The Roles of the Military in the History of Benin  
(Dahomey): 1870-Present

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ABSTRACT

The political history of West Africa over the past 130 years has been constantly influenced by the actions of the military in the region. In the 1880s, when Europe’s most powerful states became interested in economic opportunities in Africa, the Europeans agreed to share the potential wealth and so partitioned the continent among themselves. African resistance was valiant, but the Europeans were unrelenting and eventually victorious. For the next sixty years, France occupied and exploited West Africa. The 1960s ushered in an age of independence for the former colony of French West Africa. Independence led to a myriad of military regimes throughout the region, which lasted until democracy was introduced in the early 1990s in many countries.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present a complete picture of the way in which the military has shaped the politics in Benin (formerly called Dahomey) from 1870 to the present. (Figure 1). It is primarily a study of military roles in the history of Benin. Health, religion, education, agriculture, and other important social issues will not be addressed directly in this paper. Trade and related economic issues which were major motivating factors for the French pursuit of colonies in West Africa will be addressed in that context.

Dahomey was occupied by the French from 1894 to 1960 and was part of French West Africa (Figure 2). It became the independent state of Dahomey in 1960, following a peaceful transfer of power from France. Today, Benin has a Republican form of government and its estimated population in 2001 was just less than 6.6 million, of which 99 percent were African. There are more than 40 ethnic groups in the country today with the Fon, Adja, Yoruba, and Bariba being the most prominent. Despite the low number of French citizens presently in Benin (about 5,500), French remains the official language (Bureau of African Affairs 2003, 1).

It is the hypothesis of this paper that from the last three decades of the 19th century to the present the actions of the military have directly or at
least significantly influenced all aspects of politics in Benin. Through an extensive review of the available sources this study will examine the changing roles of the various factions (French and African) of the military and the effects they have had on political events before, during, and after French colonization in Benin. This in-depth look at the last 130 years of the military and political history of Benin will serve as a microcosm of the events throughout West Africa during this period.

For clarity, this paper has been broken chronologically into three parts: 1870-1900, 1900-1960, and 1960 to the present. The first thirty years were the time of European military intervention and occupation of West Africa. The middle sixty years were the colonial era, and the last forty-plus years have been the period of African independence.

Sources and Methodology

As previously stated, the focus of this research is to examine the available resources in order to analyze the effects that the military forces in Benin have had on the politics of the country and to critically evaluate the hypothesis presented. Many authors from Europe and Africa have dealt with the various aspects of African history in general terms. To complete this research paper it has been necessary to examine the works of numerous noteworthy historians and social scientists. The sources are not primary documents since those are predominately written in French. A myriad of secondary documents utilized in this paper have been, in most cases, written using those same primary documents mentioned above.

Logical assumptions and conclusions have been included throughout this research work as part of the analytical process. Documents such as charts, graphs, and maps have been included to add clarity. Where applicable, quotations from both historians and historical figures have been included to add credible support to the narrative portion of this paper.

1870-1900: Partition, Resistance, and Colonization

Prior to the 1870s, the military in Dahomey consisted of independent African kingdom’s armies; and their primary mission was to take and hold as much territory as possible for each individual king in the region. By the middle of the 1880s, that mission had changed, for the most part, to one of African resistance to the incursions by the French, who were using their military forces as a means of conquest and then occupation of West Africa.
Figure 1: Present Day Benin

Source: Decalo 1990, 90
In the second half of the 19th century, Western Europeans began looking to West Africa as a place to expand their spheres of economic influence. When Prussia defeated France in the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, France immediately instituted a search for new areas of the world in which to increase its empire. Those early explorations, soon to be expeditionary incursions, were at the behest of civilian trading companies, which had an integrated relationship with the government of France (Ajayi and Crowder 1973, 529; Gann and Duignan 1969, 89; Obichere 1971, 3). The French established a toehold in Dahomey at the port of Cotonou early in the 1870s. The primary goal for the French, in the area of Dahomey, was to control a share of navigation rights on the important trade routes along the Niger River. However, the French were not the only Europeans who were seeking lucrative pecuniary possibilities in West Africa during the last decades of the 19th century.

Several European powers began to increase their influence in Africa by the end of the 1870s. Chief among these were the British and the French; however, the Portuguese and the Germans were also seeking inroads along the West African coast for the dual purposes of obtaining raw
materials and markets for manufactured goods. In late 1884, German Chancellor Bismarck, hoping to find a peaceful means of allowing the Europeans to share in the “Scramble for Africa,” organized a meeting of the major Western powers in Berlin to decide the fate of the African continent and its people. The Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 was convened to discuss and settle the disputes that were arising over the navigation and trade routes in West Africa.

The European signatories of “The General Act of The Berlin Conference,” the document agreed upon at the Berlin Conference, were representative of all the major powers: Germany, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Spain, France, Great Britain, Italy, The Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, and The Ottoman Empire (Gavin and Betley 1973, 301). European Powers used the provisions of the “General Act” to justify their imperialistic actions, which occurred over the next fifteen years throughout Africa. Articles 34 and 35 of The General Act succinctly state the conclusions of those in attendance at the Berlin Conference:

**Article 34:** Any Power which henceforth takes possession of a tract of land on the coasts of the African Continent outside of its present possessions, or which being hitherto without such possessions, shall acquire them, as well as the Power which assumes a protectorate there, shall accompany the respective act with a notification thereof, addressed to the other Signatory Powers of the present Act, in order to enable them, if need be, to make good any claims of their own.

**Article 35:** The Signatory Powers of the present Act recognize the obligation to insure the establishment of authority in the regions occupied by them on the coasts of the African Continent sufficient to protect existing rights, and, as the case may be, freedom of trade and of transit under the conditions agreed upon (Gavin and Betley 1973, 299-300).

The pithy wording in these two articles, which are arguably the most important in the document, required the Europeans to inform other signatories of their intention to occupy any African nation to which they laid claim. Additionally, the Europeans needed to have effective authoritative control of any subdued region as required by the General Act.

The French maintenance of a protectorate over the Dahomean coastal city of Porto Novo is a prime case in point of the required effective control policy. In keeping with the accords of the General Act, to enforce their dominance in Porto Novo the French had to have complete control of the port and the surrounding territory. Their control had to be physically evident and capable of holding the area against any and all opposition,
foreign and domestic. To achieve the required domination of claimed territory, the French realized that military strength would be necessary. To this end, according to Jean Bayol (a senior French diplomat in Dahomey) the French had a combined total of 962 soldiers garrisoned at Cotonou and Porto Novo (See Table 1 below).

