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Sarah Zimmerman, *Militarizing Marriage: West African Soldiers' Conjugal Traditions in Modern French Empire*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2020. \$34.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780821424476; \$80.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780821424223.

Review by Ruth Ginio, Ben Gurion University of the Negev.

When Myron Echenberg published his pioneering *Colonial Conscripts* in 1991, the *tirailleurs Sénégalais* were hardly a lasting topic of conversation, either in France or in Francophone Africa.<sup>[1]</sup> Thirteen years later, in 2004, the French government decided to conduct the annual ceremony to celebrate the liberation of France from Nazi occupation with the landing in Provence rather than that in Normandy so as not to highlight American participation in the process. That was the moment when the *tirailleurs* entered the public stage. The French government invited African leaders to take part in the ceremony to mark the massive participation of African soldiers in this military operation. Soon after, Senegal's president Abdoulaye Wade turned the day Toulon was liberated from the Nazis into the "*Journée du Tirailleur*" and began encouraging their commemoration. This sudden remembrance of France's African soldiers led to an academic interest in France, Britain, the US, and elsewhere. Much ink has been spilled since then on the *tirailleurs*. Still, Sarah Zimmerman's fascinating book is a unique study, based on multiple and diverse sources, that challenges some basic assumptions of the existing research from all its perspectives. When it looked as if there was nothing new to say about the *tirailleurs*, Zimmerman's book came with a completely different angle than anything written so far.

Recent research on the *tirailleurs* focused on several main issues: their remembrance and forgetting; their contribution and experiences in the two world wars; French ingratitude towards them and especially the brutal repression of their justified protests in Camp Thiaroye; and the special bond that African veterans forged with the French state, including the burning issue of the freezing of these veterans' pensions in 1960.<sup>[2]</sup> Several studies, including my own, also looked at the soldiers' previously neglected participation in the wars of decolonization.<sup>[3]</sup> Public debates in France, especially following Bachir Boucharab's film *Indigènes (Days of Glory, 2006)*, influenced scholars' choice to concentrate on the aspects mentioned above of the *tirailleurs'* service in the French army.

Zimmerman looks at this story from a completely different angle—that of women. While some of the studies on the *tirailleurs* touched upon issues related to women, their authors did so mainly to highlight the issue of interracial relations and the French military and civilian attitude towards them. The women discussed were, therefore, principally European. For Zimmerman, women—West African, Malagasy, Moroccan, Syrian, and Asian—are at the center of the story. She does

not look only at the relations of soldiers with women and how they affected their experiences. She directs her attention to women who became attached to the *tirailleurs*, either from their own choice (a term that is often ambiguous) or by coercion. This perspective allows us to see the other half of the picture, without which the *tirailleurs'* story is not complete. But it does much more than that. Zimmerman examines the story of the *tirailleurs* from its African-local perspective rather than as part of European history. The best example of this is the chapter that deals with World War I without stepping out of West Africa.

The book includes six chapters and an epilogue. Chapter one describes the process through which women became wives of soldiers. In most cases, these marriages were involuntary. Many of the African men recruited to the army were slaves, for whom military service was a way to win some freedom. So were many of the women who married these men. Following the conquest, the French sometimes forced the defeated leaders' wives to marry soldiers. The chapter examines how this new kind of marriage affected marital customs--no bridewealth was required when a soldier married. The woman's extended family had no way to control the marriage or protect her from violence and abuse. The French commanders supposedly took over these roles, but they did not interfere in intimate matters and punished soldiers for violence only in extreme cases.

Nevertheless, marrying soldiers offered women some social mobility and protection against enslavement. Within the army, they had a strange status. They were not officially part of the army. Still, they contributed to its functioning by offering cooking and laundry services to the soldiers. Until WWI, they also took part in military campaigns. One illustrative example is of a woman who gave birth during such a campaign. The French commander ordered two soldiers to assist her. After that, she continued to walk for four hours more with her newborn. If this is not battlefield heroism, I do not know what is.

In chapter two, Zimmerman discusses relations between women, both local and West African, in two parts of the French African empire--Congo and Madagascar. While the French military authorities saw marriages with local women as compatible with the customs of Western African societies, they were concerned that marriages between soldiers and women from those other parts of the empire might cause social disorder. The issue of women's consent that was usually irrelevant in West Africa became crucial in Congo and Madagascar, as the French were reluctant to disturb the patriarchal order. West African women accompanied their husbands to both regions to prevent relations between soldiers and local women. Yet, such contacts did exist. In Madagascar, West African wives of soldiers even encouraged them because they wished to benefit from the assistance of Malagasy women in their daily chores. These relations' nature was unclear as many of these women had no real choice in the matter. The chilling saying in Madagascar that Zimmerman quotes: "Senegalese soldiers do not rape, they marry" (p. 80) demonstrates well the blurring of concepts such as slavery and marriage in the colonial military context.

Chapter three takes us to Morocco, the last arena in which women accompanied the *tirailleurs*. Zimmerman pays special attention to Mangin's racial theories that had significant influence over military policies. While these theories had been extensively discussed in almost every study on the *tirailleurs*, their practical implications on soldiers' conditions of service are hardly ever mentioned. Zimmerman emphasizes that Mangin's book created a science of neglect. To prove that African soldiers could eat less, they received smaller portions of food, as did their wives and children. The resulting vitamin B1 deficiency caused many soldiers to develop the Bri Bri disease.

