

# Chapter 1

## Colonies Without Motherlands

### Regime Change

In June and early July 1940, General de Gaulle was the landless leader of a rebel movement. Professor Denis Saurat, who would soon voyage to Free French Africa, recalls the general's desperation during those long weeks: "‘Give me some land,’ the general kept saying, ‘some land that is France. Anywhere. A French base. Somewhere to start from.’"<sup>1</sup> The tiny Franco-British New-Hebrides islands in the South Pacific answered his call on July 20, but this was hardly the base he had hoped for. Chad, Cameroon, Moyen-Congo, Gabon, and Oubangui-Chari became that fateful starting point in late August 1940.

Free French Africa was conceived in London, but born in Fort-Lamy (current N'Djamena), the capital of Chad, on August 26, 1940. The act of conception – de Gaulle's orders to a handful of trusted emissaries – is by far the best known of the two events. I will focus here on aspects that have been largely ignored: the broad context in which FEA and Cameroon came to join the Gaullist camp and the Free French quest for international legitimacy resting on Africa.

One of the leitmotifs in the telling and retelling of the events of August 1940 in FEA and Cameroon involves an emphasis on these territories as second-rank and counterintuitive starting points for the Free French cause. De Gaulle himself described them as "the poorest of our entire empire." Colonel René Boisseau added, "This movement of revolt that

<sup>1</sup> Denis Saurat, *Watch over Africa* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1941), p. 7.

prefigured the magnificent political and military revival undertaken by France thereafter, started in FEA, which is to say the most backwards, the weakest colony.” Another recurring trope involves the designation of the events of August 26, 27, and 28 as “the three glorious days.” The reference to the Revolution of July 1830 in France was no accident. To Boisseau, the events in Africa like the nineteenth-century Parisian insurrection “marked the end of the divine monarchy and the coming to power of popular sovereignty.” With hindsight, this seems a tenuous parallel. Although Vichy’s authoritarianism leaves no doubt, Free France certainly fell short of embodying popular sovereignty, especially in Africa.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the reality behind these territories shifting from Vichy to Free France was messier, less unanimous, and less predetermined than most testimonies allow. As Jean-Pierre Azéma has noted, “[the events of August 1940 in FEA and Cameroon] are more prosaic [than is usually imagined], while remaining singular, as is often the case when a small minority takes charge.”<sup>3</sup>

From its very inception, Free France in London sought to rally colonies, but it lacked colonial experience. Battered but not beaten by the Battle of France, Captain Philippe de Hauteclocque visited the Wellcome Bureau in London on August 1, 1940, to receive vaccination against yellow fever. From there he set off to W. H. Gore and Company to be outfitted for the tropics.<sup>4</sup> The chrysalis process had begun. In less than a month he underwent a profound metamorphosis. He changed his name to François Leclerc so as to avoid reprisals against his family in France, and then transformed into a colonial.<sup>5</sup> By the time he arrived in Cameroon on August 27, he rose to the rank of colonel “as if by enchantment,” noted de Gaulle whimsically.<sup>6</sup>

On August 6, Leclerc along with René Pleven, André Parant, and Claude Hettier de Boislambert, received the improbable mission of bringing African territories over to de Gaulle’s side. Pleven boasted experience as the head of a telephone company, Parant as captain of a unit of Algerian troops during the Battle of France, and Boislambert was an avid big game

<sup>2</sup> De Gaulle, *Mémoires de Guerre*, Vol. 1, p. 144. René Boisseau, *Les trois glorieuses de l'empire, 26–27–28 août 1940* (Paris: Office français d'édition, 1945), pp. 9–13.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Pierre Azéma, 1940, *l'année terrible* (Paris: éditions du Seuil, 1990), p. 303.

<sup>4</sup> AML, Leclerc 5a. Edgard de Larminat, *Chroniques irrévérencieuses* (Paris: Plon, 1962), p. 124.

<sup>5</sup> Leclerc possessed some experience here, having previously served in Morocco.

<sup>6</sup> Charles de Gaulle, *Mémoires de guerre*, Vol. 1, p. 120.

hunter who had served as liaison officer with the British. Of the three men, it was Boislambert who passed for a “specialist of black Africa”<sup>7</sup>— he who would end up a prisoner of Vichy after being captured during the failed Dakar operation of September 1940. Soon, Edgard de Larminat joined the team of conspirators. A veteran of the Battle of Verdun, this career officer possessed some colonial experience. On August 18, in Lagos, the group divvied up their roles. A week later, from the slice of Cameroon under British mandate in the shadow of Mount Cameroon, as well as from the shores of the immense Congo River that separated Leopoldville (now Kinshasa) from Brazzaville, these Gaullist agents prepared to seize FEA and Cameroon from Vichy’s clutches. They secured vital support from sympathetic Belgian and British officials. At the same time, from within, Governor Félix Eboué was poised to announce the rallying of Chad, which would mark the operation’s starting point on August 26. The conspirators had established contacts within FEA, not merely with Eboué, but also with Africans who wished to continue the struggle. At this point, despite some unrest, French Congo, Cameroon, Oubangui-Chari, Chad, and Gabon had remained faithful to Pétain’s Vichy regime. The ragtag team of adventurers sent from London to change this state of affairs bore code names that could have come from Hollywood: Sullivan, Douglas, and Charles. They were lightly armed. Cameroon was taken with seventeen pistols. As Jean Lacouture has observed, although the scheme succeeded, it resembled some bizarre “giant automobile rally,” whose course was quite simply “outlandish.”<sup>8</sup> I will now analyze several dimensions of the “three glorious days,” which is to say the rallying of Chad on August 26, 1940, Cameroon on the 27th, and French Congo on the 28th.

### British Proximity and Support

Like the rallying of the New Hebrides and the tiny French colonies in India that same year, the “three glorious days” were largely conditioned by British aid and proximity. In fact, some historians have rejected the very term of “rallying” altogether to describe the events that concern us. Outside of Chad, they contend, all of the other territories went over to de Gaulle under external pressure, Vichy officials often having to be led

<sup>7</sup> Charles de Gaulle, *Lettres, notes et carnets*, p. 72.

<sup>8</sup> Jean Lacouture, *De Gaulle*, Vol. 1 (Paris: le Seuil, 1984), p. 433.

away at gunpoint.<sup>9</sup> I would add that the contiguity of British colonies like Nigeria proved decisive, as well as the broader 1940 geopolitical context. It bears reminding that in June 1940, Churchill and Jean Monnet had contemplated the creation of a single Franco-British citizenship, a veritable union between the two nations. In the colonial sphere, following discussions in March 1940, a permanent liaison office had been established linking the British Colonial Office and the French Ministry of the Colonies.<sup>10</sup> Locally in FEA and Cameroon, the very first rumblings of resistance involved just such a rapprochement with Britain. On June 22, 1940, the very day that France signed the armistice with Germany, an administrator in the Sanaga Maritime region of Cameroon reported to his superiors that “a few madcaps descended on Douala with the intention, they stated, of finding the British Consul and putting him in charge of Cameroon’s destiny.” The district head finally dissuaded them from this undertaking, by arguing that it risked “spreading concern among natives.”<sup>11</sup> Sangfroid in the face of the colonized was no small matter as the motherland crumbled.

The tragic sinking of French naval vessels by the British at Mers el-Kébir Algeria on July 3, 1940, and the resulting death of 1,297 French sailors, sowed doubt in many a French official in Africa. Yet it did not scuttle a Franco-British rapprochement that was already strong in the regions that concern us. From the outside, in August 1940, British officials in Africa did their utmost to aid de Gaulle’s delegates. The Secretary General in Nigeria, Miles Clifford, put Leclerc in touch with Frenchmen who had left Cameroon, relayed telegrams to him, handed him numerous maps, and provided him with a car. All of this was accompanied by attentive letters drafted in shaky French – but in French nonetheless. Clifford accomplished the task while abiding by the rules. On September 11, 1940, he asked Leclerc to kindly reconstitute the seventeen revolvers he had lent him in Victoria, weapons that had allowed the Free Frenchman to take Cameroon a few days prior. The Victoria police force now wished to see them returned.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Muracciole, p. 207; Marc Michel, “Les ralliements à la France Libre en 1940,” paper delivered at the round table “La seconde guerre mondiale et son impact en Afrique,” University of Aix-en-Provence, February 11, 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Cécile Istasse-Moussinga, “La collaboration de guerre franco-britannique en Afrique,” *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains* 181 (January 1996), p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> ANCMR 2AC 11190A, Edéa to Yaoundé, June 22, 1940.

<sup>12</sup> AML, Leclerc 6a, file 1.

