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**Bureaucracy, Colonial Control, and New Political Space**

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MARTIN MOURRE

COMBAT VETERANS IN FRENCH WEST AFRICA  
IN THE 1940s

Bureaucracy, Colonial Control, and New Political Space

»Des Associations locales d'anciens combattants ont été formées un peu partout. Ce n'est pas suffisant. Le règlement rapide des pensions et leur réévaluation s'imposent. Des crédits doivent être accordés pour la fondation de Coopératives, de foyer d'anciens combattants, etc. Si l'on adopte ces mesures, si l'on sait intéresser les anciens tirailleurs à notre œuvre, ils seront avec nous; par contre, s'ils ont l'impression que l'Administration les traite avec indifférence, ils se jetteront dans les bras du parti politique qui leur fera le plus de promesses!.«

These were the words of the governor of French Sudan, Edmond Louveau, in his political report for the year 1946, addressed to René Barthes, the governor-general of French West Africa (Afrique occidentale française, AOF). Louveau's remarks clearly reflect the dilemma facing the colonial administration at the end of the Second World War. The administration was observing the emergence of a new social force, organized through associations, and was urgently concerned about the potential political dangers that it represented. Louveau's words urging the co-optation of this force did not fall on deaf ears, and in August 1950 the parliament passed a law aiming at equal pensions between former soldiers from metropolitan France and from the overseas territories. African combat veterans' attachment to France was confirmed later, in September 1958, in the referendum on membership in the Communauté française, when many associations of combat veterans<sup>2</sup> called for a »yes« vote to the project proposed by General de Gaulle. Over a period of two decades, from the start of the war until the eve of African independence, the veterans' movement in West Africa underwent profound transformations.

- 1 »Local associations of combat veterans have been formed all over the place. That is not enough. It is essential that pensions be paid quickly and re-evaluated. Credits must be granted for the founding of cooperatives, homes for former combatants, etc. If we adopt these measures, if we are able to interest the former *tirailleurs* in our work, they will be with us; but if they have the impression that the administration is treating them with indifference, they will throw themselves into the arms of the political party which makes them the most promises«: Archives Nationales du Sénégal (ANS), 2G46 21, Governor Louveau of French Sudan, 1946 annual political report for French Sudan, 23 June 1947, p. 89.
- 2 In this article the term »combat veteran«, as a translation of the French term »ancien combattant«, is used in the common sense of having served in the armed forces, not in the more restrictive, bureaucratic sense used by the French administration of having served for 90 or more days in a unit deployed to the front.

There is a burgeoning historiography on this period of decolonization, whether focused on debates around citizenship<sup>3</sup>, social struggles through trade union<sup>4</sup> or student<sup>5</sup> movements, or independence struggles in various national contexts<sup>6</sup>. However, little attention has been paid to the less visible social practices that formed this political space. By looking at the combat veterans' movement at a regional level during and immediately after the Second World War, this article sheds new light on the formation of a political space made up of diverse groups of actors. The creation of veterans' associations was linked to the colonial administration, because it was this administration that gave them official recognition. At the time, this was a major phenomenon in West Africa<sup>7</sup>. These associations functioned on a common model: they elected a board, produced reports, and had dues-paying members. In short, they were governed by bureaucratic rules that standardized the forms taken by social demands. This set of bureaucratic rules involved a diffuse process that I interpret as a »social form of power«<sup>8</sup>, to use Béatrice Hibou's expression on bureaucratization in the neoliberal era. In the following pages, the focus is not so much on rigidly defining this social form as on understanding how the emergence of this process influenced the history of decolonization in West Africa.

The practices observed in this period among combat veterans reflected debates and imaginaries rooted in the political life of the 1920s and 1930s. With the end of the First World War came the question of the social reintegration of former West African soldiers, more than 190,000 of whom had participated in the First World War<sup>9</sup>. According to Gregory Mann, this reintegration process presented the administration with a series of novel problems, and responding to them required the development of bureaucratic norms. The administration had to deal with flawed or non-existent vital records, making it difficult to determine the rights of ex-soldiers, who in turn did not necessarily have the resources required to navigate the intricacies of colonial bureaucracy. It was thus difficult to know who was entitled to claim veterans' (or other types of) pensions<sup>10</sup>. One of the solutions the administration used was to try to offer direct patronage to combat veterans, in particular by appointing some of them as chiefs of villages, or even cantons.

