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Eric T. Jennings, *Free French Africa in World War II: The African Resistance*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. xvi + 300 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, and index. \$28.99 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-1076-9697-6.

Review by Kim Munholland, University of Minnesota Twin Cities.

With the French defeat of 1940, a little known, recently promoted general in London broadcast his intention not to surrender but to fight on. We know that few French heard General de Gaulle's speech. Anyway, what did he have to work with? There were French troops who had been evacuated from the beaches of Dunkirk with British soldiers, wandering the streets trying to make up their minds about staying in England or returning to France where an armistice with the German Army had halted the fighting. But de Gaulle was no more than Churchill's guest operating from foreign soil with only a microphone as a weapon.

For the next six weeks he was, as his biographer, Jean Lacouture, labelled him, "*Charles-sans-terre*." Only at the end of July did news trickle in that a small island, the Anglo-French condominium of the New Hebrides, had rallied to the Free French cause.^[1] But the New Hebrides was inconveniently located 18,000 kilometers from London. Closer to home, the British Mediterranean squadron had recently attacked and sunk a French battleship and damaged other French naval ships anchored in the port of Mers-el-Kébir in Algeria, leaving behind 1,297 dead French sailors and an additional 350 wounded. De Gaulle needed some French support to establish legitimacy and credibility on his own. He had no option other than to hope the French empire would rally to the Free French movement. It was truly a movement, constructed from matchsticks. René Cassin titled his memoir, *Les hommes partis de rien: le réveil de la France abattue, 1940-41*.^[2] Jennings' study takes us in search of how this awakening of French and African men and women occurred in French Equatorial Africa (FEA) and the colonial mandate of Cameroon, beginning with the three glorious days of the rally on 26, 27, and 28 August 1940 to the Allied landings and liberation of North and French West Africa, from November 1942 to May 1943, and the eventual participation in the liberation of metropolitan France. Throughout and in conclusion, Jennings explores the legacies and memories that this drama left not only for the French, but particularly for the African men and women who gave their lives and labor for the recovery and restoration of a Free France.

The arrival of "a ragtag team of adventurers sent from London" (p. 19), at the beginning of August 1940 touched off three glorious days of rallying that, with support from nearby British colonies, produced a regime change, splitting Free French Africa from Vichy-controlled French West Africa. FEA and Cameroon henceforth constituted "French Lands" that, however impoverished, gave de Gaulle both legitimacy and a territorial base with a population of fourteen million French citizens and subjects (8,881 Europeans and 6,124,391 Africans) in 1941.

A more complicated task was to give a governing structure to this territorial base, beginning with the designation of Brazzaville as the capital of a sovereign Free French Africa. In the months following the

rally, Free French Africa began to act like a sovereign state by issuing a currency, negotiating trade agreements with neighboring colonial territories, issuing laws and regulations, and recruiting an army. Yet Free French Africa had to deal with a series of practical problems ranging from propagandizing the image of de Gaulle among native populations, dealing with internal rivalries, jealousies, and ambitions within the French administration and among French business interests to recruiting labor among Africans who were often subject to the same harsh exploitation, particularly in mines or on rubber plantations, as was the practice before the war. Sources of discord ranged from politics to matters of race. These quarrels, conflicts, and dissensions produced what Jennings has labeled “dysfunction in Gaullist Africa” as the title for the third chapter of the book, a condition that astonished Allied visitors to FEA and Cameroon. Although de Gaulle minimized these differences, he realized that, at some point, the Free French would have to consider how to reform the way in which France managed its empire, laying the foundation for the Brazzaville conference in 1944. Despite these diverse interests and agendas Free French Africa managed to pull together in the interests of the military effort that resulted in a triumphal offensive from South to North, an impressive achievement that reinforced the credibility of Free French Africa as a contributor to the war effort against the Axis powers.

The Free French military build-up began shortly after the rally and in the aftermath of a divisive conflict between Vichy and Free French forces in Gabon. De Gaulle wished to demonstrate the ability of the Free French to take the battle to the enemy. The first blow came when forces under the leadership of Colonel Philippe Leclerc crossed the frontier into Libya, headed for the Italian outpost at Kufra. A majority of troops under his command were African, recruited and trained in the build-up before the attack. In addition to soldiers, Africans provided drivers to supply troops across the desolate landscape. Africans were also pressed into work on the roads, which ensured the mobility of French African units over the sands and rocky terrain of Saharan Africa. Jennings argues that this African contribution to the military success of Free French Africa has been undervalued, as a result of Leclerc’s reservations about the fighting abilities of those African troops he had trained. Nevertheless, the victories at Koufra, the Fezzan, and Bir Hakeim, those spectacular military victories that marked the sweep from south to north across the Sahara and in which African troops played a decisive role, enabled de Gaulle to henceforth refer to the Free French as the Fighting French. Although there were still equipment shortages to overcome and more soldiers to train, the military success in Africa gave a boost to morale and Free French legitimacy.