**Table 1: French Troops in Dahomey (1890)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>European Officers</th>
<th>European Enlisted</th>
<th>African Officers</th>
<th>Tirailleurs: African Enlisted</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cotonou</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Porto Novo</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>531</td>
<td>612</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>830</td>
<td>962</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: My Table derived from Obichere 1971, 68

Following the Berlin Conference, local African leaders were left with the decision of how to react to the actions of the Europeans. There were three possible options available to African leaders: Some chose to make treaties and thus live in peace with the intruders; contrastingly, many more chose to use military force to oppose the occupation of their homelands; and a number of them chose a combination of the two options.

King Gelele of the Fon controlled a relatively large portion of Southern Dahomey. Gelele headed the most powerful of the area’s kingdoms from his capital at Abomey. He and his people were involved in all of the most significant events that occurred during the French military incursions into Dahomey during the last two decades of the 19th century.

King Gelele (also spelled: Glele, Glegle) preferred to take a diplomatic approach in his dealings with the French. Apparently Gelele believed that by granting the French trade privileges in Cotonou and access to their previous protectorate over Porto Novo he would be able to restrict them to the coastal regions. Eventually, he learned that the French tended to turn any small concession that they were granted into a greater advantage. In late 1889, when the French demanded that they be granted a protectorate over Cotonou, which would have meant that the French would then be collecting trade revenues previously collected by Gelele, Prince Kondo, acting on behalf of an ailing Gelele, declared all trade agreements with France void (Newbury cited by Obichere 1971, 64-65).

There are conflicting reports concerning military actions against the French by the Fon while Gelele was their king. It seems to be the consensus that there were probably some minor skirmishes between the Fon and the
French, but most likely there was not open warfare (Obichere 1971, 64; Crowder 1968, 100-101; Gann and Duignan 1969, 213-214). Gann and Duignan illustrated this policy of relative non-aggression by Gelele towards the French with the following example. In 1878, when the French sent troops to occupy Cotonou King Gelele decided not to fight because in his words, “he who makes the powder wins the battle” (Gelele cited by Gann and Duignan 1969, 213; and Webster, Boahen and Tidy 1980, 187). An uneasy peace was maintained between the French and the Fon until the end of the 1880s.

When King Gelele, who had been in poor health for some time, died in late 1889, his son, Kondo, who took the title of Behanzin when he was crowned in January 1890, succeeded his father (Obichere 1971, 66-67). King Behanzin, who controlled a large numerical military advantage over the French, immediately demonstrated that he intended to take a more combative approach toward the French than his father had displayed. By the beginning of 1890, when French forces in Dahomey were less than 1000 (See Table 1), Behanzin commanded an army that numbered about 12,000 (Ross in Crowder 159, 1971; Obichere 1971, 67). Shortly after becoming the leader of the Fon, Behanzin and the French went to war.

When the First Dahomey War commenced in early 1890, the French were greatly outnumbered; however, they employed tactics that were not used by the Dahomeans. The French navy blockaded the major seaports, thus preventing any chance of rearmament for Behanzin’s army by Germany or Portugal (Obichere 1971, 72). Additionally, navy warships supplemented fighting by French ground troops during many battles. Obichere reported that, “Terrillon [the French Commander] …directed his troops to the left bank of the River Queme, where they were supported by the gunboat L’Emeraude” (Obichere 1971, 73). It can be surmised from the historical records that the Dahomeans did not have a navy, and that the French navy played a significant part in the conquest of Dahomey.

The French combined their naval combat strategies with the most sophisticated weapon technology known in the late 19th century, including repeating rifles and long-range cannons. According to Bayol, the French were much better armed than the Dahomeans, who were armed with what Bayol described as: “long buccaneer guns…whose range did not exceed one hundred meters” (Bayol cited by Obichere 1971, 68). He went on to say that although the Dahomeans did have some repeating rifles, the majority of their hand-held arms were reminiscent of those used by the “French infantry a century before” and “a few old cannons of seventeenth century origin” (Bayol cited by Obichere 1971, 69).

The case concerning the Dahomean weapons was reported much differently by the French Commander Terrillon. According to an official report by Terrillon, the Fon possessed sophisticated equipment
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manufactured by European armament companies such as “Sniders, Winchester, chassepot, Spencer, Werndl, Peabody, Malincher, [and] Martini” (Terrillon cited by Obichere 1971, 69).

Apparently, Bayol deliberately under-reported the Dahomean’s weaponry while at the same time degrading the fighting ability of the Fon in order to convince the government officials in Paris to continue their support of his authority. Terrillon, as commander, may have been trying to show that he was fighting a strong enemy so that at the end of the war the government officials in Paris would not underestimate his victory. Therefore, it seems possible that the actual weaponry of the Fon was somewhere in-between the two official reports.

Despite the contradictions noted above, the French military technology was certainly more sophisticated than that possessed by the Fon, and the French utilized more than just military power in their war with Dahomey. The French made use of psychological warfare in an attempt to demoralize the Dahomeans. For example, at the conclusion of one battle Obichere described the French tactics this way: “The village of Zogbo was burned by Commandant Terrillon and his troops before they returned to Cotonou” (Obichere 1971, 71). He went on to report that it was standard practice for French troops to employ a “scorched-earth” policy whenever they encountered Dahomean resistance in the field. Obichere noted that “Several villages were bombarded and burned down as the troops marched from Kesounou toward Dangbo” (Obichere 1971, 73). French advantages in tactics and weapons were offset by two factors: Fon resistance and endemic health issues.

Behanzin proved to be an extremely vigilant opposition leader; his army used guerrilla tactics of hit-and-run during night raids to harass the French throughout the war. The French did not expect the Dahomean’ resistance to withstand the onslaught by both naval and army power, but the war progressed into the late summer of 1890 with the French suffering military casualties that were described by Obichere as “considerable” (Obichere 1971, 71). No official numbers of French dead and wounded are available to the general public.

