

BOOK REVIEW

Timothy Stapleton. *West African Soldiers in Britain's Colonial Army, 1860–1960.*

Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2022. x + 390 pp. Bibliography. Index. \$125. Hardcover. ISBN-13:978-1-64825-025-5.

The study of war and society in Africa has gained currency among Africanist scholars, and historians have engaged the roles of West African soldiers in World War I and II, particularly examining how race and class coalesced to shape wartime experiences and decolonization in Africa. Timothy Stapleton's *West African Soldiers in Britain's Colonial Army, 1860–1960*, drawing from oral sources and archival records in five countries, is part of an emerging scholarship on African military history. It is the first book on West Africa to capture the grand narrative of the Royal West African Frontier Force, which other historians of the subregion have captured either in passing or as a chapter in books.

Stapleton locates the British colonial army at the intersection of identity, class, gender, healthcare, and colonial violence. He argues that the British colonial army birthed multiple identities among West Africans and altered patterns of relations among colonial subjects since the West African Frontier Force was established in 1897. Stapleton contends that it was the outbreak of World War Two that revolutionized and modernized the British Army in West Africa and that the aftermath of the war proved the institution to be makeshift as the roles of soldiers became fluid and shifted from combat warfare to internal security, and African soldiers were sometimes used as instruments of colonial repression.

The book consists of eleven chapters, including an introduction and a conclusion. The first chapter examines recruitment processes—conscription, voluntary enlistment, and wartime mobilization into the Army. It considers the roles of traditional rulers in colonial army recruitment and the use of their subjects and enslaved people for imperial military services. Stapleton juxtaposes British colonial “slave soldiery” with the “rachat system” of recruitment in the French colonial army, whereby enslaved people were sublet from their owners to the colonial authorities for a commensurate amount. Stapleton posits that colonial slave soldiery, as in pre-colonial West Africa, provided an impetus to army recruitment in British West Africa (31–32). The gist of this

argument is that despite Britain's role in the abolition of slavery, the demands of imperialism compromised the ideal of freedom in the West African colonies. This resonates with Annie Phillips's contention that the British colonial policies in West Africa were inconsistent and enigmatic (*The Enigma of Colonialism: British Policy in West Africa* [James Currey, 1989]).

Chapters Two, Three, and Four engage the theme of ethnicity and religion in Africa. As in India, where the British colonial administration developed a martial race ideology to sustain the colonial army, a similar doctrine of difference emerged in Nigeria and the Gold Coast, where the northern part of the colonies was considered martial, while other groups in the southern part of the colonies were considered incapable of military service. Stapleton dispels this notion, arguing that the colonial military in Nigeria and Gold Coast were quite heterogeneous and that the British recruitment policy there depended on the responses of communities in the colonies toward recruitment; time and circumstances determined colonial army composition in Nigeria and the Gold Coast. The case of Sierra Leone and The Gambia, Stapleton shows, proved the paradox of the British martial ideology in Africa; colonial officials in these two colonies could not impose any ideology of difference. The myth of Islam being a "barrack religion" owing to the dominance of African Muslim recruits was punctured by Stapleton.


Chapter Five examines how the British culture of uniforms, medals, military songs, bands, and other insignia created a military identity in the West African Frontier Force, enhancing soldiers' effectiveness and boosting their morale for colonial services. For Stapleton, symbols are elements of class and difference, as they constantly reminded African soldiers of their rank and position in the colonial service. On the other hand, "symbols" also sought to "ornamentalize" the colonies by creating a military tradition linking the colonies with the metropole (168).

Chapter Six burrows into the discourse of colonial healthcare and the role of the WAFF in developing healthcare facilities through their outreach and support for healthcare personnel across West African interiors in the fight against tropical and venereal diseases which could threaten the sustainability of the colonial state. Chapter Seven stands out for its attention to women's engagement in the colonial army, an institution many historians considered masculine. While it is true that men populated WAFF, Stapleton's examination of women reveals their significant roles in the everyday life of African soldiers.

In Chapters Eight, Nine, and Ten, Stapleton engages the cases of military punishment, mutinies, and violence caused by African soldiers, drawing case studies from across the four colonies. Stapleton showed that flogging was a common form of maintaining discipline among the rank and file in the British colonial armies in Africa and that racism also shaped the ways in which colonial soldiers were disciplined. However, flogging as a disciplinary measure was not a consistent military practice across the West African colonies. While it was an effective form of punishment in Northern Nigeria, "the Gambia hardly knew about the practice" (271). Stapleton contends that

there were no cases of mutiny by African soldiers during World War One, although West African soldiers became mutinous in World War Two.

The final chapter engages the post-service life of West African soldiers. Stapleton argues that the army was a veritable platform used for building a second career for most ex-soldiers. Their experience, discipline, and training during service were considered assets to the colonial state. Unfortunately, postwar life did not get much attention from Stapleton in ways that could have allowed us to understand ex-soldiers' roles in nationalism and colonial development. This is not a problem, however, since Stapleton acknowledges that the postwar life of West African soldiers is deserving of separate book attention. Historians, researchers, students, and military experts interested in the evolution of modern military institutions in Africa will find this masterpiece useful.

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