Another solution used to control this population was to integrate them into the veterans' associations run by the few Europeans living in the colonies. But it was seen as important not to encourage local initiatives, which, the Bureau Militaire in French Sudan feared, could become

- 3 Frederick COOPER, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960*, Princeton, NJ 2014.
- 4 Tony CHAFER, *The End of Empire in French West Africa. France's Successful Decolonization?* Oxford, New York 2002; Omar GUÈYE, *Sénégal. Histoire du mouvement syndical, la marche vers le Code du travail*, Paris 2011.
- 5 Françoise BLUM, *L'indépendance sera révolutionnaire ou ne sera pas. Étudiants africains en France contre l'ordre colonial*, in: *Cahiers d'histoire. Revue d'histoire critique*, no. 126, 2015, DOI: 10.4000/chrhc.4165.
- 6 Klaas VAN WALRAVEN, *The Yearning for Relief. A History of the Sawaba Movement in Niger*, Leiden 2013; Elizabeth SCHMIDT, *Cold War and Decolonization in Guinea, 1946–1958*, Athens, OH 2007; Christian ROCHE, *Le Sénégal à la conquête de son indépendance, 1939–1960. Chronique de la vie politique et syndicale, de l'Empire français à l'indépendance*, Paris 2001.
- 7 Hélène D'ALMEIDA-TOPOR, Odile GOERG (eds.), *Le mouvement associatif des jeunes en Afrique noire au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris 1989; see also Laure CARBONNEL, Kamina DIALLO and Lamine DOUMBIA (eds.), *Associations et bureaucratization: perspectives africaines*, in: *Émulations*, 37/2021.
- 8 Béatrice HIBOU, *The Bureaucratization of the World in the Neoliberal Era. An International and Comparative Perspective*, New York 2015, p. 11.
- 9 Marc MICHEL, *Les Africains et la Grande Guerre. L'Appel à l'Afrique (1914–1918)*, Paris 2003, p. 191.
- 10 Gregory MANN, *Native Sons. West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century*, Durham, NC, London 2006, p. 100.

»war machines«<sup>11</sup>. In a sense, this management of West African combat veterans was in line with a more general debate that was raging in Paris and in the senior ranks of the colonial administration in Africa: that of the choice between assimilation and association. In theory, conventional Jacobin and republican wisdom weighed on the side of a preference for assimilation. This was the option represented by the Diagne laws of 1915 and 1916, which had led to the adoption of full citizenship for the citizens of the Quatre communes in Senegal. In practice, however, the choice made was to govern certain categories of the population through different processes of co-optation. This debate was to take a new turn, first with the advent of the Vichy regime in the colonies, and then with the social gains of the post-war years. In parallel to political struggles on economic or ideological terrain, West African social space was traversed by a bureaucratic phenomenon that brought with it the emergence of new moral and political subjectivities<sup>12</sup>.

With the proliferation of associations of all kinds, and the bureaucratic forms that they generated, came new processes of political inclusion. In the first part of this article I look at different forms of structure taken by the veterans' movement. Beginning as a mass movement under the Vichy regime, a large network of veterans' associations emerged from 1943. In the second part, I highlight the link between associations and colonial administrations through the establishment and negotiation of particular social practices after the end of the Second World War. These practices were associated to political demands, but they were structured by bureaucratic rules. I focus in particular on the Association des anciens combattants et victimes de guerre de l'AOF et du Togo (Association of combat veterans and victims of the war of AOF and Togo, or AACVG), which was in fact a federation of associations, seeking to unite as broad and large a coalition as possible behind it; and which, above all, was led by West African combat veterans, in contrast to the earlier situation.

### Associations and the politicization of African societies during the Second World War

Early in the summer of 1940, when France was in the midst of a military rout, leading Pétain to call for an end to combat on 17 June, some in Dakar held a different view of the situation. On 20 June 1940, the population, grouped behind combat veterans, demonstrated in Dakar, the capital of the AOF, to »defend France and the Empire«<sup>13</sup>. Following the Armistice, on 24 June, the Federation shifted into the Vichy camp, while French Equatorial Africa (Afrique équatoriale française, or AEF) chose to align itself with de Gaulle<sup>14</sup>. Pierre Boisson, a senior official, was appointed head of AOF, as High Commissioner for Africa (Haut-commissaire pour l'Afrique). A veteran of the First World War, where he had lost a leg, Boisson was more a follower of Marshal Pétain than an admirer of the Nazi regime. He quickly implemented a series of discriminatory measures. Among the most serious was the banning of trade unions, which had been authorized since the Popular Front government. At the civic level, in January 1941, »combat veterans decorated with the Légion d'honneur, who had been made electors in the local assemblies by the decrees of 19 April and 22 August, 1939, were deprived of this right«<sup>15</sup>.

11 Ibid., p. 104.

12 Séverine AWENENGO DALBERTO, Richard BANÉGAS, *Citoyens de papier. Des écritures bureaucratiques de soi en Afrique*, in: *Genèses*, 112/3 (2018), p. 3–11.

13 Catherine AKPO-VACHÉ, *L'AOF et la seconde guerre mondiale. La vie politique (septembre 1939 – octobre 1945)*, Paris 1996, p. 28

14 Eric JENNINGS, *La France libre fut africaine*, Paris 2014.

15 »[...] les anciens combattants décorés de la légion d'honneur, devenus électeurs aux assemblées locales par les décrets des 19 avril et 22 août 1939 furent privés de ce droit«. AKPO-VACHÉ, *L'AOF et la seconde guerre mondiale* (as in n. 13), p. 128.

