

Centenary (Madagascar)

By [Arnaud Leonard](#)

In Madagascar, between 2014 and 2018, there were many initiatives to commemorate Malagasy participation in the Great War: exhibitions, monument inaugurations, ceremonies, conferences, etc. However, these have often presented a stereotypical vision of war, which had little impact on public opinion. Despite the historical research available online, the myths of cannon fodder and the claims of blood debt have been revived.

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Introduction

During the First World War, more than 40,000 [soldiers](#) and [workers](#) were recruited in Madagascar. The largest island in the Indian Ocean, conquered by the French in 1896, had a population of about 3 million. 10 percent of these *tirailleurs* [died](#) during or just after the conflict. The French authorities only deployed these troops to Europe and the Mediterranean ([Greece](#)) at a late stage: the first major waves of recruitment took place in August 1916. In some cases, Malagasies volunteered in the hope of securing French citizenship, but the vast majority of *tirailleurs* were poor rice farmers, indebted workers and freed slaves, pushed by the administration and its promise of significant war pay and family benefits. As General Governor Hubert-Auguste Garbit (1869-1933) pointed out in a lecture given in Paris on 16 May 1919, 45,863 Malagasy enlisted during the First World War: 41,355 to serve in fighting units and 4,508 as non-combatants.^[1] However, as the study of the kind of death recorded in the registers of the *Morts pour la France* reveals, of the 3,980 Malagasy who died during the conflict, 3,060 perished from contracting illness during service.^[2]

Official memorialisation in Madagascar at the end of the war was a calculated concession to soldiers from the Great Island. Its goal was primarily political and not military: the [monuments](#) raised in the Highlands in 1923 and 1924 were first and foremost a means of glorifying the colonial project, more than an attempt to honour the Malagasy (and French) people who perished in the

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war. From the mid-1970s, Malagasy participation in the First World War fell into an almost collective oblivion on the Great Island. Interest was rekindled as the centenary of the Great War approached, and a "commemoration committee" was established within the Malagasy Ministry of Defence and Armed Forces to coordinate various [historical](#) and memorial projects. In November 2014, the exhibition *The Malagasy tirailleurs in the First World War*, placed under the high patronage of the Prime Minister Roger Kolo, was held at Antananarivo City Hall. In October 2015, a monument commemorating the first embarkation of Malagasy soldiers for the war was inaugurated in the port of Toamasina (French: Tamatave), on the Avenue de l'Indépendance. Other initiatives coming from multiple actors have marked the centenary period on the Indian Ocean island. To what extent can we speak of a renaissance of the [memory](#) of the *tirailleurs* in Madagascar since 2014? To answer this question, we will successively study the different vectors of memory diffusion: exhibitions, steles and monuments, remembrance ceremonies, publications of [press](#) articles, academic papers, soldiers' [letters](#) and memoirs, comic strips, and the posting of [documentaries](#) [online](#).

A Large and Very Temporary Exhibition in the Capital City

A turning point in the long period of relative forgetfulness of Malagasy participation in the Great War consisted of the preparation and realization of an exhibition of thirty-five panels at the headquarters of the [urban](#) commune of Antananarivo (French: Tananarive). Originally planned for 13-20 June 2014, the date was changed following the formation of a new government in April of that year. The prime minister's office (*Primature*) placed the exhibition under its patronage. This led to an extensive exercise in commemorative diplomacy. The ambassador of [France](#) was invited to the exhibition's opening in the National Archives as was the minister of culture and the minister of defence of Madagascar. This political dimension also echoed the invitation of President Andry Rajoelina of the Republic of Madagascar to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Second World War landing in Provence (Operation Dragoon) in August 2014.

