in newspapers, accompanied by short captions that did not place them in their historical or geographical context. The pictures stood alone, removed from the colonial context in which African soldiers were conscripted and brought to Europe to fight under the French tricolour. In this way, they further reinforced the romantically distorted view of France’s relationship with its black populations from the colonies. The pictures served as a discursive strategy to underscore the racially marginalised conditions of African Americans and to promote the idea of France free from racial or cultural biases against black people.

While black American activists’ views of the war privileged domestic nation-centred political concerns, they also promoted a self-proclaimed cultural superiority toward French colonial troops from Africa. Their representation of these troops demonstrated a political, parochial, and naive understanding of the racial realities of French colonialism and unfamiliarity with the historical and cultural diversity of African people. They referred to African soldiers not as a separate subject but to emphasise their claim that they were more developed and civilised than those soldiers. As a black newspaper editorial argued, “if the French Senegalese are the terror of the enemy, the well-trained Southern Negro will make a worthwhile soldier. We believe it without qualification!” (*Richmond Planet*, 1917, June 9) Thus, if African soldiers were savage warriors by nature, African Americans were receptive to training and would make equally, if not more, effective soldiers than their African counterparts. African American newspapers positioned American soldiers as occupying a higher echelon than African soldiers on the ladder of modern Western civilisation, thus demonstrating African Americans’ fitness for full citizenship rights and equal treatment.

While celebrating France, a colour-blind country, African American activists fully adopted the French idea of the colonial civilising mission. Édouard Réquin, a French military representative in the United States, delivered a speech to a group of black press editors in an effort to garner their support for the French war effort. Réquin lauded France’s employment of African soldiers, particularly those from North Africa. He argues that, as “Mohammedans”, North African soldiers were a prime example of the colonial civilising mission’s effectiveness in overcoming Muslim colonial resistance. According to him, “If one considers that in North Africa the Mohammedan group has been essentially refractory to all foreign intervention, the voluntary participation of colored men in the defense of French soil consecrates definitely the motivating principles of our expansion.” (Williams, C. L, 2010, p158). On the other hand, the “Senegalese” soldiers, for Réquin, were still living in a state of savagery, utterly devoid of self-conscious agency and autonomous thought, and unable to handle complex weaponry and modern war tactics. Yet, they were “equally devoted to France, whom they serve most loyally, and to the flag which represents France,” and “just as we have delivered these black men from African barbarism, so we have given them

civilisation and justice; it is their duty in turn to defend among us that justice and that civilisation against Prussian barbarism.” (Williams, C. L, 2010, p158)

For Réquin, the savage qualities of African troops didn't apply to African Americans. African soldiers were “primitive men without civilisation—men who cannot be compared from this point of view with colored Americans,” (Williams, C. L, 2010, p158) he claimed. It was this part of Réquin's argument that most interested the African American press and activists. They used it to promote a socially constructed military worthiness, cultural hierarchy, and evolutionary superiority that elevated them from “the savage” troops from Africa. *New York Age*, an influential African American paper, featured Réquin's article on the front under the subheading “French Officer Says Colored Soldiers of France are Received Exactly the Same as White Soldiers—Foreign Colored Troops Cannot be Compared with Colored Americans who are Products of Civilization.”( *New York Age*, 1918, August 10) The subheading highlighted the two central points of Réquin's article for the reader. First, it positioned the supposed “egalitarian” and “colour-blind” policies of France in contrast to the American army system built on racial segregation and inferiorisation of black people. Second, it promoted a civilisation-based hierarchical stratification among people of African descent by portraying African Americans as holding superior mental, cultural, and historical characteristics in comparison to those from Africa. By this racialised logic, they legitimised their campaign for full social and political integration into contemporary Western democracy, particularly American democracy.

### **3. “The décalage” between African American and French colonial troops.**

While the ideological debate on black people's involvement in The Great War was heightening both in the United States and Europe, the encounter between African American and colonial African troops was also taking place on the Western Front in France. The encounter between the two was unavoidable, as the racialised nature of their duties as stevedores at the rear of the army or shock troops at the front brought them together and fostered a sense of racial affinity between them. However, despite their racial affinity, numerous linguistic, cultural, and civilisational barriers framed their daily interactions. Dressing in distinct military uniforms and foreign attire and speaking different languages represented a remarkable challenge for both. Their initial encounter was, therefore, characterised by mutual exoticisation and cultural misunderstanding.