Although it was repressive, the administration also had to contain popular demands, in particular due to the sacrifices demanded of the population in a time of war. As Ruth Ginio observes, bringing the Vichy ideology into the Empire was not a simple matter: for the colonial authorities, the very words »revolution« and »national« could have dangerous connotations<sup>16</sup>. The ideology was thus accompanied by the establishment of new structures aimed at keeping colonial populations in line. Creating the Légion française des combattants de l'Afrique noire, modelled on the Légion française des combattants<sup>17</sup>, they attempted to use veterans to this end. This also kept demobilized West African soldiers from the French campaign busy, as there had been several serious incidents when the *tirailleurs* returned to Kindia, Guinea in November 1940.

In Côte d'Ivoire, the local section of the Légion française des combattants became a movement of some importance. Created in February by an *arrêté général*, its president, Delannoy, sought to organize it by issuing a call to all veterans. On 1 May, »the first meeting of the Légion was held at the Maison du Combattant in Abidjan. There were already 206 members«<sup>18</sup>. By the end of the year, the number of recruits rose to 2,532, including more than 2,108 »French subjects«, versus only 412 »Europeans and citizens«. The history of the Légion in West Africa clearly reflects the tensions of the time: colonial, and thus racial, tensions, but also tensions linked to the Vichy compromise. The annual report for the year 1943 concerning Senegal notes that »on 1 April, the portrait of Marshal Pétain affixed to the notice board of the headquarters of the ex-Légion was slashed and covered with a Cross of Lorraine. At the time, some military figures spoke of »futile/pointless attacks targeting Marshal Pétain«<sup>19</sup>. The report added that »a pastoral letter written in April by Monsignor Grimaud [*sic*], according to which »Marshal Pétain has been the only legitimate leader of France since 1940«, created some consternation and unease in public opinion«<sup>20</sup>. But the general situation had shifted a few months earlier, with the Allied landing in North Africa in November 1942.

In Dakar, Boisson continued to have the support of the allies for a time, but ended up resigning in July 1943 in the face of public pressure. He was replaced by a man who had been a committed Gaullist from the earliest days, Pierre Cournarie. These changes at the imperial scale affected the organization of political life in the West African federation in general, and in the social world of combat veterans in particular. In AOF, the Légion had been dissolved in February, and an ordinance of 12 February created a Légion française des anciens combattants, restoring the initial term, which ultimately was never formed. Shortly afterwards, »an ordinance

16 Ruth GINIO, *French Colonialism unmasked. The Vichy years in French West Africa*, Lincoln, NE, London 2006, p. 23.

17 On the Légion in France, see Jean-Marie GUILLON, *La Légion française des combattants, ou comment comprendre la France de Vichy*, in: *Annales du Midi. Revue archéologique, historique et philologique de la France méridionale* 116 (2004), no. 245, p. 5–24; to my knowledge, there is no such work dealing with the colonial empire.

18 »[...] à la Maison du Combattant à Abidjan, la première réunion légionnaire [took place]. Les adhérents étaient déjà au nombre de 206«. ANS, 2G41 22, Governor of Côte-d'Ivoire Deschamps, 1941 political and social report for Côte-d'Ivoire, 22 August 1942, p. 31.

19 »[...] le 1er avril, le portrait du Maréchal Pétain apposé sur le mur d'affichage de la Maison de l'ex-Légion est lacéré et couvert d'une croix de Lorraine. À cette occasion certains éléments militaires parlent d'atteintes inutiles portées à la personne du Maréchal«. ANS, 2G43 16, unsigned, 1943 annual political report for Senegal, p. 2.

20 »[La] lettre pastorale d'avril de Monseigneur Grimaud [*sic*], suivant laquelle »le Maréchal Pétain est depuis 1940 le seul chef légitime de la France« jette quelques désarroi et malaise dans l'opinion«. Ibid. Auguste Grimault had been Bishop of Dakar since 1927; he resigned under pressure from the de Gaulle government at the time of the Liberation.

of 20 April 1943 created the Union française des anciens combattants et victimes de la guerre for the same purpose. This union was also not organized in French West Africa<sup>21</sup>.

This desire to control the veterans' movement by conferring on it the administrative, and thus bureaucratic, form of the association continued as the political situation changed considerably. Two years later, Governor General Cournarie noted that »the regional association and the local associations are dormant. They are completely inactive. The European combat veterans of Togo, however, wanted to form an independent social club [*amicale*].« He added that he found it »regrettable that a combat veterans' movement is not emerging, but the Légion has left too many bad memories for it to be otherwise<sup>22</sup>. These remarks show that the colonial authorities were not able to control this movement of combat veterans, both European and a fortiori West African, and that it was concerned about this fact. The period was conducive to political changes, which also took place via the creation of new organizations whose structures were not limited to mere clubs or groups. With the return of a certain freedom of action came a proliferation of institutionally recognized parties and associations, which both freshly demobilized soldiers and First World War veterans could join. In this new context, these groups were able to propose ideas that diverged from the interests of the colonial authorities.