Meanwhile, with the war not going as well as anticipated, the French were facing another problem that had historically beset Europeans who dared to penetrate the tropical environs of sub-Saharan Africa: i.e., diseases. Captain Leopold Fournier (the French naval commander in Dahomey) reported “an outbreak of influenza, [combined with] the general incidence of malarial fever, acute dysentery, gastric biliousness, and vomiting among the troops” (Fournier cited by Obichere 1971, 79). Thus, health problems combined with French military setbacks began to create dissension within the French government in Paris concerning the execution of the war.
A change in the political support from Paris for the war effort against the Fon led to a drastic realignment of the French leadership in Dahomey. According to Obichere, Bayol lost his political support and the result was a “transfer [of] the control and direction of the Dahomey affair to M. E. Barbey, the minister for the navy, with the mandate to obtain a negotiated settlement as soon as possible” (Obichere 1971, 76). Obviously Bayol’s overestimation of his own abilities combined with his underestimation of the defensive abilities of the Dahomeans led directly to the removal of Bayol from colonial power. Shortly thereafter, Barbey acted on the governmental mandate by ending the First Dahomey War.

Near the end of 1890, the French sued for peace and a treaty was negotiated and signed with Behanzin. The resulting peace treaty proved to be a prestige building device for Behanzin—the terms guaranteed that the French would pay an annual stipend to the Fon of 20,000 francs, which was viewed by Dahomeans as a tribute to Behanzin. Additionally, local Dahomean officials were returned to their government positions. As a concession, the treaty guaranteed the French exclusive trading privileges in the ports of Cotonou and Porto Novo, which was a return to the pre-war status quo (Ross cited by Crowder 157, 1971; Obichere 1971, 82-83). In effect, the First Dahomey War was a moral victory for the Dahomeans and, at best, a military and diplomatic stalemate for the French.

The French, however, were not satisfied with just maintaining authority over trade in Cotonou and Porto Novo; they coveted jurisdiction over the important navigation routes on the Niger River in northern Dahomey. Consequently, within a very short period of time after the 1890 treaty was signed, disagreements over dominion recommenced between the Fon and the French. As 1892 dawned, Behanzin was once again exercising his authority over Dahomey while the French were making preparations for another war against the Fon.

Early in 1892, Behanzin conveyed a concise point-of-view to the French in a letter he sent to Victor Ballot, the French administrator in Porto Novo. He wrote: “I am the King of the Negroes and white men have no concern with what I do...Please remain calm, carry on your trade at Porto Novo, and on that basis we shall remain at peace as before. If you want war I am ready” (Gann and Duignan 1969, 215). The French, who wanted an overland route through Dahomey to the Niger River, rejected this call for peace, thereby setting the stage for the Second Dahomey War.

In the spring of 1892, Colonel Alfred A. Dodds, a French mulatto, was given command of the French Expeditionary Force in Dahomey (Obichere 1971, 103; Encyclopedia 1911). Even though his mother was African, Dodds was a French citizen by his father, and he was educated in France. During his early military career Dodds distinguished himself with heroic leadership as far back as the Franco-Prussian War in the early 1870s.
(Obichere, 1971, 103) and he progressed through the officer ranks to eventually become a Colonel and later a General (Ajayi and Crowder 1973, 417; Gann and Duignan 1969, 392). Finally, from 1888-1891 Dodds was a commanding officer in the *Tirailleurs Sénégalais*, who were African soldiers in the French Colonial Army, (Echenberg 1991, 1; Encyclopedia 1911). This then was the officer who was assigned the task of subduing Behanzin and his army in the upcoming war.

In late May 1892, when Colonel Dodds took command of the French forces in Dahomey, the number of troops was approximately 800 (Obichere 1971, 104), which was slightly less than the number before the First Dahomey War (See Table 1). Before beginning a sustained offensive into the Dahomey interior, Dodds received reinforcements that more than doubled his available troops. To supplement those troops, King Tofa of the Gun (a kingdom that was historically subservient to the Fon kings) sent over 2,200 of his people to serve the French as porters in their offensive against the Fon (Obichere 1971, 105-106). Obichere stated that prior to the offensive against Abomey the troops under Dodds’ command consisted of “76 officers and 2088 enlisted men, 930 of which were Africans” (Obichere 1971, 106). Michael Crowder put the number closer to 3000 (Crowder 1968, 102-103). Despite the discrepancy, it is clear that the French had learned from the First Dahomey War and were determined to use a substantially larger force during the Second Dahomey War.

The final French offensive to capture Abomey began during the summer of 1892; when Abomey fell in late 1892, with heavy Fon casualties, Dodds was promoted to the rank of General (Obichere 1971, 109; Echenberg 1991, 20). A large percentage of the Fon army was destroyed during the campaign of resistance. It has been estimated that they suffered 2000 dead and another 3000 wounded (Boahen 1985, 63). Albeit the Fon army was nearly destroyed by the French in their march to Abomey, King Behanzin still managed to escape before the French occupied the city. He fled north with about 2000 troops and continued to fight in traditional Fon guerrilla fashion until General Dodds finally defeated him in early 1894 (Boahen 1985, 129; Crowder and Ajayi 1974, 418).

Superior tactics, more sophisticated weaponry, and outstanding leadership were the primary reasons why the French invaders, although outnumbered six to one, were able to defeat the Fon decisively in a relatively short period of time. According to David A. Ross, “Bullets from their [Fon] rapid-firing rifles tended to speed high over the heads of the French troops, while shells from their [German made] cannons and howitzers... more often than not, failed to explode.” He added: “Colonel Dodds made certain that his force was never taken by surprise, never divided and, above all, never cut off from its base” (Ross cited by Crowder 90).
1971, 161-162). These decisive factors contrasted greatly with the hit-and-run strategy utilized by the Fon. When King Behanzin and his remaining troops were finally captured, the armed resistance of the people of Dahomey to French colonization was stilled for the foreseeable future. With the Fon army thoroughly defeated by Colonel Dodds, French forces pushed on to the Niger River where they established the northern border of the French Colony of Dahomey (See Figure 1) (Crowder and Ajayi 1974, 418).

During nearly four years of Fon’s defiance to French military assaults on their autonomous regions, King Behanzin was a prime example of the many African leaders who opted for armed opposition over acquiescence throughout the closing years of the 19th century. In virtually all cases, the African leaders had to be captured or killed before resistance to colonial rule was suppressed.

The French did not immediately remove all local African leaders in Dahomey. To maintain stability in the region, Dodds installed Behanzin’s brother, Prince Gouthchili, as the new King of Dahomey in January 1894. Gouthchili, who took the title of Agoli-Agbo, remained as the titular leader of northern Dahomey under the direct supervision of a French administrator for the next six years. In 1900, the French officially removed Agoli-Agbo and took full control over most of the country. Finally, in 1913 the French abolished all authority that was still in the hands of the monarchs of Dahomey and declared the country an official part of French West Africa (Ross in Crowder 1971, 172; Obichere 1971, 118).

