

The French Intelligence Activities in the British Southern Cameroon: An Unveiled Side of Colonial Rivalries.

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Abstract

This paper strives to contribute to an undeveloped face of a colonial era, highlighted by discrete confrontations between two major European powers, France and Great Britain, in the post Great War period in Africa. Military intelligence operations led by French colonial authorities in the British Southern Cameroons territory were considered as outcomes of this crisis. Analysis of available sources such as military reports from the Archives, books and papers related to this context confirmed the hypothesis that says French spying activities were a continuum of exacerbated colonial rivalries; the main objective was to control the totality of the former German protectorate whose geostrategic stakes were relevant.

Keywords: Southern Cameroons, colonial intelligence services, military, rivalry.

1. Introduction

The First World War strengthened diplomatic alliances between Great Britain and France against their common enemy: the Prussian Empire (Droz, 501). This context of violence enhanced diplomatic ties between the Allied nations, and forged an imperial military cooperation amongst them for the purpose of defeating Germany in its held African territories. Such enhanced diplomatic ties and military cooperation did much to eclipse the colonial rivalries that predated the 1914 war. Nevertheless, as soon as the war ended the old rivalries resurfaced. The post-campaign period in Cameroon was characterized by tensions amid French and British officials. Cracks in the Anglo-French relations were already being detected even as their joint venture against the Germans went on during the Great War. Divergences were indeed perceptible on the field, particularly in strategic and tactical choices during military expeditions against well-organized German colonial troops. These tensions persisted and even expanded after Germany's withdrawal and departure from the Cameroons. It produced disputes between military officers of both nations, on administrative and political issues (Duval, 64). Series of clefts instaurated a climate of mistrust and transformed these formers allies into foes. This context of suspicions incited French colonial rulers for example to set in place a military intelligence service whose purpose was to collect strategic information's on the British colonial military structure in the Southern Cameroons territory. The first mission started in 1938 and ended in 1939 with considerable information about security and military objectives and their arrangement on the field.

2. Methodology and Method

The colonial history of Cameroon as a whole has attracted an amount of scholarship, but very little of this scholarship has shown interest in the history of colonial intelligence services created by both European powers. One of them is a publication entitled *Que fait l'armée française en Afrique? Heritage colonial et stratégie de domination*, authored by Raphael Granvaud; its focus is on the French colonial troop's presence in West Africa. For Raphael Granvaud, the creation of colonial intelligence service was justified by the military needs. In fact, the policies of the French colonial empire necessitated an intelligence network in order to collect information on territories considered hostile to further expansion. Then, the intelligence operations were only a military concern, civilians were not admitted (Granvaud, 6). Meanwhile, analysis of military Archives on the French colonial period in Cameroon offer a different perception of the military intelligence agents during the colonial scheme.

This paper intends to invalidate arguments of militarization of the colonial security system; a position defended by some historians like Emmanuel Blanchard and Joël Glasman. In their paper entitled *Le maintien de l'ordre colonial dans l'empire français: une historiographie émergente*, they presented the colonial intelligence services as a coercive tool which aims was to strengthen the colonial rule. Indeed, this service was a response to the nationalist movements and the pacification of unruly territories (Blanchard & Glasman, 22). Inefficiency of the colonial intelligence service in the operational scene is pointed out by these authors; agents from the service were understaffed and not adapted to the sociocultural context of the population targeted, a situation which explains why they faced difficulties to infiltrate them (Blanchard & Glasman, 23). However, sources newly discovered from the Cameroon archives point the contrary; the French intelligence service was understaffed but this gap was balanced by a tight collaboration with traditional rulers considered as assistants of the colonial administration. This role obliged them to collaborate with the colonial rulers on security issues like the surveillance of suspects. This surveillance logic was extended to the administrative domain where, civil servants were also used as agents. An illustrative case came from Mr. Bekombo Louis, a civil servant from the French colonial custom office in Douala; he gave interesting details on the military architecture of the British Cameroon. Hence, questions arise on the particularity of the colonial security issue: what were the stakes behind the French secret operations in the British Cameroon territory? How were operations elaborated on the field?

Answers to these preoccupations necessitate data collection and analysis from various sources (books, papers, archives). To balance up sources and establish the credibility of documents used for this paper, the method of corroborative evidences was followed. While using reports from colonial agents, personal prejudices and biases have been eliminated as much as possible. Simple narration of facts and historical method of analysis were followed in the development of the present article, which starts by analyzing the root causes of the tensions between the French and British colonial armies' authorities at the eve of the Great War campaign. The second part deals with the escalation of tensions, especially civil and military tensions caused by the presence and activities of a French colonial agent during his mission in the Southern Cameroon territory.

