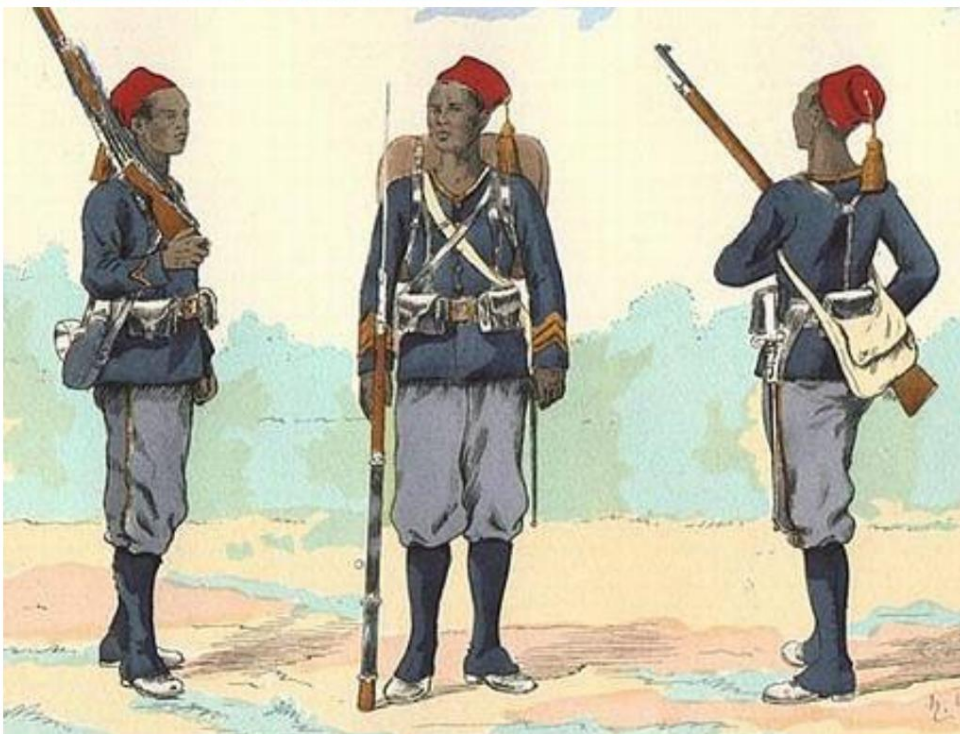
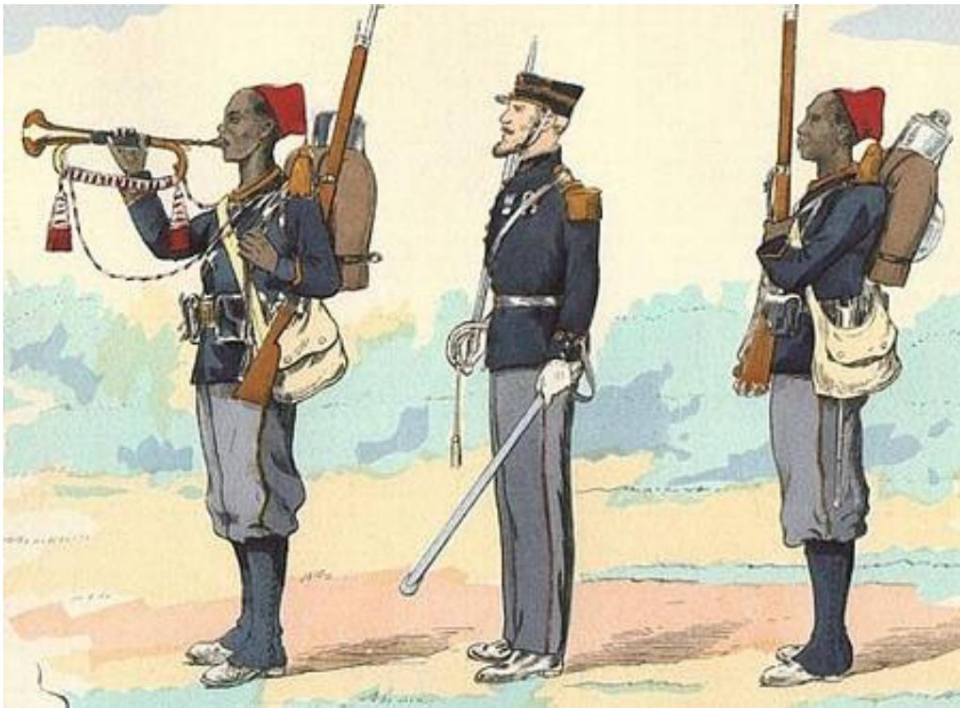


