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**Edward L. Bimberg**, *Tricolor over the Sahara: The Desert Battles of the Free French, 1940-1942*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2002. xii + 134 pp. Illustrations, select bibliography, and index. \$64.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-313-31654-6.

Review by Elizabeth Greenhalgh, University of New South Wales at the Australian Defence Force Academy.

It is good to be reminded—at a time when Francophobia is rife in the United States—that the French did in fact do some fighting during World War II. The most recent authoritative account of the events of May-June 1940 gives the number of French killed somewhere between 50,000 and 90,000, tending towards the lower figure.[1] Such a high number of fatalities suggests that some French at least fought hard. Yet listening to radio talk shows, or reading Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post*, is to get the impression that American doughboys and their G.I. sons died in their thousands during two world wars for the "cheese-eating surrender monkeys," otherwise known as "les Weasels." Edward L. Bimberg's successor to his *Moroccan Goums* (1999) comes at an opportune moment. *Tricolor Over the Sahara* is an account of the "desert battles" of the Free French in Africa from the fall of France in 1940 to 1942, when the Vichyite *Armée de l'Afrique* realized which way the wind was blowing and declared for the Allies after the success of Operation TORCH.

The story of the French Army and Africa is long and complex. Although it started in the seventeenth century in Senegal and Madagascar, the most significant events took place in the nineteenth. There was the scholarly expedition that accompanied Napoleon to Egypt. The story continued with the invasion of North Africa under Charles X, expanded under Napoleon III, following which Algeria and then Tunisia were added to the hexagon. There had been an even earlier push into the eastern Mediterranean that dated from the time of the Crusades and left the French with the conviction that the protection of the Holy Places was a peculiarly French responsibility.

What characterized these expansionist policies was a sense that France had a *mission civilisatrice* which implied not only the protection of the Holy Places but also a sense of re-creation of past glories, whether Ptolemaic in Egypt or Roman in North Africa. French soldiers were the new legionaries, using Roman roads and Roman forts to restore civilization to a land that had deteriorated since the end of the Roman Empire.

But France was not the only great power interested in the acquisition of African colonies. British power was consolidated in Egypt, even more so after the Suez canal opened a shorter route to India. With the British expanding northwards from South Africa, and the French colonizing vast areas of Central and West Africa (consolidated as *Afrique Equatoriale Française* or AEF and *Afrique Occidentale Française* or AOF), there was bound to be conflict. This crystallized in the Sudan, at Fashoda in 1898 when Colonel Marchand's force arrived too little and too late to forestall Kitchener of Khartoum. French Anglophobia

within public opinion reached fever pitch during the South African (Boer) War. Conflict was resolved, however, by a settlement of differences that became the Entente Cordiale. The Entente powers were victorious in World War I and divided the former German African colonies between them. Thus the Cameroons were divided between France and Britain simply by drawing a line on the map.

The place of the French in Africa was complex because of the mixed motives that had inspired their presence there and because of colonial rivalry with the British who (it must be remembered) had already during the eighteenth century taken over land in North America and in India that the French had been first to exploit. Indeed, their place is still complex today, with the tension between the desire to maintain *la francophonie* and the insensitivity of such events as the Paris-Dakar car race that brings no economic benefit to the poor native populations through whom the products of Western engineering skills and economic power speed.

By the time of World War II, and the armistice that left the northern part of metropolitan France under German occupation, French Africa became even more important as a potential base for continuing the war. Conscription of African native soldiers and laborers had proved necessary during the 1914-1918 conflict and might supply, again, the manpower that the terms of the armistice denied to the metropolitan armed forces and the *Armée d'Afrique*. It was in Africa that de Gaulle rallied his first significant converts. It was in Dakar (Senegal) that Free French and Vichy forces confronted each other. It was in Syria (which is not in Africa, but it figures in Bimberg's book) that Free French and Vichy fought each other. Free French and Vichy continued to quarrel and to despise each other even after "Free France" became "*la France combattante*" in August 1943.

None of these complexities figures in Bimberg's account of the fighting in the desert. He gives a little of the historical background to the invasion of Algeria (getting the date wrong), and the difference between Free French and Vichy French (*Armée d'Afrique*) military units is only described (in the author's preliminary note) "because it was so important to the Free French themselves" (p.vii). This lack of concern for the *guerre franco-française* is mirrored by an equal lack of concern for number and gender agreements. Thus we have *Tirailleurs Sénégalaise* (passim), and *Division Français* (p. vii), and even *bête noir* (p. 99). Does no one at Greenwood Press have any knowledge of French, or of such common phrases that have come into English usage? The reader's heart sinks on reading such atrocities, since an author's authority is clearly compromised if he or she cannot transcribe accurately. General Leclerc's family name is de Hauteclocque, not Hautecloque.