September 1943 saw the emergence of the Groupement d'Action Républicaine and the Association Croix de Lorraine, and November the association Combat de l'Afrique Occidentale Française. In December the three united as the Fédération d'Afrique Occidentale de la France Combattante. Its aim, according to the governor of the *circonscription* of Dakar, was »to gather all possible good will around those who took the destinies of the *patrie* and the Empire into their hands<sup>23</sup>. This grouping was more clearly targeted at the European population, and it may be that the authorities had an interest in maintaining just one federation, which could thus be more easily controlled. But African ex-soldiers were also seeking to organize. While the information was less precise, Cournarie nonetheless noted that,

»s'agissant des milieux autochtones, le Sénégal signale qu'une association dénommée: »Action pour la Libération de la France« serait en formation, à l'initiative d'un agent d'affaires, secrétaire de l'Association des Anciens combattants indigènes de Thiès. Ce dernier chercherait à faire adhérer les anciens militaires indigènes au mouvement qu'il patronne sous couvert de prendre en main leurs revendications concernant la remise en vigueur de la »Législation Mandel« en leur faveur<sup>24</sup>.«

21 »[...] une ordonnance du 20 avril 1943 créait pour le même objet une Union française des anciens combattants et victimes de la guerre. Cette union elle-même ne fut pas davantage organisée en Afrique Occidentale Française«. ANS, 2G43 85, Director general for political, administrative and social affairs, AOF, activity of the directorate in the year 1943, 10 December 1943, p. 5.

22 »[...] l'association régionale et les associations locales sont en sommeil. Leur activité est nulle. Les anciens combattants Européens du Togo ont cependant voulu se constituer en amicale indépendante. [...] regrettable qu'un mouvement »Anciens Combattants« ne se dessine pas, mais la Légion a laissé trop de mauvais souvenirs pour qu'il en soit autrement«. ANS, 2G45 105, Director general for political, administrative, and social affairs, May 1945 monthly report for AOF, 26 June 1945, p. 4.

23 »[...] de réunir toutes les bonnes volontés, autour de ceux qui ont pris en mains les destinées de la patrie et de l'Empire«. ANS, 2G43 15, governor of the colonies, administrator of the *circonscription* of Dakar and dependencies, 1943 general report for Dakar and dependencies, undated, p. 1.

24 »With regard to native populations, Senegal has indicated that an association called »Action pour la Libération de la France« is being formed, on the initiative of an *agent d'affaires*, who is the secretary of the Association of indigenous combat veterans of Thiès. He is seeking to convince indigenous former soldiers to join the movement he is leading under the pretence of taking up their demands regarding the reinstatement of the »Mandel Legislation« in their favour«. ANS, 2G43 84,

The proliferation of associations, following the summer of 1943 and the end of the Boisson period, thus reflected political changes, while in turn transforming the social practices in French West Africa. In addition, the form of the association seemed to offer a means to legitimize certain social and political actions.

The following year, as it became clearer that the Allies would win the war, associations with multiple goals began to appear. This trend persisted until the end of the Second World War, and continued in the months after its end. In 1946, the 1901 Law on the *contrat d'association* – which still structures associations in France today – was adopted in the colonies. In that year, 28 associations were declared. Their names speak of a portion of their varied activities. Some focused on youth, such as the Société des Sports de Koungheul and the Jeunesse ardente de Bambey. Others were religious in nature, such as the Union catholique de Thiès, or regional, such as the Foyer Terrassonnais in Thiès, a sports club, and the Amicale (Social club) des Saint-Louisiens et leurs descendants in Kaolack. There were also groups with a political focus, such as the Parti travailliste indépendant du Sénégal in Kaolack, the Parti ouvrier et démocratique de Thiès, the Parti du peuple du Sénégal in Saint-Louis, and the Jeunesse du Bloc africain in Khombole. These groups, for the most part, would not go on to play a determining role. Within this developing field of associative life, there were associations directly linked to combat veterans such as the Amicale des Jeunes combattants et des Militaires Africains démobilisés in Saint-Louis and the Section des Amputés de guerre du Sine-Saloum<sup>25</sup>.

These associations were authorized by governmental orders, recognized by official receipts, governed by statutes – all reflecting the sudden rise of legislation and regulations, or even simply administrative practices, in West Africa. At the same time, new political dynamics were emerging. Already in 1944, the governor of the district of Dakar noted that »native politicians have demonstrated a tendency to reject collaboration with Europeans and the desire to seize the levers of command in associations and political groups. This new line of action was confirmed in the elections to the Board of Directors of the Anciens combattants et Victimes de la Guerre«<sup>26</sup>. In the following year, Cournarie noted again that »the topic of equal rights between Europeans and Africans is sometimes raised – hence the demands formulated by native combat veterans to obtain status as French citizens and a pension scheme that would be the same for all«<sup>27</sup>. In the West, the emergence of administration as a state monopoly took place over a long period<sup>28</sup>. In West Africa, in 1944, public administrations were increasingly staffed by African functionaries, representing a new political generation. It was within these administrative bodies – and not only in parties, trade unions, places of worship, or the streets – that some of the demands considered most radical by the ruling authorities were articulated. It may thus be

Director general for political, administrative, and social affairs, AOF monthly information bulletin, 20 November 1943, p. 9.