From the time that the French established their original foothold in Dahomey in the 1870s the local kings in the region were forced to choose between cooperation with or opposition to the intruders. Nevertheless, regardless of which of those dichotomous paths the Dahomean leaders took, the eventual outcome was the same—French colonialism was established by 1900.

According to Echenberg, the Tirailleurs Sénégalais was established as part of the French military by Governor Louis Faidherbe of Senegal in 1857; and the French used them during both Dahomean Wars (Echenberg 1991, 7). The Gun, Dahomeans from the Porto Novo region, were directly involved in the Second Dahomey War as porters for the French. These two examples of French exploitations of Africans for military roles were repeated and multiplied during the next sixty years of colonial rule in French West Africa.

1900-1960: The Colonial Period

The roles of the military in Dahomey during the colonial period were varied. From 1900-World War I (WWI) French troops, including
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_Tirailleurs Sénégalais_, were used mainly to enforce colonial policies. In this section, this paper will focus on the army’s roles during WWI, the inter-war years, WWII, and the post-war period.

As the 20th century dawned on a partitioned Africa, the French initially adopted a political policy called assimilation to govern in French West Africa (Webster, Boahen, and Tidy 1980, 214). Assimilation was a policy designed to treat all people in the French Empire as French citizens, with the right to vote and hold public office. In theory, the policy of assimilation would make all colonies part of the larger French communal society. In practice, as Webster, et al. noted, “Following the conquest of vast areas in West Africa [including Dahomey] during the scramble, the French did not extend the commune system to the enlarged areas” (Webster, Boahen, and Tidy 1980, 215). Instead, throughout French West Africa the policy of assimilation was abandoned for a much more restrictive one called association.

Association, in this sense, meant that the French would govern the colonies by sending administrative personnel from Paris to the colonies to oversee all aspects of governance (Gann and Duignan 1970, 229-232; Webster, et al.1980, 214-216; Ajayi and Crowder 1973, 518-525). This policy of complete political control of Dahomey, and all of French West Africa, was a complete contrast to assimilation because as Webster, et al. noted, “Under association all Africans outside the communes [in Senegal] were classified as subjects who were not protected by French laws or had any say in government… [they] were totally subjected to the autocracy of colonial [French] officials who could demand their labour without pay” (Webster, Boahen, and Tidy 1980, 215).

The French also employed the policy of association to enlarge their military forces by drafting Africans to serve. One part of the policy of association consisted of military conscription, a practice of involuntary military service that had begun in the early part of the 20th century and continued until the middle of the 1950s. Compulsory participation in some form of military service to France was the way of life for young men in Dahomey and throughout French West Africa, during much of the colonial period (See Tables 2 and 3). _Tirailleurs Sénégalais_, a name used to describe all African soldiers from the French colonies regardless of their country of origin, was purported to be a voluntary force until French administrators in Africa passed the Conscription Law of 1912 (Boahen 1985, 293). Conscripted West African troops were employed throughout the expanding French Empire; drafted Africans fought in Europe, Asia, and Africa before and during both World Wars.

It must be noted at this point that not all of the soldiers who served in the _Tirailleurs Sénégalais_ were draftees; prior to 1912 a portion of the army was made up of volunteers. A large percentage of the early _Tirailleurs_ were
former slaves or other people from the lowest economic rungs of society. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, volunteers saw distinct advantages to service in the French army. Echenberg noted two specifics: “First, the soldier…was exempt from head taxes as long as he was in service” and “a pension plan [was] provided by the decree of 1889” (Echenberg 1991, 23-24). However, following the passing of the 1912 law, the vast majority of the Tirailleurs were conscripts.

Conscription, by its very nature, insured that the colonies would supply a continuous number of young, able-bodied men to the French army. This drain on the manpower in French West Africa meant that there was a shortage of laborers to grow the crops and to build the transportation infrastructure that was required by the French to move the natural resources to the coastal trading areas. In the words of Gann and Duignan: “Even [after local requisitions of civilian labor] there was not enough manpower for large-scale public works” (Gann and Duignan 1970, 230). With that in mind, it is reasonable to assume that the French would employ military conscripts to supplement the undermanned labor force.

In addition to being used as a cheap and readily available labor force, the soldiers of the Tirailleurs Sénégalais were also used to control areas of French West Africa prior to WWI. Echenberg reported: “Now that West Africa was becoming secure, the use of the Tirailleurs Sénégalais to help create and then defend the far-flung French empire became a more important commitment” (Echenberg 1991, 27). Thus, they were an army of occupation; however, the French army also had some related tasks assigned to them. They were responsible for guarding the territorial borders claimed by the colonizers and suppressing the rarely occurring internal anti-colonial uprisings (Welch 1970, 8).

Even after French West Africa was firmly conquered, conscription of Africans was increased in the years immediately preceding WWI. General Mangin of the French army had toured French West Africa in 1910 and it was his belief that “it was a giant reservoir of manpower for the French military” (Mangin cited by Ajayi and Crowder 1974, 543). At any rate, by the time the First World War started in 1914, France looked to West Africa for what the French perceived as a nearly limitless supply of new soldiers. Originally, the plan seems to have been for the African Tirailleurs to be used to replace regular French troops who were stationed in African colonies, thus freeing the French for fighting in Europe (Echenberg 1991, 32; Ajayi and Crowder 1974, 494).

The so-called recruitment drive (actually conscription) of 1915-1916 required the colony of French West Africa to supply France with 50,000 men (Echenberg 1991, 27; Ajayi and Crowder 1973, 497). Of the 50,000 required, about 40,000 were conscripted during the middle years of World War I. The conscription records for 1915-1916 indicate that Dahomey was
required to supply 3,800 men, but the actual figure drafted was just less than 3,600 (Ajayi and Crowder 1973, 497). A substantial number of West Africans fought and died during WWI due to compulsory military service to France. Somewhere between 170,000 and 180,000 French West Africans served in the French military from 1914-1918. Of these it has been estimated that at least 30,000 died during the fighting (Echenberg 1991, 46; Ajayi and Crowder 1973, 495).

It may be expected that with the war over the drafting of West Africans to serve in the *Tirailleurs Sénégalais* would have also come to an end; conversely, while decreasing in numbers conscription continued after WWI. (See Table 2) The pre-war size of the *Tirailleurs* was 8,500 and by 1920 that number had grown to 180,000 (Echenberg 1991, 26).

