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Our Friends Beneath the Sands

Written by Martin Windrow

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OUR FRIENDS BENEATH THE SANDS

The Foreign Legion in France's Colonial Conquests 1870–1935

MARTIN WINDROW

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1. The Tools of Empire

With a whole Metropolitan regiment I could not venture two hours' outside the town – with a single company of the Legion I could make a tour of Tonkin.

General Francois Oscar de Négrier[1]

THE FRANCO-PRUSSIAN WAR that culminated in the destruction of the Paris Commune was the first in which regiments raised specifically for service outside France had been employed in the defence of 'the Hexagon' itself. In comparison with the use there of three regiments of Algerian '*turcos*', the illegal shipping of half the Legion to France had attracted little comment, but the distinction between Metropolitan troops and those transferred from North Africa was not solely racial. French colonial troops – in the generic, rather than the specific administrative use of that term – were tacitly understood to have a different character from the Metropolitan Army, and to have entered a different implicit covenant with the state. These were not French farmboys, conscripted into uniform to spend seven years in some other part of France before re-entering the life of their family and village. Colonial troops enlisted voluntarily, breaking not only their personal bonds but also many of their ties with the national family, to soldier far away in the service of a more robust military doctrine. In crude terms, they were a tool designed for dirtier work in harsher fields, and a glance at that work should perhaps precede a summary of their history and organization.

THE DEFINING TASK of such troops was to kill those members of native populations who resisted the advance of the Europeans. If native fighting men could not be brought to battle and defeated immediately, then subjection was achieved by running off their flocks and destroying their villages,

orchards, crops and stored food, thereby inflicting starvation on their families until their leaders submitted. The human reality behind the phrase 'destroying their villages' varied widely in practice. In North Africa a 'village' might be anything from a *douar* – a scatter of tents, overrun with a minimum of drama and bloodshed after a couple of volleys, to a *ksar* – something resembling a medieval castle, that had to be shelled and stormed, house by house, at the point of the bayonet.

The French Army in the late nineteenth century (though not its native auxiliaries) was a disciplined force; its officers allowed petty looting for the cooking-pot, but well understood the dangers of unleashing their men to sack without control. But if some soldiers raised in today's liberal democracies can occasionally behave barbarously during wars fought among populations that they perceive as wholly alien, then we can hardly be shocked that their great-grandfathers did the same. There were, of course, cultural differences between various national armies, and compassionate exceptions among Christian believers, but in those days any sense of global shared humanity was shallowly rooted. The colonial soldiers of those times and places lived in a past that is doubly a foreign country to us, and they did things differently there.

It is easy to condemn such brutalities automatically, but we should beware of self-righteous cant; these soldiers were the organic products of a world that most of us would find terrifying. Statistically, it is safe to assume that only a tiny minority of the readers of this book have ever known lives of real Third World hardship, hunger, superstition, and arbitrary violence without appeal. For the nineteenth-century European underclasses such experiences might be the norm, and illiteracy denied most of them any understanding of a better world. When men born into such conditions were offered regular meals, a comprehensible system of reward and punishment, clearly defined tasks and a sense of collective self-esteem, they could be shaped into a weapon, but it would remain a rather indiscriminate one. It is dauntingly difficult for us to imagine ourselves into the minds of unreflective men – both the illiterate and the educated – who lived on the far side of the absolute historical watershed of the First World War. Before that uniquely traumatic experience most people simply did not question the need for wars nor the moral status of those who fought them, and the things that might sometimes happen on campaign were no business of civilians; after all, the adversaries that they were fighting never took prisoners themselves, except with the very worst of intentions.

