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

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Comments

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

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The American Foreign Legion: Black Soldiers of the 93d in World War I. By Frank E. Roberts. (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2004. Pp. x, 259. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, appendixes, index. \$29.95.)

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

admirable 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.