**Table 2: Tirailleurs Sénégalais 1890-1953**

![Tirailleurs Sénégalais 1890-1953](image)

Source: Echenberg 1990, 26

The continuation of the practice of drafting West Africans to serve in the French military was probably mainly due to large loss of French lives during the war. An estimated 1.3 million French soldiers were killed in the
four years of WWI (Echenberg 1991, 50). With such huge casualties it is only natural that the French people would demand a return of those soldiers who had survived; and Africa was presumably the likeliest site in which to find replacement soldiers to defend the Worldwide French Empire.

In order to maintain a high level of new replacements to serve in the Tirailleurs Sénégalais, a quota of 10,000 per year was established in 1920 for French West Africa. The number of soldiers required from Dahomey by region (north to south) is shown in Table 3 below. Annual draftees were those young men who had reached the age of nineteen by the previous December 31st; they were required to serve a total of four years, which meant that in any given year the total number of Dahomean men serving in the French military after 1924 was approximately 3,500 (Echenberg 1991, 52-56).

Table 3: Annual Conscripts Required from Dahomey, Post-WWI

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location of Region</th>
<th>Number of Soldiers Required</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Kandi</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natitingou</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parakou</td>
<td>189</td>
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<td>Savalou</td>
<td>78</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abomey</td>
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<tr>
<td>Porto Novo</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>850</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: My Table derived from Echenberg 1991, 56

When there was not any combat in which they could participate African troops were used by the French as a very inexpensive labor force. They were utilized to build or repair various infrastructure projects including the Port of Dakar, the Dakar-Niger railway, and a number of dams and bridges on the myriad rivers in French West Africa (Echenberg 1991, 61). One Tirailleurs soldier recounted his service in the Soudan (West Africa) in the 1930s this way:

To put is bluntly, it was labor at the cheapest possible price. We were paid 30 francs CFA a month. We were poorly fed...Any Malian or Voltaique family still has a fresh memory of the building of the bridge [at Markala] where men worked in the rain and under the whip without respite. The lazy and the revolutionaries were thrown into
the river to intimidate the other workers (Echenberg 1991, 61).

Surely, treatment such as that described above, similar to slave labor, left a lasting impression on those exposed to it and eventually led to a demand for freedom.

Most scholars agree that forcing blacks to serve in French colonial armies eventually worked against French interests in West Africa. Following both World Wars a majority of the political activists in Dahomey were former soldiers; Louis Hunkanrin’s life illustrates that concept. Following his service in WWI, Hunkanrin became one of the leading anti-colonial leaders in Dahomey. Before he was arrested in 1923 and sent into a ten year exile in Mauritania, Hunkanrin organized a political union in Dahomey that was modeled after one with which he had become familiar while serving in France (Echenberg 1991, 205; Webster, et al. 1991, 250-251). Although Hunkanrin was well known as an anti-colonial agitator in Dahomey during the inter-war years, his was not the only voice that was raised against the French colonial authoritative policies.

In Dahomey, during the inter-war years the French increased the head-tax (a tax that was placed on Africans simply because they existed) (Ajayi and Crowder 1974, 521). Presumably, this increase was initiated to force the people to increase their production of crops that were then sold and the proceeds collected by the French colonial government. By 1923 the tax was so exorbitant that the inhabitants of Porto Novo rioted in the streets. The riots were one striking example of the unrest that marked the inter-war years in Dahomey. Ballard’s dramatic words show the extent of typical French hubris in their dealings with the colonials:

In the Porto Novo commune of Dahomey in 1923 there were riots against the increase in the head-tax from 2.25 francs a person to fifteen francs a man, ten francs a woman, and five francs a child. Taxes on market selling rights and European-style houses were also increased. The riots were so serious that Governor-General Merlin sent in three companies of Tirailleurs and a machine gun section from Dakar and Togo, and proclaimed a state of siege (Ballard cited by Crowder 1968, 439).

There are numerous accounts such as this one in the historical annals that show the African’s discontent with French colonial rule across French West Africa during the inter-war years. However, despite the unrest, the French still continued to increase their influence in the region as WWII approached.

As can be seen in Table 2 above, the conscription of Africans continued during the inter-war years and again increased dramatically during WWII. During most of the Second World War, the troops from
West Africa carried much of the battle-load for the French forces. Mazrui noted: “After 1930, 15,000 men were recruited annually into the *Tirailleurs Sénégalais*. In 1939-1940, an 80,000-strong contingent was sent to France and between 1943 and 1945 another 100,000 crossed the sea to fight in Italy and beyond” (Mazrui 1993, 282). Myron Echenberg estimated that “the upper limits of the Free French forces [reached] 250,000” by the end of WWII (Echenberg 1991, 99). He also noted: “In the period from June 1940 until the liberation of France in the summer of 1944, black Africans constituted the main elements of the rank and file in the Free French Army” (Echenberg 1991, 88). It may be assumed this was due primarily to the early capitulation of the French to the Germans and the resulting collapse of the traditional white French army.

At any rate, the mystique of invincibility that surrounded the French colonists at the onset of the 20th century had dissipated during WWI and disappeared completely following WWII. At the conclusion of each of the two World Wars, the political activities against French colonialism in Dahomey increased largely because the returning veterans bore witness to the fallibility of the French. Prior to the First World War, the French must have seemed to be all-powerful to the people of Dahomey because they had conquered the Fon in a relatively short amount of time and thereafter controlled the entire country. However, as the actions of returning veterans like Hunkamrin illustrated in post-WWI Dahomey, the belief of the invincibility of the white man began to crumble and that deterioration accelerated during WWII.

Many West Africans who had served side-by-side with French troops and under French officers returned to their homelands with stories of their war experiences. One veteran who fought the Germans in Europe recounted his experience this way: “We were with the French all the time. We were stronger that the whites. That bullet that hit my tooth would have killed a white. When the shooting came, the whites ran. They knew the area and we did not, so we stayed. Our officers? They were behind us” (Echenberg 1991, 141). Stories such as this one explain why veterans returning to Dahomey after WWII were inspired to actively participate in political movements aimed at ending French colonial rule in their homeland.

