

Richard Leslie Hill, Peter C. Hogg. *A Black corps d'élite: an Egyptian Sudanese conscript battalion with the French Army in Mexico, 1863-1867, and its survivors in subsequent African history.* East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1995. xxi + 214 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87013-339-8; ISBN 978-0-585-37025-5.



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Louis Napoleon's African Allies

The singular circumstance of a Sudanese Muslim battalion fighting against Mexican Republicans at the behest of a French Emperor in support of an Austrian Archduke's claim to an unestablished Mexican throne is the subject of this 1995 examination. A diligently researched study, this is the first book-length English language narrative history of the *Bataillon Negre Egyptien*, the only unit of soldiers of non-colonial African origin to fight in the western hemisphere. *A Black Corps d'Elite*, the finest treatment to date of its subject, represents a significant contribution to the historiography of the Egyptian Sudan prior to the condominium. It is most remarkable for its rich detail and will be useful to those with an interest in France's Mexican adventure and to all students of the Sudan, as well as to anyone looking for a case study of institutional Muslim military slavery in its terminal period.

The authors, Richard Hill and Peter Hogg, were extensively acquainted with the Sudan as officers in the Sudan Civil Service.[1] The late Richard Hill in particular is regarded as a founding father among Sudanist historians. His *Bibliography of the Sudan* (1939) and *A Biograph-*

ical Dictionary of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan (1951) were ground-breaking works when they appeared and are still seen as "essential".[2] In addition to writing numerous books and articles, Hill had a distinguished teaching career on three continents and was the founder of Durham University's Sudan Archive. The present study was published when Professor Hill was ninety-four and it was his last book.

The chain of events that brought the Sudanese to Mexico developed largely through the aspirations of a single political figure. Napoleon III, whose rule is sometimes characterized as an effort to recover France's faded international prestige, actively and materially intruded into Mexican politics from 1861 to 1867 during *la Reforma* period of Mexican history. By this intervention the French Emperor hoped to establish a Catholic "Latin league" of former Spanish and Portuguese colonies centered at Paris with Mexico as the league's first western hemispheric component.

Napoleon was given a pretext for invasion by President Benito Juarez's declaration of a two year moratorium on Mexico's foreign debt. By courting disaffected

elements within Mexican society and engineering the overthrow of the republican government the French Emperor sought to create a compliant puppet regime. In 1862 a French army landed at Veracruz, marched on Mexico City, and ousted Juarez. A new monarchy was inaugurated at the Mexican capital with the installation of the Austrian Archduke Maximilian as emperor in 1864. That a Muslim contingent from an African French ally participated in this episode highlights the unique nature of the action, which is often viewed as a “bizarre interlude” in mid-nineteenth century European/American relations.

Because popular sentiment in Mexico favored Juarez’s government, it proved impossible to withdraw the French troops. Their army threatened by Republican forces, the French commanders needed a secure line of communication between the Mexican capital and their main supply base at Veracruz. As the line approached the Caribbean coast, however, it entered the pestilential lowlands of the *Tierra Caliente*, a region known for its endemic Yellow Fever, which killed Europeans and highland Mexicans alike in “unacceptable” numbers. This necessitated the presence of troops better able to operate in such an environment, and since it was widely believed that “Africans” could better endure tropical diseases, in late 1862 Napoleon requested a regiment of troops from Egyptian ruler Muhammad Said Pasha. The Pasha, although a committed Francophile, was compelled by various diplomatic considerations to limit his compliance with the French Emperor’s wishes. Accordingly, Napoleon got only a third of what he requested when a battalion of four companies of the *19th Regiment of the Line* was dispatched to Mexico.

The battalion had an original strength of 446 officers and men plus one civilian interpreter. It departed Alexandria on a French ship in January 1863. Five men of the battalion died while crossing the Atlantic, rather more died of an “unknown fever” after landing in Mexico, and still more perished during the acclimatization process. By the time the Sudanese took up their duties in the *Tierra Caliente* about four hundred remained.

The Sudanese were geographically limited in their operational range, but still engaged in a variety of missions. Mainly tasked to guard the incomplete railway from Veracruz and to act as train escorts, they occasionally joined other French and allied units in counter-guerrilla operations. In fact, the Sudanese never fought as a battalion while in Mexico. Rather they operated in companies either independently or as parts of larger forces under European commanders.

Quickly the Sudanese established a reputation as skilled fighters among allies and enemies alike. In nearly all of the actions in which they took a part the Sudanese inflicted more casualties than they absorbed, sometimes routing vastly superior Republican forces. From their first engagements defending rail traffic, through the nearly disastrous ambush of *Callejon de la Laja* (2 March 1865), to final withdrawal as one of the last elements of the French army to leave Mexico in March 1867, the Africans demonstrated fierceness in battle, technical proficiency, and soldierly professionalism. Of the 447 men who left Alexandria in 1863, fully 321 returned to Egypt four years later. Of those who did not come back, forty-eight were killed in action or died of wounds and sixty-four died of sickness. Interestingly enough, the Sudanese did indeed seem to be resistant to Yellow Fever. Only one death was attributed to the disease, although other ailments certainly took a severe toll.

As the title implies, the last portion of the book follows the survivors of the battalion upon their return to the Sudan. After being feted by the French in Paris, the unit was broken up when it got back to Egypt. Its members were promoted and redistributed among other units, where the Egyptians hoped the veterans would disseminate French military techniques throughout *al Nizam al-Jadid* (the New Model Army).