French colonial forces shared with all other such armies not only the values of their times, but also the lack of the external check that would be introduced – however haphazardly, and often unjustly – by the late twentieth-century mass media. In the absence of the babbling international conversation that deafens our own age, events had witnesses and some had chroniclers, but they did not have a world-wide reactive audience. After a distasteful episode the occasional letter from an indignant officer might reach his friends, but seldom any wider echo-chamber; in a deferential age there was a strong ethic, sincerely held by decent men, of discretion owed to the respected institutions of army and state. There were exceptions – in France, notably, when such a letter revealed the deranged butchery of two Naval Troops officers named Voulet and Chanoine in West Africa in 1899; but usually, the sound of brutalities committed far off in the wilderness died away into silence after the passage of a few miles and a few days – if they were even considered to be brutalities, in that environment.[2] In justice, it must be said that by the turn of the century crimes such as those of Voulet and Chanoine were exceptional, particularly north of the Sahara. The more intelligent commanders insisted that gratuitous brutality was both contemptible and counter-productive, and generally the troops' attitude to civilians was one of callous indifference rather than active cruelty, leavened with episodes of sentimental kindness to children and their mothers. Ill-treatment is not an absolute: there are degrees, and we can assume that these differences were significant to the native populations.

Once peace had been established in new colonies the French forces planted small dispersed garrisons to maintain local security. As the initial violence receded in the memory (for the native peoples it had been, after all, only one incident in a history of violence stretching back to time out of mind), so workaday contacts brought at least a degree of mutual toleration. There was little French intrusion into daily life, and most inland communities never even saw a white man. After a while, some benefits of the new stability might become apparent: a check upon tribal warfare, safer travel and increased internal trade, and – if they were lucky – some material improvements to their way of life.

However, when a native people submitted to white administration there was always a vaguely defined frontier with the territory of those still unsubdued – the tribes of either a masterless hinterland or a neighbouring native state. Rebels could find safe refuge over these borders, and the free tribes also tended to raid the peaceful and thus more productive subdued tribes,

who looked for protection to the colonial garrisons. Field columns would be assembled from among these troops, to march out once again; and so the process would be repeated, as European flags crawled steadily across the maps towards one another. The regiments that carried them showed a diversity of character that sometimes went beyond simple national differences.

UNLIKE GREAT BRITAIN – whose all-volunteer battalions might be posted anywhere from Aldershot to Canada or to Burma – France had raised particular units specifically for service overseas. Initially, however, in the 1880s–90s, the expeditionary forces for colonial conquests were a mixture of troops from three distinct organizations.

The first was the Metropolitan Army, '*le biff*' – the young conscripts fulfilling their years of obligatory military service. The second were the Naval Troops; these were volunteers before the mid-1870s, a mixture of volunteers and conscripts from then until 1893, and thereafter solely volunteers once again. The third was l'Armée d'Afrique (from 1873 designated the 19th Army Corps), raised mostly in Algeria from both Europeans and Arabs. The Africa Army's infantry was composed of white Zouave and (penal) Africa Light Infantry conscripts; Foreign Legion volunteers; and native volunteer Algerian Skirmishers ('*turcos*'). The cavalry were the Chasseurs d'Afrique (Africa Light Horse), who were white conscripts leavened with some volunteers both white and native, and the Arab volunteer Spahis.

The Naval Troops (Troupes de la Marine) traced their history back to a company raised for overseas service in 1621. Their development had been complex, but by the late nineteenth century their mission was defined as protecting naval bases both in France and the colonies, while also providing temporary task-organized units *(régiments de marche)* for global operations, specifically in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and the distant oceans. After the Franco-Prussian War four large regiments were based at Cherbourg, Brest, Rochefort and Toulon, with an unusual, baggy structure. A Régiment d'Infanterie de Marine might administer as many as 45 companies (instead of the conventional 12 of a Metropolitan Régiment de Ligne), of which 18 were usually serving overseas at any one time. In the early 1870s the Naval Infantry *('marsouins')* totalled about 20,000 men and the Naval Artillery *('bigors')* another 3,300. The first experiments in forming *ad hoc* West African auxiliary companies into regular battalions had also added some

thousands of Senegalese Skirmishers, led and administered by Naval Infantry cadres.[3]

This corps was administratively a historical leftover; the defence of home naval bases was now simply an aspect of overall national defence, and since 1856 the traditional tasks of embarked soldiers had been taken over by specially trained sailors *(fusiliers-marins)*. Since the admirals wanted to spend their budgets on the Fleet, they neglected their land units badly, while reflexively snarling at the many recommendations that these simply be turned over to the War Ministry. Trapped by this inertia, officers of the Naval Infantry endured inferior career prospects and prestige to those in both the Fleet and the Army, until the Tonkin (North Vietnam) campaigns of 1883–5 raised the service's profile and began to attract high-flyers.