The language barrier played a significant role in “the décalage”<sup>2</sup> between African American soldiers and French colonial troops. Neither African Americans could speak Arabic, Wolof, or other African languages, nor could colonial soldiers speak English. According to a report on the relationship between African American troops and the French, African American soldiers were surprised that the French “colored colonial soldiers” they encountered on the Western Front couldn't speak a word of English.<sup>3</sup> What was an “inconsequential item” for the report's writer was

---

<sup>2</sup> Brent Edwards uses the term “décalage” to describe the geographical and historical discrepancy that shapes “the liminal space” and the uneven diasporic relation between Africans and African Americans (Edwards, B. H. 2001. Pp:45-73).

<sup>3</sup> A post-war military report on the relation between African American troops and the French refers to “inconsequential items” such as “the astonishment of US colored troops at the inability of the French colored colonial to speak English.” (as Quoted in Williams, C. L. ,2010, p174).

crucial in shaping the encounter between African Americans and African troops, as they were unable to engage in productive conversations or exchange opinions and feelings.

Two stories narrated by American soldiers in France typically demonstrate how the lack of verbal communication between them influenced their perceptions of one another. The first was published in 1918 in the *Cleveland Advocate*. It narrates how an African American soldier, who the newspaper described as “a genuine negro from a southern cotton plantation”, thought that all “black men” he encountered in France were African American “negroes”. However, when the African American soldier met “a French Algerian” and asked him for a light, “the Algerian looked at [him] while he was repeating his request and then walked away.” The disappointed African American soldier complained to his fellow comrade, “Lordy, Lordy, man; doan it beat all how some of dese kin fight so long heah in dis country dat they clean fergit dere own languidge?” (*Cleveland Advocate*, 1918, September 28) The distressed African American soldier believed that the Algerian soldier was an American “negro” who forgot about his English language for the extended period he spent in France.

Another frustrating story happened to Private Julius Paul, an African American soldier, during his first encounter with a Senegalese soldier. The story was narrated by Karl Bardin, Paul’s white American officer. Paul was disappointed, as he could not converse with the Senegalese soldier, whom he thought “talk United States”. After they failed to communicate, Private Paul presumed the Senegalese soldier to be crazy and reported him to Officer Bardin. Bardin assured him that he wasn’t what he thought and was indeed one of his “real brothers from Africa. He is just the same as [him], but he only speaks French and his own African dialect.” (Bardin, Quoted in Williams, 2010, p. 175).

Such stories illustrate the isolation of African Americans and the absence of any communication with the world, let alone their contact with their ancestors from Africa. Before his encounter with the Senegalese soldier, Julius Paul had never encountered a black man who couldn’t talk “United States,” while the other soldier quoted in the first story presumed the Algerian soldier was an African American who had forgotten about English because of his extended stay in France. The fact that they didn’t speak a common language revealed a cultural and political divide between them. Their identities were firmly anchored in their distinct national and cultural realities. African Americans viewed themselves as Americans struggling for more civil rights under the Jim Crow laws within the space of the American nation. French colonial soldiers were Africans negotiating their realities with the French metropole within the framework that was imposed by colonialism and empire.

The stories, however, are written proofs that document the attempt of African Americans and Africans to build up a common ground as members of the same race and victims of similar military service conditions. Their efforts to approach one another and forge constructive relations demonstrated remarkable racial and diasporic consciousness. Linguistic and cultural barriers didn’t prevent the development of a positive attachment between them. Their skin colour and the nature of their racialised service as labourers and shock troops were behind this sense of convergence.

Gradually, the presence of African soldiers became less of a shock. African American veterans developed a strong admiration for their African counterparts.