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The chapter deals with the specific difficulties the Moroccan environment caused West African women--the hardships in raising their crops due to the different climate, and clashes between them and Moroccan women.

As noted, chapter four looks at World War I from an original and refreshing perspective. By focusing only on what happens in West Africa, Zimmerman throws new light on the implications of the war in this region and, more specifically, on the status of soldiers' wives. This war changed the rules of the game because women were no longer allowed to accompany their husbands. From being a desired part of the military machine, they became unwanted elements that the army authorities wished to distance. Occasionally, these authorities criminalized soldiers' wives, primarily when they settled near military bases and engaged in trade and sometimes in prostitution.

In chapter five, Zimmerman diverges from the chronological framework to discuss the fascinating issue of long-distance and cross-colonial relationships. She highlights two themes that have not gained much attention before. One is the process of institutionalization of military marriages, such as the inauguration of the *indemnité de séparation* for the first wife only.<sup>[4]</sup> She also highlights the difficulties these marriages created for the military authorities, who were often confused by African matrimonial rules. Zimmerman approaches the second issue, interracial relations, from an innovative perspective. She focuses not only on the *tirailleurs'* ties with European women, but also on those with women from other parts of the French empire: Madagascar, Morocco, and Syria. She shows that in Madagascar, the military attitude to marriages with local women shifted from encouragement to hostility. In Morocco and Syria, the objection to such relations was even more significant because the French categorized local women as white. They, therefore, treated such ties in the same way they treated marriages with French women.

The final chapter looks deeply into the situation in Indochina between 1930 and 1956. It first discusses the preference of African soldiers to meet and marry local women while they were on leave in the big cities over settling for occasional sexual encounters in military bordels. The French army authorities, on the other hand, were worried that local women might be agents working for the Viet Minh and attempted to limit such relations. Most interracial families broke down after the French defeat in Dien-Bien-Phu, but some soldiers even managed to bring their wives and/or children back home with them. The second part of the chapter deals with these women, who found themselves in a culturally foreign and often quite hostile environment. Zimmerman conducted interviews with such women, and their stories convey their struggle to confront these difficulties. Even when, in one case, the woman converted to Islam and managed to fit in, she still missed Vietnam.

The story Zimmerman tells us so eloquently ends with the Indochina War, but Africans continued to serve in the French army during the Algerian War. Their units were dismantled only in 1964, four years after all of former French West Africa was already independent. Zimmerman is, of course, aware of this and therefore attempts to complete the picture in the epilogue. Here comes my only reservation. The epilogue does not focus on women, which is out of keeping with the rest of the book. Zimmerman mentions them in several different contexts, but they are no longer at the center of discussion. We hear about the main events of the Algerian War (in more detail than those offered in the Indochina context) and about the plight of Guinean soldiers who found themselves in a quandary when their country opted for independence in 1958.

Zimmerman exposes us to this issue through the story of Koly Kourouma and his entangled itinerary. However, his wives are only occasionally mentioned. Indeed, as Zimmerman notes, it is difficult to find information about soldiers' relations with Algerian women in the archives as most documents are still inaccessible and will remain so until 2062. I have encountered this obstacle in my research as well. Yet, what is missing here is a discussion of the soldiers' experiences and their wives within the federation of French West Africa. The French employed African soldiers extensively to repress demonstrations and strikes in French West Africa. Their participation in this repression is a very delicate issue politically and one that both French and African officials might be reluctant to confront, not to mention the soldiers themselves. This chapter in the African soldiers' story is yet to be written.

But, of course, one cannot deal with all the gaps in this fascinating story in a single book. And it is nice to leave something for others. What Zimmerman has accomplished in *Militarizing Marriage* is already a massive contribution to scholarship. She has reminded us that no story, even a military one, is complete without understanding the women who had been a crucial part of it. The book's focus on women tells us about them and exposes us to previously invisible aspects of the soldiers' experiences. It also examines the story of the *tirailleurs* in the West African context, rather than the European one.

I recommend anyone interested in African history, colonial history, military history, or gender studies to read this book and assign it to students. It will contribute a great deal to understanding how we write history and its complex relations with current politics.

#### NOTES

[1] Myron Echenberg, *Colonial Conscripts: The Tirailleurs Sénégalais in French West Africa* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1991).

[2] See for example: Amadou Ba, *Les "Sénégalais" à Madagascar: Militaires ouest-africains dans la conquête et la colonisation de la grande-île, 1895-1960* (Paris: Harmattan, 2012); Richard S. Fogarty, *Race and War in France: Colonial Subjects in the French Army, 1914-1918* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2008); Gregory Mann, *Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Martin Mourre, *Thiaroye 1944: Histoire et mémoire d'un massacre colonial* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2017); Raffael Scheck, *French Colonial Soldiers in German Captivity during World War II* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[3] Michel Bodin, *Les Africains dans la guerre d'Indochine, 1947-1954* (Paris: Harmattan, 2000); Ruth Ginio, *The French Army and Its African Soldiers: The Years of Decolonization* (Lincoln, NE: Nebraska University Press, 2017).

[4] For an explanation of the *indemnité de separation*, see paragraph 5 in <https://journals.openedition.org/genrehistoire/1005>, last consulted 11 July 2021.

Ruth Ginio  
Ben Gurion University of the Negev  
[rginio@bgul.ac.il](mailto:rginio@bgul.ac.il)

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