Meanwhile, Boislambert evoked an £80,000 loan in cash, “handed to me by our English friends, in exchange for a simple receipt” aimed at funding the rallying of FEA in August 1940.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, Edgard de Larminat obtained aid from the governor of Nigeria, Sir Bernard Bourdillon. The latter provided him with the aircraft he used to reach Leopoldville. Once he crossed the river into Brazzaville, Lord Hailey and Frederick Pedler of the British economic mission in the Belgian Congo supported and underwrote Larminat’s efforts.<sup>14</sup> Pedler spent much of September scrounging for funds to keep Free French Africa afloat. This is evidenced by his September 15, 1940, diary entry that cites ongoing discussions to “provide ready money in French Equatorial Africa.” Between September 23 and 24, he mentions raising 434,000 francs “for Larminat . . . on Hailey’s personal guarantee” and visiting the bank in Brazzaville to discuss future loans. The following days saw Pedler secure several hundred thousand pounds, to be placed “at Larminat’s disposal.” By the end of the month, Pedler and consorts came to realize that FEA required an immediate injection of 30 million francs to pay its bills. Thereafter, both parties agreed to a monthly British contribution of £200,000.<sup>15</sup>

One can speak of an enduring dependency of Free French Africa on Great Britain and its American suppliers. Consider the list of supplies obtained by Leclerc’s forces in Chad in 1940 and 1941, on which one can find ginger ale, Heinz sandwiches, bacon, assorted teas, and Sunlight brand soap.<sup>16</sup> And yet, Larminat remained adamant that Free France appear to be completely independent, and resented any overt sign of British or Belgian assistance.<sup>17</sup>

Chad swung over first to Free France on August 26 thanks in large part to ongoing British support. On June 27, Eboué had established contact with Theodore Adams, the Chief Commissioner of the Northern Provinces of Nigeria. Three days later, Lieutenant Reynes and Lieutenant-Colonel Marchand drew up a list of men in Chad willing to continue the fight against Germany, and prepared to cross the border into Nigeria to do so. Shortly thereafter, a proponent of Pétain, Commandant Perry, got hold of the list and ripped it to shreds. Eboué’s desire to maintain the

<sup>13</sup> Claude Hettier de Boislambert, *Les fers de l’espoir* (Paris: Plon, 1978), p. 201.

<sup>14</sup> Philippe Oulmont, “Le haut-commissaire,” p. 63; Robin Pedler, *The Free French: Beaconsfield and Africa* (Beaconsfield: self-published, 2006), p. 31.

<sup>15</sup> BD Mss Afr s 1814, box 18, 38/13 to 38/16 and 38/192 and box 19, Hailey to Bourdillon, September 28, 1940.

<sup>16</sup> AML, Leclerc 6b.

<sup>17</sup> BD Mss Afr s 1814, box 19, FP A2, 32–33.

alliance with Britain and continue the struggle was evidently not unaniously shared. On July 6 and 7, Adams engaged with further talks with Eboué and Marchand. On the 8th, Eboué's Secretary General Henri Laurentie embarked for Lagos where he met with the Governor Sir Bernard Bourdillon. As Eboué biographer Brian Weinstein has observed, the following weeks proved challenging for the Guyanese-born governor. He had not yet received the ironclad guarantee that he sought from Britain, yet he still had to convince recalcitrant military and administrative personnel in Chad, all the while dealing with the staunch Vichyites in Dakar and Zinder (Niger), without arousing suspicion. Henri Laurentie worked on persuading local skeptics. He contended that failing to join the British camp would spell economic isolation for FEA. This, in turn, could trigger a native revolt against the French. On July 20, Governor Pierre Boisson landed in Fort-Lamy where he tried to coax Eboué into adopting Vichy's position. The move nearly backfired on the spot. Boisson irked several of his interlocutors, one of whom even suggested that Eboué arrest him there and then.<sup>18</sup>

On August 4, the British issued the guarantee Eboué sought. The assurances were aimed at any and all French colonies that might rally Free France. Addressed from Churchill to de Gaulle, they read: "Until such time as an independent and constitutional authority has been re-established on free French soil we shall do everything in our power to maintain the economic stability of all French oversea territories, provided they stand by the Alliance [with Britain]."<sup>19</sup> Between August 2 and 5, British envoys hammered out the details of a commercial accord in Fort-Lamy.<sup>20</sup> While the basic principles were in place, the British government still hesitated on the details. Churchill worried that action in FEA and Cameroon might undercut an operation he considered more important: the attack on Dakar. Conversely, de Gaulle and the British War Office deemed that one operation need not interfere with the other. They managed to convince Churchill on this score.<sup>21</sup> Given the ongoing Franco-British uncertainty about which colony to target first, on August 6,

<sup>18</sup> Brian Weinstein, *Eboué* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 238–40, 243. Bois Lambert, p. 198. ANOM 1Affpol 891, details on FEA entry into "dissidence." ANOM DSM 262, file 3, report on the events of July and August at Fort-Lamy. The events are also recounted in BD Mss Afr s 1085.

<sup>19</sup> ANOM Cab 49, 288, Churchill to de Gaulle.

<sup>20</sup> ANOM DSM 262, 3, Report on the events of July and August at Fort-Lamy.

<sup>21</sup> Desmond Dinan, *The Politics of Persuasion: British Policy and French African Neutrality, 1940–1942* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1988), p. 55. On the support of the War Office for de Gaulle, also see Jean-Christophe Notin, *Leclerc* (Paris: Perrin, 2005), p. 90.

1940, de Gaulle issued modular instructions to Leclerc, René Pleven, Claude Hettier de Boislambert, and André Parant, setting the following objective: “Establish and maintain liaison with the British authorities in Gambia, Sierra-Leone, Gold Coast, and Nigeria.”<sup>22</sup> The presence of the first three British colonies in West Africa reminds us that the Dakar card was very much in play. Yet it was Nigeria that would prove decisive in its aid, thanks to the borders it shared with both Cameroon and Chad. On August 7, London decided to assist concretely in the rallying of FEA and Cameroon, by providing naval assistance if necessary. This was no easy decision: the United Kingdom faced many other pressing concerns including the Battle of Britain, which had begun in earnest.<sup>23</sup>

On August 13, advanced negotiations took place between representatives of Chad and Nigeria. Governor Bourdillon in person assured the Gaullist delegation of his spirit of cooperation. Both sides then took stock of the alarming economic asphyxiation that FEA was experiencing, and of Vichy’s refusal to engage in talks with the United Kingdom. This brought the Gaullist delegation to ask whether Bourdillon “was prepared to discuss the economic situation of Chad with them, a situation which General de Gaulle ardently wishes to resolve in a particularly favorable manner.” The rallying of Chad depended on a proactive Gaullist stance concerning Chad’s economic interests, neglected by Vichy. The French delegation offered the United Kingdom the use of Fort-Lamy’s airfield and the Benue River. The British, in turn, agreed to purchase Chad’s production in pounds sterling, via Nigerian banks, and to guarantee Chad’s supply of oil. The two sides even settled on a currency conversion rate of 176 francs per pound. Eboué was asked to inform the United Kingdom of Chad’s needs in petrol for the following two months. This very first protocol, held at the French colonial archives, marked the opening up of landlocked Chad.<sup>24</sup>

The alliance with the United Kingdom was once again put forward as a prime motive in the wake of Chad’s official rallying to the Gaullist cause on August 26. At least this is what one recalcitrant non-commissioned officer (NCO) posted in Fort-Archambault contended following his personal refusal to join de Gaulle.<sup>25</sup> According to Sergeant Raymond Waag, Chad’s military leader, Lieutenant-Colonel Pierre Marchand, had

<sup>22</sup> AML 5a, Charles de Gaulle, August 6, 1940.

<sup>23</sup> Dinan, p. 55.

<sup>24</sup> ANOM Cab 55.

<sup>25</sup> This 4,000-man-strong garrison hesitated for two days before finally declaring for de Gaulle thanks to François Ingold’s impassioned speech, which left only a few dissenting in the end.

clumsily cited only economic motives to justify Chad's move to join Free France. In a speech at Fort-Archambault, Marchand apparently dwelled on the financial troubles of the Cotonfranc Corporation, Chad's main economic engine. Marchand allegedly pronounced the words "we have rallied Chad to English Nigeria" – a statement that needs to be read with caution given Vichy's propensity for amalgamating Free France with Britain. In fact, Leclerc was quick to counter such claims. In a speech in Yaoundé on August 29, he insisted on Free France's independence.<sup>26</sup> However, other sources do lend credence to Waag's point. Many across FEA were evoking a spirit of "joining Britain" – for better or for worse, in August 1940. Take the Spiritan missionaries in Mouyoungasi, French Congo, who confided in their diary on August 28: "Cameroon, Chad, and Oubangui have rallied to England's side. Congo has not yet decided but its isolation will probably make it follow suit." Two days later, the diary evokes a "coup" in Brazzaville, and adds: "we too have now rallied to England."<sup>27</sup>

In British circles, the explanation for the events of August 26–28 had everything to do with British economic support. Historian G. E. Maguire cites a report from the British Treasury, likely dating from 1941, which indicates: "It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that the whole course of the Free French Movement in Africa was economic . . . The unanimity of popular sentiment which made possible the coups d'état at Douala and Brazzaville was very largely due to the fact that French Equatorial Africa and the French Cameroons were at that time faced with economic ruin and were, therefore, swayed by our offers of prompt economic assistance."<sup>28</sup>

### Upheaval

The changeover to Free French rule marked an unprecedented colonial rupture since the loss of a vast part of the French empire after the defeat of Napoleon. Free France's followers doubtlessly claimed to embody true France in 1940. Yet this did not alter the fact that the French empire

<sup>26</sup> ANOM, GGAEF 5D 187, Haag to Pétain, April 23, 1941. On the hesitation of the garrison of Fort-Archambault, see Boisseau, pp. 19–20. On Eboué, see ANOM 1Affpol 891, p. 18. On the Yaoundé declaration, see ANS, 16G 4, report on the events of Cameroon. Viewable at the ANOM on microfilm 14Miom 2284.

<sup>27</sup> CSE, 3J1.19b, diary entries for August 28 and 30 1940.

