**Columbia History Department**

**Global Innovation Fund Senior Thesis Fellowship**

**Application**

**~~(due March 25 to emr2213@columbia.edu)~~**

**Name of applicant:**

**Year:** Junior

**Major:** Double major History/Art History

**Specialization within major:** Modern Western Military History

**Faculty member who can serve as a reference (no letter of recommendation is required):**

Pr. Stephanie McCurry

**Previous European travel:**

Extensive travel in France 2009, 2011. Studied in France over the course of my two years (2013-2015) at SciencesPo (Dual BA between SciencesPo and Columbia). Travel to the U.K. (London in particular) for a month during Summer 2015.

**Relevant courses taken, and any relevant research papers written:**

La Guerre au XXeme Siecle, Pr. Philippe Pividori, SciencesPo

Modern France: History and Historiography, Pr. Vanessa Lambert, SciencesPo

Two-year research project on Reims in the First World War using French archives under the

direction of Pr. Pividori (2013-2015)

High School Senior Thesis Project: “African Colonial Involvement in the Two World Wars: The First Step to Decolonisation?” (2013)

**Summer research plan (travel dates and archives you plan to visit):**

July 2-14: Paris (SHD, Archives Nationales, MAE) + Global Innovation Workshop (July 6-8)

July 14-22: London (National Archives, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives)

July 22 – August 5: Paris (SHD, Archives Nationales, MAE) + Day trips to Nantes (CADN)

August 5 – 14: South of France (CAOM, CHETOM)

The *Tirailleurs Sénégalais* under the Vichy Francesque

The story of the *tirailleurs Sénégalais*, the colonial troops who fought for France during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is now a fixture in French colonial historiography. Indeed, these troops drawn from all of France’s colonies have been the subject of many monographs and articles published as of the 1970s. Within this historiographical tradition, most noteworthy are the works of Myron Echenberg and Marc Michel as well as those of Eric Jennings and Gregory Mann. Nevertheless, much of the work surrounding the *tirailleurs* and their role in the two world wars deals exclusively with their involvement in General de Gaulle’s Free French Forces. Such a methodology is not without merit as it allows historians to trace a historical arc linking military service in the Second World War to decolonisation. Yet, what of the *tirailleurs* who fought under Maréchal Pétain in the army of Vichy France? Past historiography has been so intent on finding a place for the *tirailleurs* under the Gaullist Cross of Lorraine that it has forgotten to consider those who fought under the Vichy francesque.

Many *tirailleurs Sénégalais* fighting in Vichy’s army fought fratricidal battles against other colonial troops that had joined the ranks of the Free French. One particularly interesting instance of such a campaign is the Anglo-Gaullist invasion of Vichy Syria in the summer of 1941 codenamed “Operation Exporter”. The Vichyiste *17ème Régiment de Tirailleurs Sénégalais* found itself opposed to other *tirailleurs* that de Gaulle had rallied in French Equatorial Africa earlier that year. It is time that this largely forgotten campaign and the *tirailleurs* who fought for Vichy in Syria be studied carefully.

In considering these particular troops, the question of agency will be a central theme. However, in positing the individual agency of the *tirailleurs*, two caveats cannot be ignored. First, the initial decision to abide by the Vichy armistice or to keep on fighting with de Gaulle was largely the choice of European officers rather than that of the colonial soldiers. Second, in deconstructing the notion of the agency of colonial troops, one realises that the ability for individual action was limited by the structures of both the French military and the French empire. Nevertheless, the actions of the *tirailleurs* during and immediately after Operation Exporter pose two interesting questions of agency. We can examine why the *tirailleurs* under Vichy ferociously fought back against other Frenchmen and colonial troops while other troops, such as the Foreign Legion, refused to take part in fratricide? Furthermore, after the defeat of the Vichy regime in the Levant, the *tirailleurs* were given the choice to join the ranks of Free France or be repatriated to Africa. Why did such a significant portion of the troops decide to return home and what factors came to influence this decision? These two questions are of particular importance as they challenge two topoi surrounding France’s colonial troops. First, they question the accepted literature that colonial troops were eager to join the ranks of the Free French Forces. Second, it allows for the agency of colonial soldiers; a factor not usually taken into account in past literature until the *blanchissement* of 1944 and the humiliating demobilisation process the *tirailleurs* had to endure. Ultimately, this thesis will consider what agency did the *tirailleurs* in the Levant have and what factors came to influence these individual decisions?