25 ANS, 2G46 19, Governor of Senegal Wiltord, annual political report for Senegal 1945–46, 28 August 1947, p. 39–40.

26 »[...] les politiciens autochtones ont marqué une tendance à repousser la collaboration avec les européens et le désir de s'emparer des leviers de commande dans les associations et les groupements politiques. Cette nouvelle ligne de conduite s'est affirmée lors de l'élection du Conseil d'administration des Anciens combattants et Victimes de la Guerre«. ANS, 2G44 19, Governor of the colonies, administrator of the circonscription of Dakar and dependencies, 1944 overall report for Dakar and dependencies, n.d., p. 5.

27 »[...] le thème de l'égalité des droits entre européens et africains est parfois évoqué, d'où les demandes formulées par les anciens Combattants autochtones pour obtenir la qualité de citoyen français et un régime de pensions qui soit le même pour tous«. ANS, 2G45 105, Director general for political, administrative, and social affairs, AOF, January 1945 monthly report, 28 March 1945, unpaginated.

28 Pierre BOURDIEU, *On the State*. Lectures at the College de France, 1989–1992, Cambridge 2014.

hypothesized that in West Africa these administrative practices developed both within and against the colonial state.

The question that arose for the colonial authorities was how to face these demands. While each governor responded in his own words – such as the governor of Côte-d'Ivoire, who interpreted the rise of associations in terms of »the gregarious instinct of African populations«<sup>29</sup>, the general response was to try and exercise political control over combat veterans. The governor of Guinea thus claimed, in 1948, that »sub-sections are being created in almost all districts, and on December 31, the number of paying members, in round numbers, is 3,000. This association represents a non-negligible force, of which the best possible use must be made«<sup>30</sup>. The reincorporation of certain populations was premised mainly on the establishment of a centralized structure. But in trying to exercise control over combat veterans in this way, the colonial administration was playing a dangerous game. In doing so they facilitated the organization of the veterans' movement, out of which original social practices, and then political demands, would then emerge.

### Combat veterans and the bureaucratization of demands

Even before the end of the war, troop demobilization was a problem for the authorities. On 1 December 1944, at the Thiaroye military camp near Dakar, former African prisoners of war who had returned from France and who were awaiting demobilization were executed by their own French officers merely for demanding their accumulated wartime pay<sup>31</sup>. The number who died in this act of violent repression – at a time when the Federation was Gaullist and at peace – is still a matter of controversy today, with estimates ranging from 35 to nearly 400 victims<sup>32</sup>. Thiaroye became one of the engines of political struggle. Former soldiers who had been involved in this »mutiny« were first tried by a military tribunal and sentenced to between one and ten years in prison in March 1945. Their release, which took place in the spring of 1947 during President Auriol's visit to AOF, would become a common cause uniting politicians of all persuasions and from all territories.

And yet, at least judging from the materials that are available to us today, there is little indication of any official protest on the part of veterans' associations, and particularly the largest among them, the Association des anciens combattants et victimes de guerre de l'AOF et du Togo (AACVG). Instead, Auriol's voyage was taken as an opportunity for these combat veterans »to demonstrate the importance of our group, because wherever he went, from Dakar to Niamey, he was welcomed, hailed, and celebrated«<sup>33</sup>. The power relationship to the colonial

29 »l'instinct grégaire des populations africaines«. ANS, 2G46 28, Governor of Côte-d'Ivoire Durand, 1946 annual political report for Côte-d'Ivoire, undated, p. 29.

30 »[...] des sous-sections se créent dans presque toutes les circonscriptions et au 31 décembre, le nombre des cotisants s'élève en chiffre rond à 3000. Cette association constitue une force non négligeable qu'il s'agit d'utiliser au mieux«. ANS, 2G47 22, unsigned, 1947 annual political report for Guinée, n.d., p. 5.

31 Martin MOURRE, *Thiaroye 1944. Histoire et mémoire d'un massacre colonial*, Rennes 2017.

32 On the establishment of this count, see Martin MOURRE, *Thiaroye 1944* (as in n. 31), p. 43–72; Armelle MABON, *Prisonniers de guerre »indigènes«*. *Visages oubliés de la France occupée*, Paris 2019.

33 »[...] de démontrer l'importance de notre groupement, car partout où il passa de Dakar à Niamey, il fut accueilli, salué et acclamé«. *Rapport moral du secrétaire général J. Samuel M'Baye*, in: *Journal du combattant et des victimes des guerres. Organe de la Fédération des anciens combattants de l'AOF et du Togo, Union départementale de l'UFAC*, no. 10, 16 August 1948. The »Journal du Combattant et des victimes des guerres« was the organ of the Fédération des anciens combattants de l'AOF et du Togo, Union départementale de l'UFAC.

authorities driven by the veterans in this association seems to have been more timid than those that featured in the battles being waged in the same period by parliamentarians in Paris and trade unionists in West Africa. This may be because the veterans were involved in clientelist relationships with the colonial administration.