Veterans of WWII formed the backbone of the organized independence faction in Dahomey. Echenberg reported that one veterans’ political group to be reckoned with in Dahomey had a membership of 14,000 in 1948 (Echenberg 1991, 144). Most of the members of this group were from the rank-and-file of the *Tirailleurs Sénégalais* and they formed bonds with the other independent-minded groups who were growing in numbers and political strength in the post-WWII years. Mazrui added that,
“By 1948 in Dahomey, fifty-eight percent of the 54,000 electorate were ex-servicemen or serving soldiers” (Mazrui 1993, 292).

Instead of returning to the rural areas where many of them had lived prior to the war, the WWII veterans migrated to the cities and large towns where they put their newly acquired political ideologies to work against the French colonial system (Echenberg 1991, 140). A political elite, many of whom were former military men, developed in Dahomey following WWII. In The African Experience, Vincent B. Khapoya wrote: “These African soldiers, after returning home, were willing to use their new skills to assist nationalist movements fighting for freedom that were beginning to take shape in the colonies” (Khapoya 1998, 158). Davidson quoted one returning WWII veteran this way: “We all overseas soldiers are coming home with new ideas. We have been told what we fought for. That is ‘freedom.’ We want freedom, nothing but freedom” (Davidson cited by Khapoya 1998, 158). It is logical to assume that after fighting with and against white men the Dahomeans who returned to their homeland believed that their service had earned them the right to govern themselves. However, France was not yet ready to relinquish its hold on French West Africa.

At the conclusion of WWII a number of promises were made to West Africans that were supposed to correct the inequalities of the policy of association. Among those promises was French citizenship for all French West Africans, an end to conscription and forced labor, equitable representation in the National Assembly, and more African control over local political affairs (Webster, Boahen, and Tidy 1980, 178-179). To implement these reforms the French reverted to a policy of assimilation. However, as Ruth Morgenthau pointed out: “Assimilation never applied to the total relationship between France and her colonies...A policy for [educated] elites, it was hardly suitable to post-war mass politics” (Cited by Gann and Duignan 1970, 464-465). Clearly, this return to a policy from the early days of colonialism was a last-ditch effort by the French to maintain control of their African colonies.

The promises that had been made to the returning veterans were never kept. As a result, the policy of post-war assimilation failed because the stirrings of a grass-roots independence movement in West Africa were too strong to be quelled. France, weakened by WWII, was in no position to stop the anti-colonial fervor. Beginning in the 1950s, the French Parliament showed a marked inclination toward allowing self-governance in West Africa. France’s loosening of the reigns of power allowed Dahomey to become independent in 1960.
Independence: 1960-Present

The army in Dahomey at the time of independence was relatively small. According to Samuel DeCalo there were approximately 1,800 soldiers and 1,200 paramilitary police officers in 1960 (DeCalo 1990, 99). However, since there was no outside threat to the country the role of the military was not clearly defined. As a result of the relative peace in Dahomey and the fact that much of the army was stationed near the major cities on the coast, the military became involved in the political scene on an increasing basis beginning in the early 1960s and continuing until the early 1990s. The role of the military during most of the first thirty years of independence was either direct control or indirect powerbroker in the constant struggle for political jurisdiction in Dahomey. One striking trend prevailed during the nearly thirty years of military-based government in Dahomey: i.e., whenever a new military faction took control, its primary goal was maintaining power at any cost.

Beginning in the late 1950s the independence movement in Dahomey was led by three locally powerful politicos from different regions of the country. When the first independent government was formed in 1960, traditional regional control in Dahomey played a major part in its formation. Justin Ahomadegbe, a descendent of the Fon kings, emerged as the one member of the triumvirate. From the Porto Novo region Sourou-Migan Apithy, descended from the royal family in that area, gained political power. The third member of the civilian coalition government was Hubert Maga who became the leader from the northern region of Dahomey (DeCalo 1990, 95-96). This first attempt at self-rule in Dahomey, since the 1885 partition, proved to be a somewhat less than stable government.

These three attempted, unsuccessfullly, to form a number of coalition governments over the next two years. According to DeCalo, all attempts at political alliances between any combinations of the regional leaders failed because of “persistent infighting…immense pressures from competitive ethnic pyramids of allegiances, and the intense struggle for control of patronage [favors]” (DeCalo 1990, 98). Maga was the recognized President of the Republic largely because he was backed by the still powerful French contingent in the country. None of these men represented a majority of the elected representatives in parliament; subsequently, a consensus was never reached and a functional government was never formed.

When this first attempt at a democratic-style government collapsed in October, 1963, the army, under General Soglo, moved in and rearranged the power structure by replacing Maga with Apithy and naming Ahomadegbe as vice-president (DeCalo 1990, 95-99). It appears that Soglo chose Apithy to head the government because of a regional relationship
(They were both from southern Dahomey). This type of regionalism combined with ethnicity accounted for the installation of leaders during many of the power changes that took place over the next decade.

The period between 1963 and 1990 in Dahomey was one of constant military intervention into the politics of the country. (See Chronological Chart below):

**Chronological Chart of Military Interventions 1963-1990**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>October: Military intervention by General Soglo; he removes Maga as president and replaces him with Apithy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>November: Soglo removes Apithy and replaces him with Tahirou Congacou, the president of the National Assembly December: Soglo removes Congacou and installs himself as military dictator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>December: Colonel Maurice Kouandete, head of the Security Services Division and the palace guard, removes Soglo in a coup d'état and installs a group of junior officers as a Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC) with himself as the head (Among the junior officers is a young Captain named Mathieu Kerekou)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>May: A general election is held and then immediately annulled by the the Kouandete regime Early summer: Colonel Alphonse Alley, army chief of staff, attempts a coup that fails; he is forced to resign his army commission Emile Derlin Zinsou, a civilian compromise candidate, is appointed by the MRC as president of a civilian-military government—later ratified by a popular vote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>July: A group loyal to Alley attempt to kidnap Kouandete and fail December: Kouandete removes Zinsou from office in a coup and replaces him with a military directorate composed of Kouandete, Colonel Sinzogan, and Colonel Paul-Emile de Souza (who is appointed chairman), a close political ally of Zinsou. With the reduction of Kouandete’s power, Alley is reinstated and appointed director of national defense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>A general election is held and Ahomadegbe is elected president, the election is immediately annulled by Colonel de Souza and the government is controlled by a return of the triumvirate of Maga, Ahomadegbe, and Apithy in a compromise move by the military directorate (the plan is to rotate the presidency on a two year basis between the three)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>February: Kouandete leads a failed attempt to overthrow the government October: Major Mathie Kerekou, who has been gaining strength in the south, stages a successful coup, his regime rules in Dahomey for the next 18 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: My Chart Derived from DeCalo Information 99-116
As the above chart illustrates, from 1963 until 1990 the government of Dahomey, with the few infrequent exceptions noted, was controlled by one military regime after another.