French and Belgian units during the campaign in Cameroon, 1914-1916

Introduction

This article can be read in conjunction with *The Battles in Cameroon, 1914-1916* (Source 1), which provides the military historical background for the present presentation of the organization and uniforming of the French and Belgian units.

Senegalese Skirmishers



Senegalese Tirailleurs, 1899.

Drawn by Hector Large.
From Source 13.

The first Senegalese rifle regiments (*tirailleurs*) were created in 1857 by Louis Faidherbe [1](#)), who was governor of French West Africa. Initially, the units consisted of freed slaves and prisoners of war, but these were gradually replaced by conscripted soldiers. The native part of the non-commissioned officer corps came from the local leading tribes, while all officers and some senior non-commissioned officers were French.

Despite the Senegalese origin, Senegalese rifle regiments were established in virtually all French colonies in Africa, but especially in French West Africa and the other French colonies at the Equator. At the end of the war, a total of approx. 150 Senegalese rifle battalions, and a large part of these were deployed on the Western Front.

Uniforms

Under cooler climates, the Senegalese rifle regiments in 1914 wore [2](#)) dark blue uniform blouses and lighter blue trousers, as well as red fez and red sash; light khaki trousers were used for the summer uniform. All in all, not unlike the uniforms from 1890 and 1899 shown here. In warmer climates, khaki canvas uniforms were used, which became standard from 1915; in Europe, however, the uniform was made of woolen fabric.





Senegalese Tirailleurs, 1890.

Drawn by Hector Large.
From Source 13.



Senegalese Tirailleurs, ca. 1914, i laerredsuniformen.
From Source 13.



*Tirailleurs Sénégalais, 1915,
in the wool version of the uniform.
Eng Marine Troop
Uniforms.*

French units in Equatorial Africa

The commander of the units in French Equatorial Africa was General Joseph Gauderique Aymerich [3](#)), with headquarters in Brazzaville. General Aymerich commanded the following units:

Regiment of Senegalese Tirailleurs from Chad

- 10 infantry companies, 1 cavalry squadron [4](#)), 1 mountain gun platoon, 1 machine gun platoon, 2 camel
- companies 220 French and 2,300 natives

Battalion of Senegalese Riflemen No 3 of Oubangui-Chari

- 6 infantry companies
- 90 French and 1,160 natives

Battalion of Senegalese Tirailleurs No 2 of the Middle Congo

- 6 infantry companies and 1 mountain
- gun 115 French and 1,190 natives

Gabon Regiment

- 8 infantry companies
- 150 French and 1,370 natives

Not all units could be freed to participate in the campaign, as a number of units had to disband

tasks in the local areas, which were not all equally peaceful, just like the approx. The 3,000 km long border with Cameroon also had to be guarded.



Tirailleurs Sénégalais og Spahis Sénégalais, ca. 1889.
Fra Nana - Antique Prints, Maps, Ephemera, Books etc.