On a more practical level, this thesis will also cover a historiographical blindspot. The secondary literature currently available on this topic hardly goes beyond merely stating the presence of these Vichyiste *tirailleurs* in Syria. For instance, both Eric Jennings in *La France Libre Fut Africaine* and Martin Thomas in *The French Empire at War, 1940-*5 only mention the presence of African troops in the Vichyiste camp in the briefest of terms. In other cases, either the *tirailleurs* are left out completely of the narrative of Operation Exporter, or the Middle-Eastern theatre as a whole is considered to be of secondary importance as seen in Jacques Cantier and Jenning’s edited volume *L’Empire Colonial sous Vichy*, Crémieux-Brilhac’s *La France Libre*, and Pierre Montagnon’s *La France dans la Guerre de 1939-45*. Similarly, the Anglo-American historiography on Operation Exporter reads the campaign solely in terms of Vichy-German collaboration or Anglo-Gaullist friction as evidenced by the works of Jafna L. Cox and A.B. Gaunson. While these historians provide invaluable information about Operation Exporter, the campaign is still largely only studied from a European perspective. Even when a ‘colonial’ approach to the Syrian campaign is espoused, as is the case of N.E. Bou-Backlie’s work, the focus is on the *troupes spéciales* – the local Middle-Eastern troops mobilised in the French Mandates of the Levant – and Arab nationalism, rather than on the African troops. The only secondary literature that goes somewhat beyond the analytical framework of the works mentioned above is an unpublished 2011 PhD thesis by Sarah Zimmerman at the University of California, Berkeley. In her work, Zimmerman analyses the operations in the Levant as a moment of military “schizophrenia” for French troops. For Zimmerman, as the *tirailleurs* in the Levant were trained to fight the Germans under the Third Republic, then the Anglo-Gaullist coalition under Vichy, only to return to a situation wherein the Axis was the enemy once Vichy Syria had fallen, they experienced something akin to “schizophrenia”. However, this discussion is limited to a mere five pages in Zimmerman’s thesis as she addresses issues of gender in greater detail. The issue of “schizophrenia” is more of a detour than the central tenant of her work.

As such, the intervention of this thesis in the pre-existing secondary literature will not primarily be one of correction. Rather, this project will seek to complement previous scholarship through the examination of an understudied, if not unstudied, topic. Building off of Zimmerman’s theory of military “schizophrenia”, this thesis will examine how the shifting allegiances of the *tirailleurs* in the Levant came to inform the choices over which they did have control. This work therefore exists at the crossroads of imperial and military history. It will simultaneously rely on the work of imperial historians Ruth Ginio and Jennings and that of military historians such as Echenberg, Michel, and Mann. Importantly, this thesis comes at a historiographical moment whereby France is becoming more comfortable discussing its Vichyiste past as demonstrated by the further opening of the Vichy archives in December 2015.