Prepared by a team from the National Archives of Madagascar after consultation with specialists, the exhibition "Ny tiraiera Malagasy tamin'ny Ady Lehibe voalohany" (The Malagasy Tirailleurs in the First World War) featured iconographic documents, accompanied by a contextualized legend. Most of these [photographs](#) did not come from national collections, which are quite meagre, but from [archives](#) preserved and digitised in France: private collections, the photographic (and cinematographic) section of the army (SPCA) of the Établissement de Communication et de Production Audiovisuelle de la Défense (ECPAD, Médiathèque de la Défense, Ivry-sur-Seine), Valois albums from the Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine (BDIC, Nanterre), and the photographic archives of the Médiathèque de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine (Fort de Saint-Cyr, Montigny-le-Bretonneux).

The voluntary war effort in the colony was highlighted, notably the establishment of "charity evenings", fund raising to help the families of *tirailleurs* and the despatch of [tobacco](#), chocolate or sugar to soldiers at the front. The delivery of Malagasy [rice](#) and zebu meat to European fronts was also emphasised. Several documents validated the courage of Malagasy soldiers. Campaigns in Salonika (May 1915), the Chemin des Dames (May 1917), the second [Battle of the Marne](#) (June-July 1918) and the Battles of the Soissonnais (July 1918) received particular attention. The purpose of the exhibition was announced by the director of the National Archives: "this exhibition should serve to make known the roles and courage of Malagasy tirailleurs during the Great War". Such sentiments were reinforced by the words of the prime minister on this occasion: "we must know history, know what is good and what is not... The good in all this is that there was a fight for freedom".^[3]

The final choice of textual and iconographic documents presented to the public reflects this desire to promote a consensual Franco-Malagasy vision of the participation of the Great Island in the First World War. This heroic memory of the *tirailleurs* culminated with clichéd celebrations of the 12th battalion of Malagasy *tirailleurs* (12th B. T. M.), the only Malagasy battalion to have been fully engaged in combat and decorated in Meurthe-et-Moselle in October 1918. Photographs of Colonel Garbit, former governor of the colony and instigator of the recruitment of Malagasy, and General Noël Edouard De Castelnau (1851-1944), who presented the Malagasy with the colours of the ribbon of the Croix de guerre, took pride of place in the exhibition. By contrast, very few documents referred to Malagasy participation in work behind the lines, although there were some photographs of road repairs in Alfeld, in the Ballon d'Alsace. Many aspects of the *tirailleurs'* history were forgotten or sidelined in the exhibition, from their reluctant commitment to the war to the difficult reintegration of veterans into [post-war colonial society](#). Unsurprisingly, the exhibition's *Golden Book* records the "pride" of many visitors in light of the bravery of these "ancestors".

An Exhibition Well Covered in the Press

A textual and lexicological analysis of press articles reporting on this event reveals widespread public ignorance of the history of the war.^[4] Paradoxically, the number and extent of these articles suggests a surge of popular interest in the subject. There was a lamentable lack of historical or archival grounding to this discussion. The figures recorded (number of committed, wounded, dead) come from the speeches made during the ceremonies; one article goes so far as to speak of "unavailable statistical data". The number of victims is sometimes fanciful: an article announces 10,000 dead, some two and a half times the actual number. None of the authors question the voluntary nature of the commitment of the Malagasy: "Yes! The Malagasy went to enlist as *tirailleurs* during the First World War", one article loudly announces. Throughout all this celebratory commentary, the myth of "cannon fodder" remains tenacious: "According to history, Malagasy people and other Africans were pushed to the front to receive the first bullets". One article evokes the "brotherhood" between fighters united against a common "enemy".^[5] This overlooks the fact that Malagasy *tirailleurs* fought under the European command and none rose to the rank of officer. There were few opportunities for fraternization or a sense of common interest, though some interaction with other colonial troops, such as Moroccans, did take place. Again, there is very little to suggest the Malagasy troops engaged in civil and military engineering work. The occurrence of "workers" is totally absent, whereas the term "tirailleurs" appears on an equal footing with that of "soldiers" (29 times). The word "combatants" appears on 19 occasions, as does the word "dead".^[6]

Press coverage vowed to help Malagasy people *discover* their history. The aim was to "educate the current generation", and to "reveal history to future generations".^[7] But the value and integrity of such partial and ill-informed history is questionable. **Commemoration** was an act of celebration centred on the manufactured memory of the "heroic" *tirailleurs*.