3. Discussion

In Cameroon, the Great War campaign (1914-1916) was an opportunity for the demonstration of military supremacy in terms of logistics and manpower. The German colonial troops, the *Schutztruppe*, heavily outnumbered, posed a fierce resistance against all offensive attempts from the coalition forces (Duval, 45). The long duration of the conflict (18 months) saw allied troops commanded by British born General Charles Macpherson Dobell and assisted by French born General Joseph Gaudérique Aymérich who faced enormous difficulty in extracting German soldiers from their positions. Indeed, the confusion made at the head of the joint forces and the distances between the battlefields were responsible for the failure of the tactics put in place on the fronts. In fact, and largely because of the vast nature of the territory that stretched the battle scenes and according to Captain Eugène-Jean observed, each faction decided to operate separately under the orders of their respective commanders (Duval, 45). This situation drew the attention of the allied military officers who responded with organized meetings and conferences with commanders of the expeditionary forces in an attempt to enhance and coordinate their separate military ventures.

The first conference was held in the town of Douala on March 12th 1915 with the aim to coordinate actions on different fronts. In this meeting, the allies decided on a combined effort to attack Yaounde, the new capital of German Kamerun. Meanwhile, the hidden agenda of this encounter was to dissipate frictions between the components of the military coalition system. Unfortunately, this initiative failed once more because of the lack of synchronization among the coalition forces. A second meeting was again organized in Douala, on August 25th and 26th 1915. This time, the main objective was to carry out a final offensive against the German position in Yaounde and after many assaults, the allies succeeded; the town fell on January 1st 1916. The Yaounde Takeover was a result of combined attacks launched by the coalition forces, but the British troops commanded by Brigadier General Howard Georges in the absence of French and Belgian soldiers, who arrived at the German stronghold successively on January 5th, 6th and 7th 1916 (Duval, 46.).

At first sight, information given by Captain Eugène-Jean Duval seems reliable. Indeed geographical factors, particularly the nature of the territory, played an important role in slowing down the offensive endeavours of the allies.

However, his argument can be easily refuted. In fact, the justification of natural factors set forth by the allies to explain the distances between the front lines is actually insufficient to prove the heterogeneity on a tactical domain. Targets of the coalition forces were localities, particularly cities occupied by their enemies, most of which access was facilitated by roads and railways (Essomba 2013, 7).

In addition, France, which had colonial possessions surrounding German Kamerun in the East, owned telecommunications like telegraphs in each of its border offices. This, with the telecommunications infrastructures seized from the Germans during the campaign could have easily been put at the service of the allies. Then, if there were a will on the part of the actors, these means would have been used in order to facilitate coordination between the different corps. This solution could have made the distance a less important factor. All these strategic gaps gave the impression that, the Cameroon military campaign conducted by the allies was bungled. Sporadic assaults added to repetitive failures confirmed once again the thesis of rivalry within the expeditionary corps, which extended to the political domain.

Soon after the eviction of the Germans, an Anglo-French attempt to jointly administer the Cameroons became problematic. It helped to exacerbate the already existing tensions and rivalries between Britain and France. The forced departure of the Germans had created an immediate administrative void. In addition to this difficulty, inhabitants, who were traumatized by the war and nostalgic for their former German masters had not immediately accepted the sudden transition to the French and Briton. This context obliged both colonial military authorities to look for a new method of administration, which could ensure their permanent presence. The appropriate system capable of fulfilling this expectation, according to French military leaders and their British counterpart was the Condominium. Paradoxically, this common administrative system was to the advantage of Great Britain whose personnel organised controls during the temporary joint administration. Each time a locality was conquered, the British, contrary to their French counterpart, put in place basic administrative infrastructures (Duval, 64). The result was that, by the time the Germans were finally ousted, the administrative vacuums were already being filled by Britons.

To correct this imbalance, French colonial authorities decided to reconsider the condominium agreement and opted for the repartition of the territory. During discussions, disagreements appeared concerning territorial apportionment modalities. Indeed, according to the French colonial officials, the whole territory should return to them because most parts of the country, precisely the Eastern boundary zones, had been surrendered to the Germans by subjective and unjust agreements after the Agadir crisis in 1911. A request was presented to obtain the entire territory of Cameroon. British colonial leaders on their side considered that the repartition made after the campaign did not reflect their contribution since they were the first to occupy Yaounde, capital of German Kamerun (Duval, 67). To manage this issue, both countries decided to suspend this duality for the benefit of a separate administration regime. Henceforth, each colonial power was to manage the space under its control. The Royal West Africa Frontier Forces (RWAFF) already ensured the administration of the Southern part of the former German Kamerun and Eastern Kamerun was fully ruled by France (Ngoh, 1).