In Free French Africa, the recruitment and training of soldiers continued, often punctuated by fights among the African troops who were from different regions due to regional and linguistic differences, as well as sheer boredom. On some occasions, conflicts threatened to become race riots as well. In order to exploit the material resources of FEA and Cameroon, notably rubber needed to meet the needs of Allied armies and gold to provide economic independence to Free French Africa, Africans were forcibly recruited as labor. Here there was exploitation of Africans who were already working as laborers on the rubber plantations and in the harsh conditions of the gold mines. Data confirms the remarkable increase in output for both commodities, an increase obtained through a harsh system of exploitation. The methods of forced labor were as cruel as they had been under the prewar colonial regime, at times causing rebellions and brutal retaliation and repression from French masters in response. Thus, in addition to participation in a global conflict militarily, Free French Africa was drawn into the global wartime economy. Jennings documents the suffering of the forced laborers. He also notes the growing expectation of a postwar reform that would improve living conditions for those Africans and their families who had been pressed into service and suffered abuse as a result. Jennings extracts his evidence from a wide variety of sources from diverse archives, personal accounts, and the images left by photo journalists—“outsiders” as witnesses. On this basis, Jennings concludes that Free French Africa, faced with the wartime demands, did not relieve, but instead intensified labor abuses.

In his concluding observations, Jennings deals with memory, or how the Free French moment in wartime Africa is remembered or not; “the silences, appropriations, and distortions brought about after

the war, around the issue of Free France's Africanness" (p. 250). From the war to the postwar to independence, what is remembered and how memories shift drives the concluding pages. Whatever the fluctuations of French or African memories, Jennings argues in defense of his excellent book that, however modest the Free French Gaullist resistance at the outset of World War II might have been, it began in Africa, contrary to myths of resistance being London-centered; that the African action has become obscured by commemorations of resistance movements that appeared only later within occupied France. Here Jennings rightly points to the spontaneous imperial rallies in support of the Free French as the first steps of a full-scale resistance to the Axis powers. The role of Free French Africa was central to that effort. It is for this reason that Jennings regrets the absence of commemoration of the Free French African resistance in Paris.

But there is one. The Free French African military success at Bir-Hakeim has a metro station named in its honor. Bir-Hakeim is thus commemorated with other metro stations whose names are associated with French military achievements such as Austerlitz, Campo Formio, Pyramides, Solferino, and Tolbiac. As Jennings notes in another context, "[p]erhaps a more fitting vignette with which to conclude involves the composition of Free French forces at the Battle of Bir-Hakeim. There, in May and June 1941, *Generalleutnant* Erwin Rommel's German Afrika Korps forces met the stiff resistance of BM 2 (*2^e Battalion de Marche*), comprised of Frenchmen recruited in Oubangi-Chari (present-day Central African Republic). The Africans of the BM 2 fought side by side with the Spanish Republicans and German Jews of the 13th demi-brigade of the French Foreign Legion, as well with BP 1 (*Bataillon pacifique*), hailing from the South Pacific.... The episode seems like a lesson in diversity, idealism, and commitment well worth retelling today." [3] As for a retelling of the Free French at war in the Pacific, a French filmmaker, Sandra Rude, has just produced a documentary that recognizes the experience of the Free French colony of New Caledonia during WWII—more modest than Africa perhaps, but an important contribution nevertheless to the saga of the Free French at war. That, of course, is another story.

NOTES

[1] Colonized by both the British and French, the two powers eventually agreed to jointly administer the islands and established an unusual arrangement called the Condominium of New Hebrides (1906-1980) which divided New Hebrides into two separate communities with three separate governments - French, British and a joint administration.

[2] René Cassin, *Les hommes partis de rien: le réveil de la France abattue, 1940-41* (Paris: Plon, 1974).

[3] "Author's Response by Eric T. Jennings, University of Toronto," *H-Diplo Roundtable Review* 16/16(2015): 26. <<http://www.tiny.cc/Roundtable-XVI-16>>.

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