Exhibitions in the Provinces

Exhibitions were also held in the provinces. In Tadio, near Fandriana, relatives of Second World War soldier Johanesa Rafiliposaona (1912-1948) built a museum-like space on the family property, which contained a number of historical objects more or less directly linked to the two world wars. Many of the objects came from private donations, including a **gas** mask, a gourd flask, a tobacco box, cutlery and plates, a colonial hat, a board game, and postcards. One of the most intriguing elements of this display was a collection of glass plate images. These served a **pedagogical** purpose and elicited considerable interest from high school students. But these stereoscopic clichés did not show any Malagasy *tirailleurs*.

Tadio's tribute to the Great War was designed as a traveling exhibition. Objects and accompanying texts were sent to the headquarters of the National Malagasy Office of Veterans Affairs and Victims of War (ONMAC-VG) in Antananarivo in August 2015, to Toamasina City Hall in April 2016 and to several other cities in the country in 2017. The ONMAC-VG also welcomed two showcases displaying military objects and clothes related to the First World War. Some were authentic, others were reproductions. Yet again, there was no direct connection with the Malagasy soldiers, only a laboured attempt to project a heroic past.

Inaugurations of Steles Commemorating the First Embarkation of the Tirailleurs

Several steles and monuments were raised during the centenary period. The most significant of these was the stele commemorating the first embarkation of the *tirailleurs* in Toamasina. It was placed under the high patronage of the president of the republic and inaugurated on 9 October 2015 in the presence of the prime minister. The location of this three-metre-high monument is highly significant: the statue of the *tirailleur* was placed on Avenue de l'Indépendance, the symbolic artery of the city, which hosts the main headquarters of the national and local administrations. The soldier was placed at the end of the avenue facing the ocean to suggest a journey across the Mediterranean. This is an active and purposeful figure. The *tirailleur* marches forward in combat attire. The statue is made of composite material. The bilingual inscription, in Malagasy and in French, specifies: "9 Oct 1915. Centenary 1st Embarkation Malagasy Tirailleurs" (Faha - 100 Niondranana Tiraera Malagasy). The inauguration of the statue was managed by the Malagasy state; French authorities were invited but played no real role in the proceedings. Speeches were made in Malagasy and then translated into French. The desire to create a new monument dedicated to the First World War marks a rupture. There was no suggestion to restore the original war memorial of the city (located on a square called Place de la Colonne). This marble work, completed in 1898, had served to commemorate all the warlike episodes experienced by the inhabitants of the province, including the events of the French repression of 1947. It appears to have lost much of its currency with the approach of the centennial years.

Another stele was raised in Toamasina within the Lycée Français on the morning preceding the public ceremony on Avenue de l'Indépendance. The international network of Lycées Français had signed a partnership with the French centenary mission, which made it possible to stimulate the implementation of educational projects and their official labelling within the context of the centenary celebration. The artist, fine arts teacher at the Lycée Français de Tananarive and president of the POLka Association of Polish-Malagasy friendship, Albert Zieba, studies important parts of the connected history of the Malagasy, Polish and French communities of the Great Island. In Toamasina, Albert Zieba's work consists of an aluminium Adrian helmet atop a naval anchor and adorned with a palm of martyrs, on a granite base. A plaque is fixed at the base. It bears the inscription: "In memory of the soldiers of Madagascar. 1914-1918. 1939-1945. The French high schools of Toamasina and Tananarive. October 9, 2015". Indeed, students from both schools honoured Malagasy soldiers who were lost in both world wars. They held bilingual readings of *tirailleurs'* letters. It should be noted that 60 percent of pupils in the French educational network in Madagascar are of Malagasy nationality. This proportion increases if binational students are taken into account. Again, French authorities played a secondary role at the inauguration and the prefect of the Atsinanana region was present.