The reader should not expect from this work any transfer into English of insights from recent French research into the topic or from the large volume of material currently on offer in French bookstores. Bimberg uses the *Service Historique de l'Armée* volume on the Free French North African campaign, written by Jean-Noël Vincent, and he relies on a few other French sources. The majority of the forty-one works cited in the select bibliography are in English. Douglas Porch's authoritative work on the Foreign Legion is a mainstay.[2]

Nor should the reader expect any of the diplomatic and political background that is vital for an understanding of the fighting. Martin Thomas' excellent *The French Empire at War 1940-45* (1998) is not even included in the bibliography. Also lacking are Sir Edward Spears' two volumes on his experiences as head of the mission to the Free French, and Anthony Clayton's volume, *France, Soldiers, and Africa* (1988).

Bimberg ranges much more widely than his title would suggest. He starts with a brief history of the French in North Africa and goes on to the Italians in Abyssinia and also to Dakar and Narvik—neither of which could be described as desert. His chapter on the *Légion Etrangère* takes the reader from Narvik to the mountains of Ethiopia. The chapters which work best are chapters three through five, in which

Bimberg describes the harassment of the Italians in Libya as the French pushed northwards from Tchad towards Tunisia. The hit-and-run tactics that lack of equipment imposed permitted no great battle victories, but the military action allowed the Free French to establish a presence that postwar Gaullist mythology could magnify. The two best-known actions--the capture of the Koufra oasis from the Italians in March 1941 and the heroic defence of Bir Hakeim at the southern end of the Allied defensive line defending the port of Tobruk from the German and Italian attacks in May-June 1942--proved some compensation for the Dakar fiasco of 1940 and for Britain's concentration on its own strategic priorities in Syria.

Bir Hakeim is recalled in the name of a Paris metro station, close by the Invalides and the Ecole militaire on metro line 6. As for Leclerc, more French towns have named streets and squares after him and his 2DB (*Deuxième Division Blindée*) than is the case, in my personal experience, with de Gaulle himself. The success at Koufra led to the serment de Koufra. Colonel Leclerc gave a short speech to his small force of men: "Nous ne nous arrêterons que quand le drapeau français flottera aussi sur Metz et Strasbourg." Bimberg comments merely: "In time, the 'Oath of Koufra' became a symbol of French resistance everywhere" (p. 42). Vincent, on the other hand, asks why Metz and Strasbourg and states that Leclerc's promotion at St-Cyr was named after those towns and that they represented the frontier with Germany.<sup>[3]</sup> But surely the reference to the two Alsatian towns recalls World War I and the covered statue of Strasbourg in the Place de la Concorde in Paris. If after World War I France could recover its lost provinces that Germany had taken by the Treaty of Frankfurt in 1871, then France could recover yet again from the ignominy of defeat.

Bimberg clearly wishes to commemorate the desert warriors who "redeemed the honor of the French army and of France itself" (p. 116), but his homage is more in the tradition of *Beau Geste* than a detailed account that would permit a considered evaluation. It is obvious that the author, who arrived in Tunis in 1943 with his U.S. Army unit, was captivated by the sights he saw and the sounds he heard. He propagates the Gaullist mythology of desert warriors.<sup>[4]</sup> He recreates the sort of "boys' own" adventure stories that were popular in 1924 when P.C. Wren wrote *Beau Geste*. The Foreign Legion still carries the aura of mystery that permeates such work; and the legion still gets the loudest applause from the crowds on the Champs Élysées on July 14.

The line drawings that Bimberg supplies add to the "boys' own" atmosphere. Wyndham Lewis did much better with the illustrations for his writings about his trip to Morocco in 1931. The reader would be better served with some decent maps. The sketch provided on page twenty-eight is not helpful.

In short, if you want to know about the Foreign Legion, read Douglas Porch; if you want the political and diplomatic background, read Martin Thomas. But if you enjoy an adventure and prefer the *Vol de Nuit* or *Pilote de Guerre* of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry to his *Petit Prince*, then read Bimberg, especially on a winter's evening with a glass of "weasel" beaujolais.

## NOTES

[1] Julian Jackson, *The Fall of France: The Nazi Invasion of 1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 180.

[2] Jean-Noël Vincent, *Les forces françaises dans la lutte contre l'Axe en Afrique*, 2 vols (Paris: Ministère de la défense, Etat-major de l'Armée de terre, Service historique, 1983-1985); Douglas Porch, *The French Foreign Legion: A Complete History of the Legendary Fighting Force* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991).

[3] Vincent, 271.

[4] On this see Martin Thomas, *The French Empire at War, 1940-45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 85.

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