The death rate from disease was high among the Naval Troops, but higher still in the Metropolitan regiments sometimes deployed to colonial theatres. Shipping the conscripted sons of French voters to far-off, fever-ridden hellholes was eventually admitted to be politically unsustainable, militarily ineffective, and a distraction from their proper task – that of training for revenge against Germany for the disasters of 1870–71. The folly of sending Metropolitan units on such expeditions became a matter of scandal when the Madagascar campaign of 1895 cost the mixed Army/Navy/African expeditionary force some 5,000 deaths from tropical disease (nearly one-third of its strength), the highest price being paid by the Metropolitan troops.

In 1900 the Army finally prised the Naval Troops – equivalent in peace-time to a whole army corps – from the grip of the admirals. An Act of 7 July 1900 transferred them to a separate 8th Directorate of the War Ministry under the title of Colonial Troops, with their own general staff and their own career structure; they also kept their anchor badge and all-blue uniforms for reasons of morale.[4] Significantly, however, the conscription law of 30 July 1893 – which had seen their numbers drop by some 10,000 between 1897 and 1900 – remained in force. The Colonial Troops received no annual quota of conscripts, and had to fill their ranks entirely by voluntary enlistment; substantial bounties were offered, with pensions and reserved civilian employment after discharge. Despite its title, however, *la Coloniale* was not given back any monopoly of overseas operations.

Since the early 1880s the predominance of the Naval Troops in every overseas theatre beyond North Africa had fanned inter-service rivalries, with consequent jockeying for political influence and funding. The Army, too,

needed a solid core of stoic white infantry who could be sent anywhere in the world as an armature for the Arab regiments that provided most of the Army bayonets for colonial campaigns. Over the period 1883–1914, this tough spine was increasingly provided by the mercenaries of the Foreign Legion, whose numbers were steadily multiplied during those years from four to twelve battalions. One consequence would be an increasing sense of rivalry – robustly expressed during chance encounters in alleyways and brothels – between the French soldiers who wore the blue trousers and anchor badge of *In Coloniale*, and the mercenaries sporting the red trousers and seven-flamed grenade of *la Légion*.

EVEN DURING THE THIRTY YEARS of vigorous colonial expansion before 1914 there was a general public vagueness about the Légion Étrangère, which had almost never been seen on French soil: many people had heard of it, but few felt any real curiosity. From the upper slopes of the Metropolitan military establishment the Legion was regarded as a functional but mildly embarrassing afterthought, little better than a labour corps. It was confused by civilians and even by some soldiers with the '*joyeux*' of the Africa Light Infantry – Bataillons d'Infanterie Légère d'Afrique (BILA or 'Bats d'Af') – the distinctly grim units in which convicted civil criminals had to fulfil their military service obligation, and to which military offenders were sometimes transferred.[5] The French Army's leadership under the early Third Republic was an uneasy amalgam of Bourbon monarchists (both Legitimists and Orléanists), Bonapartists and Republicans, but in an officer corps sharply conscious of the wide divisions within its own ranks, at least the more educated and monied could unite in regarding the Legion as an impossibly unfashionable bunch of dim roughnecks. Intellectuals from the École Polytechnique and exquisites of the cavalry assumed that it was led by black sheep or the socially untouchable, who were condemned to serve in lethally unhealthy postings far from the career-enhancing gossip and networking of officers' club and city salon. Neither in France nor abroad, however, was the Legion's image as a military underclass specifically due to the fact that it enlisted foreign soldiers.

The word 'mercenary' has been used and understood in different ways since the early 1960s, when the collapse of the former Belgian Congo first brought it into the headlines. In fact, there has always been a clear distinction between the hired freelance seeking high short-term rewards, and the foreign-born professional soldier accepting unremarkable wages for long-

term service. It takes a rather wilful ignorance to refuse to recognize the essential difference between, say, the *affreux* of mid-twentieth-century Africa and the Royal Gurkha Rifles, though both could loosely be described as mercenaries. Given the possibility of confusion, however, the historical resonance of the term demands some examination.