Although the army and its leaders were involved in a multitude of governmental changes during the nearly three decades from independence until 1990, coups were not the army’s only endeavor; it was also used on numerous occasions to dispel riots and protests by union and student activists. DeCalo reported one such event that occurred in 1963. There was a “week of union strikes and massive demonstrations in the coastal areas” which was eventually put down by the army (DeCalo 1990, 98). DeCalo also noted one other example of the army’s action against civilian protestors in December 1967, when there was a massive strike by trade unions in Dahomey. Colonel Kouandete using a paracommando unit under his command quickly and brutally stopped this strike (DeCalo 1990, 106). These two examples are only a small sampling of the utilization of army troops to quell protests during the turbulent three decades following independence in Dahomey.

The years of military-backed governmental changes in Dahomey did not occur in a vacuum; they were a residual product of the legacy that resulted from the many years of French colonial rule. In a 1985 publication for the United Nations, Dr. A. A. Boahen stated:

Thus, one of the most novel institutions introduced by each colonial ruler was the professional army. These armies were originally created, most of them in the 1880s and 1890s, first for the conquest and occupation of Africa, then for the maintenance of colonial control, and, finally, for the prosecution of global wars and the suppression of independence movements in Africa. After the overthrow of the colonial rulers, these armies were not disbanded but were taken over by the new independent African rulers and they have turned out to be the most problematic of the products of colonialism…as a result of their repeated and often unnecessary and unjustifiable interventions in the politics of independent African states, those armies have become the heaviest of the millstones round the necks of African governments and peoples (Boahen 1985, 788-789).

This general statement perfectly depicts the roles of the military in Dahomean politics.

One consistently recurring theme was evident in all of the cases in which the military intervened and eventually took control of the newly independent African states: what was initially proclaimed to be a temporary condition turned into a permanent situation. This persistent striving of
military leaders to hold on to power, once they attained it, was certainly present in Dahomey.

In December 1965, General Christophe Soglo deposed President Congacou and took control of the political affairs in Dahomey. At the urging of a number of his subordinates, Soglo assumed the role of temporary political leader of his country, thereby setting the stage for the military’s role in Dahomean politics over the next twenty five years (DeCalo 1990, 103). Zolberg alluded to the fact that, Soglo’s “decision to assume full personal control over the government in Dahomey in December 1965, was the third military intervention in the country since independence” (Zolberg cited by Van Doorn 1969, 184-186). Soglo soon announced that temporary control of the country by his military regime would be extended to five years in an attempt to stabilize the failing economy (Van Doorn 1969, 190). Soglo’s coup d’état was the first of many military interventions in the politics of Dahomey which occurred over the next twenty-five years.

While military force was certainly the means of controlling the government in Dahomey, there were a number of reasons that the coup d’états occurred. Albeit that economic problems and regional cleavages were both contributing factors to social and political unrest and eventually to military coups, the one underlying factor that remained constant throughout the turbulent decades following independence was the desire for power. As can be expected in an area where the military controls so much of the political authority, constant shifts in loyalty were apparent in Dahomey. When one set of power brokers was perceived to be favoring a few close associates, another faction would likely attempt to gain a more powerful position for itself through forceful means. These constant shifts in loyalty often resulted in military-based governmental changes as stated above.

There was one other constant with all of the military coups that occurred in Dahomey during the early years of independence. All of the military-turned-political leaders were former officers in the Free French army. Each of the military leaders who succeeded to the Presidency of Dahomey between 1965 and 1972 were from the higher echelons of the army: in each case, they were generals. It is unclear when and how these officers obtained their high military ranks, but it seems likely that they were promoted (or promoted themselves) through a military system that rewarded loyalty, ethnic origins, and regionalism.

Coup d’états were not the only way that the military had of affecting the political events in Dahomey during the early years of independence. In the spring of 1967, a group calling itself the ‘Military Vigilance Committee’ formed an oversight team to regulate the actions of Soglo and his regime. This group was made up of middle- and junior-rank officers and non-commissioned officers (DeCalo 1990, 105). As DeCalo
pointed out, the primary focus of the committee was to “make General Soglo personally accountable to a quasi-parliament of the military” (DeCalo 1990, 105). This would not be the last time that officers from the middle-ranks of the army would be influential in the politics of Dahomey. Five years later Major Mathieu Kerekou would stage a coup that would have long term effects on the political scene in Dahomey.

In October 1972, a radical change in the trend of coups led by senior military leaders was established during the coup d’état of Major Mathieu Kerekou. The transition was more than just a youth movement; it was a radical break with the age of colonialism in Dahomey. Kerekou and his compatriots were from a new generation of officers who were not associated with the French military. As previously stated, (See Chronological Chart above) Kerekou had been on the political scene in Dahomey since 1967. Unlike previous regimes, which tended to be controlled by those with common origins, the Kerekou government consisted of young army officers from disparate locations within Dahomey. Kerekou was a Somba from the north, while three of his closest supporters were Fon from the south. Although they were not ethnically nor regionally related, these young officers were all early followers of Kouandete (a cousin of Kerekou) and they seemed to have formed a bond when stationed together at the same base in Ouidah (DeCalo 1990, 102-117).

Much more than just an evolutionary step, the 1972 coup was a revolutionary change in the inner-workings of the military-backed government of Dahomey. DeCalo described their actions this way: “In order to differentiate themselves more sharply from antecedent neocolonial civilian and military ‘ancien regime,’ the young putschists stumbled onto Marxism-Leninism” (DeCalo 1990, 118). Kerekou and his contemporaries officially adopted a new political ideology—Socialism—and renamed the country the People’s Republic of Benin in 1975. Although he adopted a new political ideology, Kerekou, like his predecessors, maintained tight control over the country by utilizing the military when necessary.

During his nearly two decades in office, Kerekou used the military to maintain order when students and other civilians dared to confront the policies of his administration. For example, DeCalo noted one such event that occurred when students’ protests over a lack of funding for higher education took place in 1985. “The army was sent into the schools and university with orders to shoot on sight [any protesters]” (DeCalo 1990, 124). This type of brutal repression against anyone opposing the Kerekou government was customary throughout the long-lived military regime.