In their struggle against Jim Crow laws within the American army that devalued their service, African American soldiers viewed French colonial soldiers from North and West Africa as a source of racial diasporic pride. Over time, the language barrier no longer posed a challenge for them as they learned French, and African soldiers also picked up some English words. A journalist accompanying the African American regiments wrote to the *New York Age*, observing how “Many of the men [African American soldiers] have become fluent French talkers, and I have heard animated conversations between Colored men and the Senegalese who chanced to be passing. Negro lads get along famously with both white and black Frenchmen.” (*New York Age*, 1918, June 8). The sight of each other became less of a shock, familiarity and interactions increased, and friendly sentiments began to develop between them. Horace Garvin, an African American soldier, remembers how he “came in contact with Algerians. They seemed to be good soldiers.” (as quoted in Williams, C. L., 2010, p175). The bandleader James Europe also expressed his respect for French colonial soldiers in a letter to the editor of the *New York Age*:

It is glorious to see the French regiments intermingled with black boys, and I wish to state here that of all the black French troops I have seen over here, I have never seen one without some sort of decoration, and I have met thousands (*New York Age*, 1918, p2).

The camaraderie between African Americans and Africans led to a form of political exchange that laid the foundation for a post-war common diasporic condition and the emergence of Pan-Africanism (Williams, C. L., 2010, p269). While African soldiers were brought to Europe as a result of enduring coloniality under the French empire, African American soldiers were also victims of the colonial situation, not because of a foreign imperial power but because of the racial segregation and exploitation imposed on them by the white American population and government, since they were coercively brought to “the New World” as slaves. As people of African descent, both of them shared a common marginalised space created by white Western hegemony. Recognising this context, they established the foundation for what may be described as the genesis of the modern African diaspora in Europe. This initial sense of diasporic attachment was expressed through various forms of concern and admiration for each other. For instance, a black American soldier expressed surprise when a black “Frenchman,” likely another soldier, enquired whether the American army planned to execute the remaining men found guilty in the famous Houston rebellion of 1917, in which African American soldiers retaliated against racial mistreatment and killed seventeen white Americans. The soldier described the French Africans he met as politically aware of what was happening to black people around the world: “They know everything, and for what they don’t know, we will inform them.”<sup>4</sup> The mobilisation for war fostered transnational networks of social, cultural, and political exchange, enabling African Americans to engage in diasporic conversations with French colonial troops, thereby establishing transatlantic solidarity among people of African descent.

---

<sup>4</sup> Unnamed soldier to W. E. B. Du Bois as cited in Williams, C. L., 2010, p. 176.

While these embryonic forms of political and cultural exchange between African soldiers and French colonial troops were made possible by the mutual respect and racial affinity that developed between them, they didn't overcome the disparities that separated them. These disparities were political and historical and not just linguistic. Their encounter was shaped by elements deeply ingrained in their historical and political backgrounds. African American soldiers failed to understand the colonial dimensions behind the participation of African troops in the war and their uneven relations with the French metropole. Horace Pippin, an African American artist and soldier in the Harlem Hellfighters Regiment, described the feeling of safety provided by Algerian troops stationed next to his regiment, saying that "everything was still. On our right flank, the Algerians were holding that part of the line. They were a good lot of fellows with us." (Pippin, ca. 1920-1943, p. 1) Meanwhile, their antipathy for the French caught his attention as he remarked that "they didn't care for the French much. If we were with one of them and a French man came by us, the Algerian would say Pas-Bon. Dar. French Por-Bon. he meant that the French were no good for him." (Pippin, ca. 1920-1943, pp. 29-30).

Nevertheless, Pippin never bothered himself to search for an answer to the question of why the Algerians didn't care for the French. Being an African American soldier coming to France for nationally bound reasons and goals kept him from understanding the tense colonial relations behind France's recruitment of troops from Africa. Violent colonial aggression and fervent resistance had marked the relationship between France and Africa since the early 19th century. Pippin lacked both the historical context and a fully diasporic consciousness necessary to grasp such intricacies. Reading African American narratives of the Great War reveals that they largely perpetuated the common Eurocentric stereotypical depictions of African soldiers as ruthless, savage warriors. Horace Pippin may have appreciated the Algerian soldiers he encountered, but his observations were primarily based on their brutal combat skills, primitive weapons, and callous disregard for their German opponents. Pippin remembered:

They were bad to their foe, for they would not give a foe a chance. I have seen them go over the top many times and they never have a prisoner, but their knife would have fresh blood on it when he came back. They carried a knife with the blade about 8 inches long, 2 inches at the butt of the blade and would [?] to a point. They would carry this knife in their belt all the time. But when they would go over the top, they put their knife into their mouth and no rifle at all with them. I have seen them do it. But when they come back do not look for a German, for they would not have any with them. That is the way they would handle the Germans (Pippin, ca. 1920-1943, p.30).