Understanding veterans' politicization at the end of the war, when this was becoming a crucial issue for the colonial authorities, first involves understanding how some actors were able to form autonomous organizations at the time. Looking at this administrative system – its emergence and organization, the various dynamics behind its functioning – thus provides an original perspective from which to understand the structuring of a social and political space in the late 1940s. The AACVG was created in a series of stages. Samuel M'baye, its General Secretary, explained a few years later, in his report to the organization's 1948 annual general meeting, that »as you may imagine, from the start we had to combat the indifference, if not the hostility, of the administrative services, which, having previously considered existing veterans' groups as mere social clubs, scarcely bothered to consider the problems posed by our rights«<sup>34</sup>.

In reality, this discourse to the members of the association partly reflected an argumentative strategy. While, as we saw above, the authorities were worried about the absence of Europeans in decision-making positions, in March 1944 the colonial administration was far from hostile to the organization of combat veterans. On the contrary, the inauguration of the association's board of directors took place under the leadership of the general secretary of the general government of AOF, Yves Digo, himself a combat veteran. In August 1946, after »deliberation by the Board of Directors«<sup>35</sup>, the organization's name changed from »regional association« to »federation«. It is interesting to note that while the term »federation« can be attributed a variety of meanings, it parallels the vocabulary of the political and administrative organization of the French empire's West African territories. Moreover, the association's headquarters were located in Dakar, in the capital of AOF, even though there were more combat veterans in other territories than in the colony of Senegal. Recognition by the colonial authorities – the association was located in the Avenue Gambetta, which became the Avenue Lamine Guèye after independence, a few hundred metres from the Palace of the High Commissioner of AOF – contributed to the group's hegemony.

For the AACVG, becoming a viable interlocutor required real social standing. Beyond the various forms of support that it in fact provided to veterans, the Association not only sought to bring in as many veterans' groups as possible, but also adopted a type of bureaucratic language. The first issue of the newspaper that it published beginning in March 1948 features an organization chart. While the term itself was not used, at the top was the office of the »Federal Board of Directors«. Immediately below were the eight associations, grouped by territories whose delimitation more closely resembled the geography of military than of political life. For Senegal, there were the associations of Senegal-Mauritania and the district of Dakar, and then there were the associations of Guinea, Côte-d'Ivoire, Haute-Volta, Dahomey-Togo, Sudan, and Niger. From the »Journal du Combattant« – which in September 1948 became the »Voix du Combattant« – it is not easy to precisely follow the activities of each of these entities. What is certain is that there was a proliferation of associations, more generally confirming one of the characteristics of this new West African social space that emerged in 1943. For example, in June 1948, an

34 »[...] comme vous pouvez le penser nous avons dès le début à lutter contre l'indifférence sinon l'hostilité des services administratifs qui ayant jusqu'à considéré les groupements d'anciens combattants existants comme de simples amicales ne se sont guère soucié de se pencher sur les problèmes que posaient nos droits«. Ibid.

35 Ibid.

»association de mutilés de guerre«<sup>36</sup> (association of the war wounded) was created at the federal level, and in July an »association locale des anciens prisonniers de guerre du territoire de la délégation de Dakar«<sup>37</sup> (local association of former prisoners of war of the territory of the Dakar delegation). These two associations immediately joined the AACVG.

In addition to these specific categories, there were »sections« representing an even more local level. In May 1947, the Association des anciens combattants de la circonscription de Dakar (Association of combat veterans of the district of Dakar) included »1,564 contributing members grouped into 16 sections« and a year later, »1,595 members grouped into 22 sections«<sup>38</sup>. In Guinea, there were 24 sections and around 15,000 members<sup>39</sup>. There were massive numbers of combat veterans in West Africa after the Second World War. Myron Echenberg notes that »in 1950, over a quarter of a million claims for some sort of military compensation had been registered with French authorities in West Africa«<sup>40</sup>. The political control of these former soldiers had an economic cost, but also a bureaucratic one – that of identifying these men in a context where vital records were in their infancy<sup>41</sup>. The work of the various associations was thus of clear interest to the colonial administration. In parallel, the Liger mission, a major survey to identify former combatants throughout the AOF Federation, was carried out between 1948 and 1950. The proliferation of these different groups also meant that the prerogatives of each had to be defined. This led the AACVG to issue a series of calls to order. In April 1948, the editorial in the »Journal du Combattant« observed that only the Federation of combat veterans was *reconnue d'utilité publique* (recognized as being of public utility, an official status for associations under the 1901 law). Consequently, it explained, it was the only one »authorized to take an official position to approve or, if necessary, defend the interests and prerogatives of combat veterans«<sup>42</sup>. The Federation, then, was seeking to secure a sort of monopoly by excluding other forms of assembly, whose very definition was disputed. The »Journal du Combattant« explained that »the groupement des Grands Mutilés [collective of the grievously wounded], Amicales Régimentaires [regimental social clubs], and Mutualités [mutual societies] will be able to exist under the 1901 law, but will not be considered combat veterans' groups as such«<sup>43</sup>.

