2004

Review of "The American Foreign Legion: Black Soldiers Of The 93D In World War I"

Jennifer D. Keene
Chapman University, keene@chapman.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/history_articles

Part of the Military History Commons, Race and Ethnicity Commons, and the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History at Chapman University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Articles and Research by an authorized administrator of Chapman University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact laughtin@chapman.edu.
Review of "The American Foreign Legion: Black Soldiers Of The 93D In World War I"

Comments
This review was originally published in Register Of The Kentucky Historical Society, volume 102, issue 3, in 2004.

Copyright
Kentucky Historical Society
Moses to quote this statement three times (pp. 33, 57-58, 79).

RAYMOND WOLTERS is Thomas Muncy Keith Professor of History at the University of Delaware and the author, most recently, of Du Bois and His Rivals (2002). He is currently writing a book on school desegregation and educational reform since 1954.


Frank E. Roberts’s The American Foreign Legion draws its title from a passing comparison that the author makes between the assignment of four African American infantry regiments to the French Army during the First World War and France’s first Foreign Legion, an assemblage of French political outcasts sent to fight for Spain in 1835 who, despite having fought heroically, received a dubious welcome home from a hostile French government. In Roberts’s narration of the wartime exploits of the four infantry regiments that made up the provisional Ninety-third Division, the French are recast as an enlightened government willing and able to recognize the fighting abilities of black Americans. The tale that Roberts recounts is not technically the story of a division, as the Ninety-third Division only existed on paper, but rather the experiences of four distinct regiments, each with its own particular history. What these regiments shared, however, was a permanent wartime assignment with the French Army, a decision that the American Forces Expeditionary Forces commander General John J. Pershing reached amid controversy within the American armed forces over whether black troops would spend the war fighting or working behind the lines and an equally volatile dispute between the French and Americans over whether the U.S. would form an independent army or meld its infantry troops into the French command. In their assignment to the French, the members of the Ninety-third Division proved the exception rather than the rule to how the American Army would resolve these disputes. In marked contrast to the experiences of the Ninety-third Division, the vast majority of black troops spent the war in noncombatant positions, and Pershing remained steadfast in using the remainder of American troops to build an independent American army in France.

Given the diverse experiences of the 369th, 370th, 371st, and 372nd Infantry Regiments, Roberts organizes his book around the main themes of organization, stateside training, debarkation, arrival in France, assignment to the French Army, combat experiences, and the return home. Within these general themes, Roberts discusses the
experiences of each regiment. While recognizing the uniqueness of each unit, some unifying themes emerge, particularly the formidable amount of time that these regiments spent in combat and the scanty training that they received for these combat assignments as American officials spent more time worrying about containing race relations in army training camps at home and overseas than they did preparing these troops for battle.

The 369th, for good reason, is the most famous of these regiments, and an often-cited statistic notes that the regiment fought for 191 days in the line, the longest of any American regiment. Unlike most other books dedicated to the black soldiers’ experiences during the war that make note of this fact, yet devote the vast majority of their pages to the racial conflicts and domestic experiences of these troops, Roberts follows this statement with a comprehensive rendering of the combat experiences of all four regiments. Roberts explains clearly the combat missions given to these units, when they succeeded and why, and the heavy toll that fighting took on the men. Fighting may have been an honor, but along the Western Front in 1918 it was also terrifying and exhausting, a point that comes through clearly in Roberts’s narrative. Perhaps a more meaningful statistic than the repeatedly-mentioned 191 days is the one Roberts gives toward the end of the book when he notes that the fortitude of the 369th, 371st, and 372nd in the Champagne sector in the fall of 1918 “can perhaps best be measured when one considers that the maximum time a U.S. infantry regiment could be expected to carry out its mission in an assault of this nature before becoming exhausted and requiring relief was estimated at three days. These three regiments fought a fierce, successful battle against a dedicated and well-fortified enemy for up to a total of nine days in action” (p. 150).

While Roberts’s account succeeds on many levels, there are some weaknesses to the book, most notably its heavy reliance on a handful of postwar officer memoirs with only a smattering of official documents added to the mix. These published accounts obviously skew toward the celebratory, and the failure to consult the private papers of soldiers and officers, African American newspapers, and the full range of official sources concerning these units in the American and French archives results in a book drained of much human drama and pathos. It also means that it is mostly white voices recounting the history of these black regiments. The book also fails to link the fight for civil rights during this period with the struggle against the Germans on the Western Front, a dual campaign that the men themselves saw themselves fighting every day. Although a definitive account that offers a comprehensive view of the Ninety-third Division remains to be written, Roberts’s book is an
admiring testament to the perseverance of men who viewed a chance to fight for their country as an honor to embrace, not avoid.

Jennifer D. Keene is an associate professor of history and chair of the history department at Chapman University in Orange, California. She is the author of Doughboys, the Great War and the Remaking of America (2001) and is currently working on a book about black soldiers’ experiences during the First World War.


One novel initiative of the New Deal was a set of programs to adorn public buildings such as libraries, courthouses, and post offices with original works of art. The U.S. Treasury Department began these projects, first with the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) from 1933 to 1934 and then with the Section of Fine Arts from 1934 to 1943. The Treasury programs were inspired by the rebirth of mural painting in Mexico by artists such as Diego Rivera and by the influence of American Scene painters such as Thomas Hart Benton who used murals to celebrate daily life and regional or historical subjects. One ambition of the projects was to assist artists struggling to find work during the Great Depression, but a more important aim was to create a public art that would be a form of national expression with inspiring visual messages of American life and history. The murals were to be art about the American people and for the American people.

Two excellent books have examined the New Deal art projects. These are Karal Ann Marling’s Wall-to-Wall America (1982), which looks at selected controversies that the paintings generated, and Barbara Melosh’s Engendering Culture (1991), which examines the highly gendered cultural representations of the murals. These books, in turn, have been supplemented by regional and state studies, and the newest addition to this list is Philip Parisi’s very fine book The Texas Post Office Murals. The Treasury programs sponsored the painting of 109 murals and works of art in sixty-nine Texas post offices and public buildings. Some were in Houston, Dallas, and Waco, while others were in small towns such as Alice, Gatesville, and Teague. True to the American Scene ideal, the Texas murals were devoted to such subjects as the settling of Texas, the Plains Indians, the cattle drives, the development of farming, the arrival of the railroads, the building of communities, and the work of Texas’s ranches, oil fields, and shipyards. Sometimes the subjects were historic figures such as Sam