The abundant secondary literature on French colonial troops and the mandate in Syria, that I have largely already surveyed, will be used to provide background information and orient a reader who is unfamiliar with my topic. Moreover, a terminology section will likely be necessary in introduction to the thesis as many of my key terms are in French. However, the crux of the project will rely on primary sources held in both France and the United Kingdom. Of interest for this project are the *Service Historique de la Défense (SHD)*, *the Archives Nationales*, *the Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes (CADN)*, *the Ministère des Affaires Étrangères*, *Centre d’Archives d’Outre-Mer,,* the *Centre d’Histoire et d’Études des Troupes d’Outre-Mer (CHETOM)*, the National Archives of the United Kingdom, and the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives.[[1]](#footnote-1) The most important archives in terms of quantity of materials will be the SHD, the CADN, the CHETOM, and the National Archives. The resources at the SHD will provide the basis for all discussion of French military units in the Levant, particularly the the *série P* that deals with Vichy’s plans for national defense. The CHETOM provides detailed documentation pertaining to the *17ème Régiment de Tirailleurs Sénégalais* while the CADN is the most useful archive for the study of documents pertaining to the French mandates in Syria and the Levant. Lastly, the National Archives offer the most detailed accounts of Operation Exporter given that it was a British operation. These archival materials are of the utmost importance for this thesis for three reasons. First, the *série P* have rarely been examined in scholarly work and will therefore provide an invaluable Vichy perspective on the Middle Eastern theatre. Moreover, the documents at the CHETOM will allow for a detailed narrative of the *tirailleurs* in Syria to be constructed. Lastly, while many of the other archives have already been studied and published in secondary literature, they have not been examined in such a manner as to understand the situation of colonial troops in the Levant. My knowledge of French, my mother tongue and a language in which I have conducted scholarly work, as well as my previous experience researching in French archives will be invaluable tools for this research project.

Luckily, with the exception of the French archives that will be closed for 14th of July, the archives will be open for the entirety of the summer. I plan to begin the summer in Paris for the grant workshop and then do a week’s worth of archival research at the SHD. From there, I will go to London for a week during Bastille Day. Upon returning to Paris, I will finish my work at the various Parisian archives while taking trips to Nantes via TGV for a two-and-a-half-week period. Lastly, I will travel to the South of France to visit the CAOM and the CHETOM. To minimise expenses, I will stay with Friends in Paris and London. The only immediately apparent problem that I foresee is that the online catalogue services of both the CADN and the MAE are currently being reconfigured and therefore do not provide access the detailed listings of these archives’ holdings. Nevertheless, I anticipate that by contacting the archivists and I will be able to quickly pinpoint which documents will be of most use to my project.

**PRELIMINARY BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Archival Materials:

*Archives National Paris*: Archives du Général de Gaulle; Papiers de George Catroux; Répertoire du Centre des Hautes Études sur l’Afrique et l’Asie Moderne; Archives du Comité d’Histoire de la Deuxiéme Guerre Mondiale – France Libre et Résistance Extérieure; Fonds Arthur Birembaut, Fonds Edouard Brémond; Fonds d’archives privies de la Seconde Guerre Mondiale

*Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes (CADN)*: Fonds Beyrouth – Mandat; Fonds Beyrouth – Syrie & Liban

*Centre d’Archives d’Outre-Mer d’Aix en Provence (CAOM)*: Ministère des Colonies, Comité National Français (1941/1943) 61 COL353; Ministère des Colonies, Direction des Affaires Publiques 61 COL2559; Fonds des Mémoires des Élèves 123 COL59/15

*Centre d’Histoire et d’Études des Troupes d’Outre-Mer (CHETOM)*: 17ème Régiment de Tirailleurs Sénégalais 34 N 1096

*Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives:* SPEARS, Major General Sir Edward Louis (1886-1974) #1850

*Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Paris (MAE)*: Série E – Levant

*National Archives of the United Kingdom*: War Office and Successors Registered Files WO 32; Middle East Forces Second World War WO 201; British Military Missions in Liaison with Allied Forces Second World War WO 202; Office of the Chief of the Imperial General Staff WO 216; Middle East Supply Centre FO 922, Private Papers of Sir Anthony Eden FO 954; War Cabinet and Cabinet Minutes (WM and CM Series) CAB 65; Operation Correspondence and Papers PREM 3.

*Service Historique de Défense (SHD)*: Sous-série 4H Levant; sous-série 1P Le niveau Défense Nationale en métropole et en Afrique du Nord; sous-série 2P Le cabinet du Secrétariat d'Etat à la Guerre, 4P Organisme militaire établis par le général de Gaulle à Londres; sous-série GR 9 NN1 Direction de l’infantrie; sous-série 1K 230 Papiers du Général Paul Beynet.

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1. For a detailed listing of which archive materials will be consulted please refer to the bibliography. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)