36 Constitution d'une association de mutilés de guerre, in: Journal du combattant et des victimes des guerres. Organe de la Fédération des anciens combattants de l'AOF et du Togo, Union départementale de l'UFAC no. 7, 29 June 1948.

37 Communiqué de l'association des prisonniers de guerre, in: Journal du combattant et des victimes des guerres. Organe de la Fédération des anciens combattants de l'AOF et du Togo, Union départementale de l'UFAC, no. 8, 14 July 1948.

38 Journal du combattant et des victimes des guerres. Organe de la Fédération des anciens combattants de l'AOF et du Togo, Union départementale de l'UFAC no. 1, no date [March 1948].

39 Chronique régionale. Guinée française. Compte-rendu de l'Assemblée générale, in: Journal du combattant et des victimes des guerres. Organe de la Fédération des anciens combattants de l'AOF et du Togo, Union départementale de l'UFAC, no. 6, 15 June 1948.

40 MYRON ECHENBERG, Colonial Conscripts: The Tirailleurs Sénégalais in French West Africa, 1857–1960, Portsmouth, NH, London 1991, p. 128.

41 Frederick COOPER, Voting, Welfare and Registration. The Strange Fate of the État-Civil in French Africa, 1945–1960, in: Keith BRECKENRIDGE, Simon SZRETER (eds.), Registration and Recognition, Documenting the Person in World History, Oxford 2012, p. 385–412.

42 »[...] habilitée à prendre officiellement position pour approuver ou défendre, le cas échéant, les intérêts et les prérogatives des Anciens Combattants«. Pas d'équivoque, in: Journal du combattant et des victimes des guerres. Organe de la Fédération des anciens combattants de l'AOF et du Togo, Union départementale de l'UFAC, no. 2, 15 April 1948.

43 »[...] le groupement des Grands Mutilés, les Amicales Régimentaires et les Mutualités pourront exister sous l'empire de la loi de 1901, mais ne pourront être considérés comme groupements d'Anciens Combattants proprement dit«. Ibid.

The editorial continued with a warning: »ONLY ONE SINGLE COMBAT VETERANS' ASSOCIATION CAN EXIST IN EACH REGION OR TERRITORY«<sup>44</sup>.

But while the AACVG seemed to hold a part of its power on the basis of delegation by the colonial administration<sup>45</sup>, this does not tell us how this domination was able to become accepted and legitimized. For this power to work, combat veterans had to submit to it. One way the association won over veterans was by offering various services and benefits. An insert in issue no. 10 of the Journal provided a long list. The AACVG would advise veterans on subjects such as »reforms – pensions – reminders – Rights of the mobilized, widows, orphans and ascendants – Veterans of 1914–1918, external theatres of operations, 1939–1945 – French forces of the interior – Prisoners – Deportees – Civilian victims – Disaster victims – Decorations – Disability cards – Priority cards – Pupils of the Nation – Reserved employment – Agricultural loans, etc. ...«<sup>46</sup>. The association thus demonstrated its mastery of a scarce resource – the very language of the colonial administration – and its leaders sought to make the most of this resource by making it known. The association's power, or at least its legitimacy in the eyes of different actors, thus turned on this symbolic dimension.

In the late 1940s, the association constantly strove to communicate with its members. This communication was expressed in a particular form, and certain rules for the functioning of the organisation were sometimes drily recalled, as in an »avis aux présidents et chefs de sections des Associations régionales« remarking that

»malgré les instructions données de nombreuses lettres requêtes émanant de camarades de diverses centres continuent à être adressées au Président fédéral. Il importe de veiller à ce manque de compréhension en faisant comprendre aux intéressés que toute correspondance doit être adressée sous le couvert des chefs de sections qui doivent d'abord essayer de faire donner satisfaction aux demandes, ou les transmettre après visa à leur siège social pour attribution«<sup>47</sup>.

By using bureaucratic language – for example, the recurring use of the terms »récépissé« (an official document acknowledging receipt of another document) and »circular« in the »Journal« – the leaders of the association produced a certain type of dispositif, in Foucauldian terms.

44 »IL NE PEUT EXISTER DANS CHAQUE RÉGION OU TERRITOIRE QU'UNE SEULE ET UNIQUE ASSOCIATION D'ANCIENS COMBATTANTS«. Pas d'équivoque (as in n. 42).

45 In 1948, the Office des anciens combattants en AOF was founded. This organization was responsible for directly processing certain requests from combat veterans, particularly those related to applications for a *carte de combattant*. This organization functioned as a complement to the association, more than as opposition to it.