WRITERS FORAGING for a ringing epigraph have sometimes chanced upon A. E. Housman's poem *Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries*, but those splendidly stoic lines have nothing whatever to do with the Foreign Legion. Housman wrote it in September 1917, on the third anniversary of the First Battle of Ypres, in order to honour the regular soldiers of the old 1914 British Expeditionary Force who had fallen in their tens of thousands while resisting the German invasion of Flanders. To define long-service professional soldiers of our own national army as 'mercenaries' is not a usage many of us would recognize today – when it would embrace, among others, the whole armed forces of the English-speaking world – but in Housman's day the term did not carry today's baggage of disdain. It simply described soldiers who enlisted voluntarily for pay rather than being conscripted by compulsion; in the nineteenth century, and still when Housman wrote his praise-song over the graves of the BEF, the word was simply a technical description, which could apply equally to home-born and foreign volunteers. In the past, European powers had routinely hired foreign troops in formed regiments; equally, many officers were permitted, even encouraged, by their governments to rent out their skills to other friendly rulers.

The unthinking presumption that a nation's army should, in honour, consist only of men born in that country is of recent origin. The very concept of a national standing army dates only from the seventeenth century, and its birth certainly did not make the medieval practice of employing foreign soldiers obsolete. For instance, a quarter in modern Gdansk is still known as 'Old Scotland', and it is estimated that in 1600 no fewer than 37,000 Scots were living in Poland to provide a pool for mercenary recruitment. The Thirty Years War (1618–48) saw the beginnings of permanent national forces, and during the 1620s King Gustavus Adolphus was conscripting about 2 per cent of Sweden's male population for regional regiments each year; but at the same time he was also employing very large numbers of Germans and more than 30,000 Scottish, English and Irish soldiers.[6] Long-term employment of whole foreign brigades (notably, Swiss and Irish) was a permanent feature of several eighteenth-century European standing armies. While

Britain's naval strength allowed it to avoid military conscription, its small volunteer army was supplemented by many foreign mercenary units led by a mixture of skilled professionals and political emigrés.

During the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars between 1793 and 1815, Britain's field armies included many battalions of Germans other than King George's Hanoverian countrymen, and also of Frenchmen, Dutchmen, Belgians, Swiss, Italians, Sicilians, Corsicans, Maltese, Greeks, Albanians and Croats – to say nothing of its non-European garrisons in the West Indies, South Africa, Asia and the East Indies.[7] Neither was this trade all in one direction, for the flow reversed in parallel with political developments. The aftermath of Waterloo threw many British ex-soldiers into penury, and some 5,500 of them sailed off to fight for Simon Bolivar in the South American wars of independence, led by officers many of whom had also served under Wellington.[8] French and Italian officers, in their turn, travelled as far afield as the Punjab to rent out the skills they had learned under Bonaparte.

WHEN LOUIS-PHILIPPE, THE LAST KING OF FRANCE, raised the Légion Étrangère on 9 March 1831 specifically for service in Algeria (see Chapter 2), there was no disgrace in regular mercenary soldiering. A foreign regiment on the payroll was simply another state asset – indeed, in 1835 Louis-Philippe passed the original formation over as a gift to the Queen Regent of Spain during the Carlist civil war (though he had to re-raise it almost at once). By 1870 the Foreign Legion may not have been fashionable, but militarily it was perfectly respectable. This respect had not been earned by its hard labour and savage little battles in Algeria – in which the French public showed little interest – but during 'proper' wars: the foreign expeditions mounted by Napoleon III in the 1850s–60s.

The last surviving son of the great Corsican adventurer's brother Louis had grown up in exile, but after the Orléanist monarchy fell to the 1848 Revolution this tireless conspirator had managed to get himself elected president of the Second Republic, France's first experiment in democracy. The 'prince-president' proved an untrustworthy guardian for this political infant: in December 1851 a slick military coup raised him to absolute power, massively endorsed by a popular plebiscite and consolidated by means of purges and police spies. A year later he was proclaimed Emperor of the French, taking the regnal name Napoleon III in deference to his dead cousin, '*l'Aiglon*'. The emperor inherited the conditions for a decade of impressive industrial and economic growth that expanded a newly wealthy, and thus

broadly contented bourgeoisie. Since his Bonaparte blood was his only real claim to power, and resurrecting French prestige his only real policy, he launched a number of military expeditions during his first decade on the throne, and his generals from Algeria won him some of the laurels with which he hoped to distract Frenchmen from his domestic police state.