A School Project: the Monument for Rafiringa

Another pedagogical project spanned four years and led to the realization of a memorial work conceived in Madagascar but exhibited in France. In 2014, students from the Lycée Français de Tananarive learned of the existence of a *tirailleur* who had lived in their neighbourhood. He was born around 1886 and died in the Meuse on 28 February 1918. They embarked on a fictional recreation of the soldier Rafiringa's (1886-1918) war diary. They also contacted high school students living near his grave in Bar-le-Duc, and asked them to photograph the sepulchre erected in his memory. The exchange between these two groups of students became denser and richer as the centenary progressed. The first of several ceremonies took place in May 2014 in the Meuse necropolis. French students read the traditional speech (*kabary*) prepared by their counterparts in Madagascar in the presence of civil and military authorities. The following year, a proposal emerged to trace the major stages of Rafiringa's life. This was achieved by the erection of two funerary poles by the aforementioned artist Albert Zieba. At their inauguration in Antananarivo, the poles were displayed alongside the soldier's military record, his portrait and the flags of both countries honouring both Madagascar and France. Another notable feature of this installation was the presence of a *ravinala*, or "traveller's tree", that often symbolizes the Great Island. A photograph of the assembly was awarded a special prize in a national contest, "The Centenary Photography". The poles were taken to the port in Antsiranana (Diégo Suarez) and then travelled on military vessels to Toulon. They retraced the route of Private Second Class Rafiringa on his way to war. The installation was set in place at the Lycée de Bar-le-Duc on 14 March 2018, almost exactly 100 years after the *tirailleur*'s death.

Evolution of the Remembrance Ceremonies

Throughout the course of the centenary, the Malagasy press echoed remembrance ceremonies held in Europe. In the Hexagon, the Malagasy consular authorities regularly honoured the *tirailleurs* buried in national soil. In Bordeaux, a ceremony of this type has been held since 2009. For several years, the city of Grand-Champ (Morbihan) and local members of the National Union of Veterans Affairs of Indochina, théâtres d'opérations extérieurs (TOE), and North Africa have honoured the Malagasy soldier Makoa (1896-1917) whose grave was marked by a tombstone. It is the only military grave in the communal cemetery. For the 11 November ceremony in Grand-Champ, the honorary consul of Madagascar for the Great War participated for the first time in 2014. The event was widely reported in the Malagasy press.

All official ceremonies in Madagascar take a particular form. Remembrance ceremonies are always placed under the auspices of the host country, because the 11 November is not a holiday in Madagascar and any demonstrations around war memorials are restricted. The ceremonies generally take place in the presence of Malagasy and French civil and military authorities, veterans, and pupils from French schools, whether in Antananarivo (the only city with a monument honouring the soldiers of the whole island) or in other major provincial cities (Antsirabe, Diégo Suarez, Fianarantsoa, Majunga, Tamatave). Usually there is a review of troops and veterans, a minute of silence is observed and both the French and Malagasy anthems are played by a military band. The laying of wreaths is commonplace at such dedications and a strict protocol governs who carries such tributes and in what order. Some special initiatives have emerged since 2014, particularly in the premises of diplomatic residences, which offer more space for memorial initiatives. The defence attaché of the French embassy often plays a leading role in such ceremonies. He is also the originator of the exhibition entitled "They rescued France - Our gratitude is eternal". Six posters were produced in partnership with ECPAD, along with a photographic collection. Each shows a portrait of a Malagasy *tirailleur* with

the accolade "He rescued France". The role of colonial troops in the First World War was also acknowledged at the inauguration of the memorial of Notre-Dame-de-Lorette. Extracts of the secretary of state for veterans and memory's speech were read in Antananarivo as well as in Mahajanga (French: Majunga) and Diégo Suarez.

The Ceremonies around the National War Memorial in Antananarivo

The war memorial of Lake Anosy, the only memorial dedicated to all soldiers from Madagascar, is emblematic of the relationship of the Malagasy people with the memory of the Great War. When it appears on TV screens, it is most often in tropical [music](#) videos where women in short dresses wriggle on the steps of the monument. There are few more telling instances of the commodification of a nation's war memory. Typical of this genre is Malagasy singer Stephanie's video entitled "Tsy foiko ianao" (You Are Not Mine). Produced in 2015, it cast a play of multicoloured lights across the memorial and spelled out "Chemin des Dames", after the famous battles.