46 »Réformes – Pensions – Rappels – Droits du mobilisé, des veuves, orphelins et ascendants – Anciens combattants 1914–1918, TOE, 1939–1945 – FFI – Prisonniers – Déportés – Victimes civiles – Sinistrés – Décorations – Cartes d'invalidités – Cartes de priorités – Pupilles de la Nation – Emplois réservés – Crédit agricole, etc...«. Service de Renseignement du Journal du Combattant, in: Journal du combattant et des victimes des guerres. Organe de la Fédération des anciens combattants de l'AOF et du Togo, Union départementale de l'UFAC, no. 10, 16 August 1948.

47 »[...] notice to presidents and section chiefs of the regional associations«; »[...] despite the instructions given, comrades from various centres continue to address many letters of request to the federal President. It is important to guard against this lack of understanding by ensuring that all those involved understand that correspondence must be addressed under the auspices of section heads, who must first try to satisfy the requests, or transmit them after approval to their head office for assignment«. Avis aux présidents et chefs de sections des Associations régionales, in: Journal du combattant et des victimes des guerres. Organe de la Fédération des anciens combattants de l'AOF et du Togo, Union départementale de l'UFAC, no. 5, 29 May 1948.

## Conclusion

As in the aftermath of the First World War, the colonial administration sought to keep West African combat veterans from the French army in line by co-opting some prominent figures into roles as chiefs, through an employment policy, and by attempting to exercise control over veterans' associations. The difference with respect to the 1920s, aside from the proliferation of associations, was that this time the veterans were also courted by a new generation of politicians who had recently entered various political institutions: territorial assemblies, the Haut Conseil de l'AOF, and of course the Assemblée Nationale in Paris. Various political parties – such as the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (RDA), the SFIO (Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière) and, slightly later, the BDS (Bloc démocratique sénégalaise) in Senegal – joined forces to demand rights for combat veterans, resulting in the law of August 1950. Indeed, some of these party leaders were themselves combat veterans, such as Joseph Conombo in Haute-Volta, and Assane Seck, Abdoulaye Ly, and Léopold Sédar Senghor in Senegal.

Frederick Cooper, in a major study, reopened this debate on the politics of independence in West Africa. In his 2014 book *»Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa«*, Cooper investigates the dynamics, not only organizational but also ideological and conceptual, which led in a period of 15 years from the end of the French colonial empire to the emergence of eight nation-states in West Africa. Cooper's examination of the splintering of this political federation leads him to explore the meanings of notions such as citizenship, sovereignty, and various forms of political inclusion, whether at the level of the colony, the territory, the federation, or the confederation<sup>48</sup>. While these terms did appear in the pages of the *»Journal des Combattants«*, they were not central to the arguments featured in it, and tended to be replaced by notions such as equality and brotherhood. This lexicon had a particular meaning for the French Republic and for the army, but also for certain portions of West African societies. Looking at combat veterans' associations and the bureaucratic language that they invented in the 1940s may help to enable a cultural and social approach to the process of decolonization, and no longer an exclusively political one<sup>49</sup>.

For combat veterans in West Africa, this vocabulary was addressed to a number of ministries in metropolitan France: those of the armies, the budget, combat veterans, and of course the overseas territories. In his work on police forces in Togo, Joël Glasman showed that after the Second World War the qualities expected of new recruits were less those of strength and virility than of administrative discipline – producing notes, writing good reports, etc.<sup>50</sup>. As with combat veterans, here the adoption of the idioms of the colonial administration marked a real change. But it raised the question of who among combat veterans possessed this resource, who would take on these bureaucratic roles. It is noteworthy that two of the most important leaders of the post-war veterans' movement, the Senegalese Papa Douda Seck, president of the AACVG, and Papa Guèye Fall, leader of the Association des anciens prisonniers de guerre (Association of former prisoners of war), were former schoolteachers, trained at the École Normale William Ponty on Gorée island. They therefore possessed a certain mastery of the written word and of the bureaucratic intricacies of the colonial administration.

Political change during the 1940s in AOF thus did not unfold exclusively at the Palais Bourbon or in meetings of trade unionists. It deserves to be studied by way of the broad associative

48 COOPER, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation* (as in n. 3).

49 In his analysis of *»the bureaucratic phenomenon«*, the sociologist Michel Crozier shows the cultural dimension that must be attached to this process. In the case of French-speaking colonial West Africa, this dimension must of course be thought in connection with the French state. See Michel CROZIER, *Le phénomène bureaucratique*, Paris 1963.

50 Joël GLASMAN, *Les corps habillés au Togo. Genèse coloniale des métiers de police*, Paris 2015.

fabric that emerged at the time, and more precisely within the offices and boards of directors of these new organizations. By focusing on a very particular category within the West African population, we can follow the particular social forms within which specific corporate demands were addressed to the colonial administration. This reflection opens fruitful avenues for rethinking the period that led to the independence of the former African colonies, through a closer analysis of transformations in cultural representations of authority beginning in the 1940s and 1950s.