However, the condominium administration system as observed by Elango Lovelett has “never been materialized because of the clashing territorial ambitions and claims of the two allies” (Elango, 57). The persistence of tensions was verified by operations made by the French military intelligence service, which focused their research on information concerning the military situation of its British rival.

4. The British military presence: an obsession for the French Cameroon colonial rulers

Globally, territories under French occupation and intelligence services depended entirely on the administration. This colonial system, which aimed to ensure the defence and security of the territory, was built on the military corps. A Governor, considered as a central personality of this colonial architecture was generally a soldier who had proved himself in *La Coloniale*, the major French colonial army present in sub-Saharan Africa. He was assisted by a European and rarely by native non-commissioned officers. At the bottom of the pyramid, traditional rulers and troops from military units were essential for the colonial intelligence branch (Granvaud, 6). Meanwhile, this military network instituted within the colonial administration did not permit to attain fixed objectives, because of inefficiency and staff issues. In fact, the entanglement between military and civil domains instituted confusion within the intelligence services and affected their effectiveness. Moreover, this pyramidal system of intelligence created by the colonial authorities also faced difficulties in terms of manpower and wrong adjustment to the socio-cultural environment; soldiers were not natives of the occupied territory.

Similarly, Emmanuel Blanchard and Joël Glasman underlined these gaps within intelligence matters. They argued that before the inter-war period, the colonial intelligence services in sub-Saharan Africa were archaic, immature and understaffed and corollaries were verified on their duties (Blanchard & Glasman, 22-23)

According to records, the inter-war period saw the recrudescence of the French colonial military intelligence operations towards British Cameroon. However, operations were not only an army matter since the army and police were understaffed. Authorities often resorted to civilians, particularly people from the same socio cultural area with their military zone to fulfill special operations focused on all potential military elements. That was the case of Mr. Louis Bekombo, an assistant agent from the colonial customs office in Douala, who was about to leave from Tiko for 21 days, a locality situated in Southern Cameroon. He introduced a request on February 14th 1938 to travel in order to settle the dowry for his marriage. Colonial authorities seized this opportunity to get strategic information's about the military situation of the British troops (National Archives, Yaounde, APA11223/F, 1938). There were also some cases where a French colonial administrator was redeployed as an agent during an official visit to the British territory. Sources from the National Archives in Yaounde reveal that, many played this role. Mr. Rousseau is an example. Chief of the French Cameroon Civil Aviation Board, he gave concise information on the aircraft domain after an official visit to this British-influenced zone (National Archives of Yaounde, APA11223/F, 1938). It is important to note that this information was not only exploited by the colonial administration. It was also sent to the Home Secretary in Paris via the Ministry of war and national defence. The Ministry of war and national defence according to General Vaisse was the main intelligence centre after a series of verifications (Vaisse, 14).

Records reveal that French colonial military intelligence activities reached its peak during the 1930s. In this period, a vast spy system was raised. It was made of some native non-commissioned officers from the British colonial units and natives working in the administration in order to ascertain the secret of the British military machine. Information gotten from briefings and based on questionnaires elaborated by the French colonial rulers, gave with precision the different objectives targeted: logistics, manpower, and defence provisions (National Archives of Yaounde, APA11223/F, 1938).

According to Bekombo Louis on November 5th 1938, the infantry of the Cameroons' meridional colonial army was relatively well equipped. Units owned only British guns and bayonets. Apart from these individual guns, they did not have any automatic rifles, or other type of arms. They were supplied by two ammunition stores in Buea and Bamenda. The Bamenda store had a capacity of three to four cartridge boxes (National Archives, Yaounde, 1938). They had, according to reports of the month of April 1938, civil planes requisitioned for reconnaissance by the army. These aircrafts, according to the information from the 7th corroborated by sources of May 21st 1938 and confirmed later by the colonial security on June 1st 1938, belong to Mr. Theo Blaich, a German and owner of the *Kamerun Bananen Gesellschaft*, a company specialized on the production of banana, located at Likombe, 4 Km from Tiko. The aircraft had an excellent, but too narrow airfield, measuring about 50 on 60 meters and was endowed with 3 planes. **(Figure 1)**

Most of these aircrafts were parked in two hangars constructed on the Likombe estate by Mr. Theo Blaich, which had 20 meters on 10. The record descriptions mention that the landing-ground measured 540 meters of length on the weather side and banana trees surrounded 200 meters of large on the leaside. According to this agent, the landing-ground could receive small French aircraft like *Luciole* but was not reserved for heavy aircraft like *Pelican* and *Potez* (National Archives, Yaounde, 1938). Information on the British military aircraft situation reveals that they were not able to launch vast military operations due to the shortening of appropriate air infrastructure. However, according to the director of the civil aviation board, these equipments could be used for military patrols on the borders with the Oriental Cameroon because of their handiness and large range of action. This logic of reduced logistics is also observed in the maritime domain.