<sup>28</sup> G. E. Maguire, *Anglo-American Policy Towards the Free French* (Oxford: Macmillan Press, 1995), p. 115.



had been split and that a group of colonies and one country under mandate rule had left metropolitan France's orbit. For Free France, functioning without a metropole involved a series of risks. Territories might be chipped away by other powers (a perpetual Gaullist fear); the empire might come undone; a constitutional void resulting from the absence of a central power might sap the movement's legitimacy; the colonial or mandate relationship might be strained or even broken.<sup>29</sup>

If Chad rallied first, it was no doubt in part because of its leaders' convictions, but also because of the territory's strategic location. Félix Eboué's motives have been well studied. He was certainly moved in part by the discriminatory nature of the regime that was taking shape at Vichy. The fact that he was black, a freemason (admittedly not a very fervent one), and a member of the SFIO, or French Socialist party, likely weighed in. Yet Brian Weinstein is correct to suggest that none of these factors should be considered overriding. After all, he reminds us that the black Guadeloupean deputy Gratien Candace, the former freemason, and Vichy Minister Marcel Peyrouton, and the purported socialist colonial Governor Hubert Deschamps, all remained unwaveringly faithful to Vichy, never allowing internal contradictions to get in the way.<sup>30</sup> Let us therefore return to geostrategic explanations and set aside monocausal ones. On June 27, in Brazzaville, Pierre Boisson received the order to demilitarize the border between Chad and Mussolini's Libya. Five days after the armistice, the hour of placating both Axis powers had rung. This fueled Eboué's concerns. The governor-general dreaded the possibility of an Italian armistice commission setting foot in Chad.<sup>31</sup> He therefore sought to remain in the war at all cost, knowing full well that his colony lay on a potential military front line. Before taking action, however, he quite sensibly sought assurances from London, which he received.<sup>32</sup>

At eight o'clock on August 26, 1940, Governor Félix Eboué and Lieutenant-Colonel Pierre Marchand solemnly entered the main chamber of Fort-Lamy's city hall. The ensuing speech was read by Marchand, the more lukewarm of the two men toward Gaullism. The idea was to display complete unity. Pleven, Eboué, and Laurentie had drafted the

<sup>29</sup> On the fear of imperial disintegration see Cassin, p. 216.

<sup>30</sup> Weinstein, pp. 249–50. On Eboué being a tepid freemason, see Raymond Guillaneuf's entry in the following edited volume: Josette Rivallain and Hélène d'Almeida-Topor eds., *Eboué, soixante ans après* (Paris: SFHOM, 2008), p. 45.

<sup>31</sup> ANOM GGAEF 5D 290, Boisson June 27, 1940. Weinstein, p. 237. Lacouture, p. 433.

<sup>32</sup> Larminat, pp. 128–29.

seminal declaration.<sup>33</sup> It began by asserting that Chad had fulfilled its responsibilities. It had initially obeyed the motherland: “the garrisons of Chad submitted in sadness but in the strictest discipline to an armistice that was reached without consulting the French empire.” The fact that the colonies were never consulted was surely nothing new, but here it was utilized to justify the territory’s entry into dissidence. The text went on to explain that over the last two months the “metropolitan government” placed “under the evident constraint of the enemy” had attempted to force the colonies to “multiply hostile measures towards Great Britain and to impose a policy of economic isolation on French Africa which would lead both native and European populations to ruin.”<sup>34</sup> A thesis was being established, one that would be crystallized by the organic decision of November 16, 1940. The thesis held that the metropolitan government was not only unfree, but also illegitimate, having gone so far as to abolish the very term “republic.” Furthermore, the metropolitan government now operated against colonial interests, and those of yesterday’s ally. It is no doubt significant that administrator Jean Belay, who refused to be swayed by the August 26 declaration, later remembered it as having signaled “Chad’s independence.”<sup>35</sup>

In point of fact, Eboué, Laurentie, and Pleven contended that Chad now found itself without a free and responsible metropole. It was not so much that Chad had seceded, as France was no longer in a position to fulfill its proper function as a motherland. This presented an obvious contradiction. Free France insisted on maintaining what René Cassin defined as “the unity of the French empire as an international personality indivisibly linked to France”<sup>36</sup> – a legal point on which the great Free French legal mind insisted – while at the same time untethering FEA and Cameroon from the Vichy government, and hence from mainland France. The balancing act only really worked if one could conceive of the motherland as being portable.

The authors of the August 26 declaration decided to “proclaim the union of the territories and troops that protect them with the Free French forces of General de Gaulle” and to “immediately undertake economic planning with neighboring British colonies.” They then allowed themselves a colonial barb directed at the motherland: “Chad was won to

<sup>33</sup> Weinstein, p. 246; Boisseau, p. 16.

<sup>34</sup> SHD, 11P 21, declaration of 26 August 1940.

<sup>35</sup> Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac, *La France libre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996) pp. 180–181. ANOM DSM 262, 3, Jean Belay report.

<sup>36</sup> Cassin, p. 217.

France despite the indifference of its central authorities; faithful to the spirit of our elders, the Chadians will keep these territories French, come what may.”<sup>37</sup> Here we see a clear articulation of colonial *esprit de corps*. The authors predicted that salvation would come from the empire, while observing that the empire in question had been built in spite of the metropole’s indifference. Here the colonial army and lobby expressed revenge against colonial skeptics. But mostly the declaration both rested on and fostered an enduring myth, according to which the French were indifferent to their empire, despite its manifest importance to France’s rank and future. In this sense, Gaullism of the first hour undertook a kind of colonial self-marginalization: the Resistance was colonial, Chad forged ahead, alone if need be, in its martial tradition. De Gaulle’s external resistance was draping itself in the mantle of the French army’s conquest of Africa.

A few days later Colonel Leclerc pronounced Cameroon’s “political and economic independence.” He added, “Thanks to the agreements reached with the British government, we are bringing Cameroon assurances of economic revival.” As for the origins of Cameroon’s shift to Free France, Leclerc attributed it to “a response from General de Gaulle to the calls that reached him.” He concluded with a resounding: “Long live France! Long live free Cameroon!”<sup>38</sup> No doubt he used the term “independence” to signify a break with Vichy; no doubt the expression “free Cameroon” alluded to German ambitions. Yet the words were out, pregnant with meaning, and starkly contrasting with the August 26 declaration that insisted on Chad’s eternal ties to France. In many ways, August 1940 marked a moment of rupture.

A close analysis reveals many holes and contradictions in these early arguments. The colonies were breaking with the motherland so as to guarantee the rights of native and white populations, but none of these populations had been consulted. Admittedly, some individuals had called on de Gaulle to intervene. Yet could these isolated requests really be mistaken for collective will? The representatives of the colonies proclaimed themselves judges of the motherland’s freedom of action, withdrawing in the process that decision from General de Gaulle, whose constitutional legitimacy in August 1940 seems equally uncertain. Cameroon’s independence proclamation emanated from a maverick representative of the French army, who held the rank of captain only a few weeks before.

<sup>37</sup> SHD, 11P 21, August 26 declaration.

<sup>38</sup> AML Leclerc, 5a, poster.

None of this removes from the daring of Governor Eboué and General de Gaulle's project; on the contrary, the institutional haze derived from this audacity and vice versa.

### Local and Imperial Stakes

The regime changes in French central Africa in late August 1940 involved grafting General de Gaulle's vision in London onto a local context. In Cameroon, as elsewhere, the French community was divided in these troubled times. On June 25, the man at the helm of the mandate territory, Commissioner Richard Brunot, indicated that "Cameroon is unanimous and firm in wanting to continue the fight alongside British Nigeria." But the context was shifting rapidly, and Brunot "equivocated," notes Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilac. According to Marc Michel, Brunot's strategy or coping mechanism involved "tacking" to and fro between different interests and imperatives. Brunot was certainly not alone in hesitating at the time. Recalling this period in FEA, future Olympic medalist René Lemoine wrote, "Gaullists and Vichyites one day had changed their mind the next. Only to shift back the day following!"<sup>39</sup> Bernard Bourdillon's secretary Robert Wright recalls preparing to receive Brunot with a bottle of Vichy water, then scrambling to replace it with champagne, after Brunot professed his loyalty to de Gaulle. In fairness, it should be pointed out that Brunot faced intense pressure from within and without. Even the Free French in London recognized that his position had become "very difficult" over the course of July.<sup>40</sup>

In a bid to stem the tide of opposition to the armistice across Cameroon, on July 5, a group of Pétain supporters distributed flyers in Yaoundé's hotels that read as follows: "The government of France, led by men like Pétain, Weygand, Darlan, and Colson, whose patriotism is unquestionable, is the legal government. The entire French empire has closed rank behind Pétain. Distance yourself from maneuvers aimed at

<sup>39</sup> ANOM GGAEF 5D 290, Yaoundé, June 25, 1940. Crémieux-Brilhac, *La France libre*, p. 143. Marc Michel, "Leclerc et l'Afrique Noire," in Christine Levisse-Touzé, ed., *Du capitaine de Hauteclouque au général de Gaulle* (Brussels: Complexe, 2000), p. 261. René Lemoine testimony, cited by par Yves Boulvert, *Bangui, 1889-1989* (Paris: Sepia, 1994), p. 188.