In a 1977 documentary about African American veterans of the Great War, Albert Veyrenc, who was with Horace Pippin in the same 369th Infantry Regiment, similarly described Moroccan soldiers:

The Moroccans were good, good, very good fighters and brave fighters except for one thing... they couldn't stand the shellfire and the loud explosion of the big guns. They figured it was something from the heavens but for fighting. They go over the top with their rifles slinging strung over their backs ... with knives in their hands, they were game, and they wouldn't take any prisoners. They wouldn't take nothing. Now, I can say this without fear of contradiction might be wrong in the amount, but something like 200 or 500 Francs, the French government paid the

Moroccans who brought in a prisoner alive. I would have brought in a thousand; I wouldn't get a quarter, but they didn't bring any prisoners. They killed them. They cut their ears off and strung them on a string, tied them around their waist. That was it for them for the Moroccans; they shave without lather. What else can I say about a Moroccan? and there was no racial pressure; they were all colors and all shades. They were black with kinky hair. They were white with blond hair, but they were all Moroccans.<sup>5</sup>

Pippin and Veyrenc's narratives illustrate feelings of racial pride and diasporic affinity for people of African descent by celebrating the bravery, manliness, and capacity of North and West African troops to kill and capture Germans without repercussions. On the other side, they replicate and perpetuate the common stereotypes found in white American and other Eurocentric narratives about African soldiers in the Great War. The perceptions of African soldiers taking no prisoners and performing acts of mutilation served as proof of the continued lack of civilisation among African people and, subsequently, supported African Americans' presumption of an evolutionary superiority toward other black people from around the world. Although military service, with its martial heroism and sacrifice, facilitated a deeper mutual understanding among people of African descent in the diaspora, the rift was hierarchical and shaped by broader civilisationist ideologies that elevated African Americans to a higher position in political and cultural development than other people from Africa.

This sense of civilisationist hierarchy was also greatly influenced by the pervasive racist belief that Africans were incapable of perceiving the intricacies of modern warfare and operating sophisticated weapons, thereby situating them outside the purview of the Western definition of modernity. This common apprehension was behind the shock of African American soldiers at the sight of African soldiers operating giant artillery machines on the Western Front:

Some of the objects that exacted their [African American troops] particular attention were huge guns mounted on trucks and were propelled by large locomotives. They were manned by French and African troops, who took delight in explaining some of the important features to these interested and curious spectators (Mason & Furr, 1920, p. 113).

The scene of African soldiers explaining to European spectators how to operate sophisticated war machines quite astonished African American onlookers, who found great symbolism in it. While their participation in the war was, in one of its aspects, an escape from and a struggle against the American racial order that denied them fundamental civil rights because of their colour, in France, black people from the French empire had the same rights as white French citizens. The African soldiers referred to in the passage were not only demonstrating their ability to operate complex weaponry alongside French soldiers but also teaching the white "interested and curious spectators" about the machines and how to operate them. This was a scene that African Americans were confident would never occur in their segregated society back home.

The African soldiers' capacity to operate complex machines didn't prevent the authors of the passage from situating them in a lower echelon of civilisation in comparison to African American soldiers. After praising them in the above passage, they later criticised them for being savage,

---

<sup>5</sup> Albert Veyrenc in *Men of Bronze*, Documentary, researched, produced, and directed by William Miles, 1977.

impatient, and “unsurpassed by any of the Allies” in valour (Mason & Furr, 1920, p. 114). The writers made an appalling comparison between African and African American troops to show that the latter were more organised and civilised. The “furious” African troops attacking the German lines in a “fiendish glee”, careless about the human loss in the ranks:

Never was there a more appalling sight. The furious Africans plunged onward waving their arms and huge knives with fiendish glee, charging German machine-gun nests with absolute disregard of death and injury. Although their ranks were seriously depleted by the unerring machine-gun fire of the Huns, they drove on taking one position after another, leaving nothing but the wounded and dead, and utter destruction in their wake (Mason & Furr, 1920, p. 118).