Throughout the first decade of his regime, Kerekou eliminated his adversaries and many of his former allies. DeCalo reported that “by 1981 Kerekou was the sole survivor of the core clique that had coalesced to
mount the coup d’état in 1972” (DeCalo 1990, 122). As had been the case since independence, the person who controlled the military in Benin was the one who controlled the country. Throughout the rest of the 1970s and all of the 1980s Kerekou did indeed maintain control of the military regime in Benin. His was by far the longest lasting military regime to rule in Dahomey, 1972-1990.

Kerekou managed to hold on to power for an extended length of time by keeping the bureaucrats and military rank-and-file satisfied. He allocated a large percentage of the national budget to government and military officials throughout the 1980s. According to DeCalo, the state payroll (civil servants and the military) consumed an estimated “65 percent to 95 percent of the budget” (DeCalo 1990, 94). Whenever there was an attempt to reduce the number of state-supported jobs, the powerful trade unions, which were backed by the military, always stopped the reduction efforts (DeCalo 1990, 94). However, by the end of 1990 the cash cow that fed the Kerekou government was coming to an end.

Economic morass, failure of the Kerekou regime to deal with the government’s excesses, and the end of the cold war led to a popular uprising and a call for government reform in late 1990. The longest and most successful military regime in Benin’s brief independent history was about to be replaced by a democratically elected government.

In February 1990, Kerekou acquiesced to the demand for political and economic reform by convening a national conference with the mission of addressing the problems facing Benin. Originally, the conference was conceived to be only a forum where local representatives could air their grievances and seek solutions for the ills of the country. However, political unrest led to a direction change for the conference. As Houngnikpo pointed out, “The conference became a subtle political trial of the [Kerekou] regime” (Houngnikpo 2000, 218). The conference resulted in the establishment of a constitution for Benin that called for democratic-based, multi-party elections.

As a compensatory gesture, Kerekou was allowed to remain as titular head of state, but a civilian Prime Minister was appointed to run the government during the interim period before elections could be held. Additionally, Kerekou remained in control of the military, and it seems obvious that without his cooperation the transition from military rule to a freely elected government could not have occurred (Houngnikpo 2000, 219; Banks 1999, 97). National elections were held in 1991.

Prime Minister Nicephore Soglo, who had been appointed at the 1990 conference, received 68 percent of the popular vote. Soglo was faced with an economic crisis when he took office in April 1991. In early 1992, with no viable reforms apparent, civil unrest led to an attempted coup which the Soglo government managed to subdue. By 1994 the economy of
Benin had deteriorated to the point of collapse and the Soglo coalition was in danger of imploding (Runchock 2001, 28). Soglo managed to keep his government viable until another national election was scheduled in 1996.

In the 1996 elections, Soglo’s inability to find a remedy for the country’s economic problems was the main concern of the electorate. Somewhat surprisingly, Mathieu Kerekou was returned to power when he defeated Soglo in a runoff election (Runchock 2001, 28). Apparently, the people of Benin had forgiven Kerekou for mismanagement and excesses during his previous 18 years in office. It is also possible that the Benin people desired to return Kerekou to office because they were disheartened by the six years of ineffective civilian leadership of President Soglo; and they believed that Kerekou’s experience would create more stability in the country. Regardless of the reason for Kerekou’s reemergence as a political force, since 1996 the military has taken a national defense posture and so far democratic principles seem to be holding in Benin.

The events in Dahomey are a prime example of the influential effects that the military has had over African state governments since independence. Concerning Dahomey, DeCalo remarked: “Six times in ten years (1963-72) the army, or factions of it, successfully seized power, with the country also intermittently rocked by military mutinies, attempted coups, and internal army strife” (DeCalo 1990, 89). The situation in Dahomey was not an isolated condition: similar events were occurring throughout many former European colonies in Africa.

DeCalo noted that “Few are the [African] states that at some stage have not been governed by military juntas or rocked by attempted coups or poser grabs” (DeCalo 1990, 1). The first of a plethora of military coups in West Africa occurred in Togo in 1963; the Togo military coup was the first domino to fall in the former colonies. Over the next decade-and-a-half, military interventions in the political affairs of newly independent African states became the norm, rather than the exception. DeCalo put it succinctly: “By 1975, twenty of the continent’s forty-one [independent] states were led by military or civil-military cliques;” and the dominoes continued to fall: “A decade later the military seized power in Maseru, in the continent’s sixty-first coup d’état” (DeCalo 1990, 2). Finally, by the 1990s democratically elected governments began to emerge across the African continent, although civil wars and unrest still prevail in some countries.

**Conclusion**

Examination of historical sources leads to a reasonable conclusion that military power has consistently been used to achieve and maintain political control in Dahomey. Prior to the French invasion of Dahomey,
local African kings were using standing armies to control and increase their kingdoms.

After conquering Dahomey at the end of the 19th century the French consistently utilized African soldiers of the *Tirailleurs Sénégalais* to repress uprisings by other West Africans so that the French could maintain control in French West Africa. Additionally, the French used African troops to maintain and enlarge the French Empire worldwide. Throughout the colonial period, which included a span of sixty years and two World Wars, Dahomeans were recruited (or more often drafted) to fight around the globe on behalf of the French. As the former soldiers returned to Dahomey they were dominant in the anti-colonial movements. A vast majority of nationalist leaders in Dahomey were former military draftees. After serving in various parts of the world, they returned to their homeland with renewed interest in ridding their country of the French interlopers who had controlled them for more than fifty years. Beginning after World War I and increasing exponentially after World War II, there was a burgeoning independence movement throughout French West Africa which resulted in the end of French colonialism in Dahomey.

Less than three years after independence in 1960 and until the dawn of democracy in 1990, Benin was either completely in the hands of the military or under the control of governments which served at the behest of military leaders. DeCalo observed that as late as 1990, the government of Benin was “a civil-military hybrid in which power [was] overwhelmingly centralized in military hands...[where] its true fount of power [was] possession of the means of coercion, without which it would be swept out of office like all antecedent administrations” (DeCalo 1990, 89). Shortly after DeCalo wrote those prophetic words, Mathieu Kerekou, who had been the military leader of Benin for eighteen years, was compelled to relinquish his control to a democratically elected government. That peaceful change of political power without the intervention of the military was remarkable for its historical significance.
Works Cited


The Roles of the Military in the History of Benin (Dahomey): 1870-Present