<sup>40</sup> AMC Boislabert F50 (2) Africa (1940) note on Cameroon dated July 31, 1940. On the champagne and Vichy water (an image right out of the film *Casablanca*), see BD MSS Afr. s 1085, folio 10b.

dividing Frenchmen.”<sup>41</sup> On July 6, Brunot asked the United Kingdom for “the necessary help . . . to secure the welfare of the population and to maintain the country’s economic activity.”<sup>42</sup>

In Cameroon, rumors abounded between June and August 1940. Some imagined General Francisco Franco’s troops massing on the Spanish Guinean border ready to invade; others evoked the imminent arrival of a German armistice commission. Like many others, Raymond Dronne saw an invisible German hand lurking behind the Spanish Guinea border. According to him, one of the Germans present on the island of Fernando-Po “has already given himself the title of governor of Cameroon.” In this extremely tense context, a brawl was narrowly avoided between pro and anti-British sides when Pétainist Admiral Charles Platon, furious at Albion since Dunkirk, visited Cameroon between July 20 and 22, 1940.<sup>43</sup> Platon’s visit unquestionably “accelerated” what one British report termed the “deterioration of the political situation.” On July 23, a slightly embarrassed Commissioner Brunot informed British official Godfrey Allen that he had received the order to prevent British planes from flying over French Cameroon.<sup>44</sup>

Another high-ranking Vichy official, Commissioner to French Africa Pierre Boisson, also intervened frequently. He initially called on the leaders of French territories in Africa to temporize, then, after the tragedy of Mers el-Kébir, to ignore the British siren calls.<sup>45</sup> Over the course of August, Boisson’s messages became more explicit, his language sharper. On August 12, he warned Governor Husson in Brazzaville to be on the lookout for possible Gaullist landings, enjoining local African chiefs to alert the army if such an attack occurred. On August 20, he informed all rulers of French territories in Africa that it was henceforth illegal for French nationals to set foot in British territories.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>41</sup> ANS, 16G 4, Brunot, confidential information. Viewable at the ANOM on microfilm 14Miom 2284.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> ANS, 16G 4, report on the dissidence in Cameroon. Viewable at the ANOM on microfilm 14Miom 2284. Raymond Dronne, *Leclerc et le serment de Koufra* (Paris: Editions du Temps, 1965), p. 47. On the rumors, also see Pascal-Henry Biwolé, “Le ralliement et l’œuvre de Leclerc au Cameroun” paper for the Ecole supérieure militaire de Saint-Cyr, June 2002, p. 22.

<sup>44</sup> BD Mss Afr. s. 424, folio 241.

<sup>45</sup> Boislambert, p. 196.

<sup>46</sup> ANOM, 217 APOM, box 2, Telegram 73 from Boisson dated August 12; Telegram C28.

Cameroon constituted a special case. As a country under League of Nations mandate, it was governed by different rules than colonies. In the wake of World War I, Cameroon had been divided into two mandates, one British the other French. This proximity facilitated dialogue between the two allies. A former German colony prior to the Great War, Cameroon also crystallized both intense fears of a return of German influence in this part of Africa, and French paranoia concerning possible Germanophilia in some African circles.<sup>47</sup> Police investigations appeared to confirm Free French fears. One reported on August 24 that “the native Diboti Ekwalla, an employee at the King company in Yaoundé, publicly expressed joy at the news that Germany had defeated France.”<sup>48</sup> Pro-German and anti-colonial sentiment merged seamlessly in French security reports. It seems safe to conclude that the fear of a German return played an important role in the events of August 1940 in Cameroon.<sup>49</sup>

Cameroon’s unique status also conditioned the events of the “three glorious days.” In the wake of the armistice, Commissioner Brunot asserted that Cameroon was henceforth under League of Nations control, given the annihilation of the metropole that had previously held tutelage over the territory in the League’s name.<sup>50</sup> This argument became an important thread for the anti-Vichy camp on location. On July 5, Miles Clifford, the head of a British liaison mission in Cameroon, delivered an impassioned speech before Yaoundé’s chamber of commerce. Seeking to minimize the damage caused by Mers el-Kébir two days prior, he evoked the spirit of Franco-British cooperation. Then he played his trump card: “There is one more important consideration, a moral question. This territory does not belong to France but to Africans. It was conferred to a democratic government representing the authority of the League of Nations, which served it well. This government is no longer free to follow the policy of the League of Nations. It has fallen under the

<sup>47</sup> In British Cameroon, the situation was arguably even more fraught, given that Germans overtly sympathetic to Hitler still controlled several sectors of the economy prior to 1940. Anthony Ndi, “The Second World War in Southern Cameroon and its impact on mission-state relations,” in David Killingray and Richard Rathbone, ed., *Africa and the Second World War* (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 1986), pp. 206–10.

<sup>48</sup> Yaoundé was a small capital of 9,080 inhabitants. André Franqueville, *Yaoundé, Construire une capitale* (Paris: ORSTOM, 1984), p. 12. On the Ekwalla case, see: ANCMR 2AC 11190A, note to the director of political affairs, August 24, 1940.

<sup>49</sup> On this point, see Lacouture, p. 434.

<sup>50</sup> ANS, 16G 4, report on the origins of the de Gaulle movement in Cameroon. Viewable at the ANOM on microfilm 14Miom 2284.

boot of a man, a monster, who has called Africans sub-human.”<sup>51</sup> Thus, at this critical moment, a British representative cautioned his audience in Yaoundé that France’s presence in Cameroon rested on an institution despised by the Third Reich, and on France’s status as a democracy. For good measure, he added a reminder of Hitler’s racism toward Africans.

Everything and anything having to do with Germany assumed serious proportions. While Brunot hesitated in June and July of 1940, he transferred to the British authorities the German inmates held in French Cameroon (Germans had been interned since the declaration of war in 1939). This step contravened the orders received from France. In Yaoundé on July 20, 1940, a soldier supporting Pétain by the name of Jean Floch wrote an outraged letter underlining that in both Togo and Syria, territories presenting institutional and historical analogies with Cameroon, the French authorities had rigorously respected the clauses of the June 22 armistice; only Cameroon had opted to take a different path.<sup>52</sup> However, according to the testimony of Lieutenant François Denise, Commissioner Brunot soon regretted his bold decision, and was reprimanded for it by Admiral Platon during his passage in Cameroon. And yet even after issuing this admonishment, the admiral was not fully reassured by Brunot’s position: he noted the presence of a British war ship, the HMS *Dragon*, in Douala’s harbor, a major infraction to the line advocated by the French government since Mers el-Kébir. On July 27, he observed French and British flags flying in unison at Douala’s airport. When he uttered an acerbic remark on the topic, he was harangued by the head of the public works department, Roger Mauclère. Mauclère’s colleagues had elected him leader of the local Gaullist current. He evoked a past defeat of France when he proclaimed, “After the capitulation of Metz and Sedan in 1870, France continued to fight and won victories, saving its honor; and yet at the time France was alone and did not have its immense empire behind it as it does today.”

That very day Mauclère contacted General de Gaulle in London, requesting instructions. On the 30th, he called for aid from Nigeria. The following day, de Gaulle telegraphed him underlining “the necessity to proclaim Cameroon’s provisional autonomy for the duration of

<sup>51</sup> “Le Colonel Clifford définit l’attitude de l’Angleterre,” *L’Eveil du Cameroun*, July 9, 1940, reproduced in ANS, 16G 4, viewable at the ANOM on microfilm 14Miom 2284.

<sup>52</sup> ANS, 16G 4, Floch to commander of police forces in Cameroon, July 30, 1940. Viewable at the ANOM on microfilm 14Miom 2284.

the war.”<sup>53</sup> At this juncture, French military personnel were deserting in ever-growing numbers in Cameroon. Persuaded that Boisson and Platon had brought Brunot back into Pétain’s orbit, these men began leaving for British Cameroon on and around July 30. All signs seemed to point to the tide now turning in favor of the Pétain camp. Starting on July 30, 1940, the main newspaper, *L’Eveil du Cameroun*, removed the remarkable running title it had been displaying for weeks on its front page: “Franco-British Empire.”

In this sense, the operation conducted by the roughly forty men who toppled the Vichy presence in Cameroon on August 27, 1940, occurred at the eleventh hour, at a time when momentum had actually shifted away from the Gaullist side. The main actors of the coup de main were broken down as follows by Christian Laigret: eleven men on the inside in Douala, another seven in Yaoundé, and twenty-two men including Leclerc and Boislambert coming from Tiko in British Cameroon by pirogue under driving rain. Laigret’s distinction between those on the inside and the outside is at once helpful and misleading insofar as many of the men on board the pirogues were Frenchmen from Cameroon who had left for British territories over the previous two weeks. They were therefore returning to French Cameroon, more than invading it per se.

Colonial methods prevailed during the nocturnal crossing on the evening of August 26 and the morning of August 27. The paddlers, who hailed from Calabar in Nigeria, had been given only the vague and misleading sense of their mission. British official Godfrey Allen had falsely depicted the expedition as comprising: “French officers who had left the French Cameroons because they did not get on with their officer commanding; as this officer had now been replaced, they wished to return with as little fuss as possible.” According to Lieutenant Denise, the paddlers were deemed too slow, leading the Free French team to beat and whip them. When the paddlers expressed concern about accosting clandestinely in Douala under the cover of darkness, Adjudant Henri Drouilh threatened to throw them overboard. The Nigerians subsequently complained to the British that the Free French had behaved as “rascals.”