On 7 March 2018, the president of the Republic of Madagascar came to inaugurate the new facilities around the monument. The ceremony marked multiple events, including the creation of new green spaces to celebrate International Women's Day on 8 March. On the dike leading to the memorial, paved curbs, posts and rope railings were set out. Night lighting was installed using solar panels. These renovations and beautification works were mainly related to the recreational development of the site and have little or no heritage value. Their relationship to the memory of the Great War is equally tangential.

Monuments like these have long provided a stage for memorial diplomacy. In the course of the 16th Francophonie Summit (held in Antananarivo), French President François Hollande visited the Lake Anosy memorial. His statement on 26 November 2016 began by noting that "it is the first time since Madagascar gained independence that a president of the French Republic and a head of the Malagasy government have come together to bow before the Lake Anosy war memorial". But his speech included some grave historical inaccuracies. Hollande claimed that 2,500 men from Madagascar died abroad - the latest research confirms the figure to be ca. 4,000.^[8] On Sunday, 11 November 2018, the Malagasy minister of defence and the ambassador of France to Madagascar jointly unveiled a commemorative plaque at the Lake Anosy monument. Alongside the speech of French Prime Minister Georges Clémenceau (1841-1929) the following inscription was made: "1918 - 2018. Centenary of the Great War. In memory of those who fell in the war and died for France. Peace, Freedom in Heritage".

Historical Research and Archival Endeavour

Rigorous historical research on Malagasy participation in the First World War has been limited. A symposium entitled "Commemorating 1914-2014: Memory Traces and Actors of Conflicts" was organized by the University of Fianarantsoa in November 2014 and attended by several lecturers from the University of Rouen. Most research covers Madagascar during the second rather than the First World War. Malagasy First World War historians often belong to French academic institutions (for example Faranirina V. Rajaonah at Université Paris Diderot). Similarly, only one conference concerning *tirailleurs* took place at the French Institute of Madagascar in Antananarivo ("Tirailleurs: Memory at the Risk of History", June 2015). Interesting directions for new research should include studying a phenomenon of the 1920s and 1930s where individual stones (*tsangambato* or *vatoлахy*) were erected to honour soldiers who had died abroad. Many of these memorial monoliths are now mistakenly considered dedications to victims of the French repression of 1947, as shown by the example of the monument to Private Second Class Totohely (1884-1916) at the entrance to the city of Fenoarivo Atsinanana (French: Fénérive-Est). In addition, no collection from the population of objects that belonged to the Malagasy *Poilus* has been set up.

A Limited Distribution of Letters, Memoirs, Documentaries and Comic Strips

While official history may be preferred, a number of private initiatives have uncovered letters and memoirs of Malagasy soldiers and workers. Let us first quote the MEMORIAL project of the Union of Veterans' Widows and Descendants (UACVD). The project consisted of compiling the magazine "Ny Feon'ny Marina" (The Voice of Truth), a bi-monthly Catholic magazine in Malagasy language published in Tananarive. An exhaustive search through the issues of 1915-1946 recovered many articles relating to Malagasy soldiers. The association produced a bilingual version with the translation in the first column and the scanned original text in the second column. Two volumes were printed in B5 format. Another collective initiative, this time from a high school, was the transcription and presentation of Pierre Ramampy's (1897-1961) memoirs dating from 1916 to 1920. Ramampy was a figure of Malagasy political life in the 1950s. The manuscript had been entrusted to the students of the Lycée \$Centenary (Madagascar) - 1914-1918-Online

Français de Tananarive by his daughter Marie Zénaïde Lechat and was published in May 2016. Finally, in October 2016, the diary of Jonah Raliterason (?-1971), a soldier of the famous 12th B. T. M., dating from September 1916 to November 1918, was published by his granddaughter. These family stories set in a much wider national narrative suggest that the well springs of war memory are set deep in personal history.