When a French army fought alongside the British in the Crimea in 1854–5, four battalions of the Legion spent freezing months in the trenches before Sebastopol. In May 1855 their Colonel Viénot was killed in a night attack on the city's Malakoff bastion, and in September a hand-picked company of légionnaires carried scaling ladders for the final successful assault; however, despite its thousand dead in the Crimea, the Legion was still virtually unknown outside l'Armée d'Afrique itself. In 1859 Napoleon decided to meddle in northern Italy's war of independence from Austria, and the Legion distinguished itself at Magenta in June. Another colonel, de Chabrière, fell at the head of his men, and as the légionnaires fought their way into the town their corps commander, General Patrice MacMahon (himself descended from an emigré mercenary) was said to have remarked 'The Legion's there – this job's in the bag!'. Before the Crimea the Legion's ability to face modern armies in battle had been questioned, but now the mercenaries were given a place of honour in the victory parade through Milan. The prohibition on their ever serving on French soil that had been decreed at their raising in 1831 was briefly relaxed, and Parisians were mildly intrigued by their participation in the triumphal march through the capital on 14 August 1859. Within a few years, however, the Imperial gambler's luck ran out, and the légionnaires found themselves among the chips thrown down for his losing bet.

'L'AVENTURE MEXICAINE' began as an international attempt to recover debts owed by the government of President Benito Juárez of Mexico. With the United States safely embroiled in its own Civil War, in December 1861 Spanish, French and British troops landed at Veracruz on the east coast to seize the customs house. The Spanish and British sensibly withdrew in April 1862; but Napoleon (and his forceful Spanish empress, Eugénie) allowed himself to be convinced that a Catholic client state could be created for France in the Americas. Mexican conservatives, incensed by the threat to their privileges posed by the Zapotec Indian reformer Juárez, assured French envoys that the people would rise up in support of an intervention. Apparently believing them, Napoleon used French bayonets to install the

unemployed Austrian Archduke Maximilian as a vassal Emperor of Mexico, at the head of the reactionary party in this civil war.

The anticipated easy victory did not materialize, and by April 1863 the French army was tied down by the difficult siege of Puebla, 150 miles inland and the key to any advance on Mexico City. Colonel Jeanningros' Foreign Regiment were not in the trenches but on the lines of communication, dispersed through the pestilential 'hot lands' below the escarpment to guard 75 miles of the road up from Veracruz against frequent attacks. Although they had only been in sub-tropical Mexico for a month they had already paid a heavy toll to the 'black vomit' and malaria. On 29 April, when the 3rd Company of the 1st Battalion were ordered to march back down the track to meet and escort an important convoy carrying up stores and pay for the siege army they numbered only 62 NCOs and men and one officer, Sub-lieutenant Vilain. Two officers of the regimental staff volunteered for the mission: the standard-bearer, Sub-lieutenant Maudet (like Vilain, an ex-NCO), and the adjutant-major Captain Jean Danjou. A veteran of Sebastopol, Magenta and Solferino, Danjou was recognizable to all by his articulated wooden left hand, carved for him in Algeria in May 1853 after a signal gun had blown up in his fingers. In the pre-dawn darkness of 30 April 1863, he led the company out of Chiquihuite and down the track; the cliché is that they 'marched into legend', but it was a legend that took many years to spread very far.