<sup>53</sup> AML, Leclerc 15, André Rogez, the de Gaulle movement in Cameroon; AML Leclerc 5a, note from Denise; ANS, 16G 4, report on the rebellion in Cameroun, viewable at the ANOM on microfilm 14Miom. 2284. Théodore Ateba Yene, *Cameroun, mémoire d’un colonisé* (Paris: l’Harmattan, 1988), p. 27. Christian Laigret, *Sur les chemins de l’union française* (Châteauroux: Editions Novelty, 1949), pp. 41, 48; Boislambert, p. 198, Adolphe Sicé, *L’AEF et le Cameroun au service de la France* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1946), p. 113. Dinan, p. 54. De Gaulle, *Lettres, notes et carnets, 1940-1941*, p. 69.



Allen suggests that they only agreed to continue paddling after negotiating a pay hike. According to Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Quilichini, the members of the expedition ended up having to row themselves near the end of the crossing.

Some limited planning had been undertaken in advance: Leclerc had sent a message – again by pirogue – to known Gaullist supporters in Douala, asking for their aid, and for vehicles on his arrival. On August 28, in the capital Yaoundé, a veritable putsch unfolded in the administrative district. Gaullists burst into government buildings, brandishing revolvers, and asking officials and especially officers to answer the following question on the spot: “Do you want to join Free France in order to continue the war against the Germans and the Italians?” Those who responded negatively were instructed to leave for French West Africa, which remained under Vichy control. All told, the preparation and scale of the operation had been astonishingly modest: on August 28 a single airplane had flown over Yaoundé dropping Gaullist leaflets. Pirogues had played a more decisive role than aircraft.<sup>54</sup>

Local contexts profoundly shaped the regime change. As Eliane Ebako has explained, in Gabon more was at stake than simple patriotism and political conviction. Old Libreville quarrels surrounding religion, trade, and other local interests also played important roles. In French Congo, in early August 1940 a “patriotic league for freedom and honor” was formed with the goal of tipping the colony over to the Gaullist side.<sup>55</sup> It should be added that Brazzavillians followed international developments, via U.S. radio and Belgian information outlets. The local and the international coalesced. Thus, on August 3, 1940, the British Consul in Leopoldville, speaking on Leopoldville radio, addressed the inhabitants of French Congo directly, informing them that trade could resume again as soon as French Congo honored its commitment to the alliance with Britain.<sup>56</sup>

Again, preexisting tensions mattered. In February 1941, six months after the “glorious days,” an official in Edgard de Larminat’s office

<sup>54</sup> Laigret, pp. 51, 52, 59, 61; Larminat, p. 136; Dronne, p. 33; Quilichini, “Le ralliement du Cameroun,” *Tropiques*, February 1948, p. 7. AML Leclerc 5a, note from Denise. On the pamphlets, see ANS, 16G 4, report on the dissident movement in Cameroon. Viewable at the ANOM on microfilm 14Miom 2284. The list of the twenty-two men who accompanied Leclerc and Bois Lambert to Douala (not counting the paddlers) can be found in AMC FL 50 (2) Africa 1940, liste nominative. For the British account on the paddlers, see BD MSS Afr. s 424, folio 293.

<sup>55</sup> Ebako, p. 96. Sicé, pp. 122–23.

<sup>56</sup> ANOM Fonds Galasus box 2, declaration of the British Consul general in Brazzaville.

explained that Louis Duplaquet, an official serving in the forestry department in Brazzaville, “asked to be relieved of his duties and to return to France.” The note added: “Yet another one who has not understood things, and has allowed himself to be dominated by personal animosities. Pathetic fellow.”<sup>57</sup> In Cameroon, tensions crystallized around ongoing economic concerns. Friction between planters and administrators over the question of African labor reached such levels in the summer of 1940 that a representative of Edwards Spears’ mission – charged with liaison between the United Kingdom and Free France – termed it a crisis. Planters refused to offer decent wages. Under such conditions the administration grumbled about implementing forced labor. The economic question risked undoing Free France’s August gains. Indeed, two months after the “glorious days” of August, Leclerc himself deemed that if large-scale exports did not resume promptly, Free France could be toppled much as Vichy had been before it.<sup>58</sup>

Unlike Chad, whose regime change was truly impelled from within, before the “three glorious days” leaders in FEA and Cameroon displayed either outright hostility to Free France (as in Brazzaville) or hesitation (as in Yaoundé). Interestingly, André Rogez suggested after the fact that in July and August 1940, de Gaulle proponents in Cameroon tended to occupy lower ranks. This would later lead to recriminations after the shift to Free France, for Rogez deemed that those who had been “cowards” in 1940 occupied more important posts than genuine Gaullists a year later.<sup>59</sup> In this particular case, regrets were expressed that an early Gaullist engagement had not translated into a spectacular ascension through the ranks. Others expressed the opposite complaint: that some Gaullists came to occupy high office simply by virtue of their political gamble. In other words, the August 1940 moment was something of an earthquake that impacted careers, networks, and families. Its aftershocks set off jealousies, disillusionments, and disappointments, even among the victors.

### Convincing Colonials

The “three glorious days” were above all an act of persuasion directed at the handful of administrators who ran the colonies that Free France was

<sup>57</sup> Ebako, p. 96. Sicé, pp. 122–23.

<sup>58</sup> Martin Thomas, *The French Empire at War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), pp. 59–60.

<sup>59</sup> AML, Leclerc 15, André Rogez, the de Gaulle movement in Cameroon.

targeting. In an August 20, 1940, document intended to convince those on the fence, Edgard de Larminat surveyed each side's arguments. First, he asserted, were Vichy to continue to rule over FEA and Cameroon, these territories "won at the cost of so much beautiful French blood" would be "entirely shared by the victors. There is no chance that any part of them would stay French." He then sapped Vichy's legitimacy: "Do not hesitate to disobey the orders of this government that calls itself legal. The government is not free." Then followed a more down-to-earth point: the isolation of FEA and Cameroon and the difficulty they faced in exporting their products. Finally, Larminat turned to careerist concerns: "Many of you are preoccupied by your personal situations and are persuaded that obeying Vichy constitutes a guarantee of your retirements and wages." Here Larminat did not dodge the question or hide behind values of patriotism and bravery. He retorted pragmatically: "There is something ludicrous about this illusion. France is ruined and the enemy controls nine tenths of its revenue sources."<sup>60</sup> Larminat clearly mastered this self-debating genre, although it may also have revealed the fragility of his own position, since it forced him to repeat Vichy's line in order better to rebut it.

In any event, real dialogue proved hard to engage. Unmoved, on August 21 Paul Louis Husson the Vichy governor-general of FEA reported proudly to his superior Pierre Boisson in Dakar (Husson had only recently replaced Boisson in Brazzaville), that he knew nothing of the contents of Larminat's messages, because he had refused to open them when he realized that they came from de Gaulle.<sup>61</sup> British Major J. G. C. Allen evoked an "immediate" and "hysterical" reaction on Husson's part. The latter sought to break all contacts between Brazzaville and Leopoldville. A certain Tezenas du Montcel, whom Allen describes as the *éminence grise* of the Vichy side in Brazzaville, applied intense pressure on Husson to remain steadfast.<sup>62</sup> Three days later, Husson warned the governors of Chad, Congo, Oubangui, and Gabon of Larminat's letters. He asserted confidently that "good Frenchmen" would reject them, for they "aim to break French unity."<sup>63</sup> At Fort-Lamy, Larminat's words preached to the converted.

<sup>60</sup> AOL, 4B 1, AEF.

<sup>61</sup> ANOM GGAEF 5D 290, Husson to Boisson, August 21, 1940.

<sup>62</sup> AOL 4B1 AEF, Allen report, January 1943.

<sup>63</sup> ANOM GGAEF 5D 290, Husson to colonial gouverneurs, August 24, 1940.

On August 26, Larminat applied further pressure. He dispatched a very frank note across the river to Husson, informing him that: “his days are numbered,” before explaining: “we in the Gaullist camp are neither adventurers nor anarchists, but patriots and soldiers who know how to respect the bonds of discipline when they are respectable.”<sup>64</sup> Larminat’s plea constituted a remarkable balancing act. It intended to show that a movement based on the principle of disobedience was in fact bound by military values; and that a solitary Gaullist envoy, threatening French officials from the Belgian Congo, was no “adventurer.” In his memoirs, Larminat light-heartedly described himself as one of five “desperados” sent by de Gaulle.<sup>65</sup> The poker hand of the “three glorious days” depended on speed and bluff, but also on intense pressure exerted on the rulers of Cameroon, Oubangui, Gabon, and especially French Congo. August 1940 saw a swarm of ultimatums zip across the Congo River.

This said, Gaullist emissaries were also interested in the political position of Africans. Indeed, African veterans helped impel the Gaullist movement in both Bangui and Brazzaville.<sup>66</sup> Over the course of the “three glorious days,” Boislambert noted that he received assurances of support from Pointe-Noire’s colonials but also from “a few [of the town’s] African notables.”<sup>67</sup> Free France felt the need to persuade African elites. Many were already deeply committed to the cause. A few days after the June 1940 armistice, several members of Brazzaville’s Senegalese community informed Doctor Adolphe Sicé of their desire to continue the fight. One eminent member of this community, Amadou Diop, told Sicé “when one loses a round . . . one tries to win the second one, one does not pull out of the ring entirely” – a close paraphrase of de Gaulle’s words that same month. In early September, the same Diop assured the Free French administration that he would do his utmost to “attract all of our Muslim brothers around the Free French standard.” Finally, Sicé points out that Edgard de Larminat’s August 1940 leaflet campaign influenced not only Brazzaville’s white rulers, but also literate Africans who embraced the cause.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>64</sup> AML Leclerc 5a, Larminat August 26, 1940. The same letter can be found in ANOM 217 APOM.