The British Cameroon colonial navy had a main naval-station in Victoria and subsidiary stations in the localities of Tiko and Mundamé. They were placed under the authority of a British officer, Commander De Spon. They were equipped with civil boats requisitioned from the Germans after the World War I campaign. According to information obtained from an agent called Seya, of the Nigeria Police, the Victoria main naval station was commanded by a British officer Captain Guardet and supported by boats of Tiko and Mundamé when necessary. For instance, they often patrolled on the Mungo River, a natural boundary between the French Cameroon and the British zones of influence. The same inquiry mentioned that the colonial navy did not have any warship on its bases.

The units of the colonial forces were composed by elements of the police, which were not assimilated to the military corps but conscript when necessary. Sources obtained by the French colonial intelligence from Mr. Seya, revealed that Captain Georges was undertaking a re-arrangement of the military units (**Figure 2**) into a better task force throughout the Southern zone (National Archives, Yaounde, 1938)

Information collected by the spies demonstrated the particular attention paid by the French colonial military branch on the western Cameroon colonial army. Details were given on each British colonial military component (logistics, manpower and arrangement) and even future research projects concerning its development. However, this sustained intelligence monitoring and above all the recurrence of their operations raise questions as regards to the underlying motivations for it. Analyzing the history of these rivalries may give answers to these preoccupations.

The African scene was considered as a covetous and tension zone; France and Britain were always confronted with colonial issues. Tensions among these imperialist powers began with the Fachoda crisis which took place in 1898, in present day Sudan. This crisis was the consequence of convergent ambitions of France and Britain who were engaged in vast colonial empire edification projects. England wanted to construct a railway to link the Cape colonies in the current South Africa to Cairo in Egypt; while France wanted to link French Sudan to Djibouti found in the horn of Africa. Both expeditionary forces commanded by French Captain Marchand and British General Lord Kitchener passed in the locality of Fachoda (Ducloud, 6). A long series of disputes among the two colonial powers was then launched in spite of the Berlin Conference agreements. In a context dominated by mercantilism, it was difficult to find a compromise. Indeed, each rival had to look for markets in order to sell their products and to supply factories with raw materials. In this context, controlling the coastal spaces proved to be a necessity for a better commercial establishment. Thus, the army of both countries was at the head of expedition to clear the field for the trading post implantation, ensuring the security of the metropole and colonial possessions (Killingray & Omissi, 10).

Eyelom (2007, 158) proposes an economic analysis of the rivalries between France and Great Britain in Cameroon. He argues that, the allies' project to exclude the Germans from Cameroon was guided by mercantilist reasons. The first target of their colonial forces during the Great War campaign was the town of Douala, which held the essential economic infrastructures of the country. For Eyelom, this situation poisoned relations between these former allies, causing a crisis which led to tensions. This confrontation for the control of strategic spaces pushed these countries, opposed by their imperialism doctrine and their system of administration, to set the scene for future conflictual relations, as noted by Grégoire Ducloud (Ducloud, 37).

This logic of contestation brandished by the French administration, influenced all the colonial conquest initiatives in Africa and the creation of colonial checkpoints on the borders, guarded by colonial military units. In these circumstances, political matters could have justified intelligence operations towards British colonial investments and their military situation because, for both, acquiring a huge colonial territory was synonymous with greatness, prestige and overall access to the rank of Great Power. Even in the 1930s, a period within which intelligence activities reached its paroxysm, obeyed this context, though it was overshadowed by the preparations of World War II in the European scene and worldwide.