French units in Cameroon

The French columns that from August 1914 advanced into Cameroon from the north, south-east and south came from the following regiments:

Nordlige kolonne - Regiment of Senegalese Riflemen of Chad (*Oberst Largeau*) [5](#)

The Lobaye Column (*Lieutenant Colonel Morrison*)

- Battalion of Senegalese Tirailleurs No 2 of the Middle Congo
- Battalion of Senegalese Riflemen No 3 of Oubangui-Chari

The Sanga Column (*Lieutenant Colonel Hutin*)

- Régiment du Gabon 3
- infantry companies from the Belgian Congo (see below under *Force Publique from Belgian Congo*)

Southern Column (*Lieutenant Colonel Le Meillour*)

- Régiment du Gabon (probably)

The names of the columns come from Source 1, in which Map 1 shows the advance routes.



Tirailleurs Sénégalais salute the French and English flags after the capture of Garua in Cameroon, 11 June 1915.

From FirstWorldWar.com.

The Anglo-French Expeditionary Force

The French part of the Anglo-French Expeditionary Force which took part in the capture of Duala in September 1915 was augmented by units from French West Africa. The force consisted of the following units:

Stab

- Chief: Colonel Mayer 4
- staff officers Captain
- HT Horsford (English liaison officer)

1st Battalion of Senegalese Tirailleurs (*Major 6 Mechet*) —

- 18 officers, 44 French non-commissioned officers and 844 native non-commissioned officers and privates.
- Organized into 4 infantry companies

2nd Battalion of Senegalese Tirailleurs (*Major Mathieu*)

- 15 officers, 51 French non-commissioned officers and 854 native non-commissioned officers and privates.
- Organized into 4 infantry companies

A European Infantry Company (*Coloniale Blanche*) 7) (*Captain Salvetat*) 8) —

- 155 men in total. (

A Mountain Gun Battery (*Captain Gerrard*)

- 6 pieces. 80 mm mountain guns
- 75 Mule

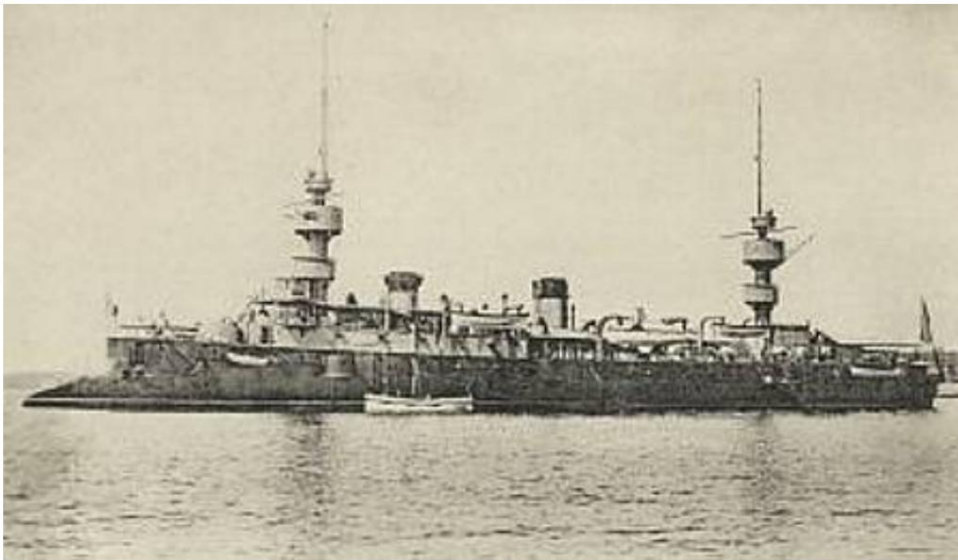
An engineer detachment

- 1 officer, 9 French non-commissioned officers and privates and 20 native non-commissioned officers and privates

Sanitary element, supply element and transport element.

Total

- 54 officers 354
- French non-commissioned officers and privates
- 1,859 native non-commissioned officers and privates
- 1,000 native porters 200
- animals, including 75 mules and 125 horses.



The French cruiser BRUIX, approx. 1902.