<sup>65</sup> Larminat, p. 128.

<sup>66</sup> ANOM 1Affpol 891 and AMC FL 50 (2) Afrique 1940 text entitled “A Brazzaville,” 1942, p. 1.

<sup>67</sup> Boislambert, p. 226.

<sup>68</sup> Sicé, p. 86, 141; ANOM Cab 48 dossier 281, Sicé speech June 30, 1942, p. 4; and ANOM 217 APOM, box 1, telegram signed by Diop, September 11, 1940.

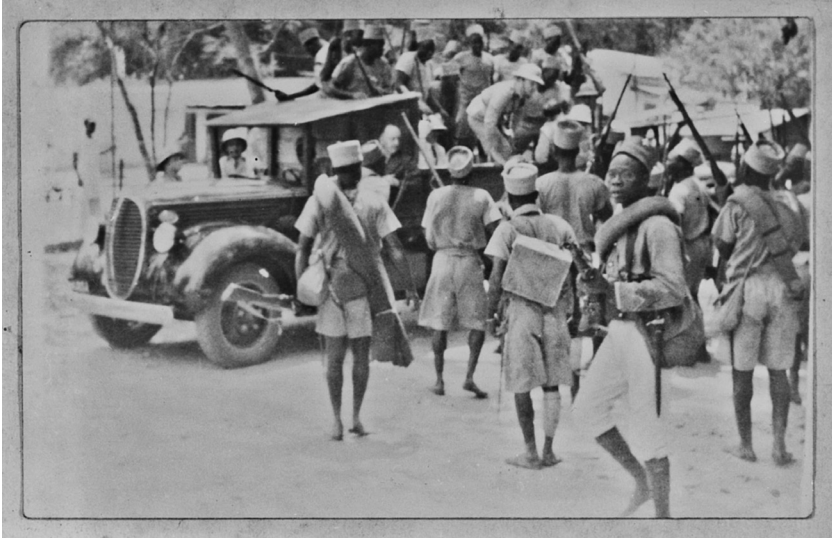


FIGURE 1. Vichy Governor General Husson being carried away on a truck to be expelled from the colony. Brazzaville, August 28, 1940. Archives nationales d'Outre-mer, fonds Géraud de Galassus (ANOM, 217APOM) All rights reserved.

Similarly, one should not forget that the men serving under Commandant Raymond Delange, Captain Pierre Rougé, and Lieutenant Guy Baucheron de Boissoudy during the events of August 28 in Brazzaville were overwhelmingly African (see Figure 1). It was in trying to move Rougé's unit from Brazzaville that Husson "lit the tinder keg."<sup>69</sup> Major J. G. C. Allen recounts how the Pétainist Commandant Sacquet attempted in vain to sway these African troops. Allen then observes that several African NCOs displayed strong anti-German sentiment, which steered their resolve. One African soldier answered Sacquet's insistent pro-Vichy admonishment by training his weapon on him. Sacquet responded with a suicide attempt. A black soldier refusing to obey the orders of a white officer against this highly charged political background created a rare and volatile situation. More was being toppled on this fateful day in the French Congo than merely Brazzaville's allegiance.<sup>70</sup>

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Vichyites used the argument of a loss of "white prestige" in their propaganda against Free France. On September 1, 1940, Boisson reproached those he called "dissidents" with "having made a

<sup>69</sup> Soustelle, p. 122.

<sup>70</sup> AOL B to 4B1 AEF, Allen report, January 1943.

spectacle in front of natives under your responsibility. You have shown them the arrest of France's official representative by a faction."<sup>71</sup> Both Vichy and Free French officials fretted over the possibility of native revolt at a time when wounded, amputated France faced a humiliating armistice. A small number of Africans, who take up a disproportionate amount of space in police reports, were indeed tempted to support Germany in 1940, no doubt by virtue of the adage that an enemy of an enemy might serve as a friend. This was particularly the case in Cameroon, where some pro-German voices were heard. But not only. According to a July 1940 report, in the town of Diosso in the Pointe-Noire area, individuals of the Bavis (or Vilis) ethnicity "sang and danced to the glory of the Germans who, it was hoped, would bring abundance and riches." The police identified an employee in the colonial administration, Pierre Tchikaye, as the instigator of these songs and dances.<sup>72</sup> In Brazzaville in January 1941, the police accused Michel Kéké, a 24-year-old illustrator and resident of the Bacongo neighborhood, of having uttered the following words: "It would better if the Germans who have taken Paris also occupied Brazzaville, and decapitated the whites." After an expedited trial, Kéké received a sentence of three years in jail and five years of banishment from Brazzaville for endangering the security of the state. His condemnation was based entirely on two testimonies, the search of his house having yielded nothing damning. Kéké denied having uttered the phrase, and pointed out that the two witnesses were rivals who envied him.<sup>73</sup> In these two cases, one can question the guilt of the accused, given colonial hypersensitivity to any seditious note in this era, and the meager evidence on which the convictions were based. However, if the songs and words were in fact pronounced, they would seem to illustrate above all the psychological impact of the French defeat of June 1940. Overthrowing the colonizer suddenly became a concrete possibility in the wake of the motherland's defeat in June, and a regime change in Africa two months later.

Europeans also proved deeply divided. Contrary to what Gaullist legend would have us believe, many Pétain followers resisted the resistance in Africa. Vichy leaflets were distributed in FEA refuting Larminat's arguments: "British propagandists tell you that without England you will not be able to sell your products. In reality France buys all of our colonial

<sup>71</sup> ANOM fonds Télégrammes, 685, Platon September 1, 1940, telegram 1195.

<sup>72</sup> SHD, 11P 21, bulletin de renseignements up to July 20, 1940.

<sup>73</sup> ANC GGAEF 379, Michel Kéké file.

production, and France needs it.” And further: “French soldiers, to convince you that your duty lies on England’s side, the British are calling upon your sense of honor. They tell you that your duty commands you to continue fighting against Germany and Italy. Since you have been by England’s side, where and whom have you fought?”<sup>74</sup> This last argument may have backfired, for many colonials regretted having to look on from a distance as France was invaded. Vichy also deployed less subtle arguments. Beginning in September 1940, Zinder radio (from Vichy-controlled Niger) evoked reprisals in France against the families of Free Frenchmen in Africa.<sup>75</sup>

Positions hardened on both sides. Edgard de Larminat issued the following unciphered telegram on September 3, 1940: “We inform all French people that chief objective of the governments of Free France in FEA and Cameroon is to keep these colonies intact so as to return them to an independent France, and to use all of their resources to help liberate the motherland.” However, a clear warning followed: “We could not accept that French people who consented to the crushing armistice imposed by Germany would take up arms to force their compatriots to obey the orders of an unfree government. In the event of such an attack, we would exercise the strictest but firmest right of self-defense.”<sup>76</sup>

One last point should be mentioned with respect to the layering of French domestic and colonial agendas. Masonic networks were quite extensive in French colonies.<sup>77</sup> Across the empire, freemasons and missionaries had frequently clashed since the nineteenth century, sometimes leaving the French administration caught in the middle. The Vichy regime’s decision to add “secret societies” to its list of scapegoats for the defeat of June 1940 therefore presented immediate and sizeable colonial ramifications. On August 27, after Chad had already gone over to de Gaulle and Cameroon was in the process of doing so, Pétainist Governor Husson relayed the order to all of FEA to apply a new law freshly received by wire from Vichy.<sup>78</sup> Aimed squarely at freemasons, this was

<sup>74</sup> AOL, 4B 1, AEF.

<sup>75</sup> ANOM GGAEF 6B 710, Eboué September 4, 1940. On the intensification of Zinder’s propaganda campaign, see Félix Eboué’s September 4 telegram in ANOM 217 APOM.

<sup>76</sup> ANC, GGAEF 82, Larminat September 3, 1940.

<sup>77</sup> See Owen White, “Networking: Freemasons and the Colonial State in French West Africa, 1895–1914,” *French History* 19:1, pp. 91–111.

<sup>78</sup> ANC GGAEF 82, Husson telegram dated August 27, 1940, relaying the text of Alibert and Marquet.

one of Vichy's very first discriminatory texts, after the one denaturalizing Jews. Fort-Lamy and Yaoundé never answered as they had already joined the Gaullist cause. In Brazzaville, the order to dissolve secret societies must still have rested on Husson's office table when Edgard de Larminat stormed into the governor's palace to seize power, backed by African troops on August 28. Free France was anything but angelic with respect to individual liberties: many of its leaders, starting with Larminat and Leclerc, shared Marshal Pétain's rigid conceptions of social hierarchies. In his memoirs, Larminat mused at how ironic it was that he would defend the cause of freemasonry. Yet the point remains that on August 28, 1940, Larminat did just that. He swiftly discarded this Vichy elixir with which Pétain promised to cure France through exclusion, repression, and discrimination.<sup>79</sup>

### Subterfuge

Much stealth and bluff surrounded the "three glorious days."<sup>80</sup> Boislambert evokes "the deception to which we resorted given what we called our insufficient ranks." Leclerc's magical transformation into a colonel constitutes a case in point. British Major L. Sealy-King explained how his wife rapidly removed a stripe from Boislambert's uniform, then transferred it to Leclerc's, to produce the lightning-fast promotion.<sup>81</sup> Edgard de Larminat's meteoric rise to general represents another example.<sup>82</sup> The feeling that Vichy possessed an overwhelming advantage in military ribbons, titles, and medals was such that one reader suggested to the *Courrier d'Afrique* that Admiral Emile Muselier and General Georges Catroux confer the rank of marshal on de Gaulle so that "their chief could hold the . . . rank necessary for him to accomplish his mission."<sup>83</sup>

These examples involve more shortcuts than subterfuge per se. There was no shortage of either. Edgard de Larminat claimed to be a franco-phone Canadian so as to pass as discretely as possible between British, Belgian, and French circles. Many Free Frenchmen in Africa adopted pseudonyms, as is revealed in a Free French telegram from November 16, 1940, that explained: "Commandant de Benschofsheim is actually

<sup>79</sup> Larminat, p. 209.