On the other hand, the African American troops used “scientific” war methods that made their attack more effective and with fewer casualties in their ranks:

The American blacks advanced in a more scientific manner, using the wave formation, which made it appear that there were double the number of men. They used shell-holes and deserted and ruined trenches as a cover from the fierce and well-directed machine-gun fire of the Huns. They poured machine-gun fire and grenades into the Hun ranks, which were fast becoming thinner and more demoralised. Groans of agony, curses, prayers, and all manner of heartrending cries rose up from the lips of the wounded and dying men, but this served as a stimulus (Mason & Furr, 1920, p. 118).

The two passages exemplify the political endeavours of African American activists, who present the exploits and accomplishments of African American troops in the war as evidence of their entitlement to equal citizenship and rights with the rest of the white American population. They also revealed an internalised sense of cultural and evolutionary superiority, a widespread perception of how many African American soldiers saw their African counterparts, and a readiness to emphasise diasporic differences in order to advance full African American integration into the American nation.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This paper has explored perceptions of black Americans toward French colonial troops by examining a broad range of black American writings about the Great War, including newspaper reports, narratives, and notebooks of Black American veterans who encountered French colonial troops in France during the war. The paper has also exposed the myth of “a colour-blind France,” which African Americans developed by comparing their treatment by the French during the war to their treatment back in the racialised, segregated society in the United States. The social and racial context back in the United States influenced their reactions to and interactions with other “coloured” troops from West and North Africa, whom the French perceived as less civilised and ranked lower in the hierarchy of civilisation. The encounter between African American soldiers and African colonial soldiers exemplified the historical, cultural, and experiential differences that defined the diaspora of people of African descent in Europe in the early 20th century. Their failure to form a common bond, despite their racial affiliation and the similarly racialised nature of their military service in Europe, resulted in a cultural, linguistic, and intellectual “*décalage*” between African Americans and other African populations in the diaspora that persists to this day.

## References

- **African troops in the war. (1914, 3 septembre).** New York Age.
- **Barbeau, A. E., Henri, F. (1974).** *The Unknown Soldiers: Black American Troops in World War I.* États-Unis: Temple University Press.
- **Cleveland Advocate. (1918).** “Algerian Didn’t Gather Him Closely.” , 28 Sept. 1918.
- **Edwards, B. H. (2001).** The uses of diaspora. *Social Text*, 19(1), 45-73.
- **Europe writes from Europe. (1918, 28 July).** New York Age, p. 2.
- **French Goumiers. (1916, 3 juin).** Chicago Defender.
- **French reinforcements. (1916, 22 avril).** Chicago Defender.
- **Learning French. (1918, 8 juin).** New York Age.
- **Mason, M., & Furr, A. (1920).** *The American Negro soldier with the Red Hand.* Boston, MA: Cornhill Co.
- **Miles, W. (Director). (1977).** *Men of Bronze* [ documentary]. United States: Killiam Shows Archive.
- **Nelson, R. L. (2010).** Soldier newspapers: A useful source in the social and cultural history of the First World War and beyond. *War in History*, 17(2), 167-191.
- **Pippin, H. (ca. 1920-1943).** *Horace Pippin notebooks and letters.* Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
- **Richmond Planet.(1917).** “Colored Men and Registration.” , 9 June 1917.
- **Slotkin, R. (2005).** *Lost battalions: The Great War and the crisis of American nationality.* New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company.
- **Tells of the employment of Negro troops by French. (1918, 10 août).** *New York Age.*
- **Williams, C. L. (2010).** *Torchbearers of democracy: African American soldiers in the World War I era.* Univ of North Carolina Press.
- **Wounded French troops. (1916, 22 juillet).** *Chicago Defender.*