Despite a boom in history documentaries on the Great War, few have thus far been produced in Madagascar. There is one notable exception. The former Picardy region and the director Corine Zongo-Wable collaborated with Malagasy filmmaker Maminihaina Rakotonirina to conduct a series of interviews in Antananarivo as part of the "Frères d'Armes" project on "The Black Force" in the Great War (July 2016).

In Madagascar more so than in Europe, it is difficult to close the centenary commemoration cycle. Despite the November armistice, most colonial troops did not return to the Great Island until September 1919. Another highly symbolic event at the end of the war deserves our attention here: the torpedoing of the steamer Djemnah by a German [submarine](#), which killed 436 people. There were 200 Malagasies amongst the casualties. The Djemnah set sail from Marseilles towards Madagascar in July 1918 and was attacked on the 14th of the same month. The attack recently became the subject of a comic strip. "Les naufragés du Djemnah" (The Castaways of the Djemnah) is a collaboration between Antananarivo high school students and the professional draftsman Mamy Raharolahy. It is based on real characters and their stories, found in archives and postcards and recounted by the students, giving new life to these men and recovering the memory of this tragic episode. Again, this was a bilingual exchange: the project was first written in French, then the comic was translated into Malagasy. It is another example of a memory project shared between the two countries and, for Malagasy youth, a landmark for a better knowledge of their country's past.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the years 2014 to 2018 occasioned a rebirth of the memory of the Malagasy *tirailleurs* of the First World War. But the official ceremonies that took place throughout the course of the centenary were shaped by their diplomatic context and reflected current day relations between the Malagasy government and the international community. They offered a rather heroic and consensual vision of the soldiers of the Great Island. There was little questioning of reasons for war, French reluctance to send Malagasy troops, the classification of ethnic groups according to their military value, the limits to the voluntary nature of the commitment and the participation of local deputy governors in forced recruitment and suppression of resistance. By the same token, the difficulties of men returning after the war lies largely outside the ambit of official war remembrance. Much of the actual experience of war is wilfully overlooked: the role of combatants is emphasised above the day to day labour behind the lines, the omnipresence of [disease](#) is downplayed, as is the marginalisation of colonial forces by white authorities. There have been some attempts to recover the memory of war, especially evident in school initiatives and educational activities, particularly in French-language schools on the Great Island. But although they were supported by Malagasy and/or French institutions, these projects have had little impact on wider public opinion. Commemoration of a century-old conflict has little relevance in a country marked by great poverty and political instability. The work of Malagasy historians still focuses largely on the processes of [de-colonization](#), while the figure of the *tirailleur* remains marked in the imagination by the spectre of the so-called Senegalese auxiliary forces, widely used by France to ensure order on the Great Island.

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Notes

1. ↑ Gontard, Maurice: Madagascar pendant la Première Guerre mondiale, Tananarive 1969, p. 128.
2. ↑ Leonard, Arnaud: Soldats et travailleurs malgaches dans la Grande Guerre. La mémoire officielle au risque de l'histoire, in: Amat-Roze, Jeanne-Marie / Benoit, Christian (eds.): L'Empire colonial français dans la Grande Guerre. Un siècle d'histoire et de mémoire, Paris 2020, p. 675.

3. ↑ Speeches by the director of the National Archives of Madagascar and the prime minister of Madagascar at the opening ceremony of the "Ny tiraiera Malagasy tamin'ny Ady Lehibe voalohany" exhibition, 13 December 2016 [translated by author].
4. ↑ Leonard, Arnaud: *Le centenaire de la Grande Guerre à Madagascar à travers la presse* (2014). *Choix d'articles*, issued by Observatoire du Centenaire, online: <https://www.pantheonsorbonne.fr/autres-structures-de-recherche/observatoire-du-centenaire/documents/> (retrieved: 14 January 2021).
5. ↑ Leonard, Centenaire presse [translated by author].
6. ↑ Ibid.
7. ↑ Ibid.
8. ↑ Leonard, Arnaud: *Soldats et travailleurs malgaches* 2020, p. 675.

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