In the European scene for instance, France and Great Britain were not enemies. The period 1938-1939 was considered as an interlude between the First and Second World Wars, marked by the reinforcement of diplomatic ties once more, notably by the alliance against Germany in spite of the isolationist policy opted for earlier by the United Kingdom. It was quite the contrary in Africa. It was a time prevailed by the germination of divergent doctrines about the reinforcement of colonial rule called 'Native policy', theorized by some political figures and academics (Dimier, 78). Both powers confronted themselves through debates regarding the administrative and economic policies of their respective possessions. This emergence of thoughts on methods of colonial management was also extended to the former German possessions like Kamerun and Togoland, mandated by the League of Nations through the administration of France and Great Britain. Rather than simple discussions, disputes were noted on the policies elaborated by both countries. British colonial observers asserted that France practiced a destructive policy towards natives by annihilating their social fabric; the direct rule system of administration adopted by them did not converge for the well being and the respect of their traditions. French rulers on their part refuted these accusations by demonstrating that their mission of "civilization" had benefits for the evolution of the natives.

These divergences on colonial policies had been referred to the League of Nations. During the commission's meeting, each country wanted to undermine its adversary; they contested and demonstrated insufficiencies of each other's administrative system. Indeed, Cameroon that was placed under the League mandate benefited of specific juridical status which clearly defined missions of its representatives in this circumstances, France and Great Britain.

It stipulated that, they should not establish any military infrastructure but should be limited to maintain the security and order within their respective territory. This regulation could justify the lessening of the British colonial army in the British Cameroon and France in French Cameroon. However, this principle was not respected on the field. In the French Cameroon for example, military structures were set in place immediately after the departure of the Germans. These disputes transformed the League's commission as observed Dominique Dimier, into a tribune of claims, each power set in place strategies to obtain its favour. (Dimier, 96) The description made by Dominique Dimier could help to comprehend the blackmail strategy adopted by these nations within the framework of the League of Nations commissions. All resources were put in place to collect data which could discredit the rival in order to monopolize the administration of the territory. To fulfill this strategic task, the intelligence services, and precisely the military intelligence branch, were welcomed to check compromising information and to locate infractions made by the competitor towards the principles defined by the League of Nations. As we saw above, the administration law elaborated by this institution was very explicit on territorial security matters and its violation could be detrimental for the nation implicated.

5. Conclusion

Resulting from this reflection which aimed to analyze the motivations justifying the French colonial military intelligence activities in the British Cameroon, it can be noticed that, these operations resulted from colonial rivalries between both imperialist powers. History teaches us that, France and Great Britain were the major colonial competitors on the international scene since the nineteenth century. These nations' main objective was to control vital spaces in order to provide their industries with raw materials and to sell off manufactured products. The purpose of the second confrontation was the implementation of their different and antagonistic systems of administration on the field. The British Cameroon, as we saw earlier, did not escape this logic in spite of its special status defined by the League of Nations. Like in other colonial possessions, French and British colonial authorities opposed each other during the League of Nations annual assembly, where each country tried to discredit its rival by searching for the least default in the application of the League's principles concerning the administrative and political domains. This attitude can be considered as a form of contestation over the colonial management of Cameroon. To acquire evidence of these deficiencies, the French colonial administrators launched operations to collect any compromising information on the military and security matters to obtain favours and even probable retrocession of the contested British Cameroon influence zone. To fulfil this objective, agents were recruited within the civil service and some military Non-commissioned Officers who gave detail information about the military situation of their British neighbour.

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Ibid, 96

Figures

Figure 1

Aircrafts	Capacities	Characteristics	Registrations
FOCKE-WUFE	150 hp	Civil utility aircraft, two-seat all-wood construction.(German manufacturing)	D-EMPE
MESSERSCHMITT TAIFUN	250 hp	Recreation aircraft, three-seat, all –metal construction. Inverted V8 engine. Length: 8.3m on 10m. Weight: 700 Kg Range : 1250 Km Consumption rate: 100 L Flight range: 250Km/h=1000Km Speed raid: 375 Km Loaded weight: 500Kg	D-IETF
JUNKER	Motor star	All-metal construction and two-seater. (German manufacturing)	D-EMAX

Board recapitulating the British Cameroon aircraft

Figure 2

Emplacements	Present arrangement	Arrangement proposed
MUNDAMÉ	1 African Non Commissioned Officers (NCOs) 4 soldiers	Same manpower
MONGO-BEACH	1 African NCOs 7 African soldiers	1 European NCOs 3 African soldiers
TOMBAL	3 African soldiers	3 African soldiers
MENNE ESTATE (on the Mbonga road)	1 NCOs 7 African soldiers	1 NCOs 3 African soldiers
MBONGA	4 African soldiers	4 African soldiers
KUMBA	5 NCOs 32 African soldiers	3 NCOs 30 African soldiers
Total	64	46

Board recapitulating the arrangement of the British Cameroon colonial forces