<sup>80</sup> On bluff, see Jean-Luc Barré, *Devenir de Gaulle, 1939–1943* (Paris: Perrin, 2003), p. 93.

<sup>81</sup> BD Mss Afr. s. 424, folio 240.

<sup>82</sup> Boislambert, p. 223; Sicé, p. 161.

<sup>83</sup> "Une suggestion d'un Français Libre," *Le Courrier d'Afrique* (édition AEF), December 7, 1940.



Commandant Ingold. He wishes to keep his name secret so as to avoid reprisals . . . The Ingold family line in Alsace once bore the name of Benschofsheim.” The constant goal involved throwing off Vichy and hence the Germans. On December 10, 1940, Leclerc requested that telegrams from Fort-Lamy continue to bear Félix Eboué’s signature, even though he had assumed his new role as Governor-General of FEA on November 12 and was therefore in Brazzaville. Leclerc’s explicitly stated goal was to “confuse Vichy’s people” snooping from French West Africa.<sup>84</sup>

### Civil War

Regime change succeeded immediately in the three targeted territories of Chad, Cameroon, and French Congo. In Oubangui-Chari the situation proved more muddled. In much of the colony, Free France won over military leaders. However, in the capital Bangui, Commandant Cammas remained unconvinced, and even tried to persuade his men to fight Free France tooth and nail. Historian Pierre Kalck evokes the threat of a “counter-coup” against de Gaulle in Oubangui. On September 4, one alarmist message from Libengé to Brazzaville reported that the Vichyites were “winning over the undecided.” Thanks to interminable negotiations and the personal intervention of Edgard de Larminat, Oubangui did end up swinging over to de Gaulle’s camp over the course of September 1940. The task was anything but simple. When the dust settled on the evening of September 21, several officers tried to arrest civilians whom they deemed “lukewarm” to the Free French cause. In the rural Kemo-Gribingui province in central Oubangui, one military unit refused to fly the Free French standard bearing the cross of Lorraine until mid-October 1940.<sup>85</sup>

While tensions simmered in Oubangui, in Gabon they spilled over. On the evening of August 28–29, Governor Georges Pierre Masson initially decided to join Free France. However, he was almost immediately confronted by the revolt of a large part of Libreville’s French population. An archival document suggests that the Gabonese schism of 1940 was shaped

<sup>84</sup> ANOM GGAEF 6B 710, telegrams dated November 16, 1940 (signed Eboué) and December 10, 1940 (signed Leclerc). Larminat, p. 122.

<sup>85</sup> ANOM GGAEF 5D 290, Saint-Mart, September 3, 1940. Pierre Kalck, *Histoire centrafricaine des origines à 1966* (Paris: l’Harmattan, 1992), pp. 262–63. ANOM 217 APOM, box 1 telegram 527, dated September 3, 1940; telegram from Libengé, dated September 4, 1940; report from Bangui dated September 22, 1940, signed Saint Mart and letter from Saint Mart dealing with rural Ougandui, dated October 1940.

and conditioned by an intense rivalry between forestry magnates, overlaid onto political differences.<sup>86</sup> According to Eliane Ebako whose thesis deals with the Gabon crisis, the cleavage in 1940 also resulted in part from tensions between freemasons and missionaries (the lines were not rigid: several Gabonese missionaries, including Fathers Weiss, Thiébauld, and Heidet, took Free France's side). Libreville's Bishop Louis Tardy, who commanded great respect at the time, became the most fervent supporter of the Pétainist camp. It was under his pressure that Gabon slipped back under Vichy rule. It promptly applied the new Vichy laws banning masonic lodges.<sup>87</sup>

In attacking Free France, Tardy targeted its weakest flank, which is to say its legitimacy. He dubbed the three glorious days "a military putsch reminiscent of South America."<sup>88</sup> On September 8, a metropolitan French delegation congratulated Gabon for having chosen the right side. The Pétainists denounced Gaullist motives as follows: "You have understood that there was more at stake than your wages, okoumé wood, flour, and wine."<sup>89</sup> According to local Vichyites, the Free French were rapacious adventurers, overthrowing regimes like banana republics, caring only for matters of commerce and personal gain. In early October, a funding drive was launched in Libreville to come to the aid of the victims of the recent Anglo-Gaullist "aggression" on Dakar.<sup>90</sup>

Gabon's Gaullists, who had been in power for roughly twenty-four hours, were now hunted, arrested, and in some cases "deported" by air to Dakar. Africans like the Catholic Jean Hilaire Aubame, who would become a close friend of Eboué's, continued to support the Gaullist cause, under cover of a seemingly apolitical cultural association (Africans were banned from creating political associations at that time).<sup>91</sup> In Brazzaville, Free France resolved to act. One of Vichy's staunch supporters in Gabon, René Labat, who would buck the trend of history by fleeing Gaullist Equatorial Africa for Vichy France, noted in 1941 that General de Gaulle could "scarcely accept the Gabon enclave, a loyalist island in his fiefdom of dissidence." De Gaulle uses much the same language in his *War Memoirs*: "a hostile enclave, that was hard to reduce because it gave on to the ocean, was created in the heart of our equatorial holdings." Later, de

<sup>86</sup> ANOM GGAEF 5D 290, note on the events at Libreville.

<sup>87</sup> Ebako, pp. 95–96.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, pp. 98, 101.

<sup>89</sup> René Labat, *Le Gabon devant le Gaullisme* (Paris: Delmas, 1941), p. 40.

<sup>90</sup> ANOM GGAEF 5D 290, radio-presse officielle dated October 9, 1940.

<sup>91</sup> ANOM GGAEF 5D 290, note on the events at Libreville. Ebako, p. 99, and Weinstein, p. 276.

Gaulle relates having issued the order on October 12, 1940, to “liquidate the hostile pocket in Gabon.”<sup>92</sup>

Adolphe Sicé remarked that if Gabon could “separate from FEA” then it followed that Gabon itself was no longer indivisible.<sup>93</sup> This was the key to the first Free French strategy utilized to deal with the unprecedented secession of Gabon. In early September, Brazzaville declared that the Gabonese region of N’Gouiné was henceforth part of Free French Congo. Then on September 14, it made the same claim regarding the Nyanga department. There followed surprise attacks by Free French forces on Mayumba and Sindara. But the capture of Lambaréné, Libreville, and Port-Gentil required heavy interventions. Those assaults involved combined air, sea, and land operations.<sup>94</sup>

The civil war in Gabon was far from the meaningless skirmish that some would describe after the war. Nor was it a drawn-out wholesale slaughter. The fighting left in total “dozens” of dead according to Ebako, “some twenty” according to General de Gaulle, thirty-three according to Jean-Christophe Notin, and “roughly one hundred” according to Jean-Pierre Azéma.<sup>95</sup>

At the time, Gabon seemed crucial to the survival of Free French Africa itself. On November 3, 1940, as Gaullist forces prepared to invest Libreville, Larminat described Gabon as the key to Gaullist success, arguing that the loss of this territory would have jeopardized “the very principle of our presence in Africa.” Furthermore, the events of Gabon and Dakar in late 1940 marked the first time since the Paris Commune of 1871 that French troops received fratricidal orders.<sup>96</sup> In fact, some Gabonese struggled to distinguish between two armies wearing the same uniforms. Like any civil war, it exacerbated already heightened antagonisms. On November 8, Gaullist forces intercepted the following instructions from the Vichy loyalists in Libreville to their comrades in Port-Gentil: “set fire to the place so that those Gaullist pigs can’t use it, assuming they get as far as Port-Gentil.” Vichy forces manifestly did not stick to a half-hearted defensive show, as some have implied. There was real conviction in their

<sup>92</sup> De Gaulle, *Mémoires de Guerre*, Vol. 1, pp. 96, 112.

<sup>93</sup> Sicé, p. 168.

<sup>94</sup> Ebako, pp. 173–74, Larminat, p. 191.

<sup>95</sup> Ebako, p. 244. De Gaulle, *Mémoires de guerre*, Vol. 1, p. 147. Notin, p. 123; Azéma, p. 304. Azéma’s estimate strikes me as the most probable, given that Free France lost seven men on the morning of November 9 on the Libreville airfield alone.

