Survival of the Fittest during the First World War: Herbert Spencer, the French Army, and the Development of La force noire, 1890-1920

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Abstract

In *La force noire,* his influential feasibility study of 1910 about recruiting West African soldiers to defend France in the event of a World War, Colonel Charles Mangin sought intellectual validation for his ideas by invoking Herbert Spencer: "the philosopher...who had conducted the most profound study of the organization of human societies and their development in history." Citing Spencer's *Principles of Sociology*, Mangin embraced the Englishman's theoretical construct of "progressive evolution" and contended that a dichotomy existed between as yet "primitive" but "militant" societies, and their more highly evolved "industrial" counterparts. Referring to the "warrior instincts that remain extremely powerful in primitive races," Mangin concluded that West Africans possessed exactly those attributes that made them ideal for use as "shock troops" by the French in the event of a European war. Mangin's scheme for expanding recruitment in West Africa for service overseas was not new; indeed, it had been advocated by a series of French Colonial Army officers–including Louis Archinard, Henri de Lacroix, Charles Perreaux, and Marie Audéoud-prior to 1910. His explicit linking of this scheme to Spencer's race theories, however, and their subsequent incorporation into the military organization, language instruction, and tactical doctrine of the Colonial Army between 1914 and 1918, offers an explicit glimpse of the Englishman's institutional influence in France. More broadly, it also provides an insight into the significance of Spencer's ideas for French imperialists, as well as the tragic human consequences of linking race theory to military doctrine during First World War and, indeed, long thereafter.

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