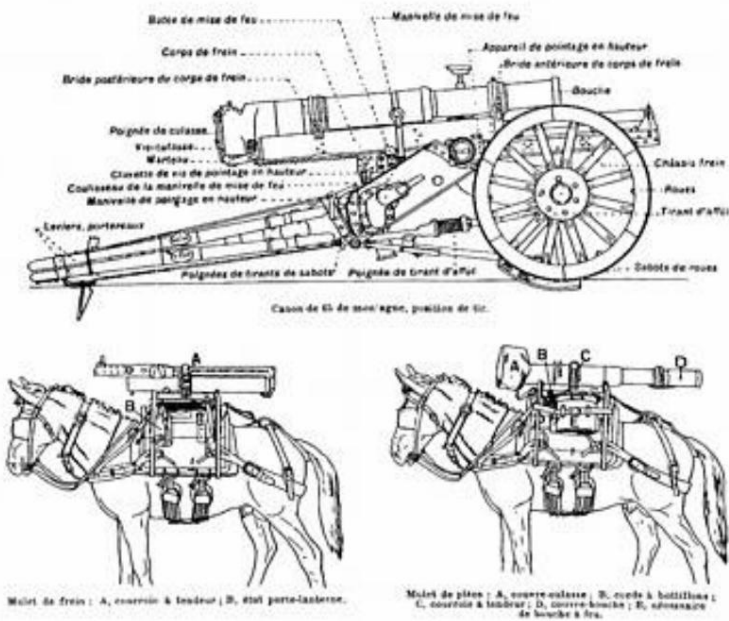
Fra Amiral Charner Class [9](#)) ([Battleships and Cruisers](#)).

The force sailed from Dakar aboard five transport vessels, escorted by the cruiser BRUIX (War Captain ME Tirard).

The following French vessels also took part during the campaign:

- The cruisers IVY, POTHUAU, FRIANTt The
- gunboats SURPRISE , AMERIQUE and VAUBAN The transport vessel
- LOIRET.

The artillery



French 65 mm mountain gun.

From Source 16.

Unlike the English mountain batteries that took part in the campaign, the French guns were transported on mules; the English West African batteries, on the other hand, were transported by porters.

Captain Gerrard's battery had 6 pcs. 80 mm mountain guns.

Although the mountain cannon shown here is of a smaller caliber than Captain Gerrard's, it is assumed that the method of driving on mules was similar.



80 mm Mountain Gun Model de Bange, ca. 1915.

From Source 17.

It does not appear from the currently available source material whether the French pamphleteers were manned by European or native artillerymen.

The cannon, which could be carried on three mules, had a range of 4.1 km.

On at least one occasion - the siege of Garua - a French 95mm cannon was deployed, which along with the

english west african batteries file battle critical importance.



Canon de 95 mm Model 1888 of Lahitolle.

From Source [17.10](#).

The pamphlet was introduced in 1875, and modernized in 1888. It is estimated that around approx. 1,000 copies were deployed during the First World War.

The cannon had a firing range of 9.8 km. Although in transport it had to be pulled by a fore-team of 6 horses, in Cameroon it was probably pulled by natives. Part of the way to Garua it was transported on a river barge.

Force Publique of the Belgian Congo



Belgian Askaris, Force Publique, Belgian

Congo, c. 1900.

From Rhodes (Paul Landau).

The first military units were officially established in 1886, when the Belgian Congo had the status of a free state, and was the personal property of the Belgian king. In 1908, the country's status changed and now became an actual Belgian colony.

Force Publique, as the force was called, consisted of at least 18 independent infantry companies, an artillery unit and an engineer unit.

In addition, there was a special unit in the Katanga province - *Troupes de Katanga* - consisting of 6 infantry companies and a cyclist company.

An infantry company typically consisted of 4 European officers and non-commissioned officers as well as 8 native non-commissioned officers and up to 150 native soldiers.

The military units in the Belgian Congo in 1914 consisted of approx. 17,000 men. However, my sources do not completely agree on the number of companies. A good overview can be found in Source 11.