The painstaking research that went into this study is evident from the authors’ construction of a biographical record for each man of the battalion, many of whom continued to play important individual parts in Sudanese history. Although most disappeared from the record, some assumed responsible provincial roles in the Sudan. Others fought in Ethiopia during the 1870s. Still others were found on both sides of the Mahdist uprising and of the Anglo-Egyptian reconquest. One of the men of the Mexican expedition, Ali Jifun, rose through the ranks to become *bimbashi* (major) and was with Kitchener at Fashoda in 1898.

As a study of this particular battalion the book is very thorough. Virtually nothing of military significance has been missed. The unit’s organization, supply, and logistics are carefully examined. The hygiene, pay, uniforms, equipment, and armament of the battalion are also well detailed. Morale, explain the authors, remained generally high, perhaps surprisingly so when one considers that the environment was alien and the cause foreign. The antagonisms often created by religious, cultural, and racial differences seemingly did not develop in a militarily detrimental way between the Sudanese and their

allies, although their Mexican enemies accused the Sudanese of savagery for “laws of retaliation” and “no quarter” styles of fighting. Hill and Hogg, however, extenuate the Mexican assertions by characterizing the battalion’s behavior as having been consistent with Afro-Islamic military service.

The book’s greatest weakness lies in its treatment of institutional military slavery. Hill and Hogg insist that “military slavery in Islam” is the “theme of our present work” (p. 188), but offer only a cursory explanation of standard Islamic military slavery and fail to demonstrate where the Sudanese ought to be placed within its ideological framework. Was the Sudanese battalion a characteristic example of Egyptian military slavery? Did Egyptian military slavery differ from institutional military enslavement elsewhere in the Islamic world? It is difficult to answer these questions because the book affords no adequate point of reference.

Islamic military slavery was “true slavery” and it was unique. The men who eventually fought in Mexico were at one point in their lives captured or otherwise handed over as tribute to the Egyptian government. Typically, only later were they chosen to become soldiers and then converted to Islam. But their status as slaves remained, even if their enslavement was of a very prestigious sort. Though the authors do a good job presenting the slave soldiers as a select element within Sudanese society strongly affiliated with an Egyptian government that afforded them many professional opportunities, their decision not to place the battalion within a broader comparative context seems an unfortunate one. Readers, therefore, must be prepared to acquaint themselves with Islamic military slavery through supplemental reading.[3]

Furthermore, despite the authors’ implication that the Sudanese battalion was a characteristic representation of military slavery in Islam, the Sudanese example seems to be rather atypical. Hill and Hogg report that the men were emancipated at the time of enlistment “to avoid the stigma of slavery and [then] held as military conscripts for the rest of their lives” (p. ix), but manumission was not usual in Islamic military slavery. Also, to equate this form of slavery with “life-long conscription” seems an oversimplification of a custom that had no other historical parallel. For these reasons *A Black Corps d’Elite* is not as informative a study as it might have been and the authors may have missed an opportunity to assess idiomatic Islamic military slavery in its final period of development.

There are few published works with which to compare this. Besides Mexican Republican polemics about Sudanese “atrocities” there are some difficult to locate nineteenth century French journal articles. The only other book on the topic is Umar Tussun’s *Butulat al-orta al-sudaniyya al-misriyya fi harb al-Maksik [Exploits of the Egyptian-Sudanese Battalion in the Mexican War]* (Iskanderiah, 1933). English accounts of the battalion are similarly rare.[4] But as all previous examinations of the unit lack the detail and historiographical breadth of the Hill/Hogg collaboration, it is unlikely that *A Black Corps d’Elite* will be displaced anytime soon as the most authoritative treatment of the subject.

The book’s shortcomings are by no means insignificant, but overall it is quite impressive. While an analytical assessment of Islamic military slavery in the nineteenth century remains to be written, *A Black Corps d’Elite* is still a remarkable and informative study. By addressing this under explored African military expedition, the authors have made a real contribution to the literature of both the Egyptian Sudan and to the French adventure in Mexico. Finally, the book’s rich detail brings the life of the ordinary Muslim fighting man into focus with a clarity that will be difficult to surpass.

Notes:

[1] Richard L. Hill worked in railway administration from 1927 to 1945. Peter C. Hogg was in the Sudan Political Service 1935-1955.

[2] The Times (of London), Obituaries, “Richard Hill,” <<http://www.the-times.co.uk/news/pages/resources/library1.n.html?1803623>>, 5 April 1996. The site provides a fond tribute to Professor Hill and a good impression of his scholarly standing.

[3] For an introduction to Muslim military slavery, see Daniel Pipes’s *Slave Soldiers and Islam: The Genesis of a Military System*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981.

[4] The first published English account of the battalion was R. Kirk’s “The Sudanese in Mexico”, *Sudan Notes and Records* XXIV (1941), pp. 113-130. More recent are “An Egyptian battalion in Mexico, 1863-1867”, *Der Islam* 53 (1976), 1, pp. 70-86, by C. and A. Creelius, and John Dunn’s very fine “Africa invades the New World: Egypt’s Mexican adventure, 1863-1867”, *War in History* 4 (1997), 1, pp. 27-34.

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