

With Recognition Comes Hope

Global Africa

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For its last editorial of 2024, the Editorial Board offers its readers the exclusive publication of the Speech delivered by Professor Mamadou Diouf, President of *the Commemoration Committee for the 80th Anniversary of the Massacre of Senegalese Tirailleurs at Thiaroye on December 1, 1944*. In fact, a few months after coming to power, the new government of Senegal established a committee tasked with restoring the facts surrounding this colonial massacre of African soldiers from sixteen (16) different countries. The commemoration ceremony took place on December 1, 2024, under the auspices of the President of the Republic of Senegal. The inaugural speech by Professor Mamadou Diouf, historian, at the Thiaroye Military Camp initiated the celebrations to honor the memory of the Tirailleurs and to recall their role in Africa's ongoing quest for dignity and justice. Five key measures were introduced by the Head of State, including "the creation of a documentation and research center to collect archives, testimonies, and narratives, while supporting research and education about this shared history. The history of Thiaroye and the Tirailleurs will also be taught so that future generations grow up with a deep understanding of this episode from our past" (Excerpts from the presidential address).

Speech by the President of the Commemoration Committee for the 80th Anniversary of the Massacre of Senegalese Tirailleurs

[Formal Greetings]

The enigma of the massacre of the Tirailleurs at Thiaroye, on December 1, 1944, at dawn, has long become a major concern for politicians, intellectuals, and artists (Lamine Gueye, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Keita Fodéba), historians and literature specialists (Myron Echenberg, Mbaye Gueye, Cheikh Faty Fay, Armelle Mabon, Abdou Sow, Martin Mourre, Sabrina Parent...), as well as writers and filmmakers (Boubacar Boris Diop, Ben Diogaye Beye, Doumbi Fakoly, Sembène Ousmane, Thierno Faty Sow, and, more recently, Diaka Ndiaye).

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On December 1, 1944, at 5:30 am, 1,200 men from the French colonial troops and the gendarmerie took position around the Thiaroye military camp. Armed and ready, the soldiers were backed by three armored vehicles and two tanks. Inside the barracks, between 1,200 and 1,800 Senegalese tirailleurs had answered the call of the officers.

The term “Senegalese” erases the diversity of their territorial origins. They were recruited, often forcibly, from the French colonial territories in Africa (AOF - French West Africa, AEF - French Equatorial Africa, Cameroon, and beyond). They were victims of the racist treatment associated with the colonial system. They fought in the war on all fronts, first and foremost on the European front.

Captured following the collapse of the French army in June 1940, they spent about a year in Germany. Some were then transferred to the “Front-Stalags” (labor camps) inside occupied France. There, they were compelled to carry out tasks that contributed to the German war effort. Upon their release, some continued fighting alongside the Free French soldiers, while others were incorporated into military labor units.

Then came the liberation (summer and autumn of 1944). Gathered in centers in Central and Southern France, after four years in German prisons, the repatriated tirailleurs, stationed at Thiaroye, awaited their demobilization and return to their home territories in Africa.

The tirailleurs’ claims addressed several issues, the most significant of which were indemnities, pay, demobilization bonuses, and other allowances, as well as the conditions of their stay at Thiaroye and their return to their home countries. The response from the colonial authorities was swift. The systematic violence of colonial governance asserted itself once again. The paradox lies in the fact that the celebration of “liberation”, which was the distinctive emblem of France at the end of the war, coincided with the massacre of the Senegalese tirailleurs at Thiaroye. No account was taken of the soldiers’ contribution to the liberation of France, let alone the civic and democratic values and engagement that were encouraged by the war. This is evident in the “mutinies” and “rebellions” that shook the colonial troops.

Massacres are recurring events in the history of colonial empires. Yet Thiaroye stands as a particularly significant moment. It occurs within the context of the celebration and euphoria surrounding the liberation, the triumph of the resistance leaders under General de Gaulle’s leadership. Fueled by a certain idea of France, it is precisely at this moment of reconstruction that the bloody repression of legitimate demands took place after the soldiers had endured the horrors of captivity, torture, and deprivation. Thiaroye brutally shattered the dreams of emancipation that had been nurtured by the propaganda of France’s liberators. The end of the war, the return of the prophetic image of a France reconnecting with its narrative and, above all, its revolutionary turn, the republican values and respect for human rights, these ideals left the Senegalese tirailleurs and the colonized peoples stranded by the side of the road.

In the days following the massacre, the French authorities did everything in their power to conceal “the massacre” (Lamine Gueye). They altered the records, from departure at Morlaix to arrival in Dakar, the number of soldiers at Thiaroye, and the causes behind the gathering of the tirailleurs... An initial report stated thirty-five (35) deaths in a “mutiny.” The official French count reported 70 Senegalese tirailleurs dead. However, the most reliable estimates state that the true toll was between three hundred (300) and four hundred (400) victims. This deliberate attempt at concealment, denounced by historians, became evident early on.

The circumstances, the intensity of the repressive operations, and the exact number of deaths remain uncertain; some administrative and military archives are inaccessible, falsified, disappeared, or inconsistent. Unveiling the truth about the massacre, and countering the maneuvers to conceal it, is today an imperative. We call for full and sincere cooperation from France.

The government of Senegal has decided to revisit this event with the commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the massacre of the Senegalese tirailleurs at Thiaroye on December 1, 1944.

Taking the initiative to produce the narrative about this moment in our history is to return the event to Africa, erasing the colonial territorialization, and allowing for a memorial staging driven by Africans, outside the realm of French honor.

Certainly, former French President François Hollande acknowledged in 2014 that French bullets had killed the *tirailleurs*; his presence at Thiaroye was seen as an act of “repairing the injustice”; he recognized that the French army’s intervention was dreadful and unbearable. However, despite the victims wearing the French uniform, the acknowledgment of the bloody repression seemed to carry the weight of absolution. Doesn’t France elevate itself through the clear-eyed reflection it has on its past? Today, former President Hollande has come to terms with recognizing that “it was a massacre by machine gun massacre, thus it is a massacre” (November 21, 2024). A few days ago, President Emmanuel Macron followed his lead in a letter addressed to his Senegalese counterpart, President Bassirou Diomaye Diakharr Faye.

The *tirailleurs*’ crime: “a crime of disobedience”, dictated by the confusion sown by the metropole, between values reserved exclusively for it on the one hand, and the imperial governance and arrogance on the other, which came at such a terrible cost that its repercussions are still felt today.

As a result, it is essential to break the silence and boldly express our perspective, our comments, and our creative imaginations regarding the event. Thiaroye represents for us, Senegalese, an opportunity, both as dramatic as it is majestic, to grant the status of “martyrs for Africa” to the victims of the massacre and for the Pan-African spirit.

The story is told from Africa by Léopold Sédar Senghor in his poem *Tyaroye* (1944) and by Keita Fodéba (1948) in his ballet-poem *Aube Africaine*. According to the first President of Senegal, these poems offer African perspectives that represent “eternal Africa, of the world to come... the new world that will be tomorrow” (Senghor). It is precisely this world to come, of unity, prosperity, democracy, and diversity, that we want to celebrate and achieve, together. This is the memory we must continue to embrace for our future history.

[...] A vast initiative: a difficult but incredibly exciting initiative, one that will require ongoing efforts, capable of contributing to historical and memorial work to produce narratives, civic, cultural, and artistic lessons for the benefit of Pan-African communities. A shared history that nourishes a pedagogy aimed at building the foundations of African integration. »

[General Acknowledgements]