The tasks of the *Force Publique* units were primarily of a police nature, and were in principle not trained to function in a larger unit framework. Among other things, they missed a command structure and supply units. Only the unit from Katanga constituted an actual battalion.



Sergeant, Belgian Congo, 1943 [11](#)).

The equipment is a leather version of the English Model 1937 pick-up system.

However, the need for military action during the First World War - against the German colonies of Cameroon and German East Africa - meant that the Force Publique gradually changed its character and became an actual military unit. From 1916 the force increased and now consisted of three brigades (*Groupes*), comprising 15 battalions.

Uniforms

At the outbreak of the war, the uniform was a dark blue uniform, with a red fez; the leather clothing was black and a red sash was worn around the waist (possibly only for parades). A light blue covering for the fez was introduced.

This made the soldiers less visible from a distance, and one could better distinguish one's own soldiers from German askaris and King's African Rifles. In use, the covers faded quickly and appeared more white than light blue.

Gradually, the uniform was changed and khaki-coloured field uniforms were adopted, which had been prescribed for officers from March 1914. The leather clothing was gradually printed with webbing after the English model.

However, both new and older uniforms were worn until the end of the war, often in combinations of the two uniform systems. The khaki uniform was not unlike the uniform of World War II.



Units of the Force Publique, photographed in German East Africa, 1918.
From Source 12.

Armament

The askaris of *the Force Publique* were equipped with Belgian Albini-Braendlin Model 1873 single-shot rifles (calibre 11 mm) [12](#), while [Belgian](#) Mauser rifles Model 1889 were used by *the Troupes de Katanga*.

The heavy weapons consisted of Maxim machine guns using the same ammunition as the Albini guns, light Nordenfelt 4.7 cm guns and Krupp 7.5 cm guns.

The battalion from Katanga included Danish-made Madsen recoilless rifles.

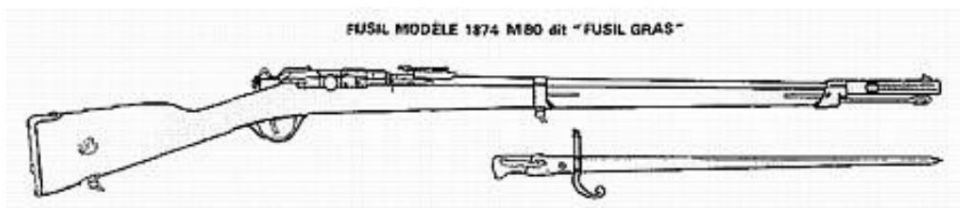
In Cameroon

At French request, the Belgian Congo provided three infantry companies for the campaign in Cameroon. The companies were composed of personnel from the units of the three provinces *Province du Congo-Kasai*, *Province de l'Equateur* and *Province orientale*, the forces from Katanga being deployed on the border between the Belgian Congo and Northern Rhodesia.

The first company arrived in the French-Equatorial African province of *Moyen-Congo*, also called French Congo, at the end of August 1914. The company consisted of 136 askaris, and was equipped with a Maxim machine gun, two Nordenfelt 4.7 cm guns and a Krupp 7.5 cm mountain cannon. Another company joined at the beginning of December 1914 and the last at the end of December of the same year.

The Belgian companies were part of the French lieutenant colonel Hutin's *Sanga column*, which advanced through Cameroon along the Sanga river.

The three companies were part of the French forces until the end of the campaign in February 1916. A total of 10 Europeans and 600 natives took part in the campaign. At times the lack of own officers was so great that French officers entered instead.



(*Rifle Gras mle 1874*) [13](#).

Similarly, ammunition for the Belgian Albini rifles was lacking towards the end of the campaign, and some of the askaris were equipped with French Gras rifles.

The French General Aymerichs noted that the Askaris of the First Belgian Company were all hand-picked men, bearing NCO insignia as well as marksmen.