<sup>96</sup> The consequences were legion. Pierre Kalck notes that in Oubangui-Chari, “for the first time, imprisoned French officers were escorted down the Oubangui river, guarded by black soldiers.” Kalck, p. 264.

anti-Gaullist stance. Consider the case of submarine Captain Bertrand de Saussine who preferred to sink with his vessel, damaged by a British ship, rather than surrender. Finally, the war triggered important population movements of African civilians, who left in numbers for Spanish Guinea, Gabon's northern neighbor.<sup>97</sup>

Libreville fell to Free French forces on November 10; Port-Gentil, the last Vichy bastion, four days later. Recriminations outlasted the fight. When a U.S. official visited the area unofficially in the wake of the battle, defeated Vichy General Marcel Têtu injudiciously sought to persuade him that "the U.S. Civil War was nothing" next to what had just transpired in Gabon. Accusations of perfidy flew from both sides. In Gaullist ranks, Lieutenant-Colonel Parant pointed to what he called "flagrant espionage" by missionaries secretly working for Vichy. Leclerc declared before his troops that "by entering Libreville . . . you have dealt a direct blow to Hitler," which seems hyperbolic in retrospect. Meanwhile, the Vichy side accused Free France of deliberately attacking Libreville's hospital and of tormenting Bishop Tardy. On November 12, Leclerc ordered that "dangerous and undesirable civilians" be detained on the *Cap de Palmes* vessel – the very same "floating prison" in which Gaullists had been interned weeks prior.<sup>98</sup> Finally, the Gabon crisis even strained alliances. The British had emitted serious doubts about de Gaulle's plan to crush the rebellion, although they ultimately did agree to lend naval support. Anger in London over Pétain's handshake with Hitler at Montoire on October 24 likely nudged the British in the direction of aiding Free France in Gabon.<sup>99</sup>

### FEA and Cameroon as "French Lands"

Once they were solidly lined up behind Free France, FEA and Cameroon brought de Gaulle both real legitimacy and a territorial base. Henri Laurentie wrote, "The empire, limited at first to the few Gaullist colonies . . . ensured France a political expression despite the eclipse

<sup>97</sup> AC, GGAEF 84, transcription of a conversation between Libreville and Port-Gentil. On the departures to Spanish Guinea, see ANOM GGAEF 4(1) D51, Report for Woleu Ntem, 1st semester 1943, p. 35.

<sup>98</sup> AC, GGAEF 84, Parant November 13 1940; Larminat, November 3rd 1940; Leclerc, telegram dispatched on 12 November 1940. AML, 5A, Gabon, November 11, 1940. ANF, 3AG 1 164, Pleven relaying Têtu's words. Larminat, pp. 202–3, 207. On the floating prison, see: ANOM GGAEF 5D 290, note on the Libreville events.

<sup>99</sup> Dinan, pp. 66–7, Thomas, p. 76, Crémieux-Brilhac, *La France libre*, p. 169.

caused by its defeat and capitulation.”<sup>100</sup> The Gaullist vision of Vichy’s illegality rests on the counterpoint of legality residing with Free France in Brazzaville beginning in August 1940. Without the colonies, Free France in London would have constituted a movement, even perhaps a regime, but not a government. According to Jean Lacouture, thanks to the three glorious days, “de Gaulle ceased to be squatter on the shores of the Thames.” René Cassin had observed much the same: “de Gaulle was no longer simply the leader of a small military organization composed of veterans. He now possessed . . . territorial authority over parts of the French empire that escaped any control by the enemy.”<sup>101</sup> FEA and Cameroon spelled legitimacy.

As soon as they controlled African territories, Free French officials worked to establish sovereignty that served to heighten their credibility. On October 9 from Douala (which replaced Yaoundé as Cameroon’s capital on October 5, 1940),<sup>102</sup> General de Gaulle dispatched two telegrams, one to FEA, the other to Winston Churchill. The first read: “On French land free from the enemy’s control I am addressing you and the entire population of French Equatorial Africa my ardent patriotic confidence. Long live the French empire! Long live France!” The second, to the British Prime Minister, ran: “On French land free from the enemy’s control, I am transmitting to you and the valiant people of the British empire the ardent confidence and faithful friendship of 14 million French citizens and subjects now united with me to pursue the war on the allied side until the final victory.”<sup>103</sup> Despite identical introductions, the messages contained striking differences. In his letter to Churchill, de Gaulle included a misleading phrase claiming 14 million French citizens and subjects when in reality FEA and Cameroon counted 8,881 “Europeans” and 6,124,391 Africans in 1941. Consciously or not, he was clearly exaggerating the size and importance of the territories that had joined his cause. To the inhabitants of FEA, he simply expressed his patriotic confidence.<sup>104</sup> However, both messages did share an assertion regarding

<sup>100</sup> Henri Laurentie, *L’Empire au secours de la métropole* (Paris: Office français d’édition, 1945), p. 25.

<sup>101</sup> Cassin, p. 233.

<sup>102</sup> André-Hubert Onana Mfège, *Les Camerounais et le Général de Gaulle* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2005), p. 35. The transfer of various administrative structures from Yaoundé to Douala over the course of the war is recorded in ANCMR NF 382/2.

<sup>103</sup> The first message comes from AC GGAEF 82, circulaire 33; the second from de Gaulle, *Lettres notes et carnets*, p. 136.

<sup>104</sup> The population numbers are drawn from ANOM, Fonds de Galasus, box 2.

FEA and Cameroon as legitimate French lands, beyond Axis control and influence.

The statement of Frenchness was especially dubious with respect to Cameroon, given its status as a League of Nations mandate under French protection since 1922. René Cassin did insist on pursuing mandate language, notifying the Society in Geneva in 1940 that General de Gaulle “has assumed the administration of the part of Cameroon placed under French mandate with all of the powers and obligations that this mandate involves.”<sup>105</sup> But in reality, General de Gaulle named Philippe Leclerc, and then a few months later Pierre Cournarie, “governors” rather than “commissioners of the republic” in Cameroon. After all, the republic was no more. According to Richard Joseph, this change in title implied the “annexation” of Cameroon.<sup>106</sup>

In any event, in the fall of 1940, Gaullist legitimacy rested squarely and almost entirely on Free French Africa, a freshly invented designator that linked Cameroon to FEA more than ever. In the wake of his two telegrams on October 27, 1940, de Gaulle recycled his earlier formula, instituting the Empire Defense Council in Brazzaville “on French land.”

For his part, Colonel Leclerc considered FEA and Cameroon to be laboratories for postwar France. Early experiments left him concerned. The continuation of pre-1940 quarrels and an inability to agree on the causes of the 1940 defeat constituted ominous signs for the crucial moment when the homeland would be liberated.<sup>107</sup> For in Leclerc’s eyes, there existed a real, palpable continuity between France and its colonial realm. While to Leclerc FEA and Cameroon might not have been the jewels of the empire, they nevertheless represented a legitimate point of departure for the Free French movement. Indeed, Leclerc declared before officers and NCOs assembled in Chad on March 21, 1941:

Where are we? We are in French Equatorial Africa, which is to say the only part of France and the French empire not to have accepted submission to Berlin. We do not have a choice and must accept this colony and its sufferings. Let us be happy that this part of the French colonial empire, one of the least developed, had the strength to wave the national

<sup>105</sup> Cassin, p. 195.

<sup>106</sup> Marc Michel, “Leclerc et l’Afrique Noire,” p. 269, note 3. Richard Joseph, *Radical Nationalism in Cameroun: Social Origins of the U.P.C. Rebellion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 46.

<sup>107</sup> ANOM Cab 63, Leclerc to de Gaulle, June 1, 1942.

flag. We would perhaps have had less merit “holding on” under the gentler climate of Morocco or Tunisia, but those beautiful provinces were not able to avoid the Vichy landslide. Today, Free France is French Equatorial Africa.<sup>108</sup>

In this vision, FEA and Cameroon brought nobility to the Gaullist cause precisely because of their underdevelopment and the “sufferings” they purportedly inflicted on the Free French. Which? The harshness of the climate, but also the state of infrastructures, the distance from the main war theaters, the fact of being expatriated so far from France, the accompanying homesickness, but mostly Africa’s fundamental otherness in Leclerc’s eyes. This seems enough to question whether Free France was entirely comfortable with its Africanness.

### The Genesis of Free French Africa

In FEA and Cameroon as elsewhere, the year 1940 brought fundamental change. In Gabon colonial forces fired at each other before the colonized. In Brazzaville, the governor was toppled and escorted away at gunpoint. After much debate, intimidation, and mutual accusations, many recalcitrant French people from FEA and Cameroon ended up being sent to Vichy-controlled French West Africa, at least until the war in Gabon froze positions and borders. FEA and Cameroon were proclaimed “independent” and regardless of terminology, broke with the motherland and from French West Africa materially, militarily, economically, and politically. Their economy was reoriented into a new British sphere, tied chiefly to Nigeria. The early discussions with Britain would soon yield vast formal commercial agreements linking Free French Africa to the British Empire. Finally, as we shall see, Free France endeavored to establish a constitutional continuity in Brazzaville, which became the capital of an alternative empire, closely linked also to Leopoldville and the Fighting Belgian Congo.

These developments squared poorly with a discourse that asserted the absolute Frenchness of FEA and Cameroon at a time when ties with France were broken. So too did the language of fidelity clash with the reality of the August 1940 rupture with a metropole now judged to be both irresponsible and illegitimate. Yet in spite of these contradictions and its fragile standing in Africa, Free France would succeed in mounting

<sup>108</sup> Cited by Général Vézinet, *Le Général Leclerc de Hauteclouque, Maréchal de France* (Paris: Presses de la Cité, 1974), p. 76.

an effective military machine. Over these immense territories spanning from south of the equator to the Sahel, it launched its delicate process of legitimation. It was in Africa that Free France printed money, produced a record of decrees, established institutional foundations, extracted taxes and natural resources, and governed subjects.