This is not the place for yet another detailed account of what became – long afterwards – the Legion's holy day. The defence of the stableyard of La Trinidad farm at Camaron (immortalized by a misspelt report as 'Camerone') has been pored over by historians with the same reverent pedantry accorded to the defence of Rorke's Drift.[9] In brief, about 45 légionnaires who survived a first attack in the open held the walls against nearly 2,000 Mexicans throughout a furnace-hot day, with virtually no water. Before he was killed, Danjou made them swear not to surrender; they fell fighting, one by one, rejecting two more calls to lay down their arms and save their lives. Late afternoon found only five left on their feet: Sub-lieutenant Clément Maudet, Corporal Philippe Maine, and légionnaires Victor Catteau, Gottfried Wenzel and Laurent Constantin. They decided to die fighting; firing their last shots at point-blank range, the five charged the enemy with the bayonet. Catteau tried to protect his officer and died with 19 bullet wounds, despite which Maudet fell mortally wounded; but the Mexican Colonel Cambas prevented his men from killing the other three. In accordance with Cambas' promise

to Corporal Maine, the provincial governor Colonel Don Francisco de Paula Milán had the French wounded taken from the field and treated as well as circumstances allowed; of the légionnaires taken alive, 20, or possibly 22, would survive captivity. The convoy, warned of the ambush, had halted, and reached Chiquihuite in safety on 4 May; and on 19 May, Puebla finally fell to General Forey's siege army.

When Colonel Jeanningros' column approached Camerone on 1 May they rescued from his hiding-place in the cactus Drummer Casimir Laï, wounded nine times. In a ditch behind the farmhouse they found the stripped corpses of 23 dead, but were forced to leave them where they lay until they were able to return two days later. When they finally buried what the vultures and coyotes had left of Jean Danjou, his wooden hand was nowhere to be seen. In 1865 Colonel Thun of the allied Austrian Legion in Mexico wrote to Jeanningros that one of his officers had found it some 75 miles away, in the possession of a French-born rancher named L'Anglais (but that this patriot wanted 50 piastres for it). The recovery of this 'precious souvenir' attracted the attention of the French commander-in-chief in Mexico, Marshal Bazaine, but only because he himself was a former Legion sergeant who had fought in Algeria.

When the Legion were shipped home to Algeria in February 1867 the wooden hand went with them in the baggage of Colonel Guilhem. In time it would become the Legion's most sacred relic; but the great annual ceremony of which it forms the centrepiece today was choreographed only in 1931, and the anniversary does not seem to have been specifically celebrated even at unit level before 30 April 1906 (when a historically minded lieutenant in a tiny post in North Vietnam paraded his platoon and told them the story). The 3rd Company's stubborn defiance, unto death, was admired in the expeditionary army, and the emperor himself instructed that 'Camerone' should be embroidered as a battle honour on the regimental flag. He also ordered that the names of the company's three officers be inscribed in gold on the walls of the Hôtel des Invalides, the shrine to French Army tradition in Paris, but the fact that this instruction was not obeyed until eighty-six years later suggests that the Legion still did not carry much weight with the military establishment.

After Camerone the Mexican civil war dragged on for four more years, and French troops increasingly became involved in self-defeating counter-insurgency. In 1865, Union victory in the American Civil War brought General Phil Sheridan down to the Rio Grande with a corps of 50,000 men

to make threatening noises. The 'Mexican adventure' ended in death by firing squad for Maximilien and in humiliation for Napoleon, and thereafter most Frenchmen were inclined to forget about it as quickly as possible. Their focus of attention now lay to the east, where Prussia's astonishing defeat of Austria–Hungary at Sadowa in July 1866 had forced the other European nations to adjust themselves to a drastically revised balance of power.

In October 1866, while the French expeditionary force was retreating towards Veracruz for withdrawal, it was announced that the Legion would be left behind in Mexico to continue serving Maximilien, just as it had been gifted to Queen Isabella of Spain thirty years before; if the order had not been countermanded on 16 December almost nobody today would ever have heard of the French Foreign Legion. The regiment sailed for Algeria in February 1867, leaving behind nearly 2,000 dead, probably 80 per cent of whom had died of disease.[10]

EIGHT YEARS AFTER CAMERONE, as we have seen, a few hundred men of the old Foreign Legion would visit the French capital for a second time, in a less celebratory mood than in 1859. At the earliest opportunity they were shipped back to Algeria, where – as in Metropolitan France – the fall of the Second Empire had unleashed both political turmoil and violent rebellion.