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The campaign in Cameroon



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2. *The Great War in West Africa* af brigadegeneral E. Howard Gorges, Hutchinson, London, 1916. Republished in 2004 by Naval & Military Press, London, ISBN 1-84574-115-3.
 3. *The History of The Royal West African Frontier Force* af oberst A. Haywood og brigadegeneral F.A.S. Clarke, Gale & Polden, Aldershot, 1964.
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Geography

6. The Humanitarian work of the French Colonial Health Service 1890-1968 (Association Amicale Santé Navale et d'Outre-Mer). The page also contains a good overview of the French colonies in West Africa - see e.g. French Equatorial Africa (AEF) and French West Africa (AOF).
7. *Politiken's Historical Atlas*, Politikens Forlag, Copenhagen 1961.

French units

8. History of the Senegalese Tirailleurs (Cap sur le Monde).
9. Senegalese Tirailleurs (Wikipedia).

10. List of Senegalese Tirailleurs units (Wikipedia).

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11. Public Force (Rudi Geudens).

12. Public Force (Wikipedia).

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13. Senegalese Tirailleurs 1890-99; en planserie tegnet af Hector Large gengivet fra Le Costume Militaire à Travers les Ages (Red Shadow). Information from copies seen for sale via Abebooks indicates that the plates originate from a three-volume work on French uniforms through the ages, originally published c. 1940 at the publisher Aux Editions Arc-En-Ciel in Paris; the books are apparently republished in 1965.

14. *Armies in East Africa* af Peter Abbott, Men-at-Arms nr. 379, Osprey Publishing, London 2002, ISBN 1-84176-489-2.

15. *Colonial Armies in Africa 1850-1918* af Peter Abbot, Foundry Books Publications, Nottingham 2006, ISBN 1-90154-307-2.

16. *Solid cast Mules* by Alex Riches and Linoel Gaurie, The Bulletin, No. 1, 2005. An article from The British Model Soldier Society's members' magazine, reviewing various toy versions of French mountain artillery.

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Postscript

The Senegalese army's website contains some very interesting pictures of, among other things, Tirailleurs Sénégalais (though none with direct relevance to the operations in Cameroon) - see Tirailleurs Sénégalais pendant la Grande Guerre (1914-18).

Per Finsted

To note:

1) Se Louis Faidherbe (1818-1889) (Wikipedia).

2) See also About the Corps Expeditionnaire d'Orient at Gallipoli 1915 for a brief mention of the uniforms of the Senegalese gunners

(3) Joseph Gauderick Aymerich (1858-1937). Mentioned in Cameroon (World Statesmen).

4) Probably from *Spahis Sénégalais* who also wore light khaki colored canvas uniforms at this time.

5) A small command of the Régiment de Tirailleurs Sénégalais du Tchad Brisset, under the command of colonel operated in October 1915 in collaboration with the English units in Nigeria (Brigadier General Cunliffe). The French command consisted of 1 cavalry squadron and 2 infantry companies.

6) The French rank designation is *Commandant*. See e.g. Ranks in the French Army (Wikipedia).

7) See Uniform plates - About French colonial troops, 1914.

8) The company was withdrawn in February 1915 due to illness.

9) The main armament included 2 pcs. 19.4 cm guns and 6 pcs. 14 cm guns, in addition to a number of smaller pamphlets. The cruiser BRUIX was in service from 1894 to 1920. See France: Marine Nationale (War at Sea).

10) Source 17 states that the pictured pamphlet is on display at a museum in Chaumont.

11) Fra *The Armed Forces of World War II - Uniforms, Insignia and Organisation* of Andrew Mollo, Military Press, New York 1987, ISBN 0-517-54478-4.

12) Se Belgian Albini-Braendlin: M1777/67, M1841/53/67, M1853/67 and M1873 (Keith Doyon).

13) See Fusil Gras mle 1874 (Wikipedia) and The Gras Rifle (Guns World), from which the illustration of the rifle originates.