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Bertrand Taithe, *The Killer Trail: A Colonial Scandal in the Heart of Africa*. Oxford/New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009. Pp. xii, 324. ISBN 978-0-19-923121-8.

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The heroic idea of the European soldiery in Africa and Asia at the end of the nineteenth century has been a difficult conceptual foe to defeat in the popular mind. Imbued through discourse with the essential spirit of the nation, the explorer-adventurer purportedly represented the height of industry, morality, and even piety. But episodes of brutality, scandal, and immorality peppered the entire process of colonial conquest and rule, raising the question of how colonial military culture and the ideals of metropolitan Europe really interacted. In *The Killer Trail*, Professor Bertrand Taithe (Manchester) examines the catastrophe of the 1898–1899 Voulet-Chanoine mission across the colony of French Sudan and considers its connections to the contemporary Dreyfus Affair and other strands of European thought to explore the intersection of colonial and metropolitan politics, society, and culture. In the process, he ably and accessibly situates this particular military adventure within the convoluted French (and broader European) psychological and social experiences of the nineteenth century, but he leaves important silences in the process.

The book's core subject is the mission sent east from Senegal in November 1898 towards Lake Chad, under the command of Capt. Paul Voulet and Lt. Julien Chanoine. Its purpose was to conquer ("pacify") the local peoples along its route, and, in connection with a force traveling from the north, bring to heel the military usurper of the ancient empire of Bornu, Rabih az-Zubayr. In traveling eastward, however, the mission's columns left behind devastation born of extreme reprisals and mass abductions, including some technically within the British-protected Sokoto Caliphate, creating a potential diplomatic hazard. Voulet and Chanoine were also severe in their treatment of the African soldiers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) under their command, going so far as to execute one who was legally a French citizen.

Ultimately, stories of excesses led French authorities to send Lt. Col. Arsène Klobb, administrator in Timbuktu, to apprehend the pair and take charge of the mission. When Klobb caught up with the Voulet-Chanoine force and its train of "retainers" (including many slaves forced to serve the mission's portage, soldiering, or sexual demands) in July 1899, Voulet had his soldiers shoot down his superior rather than give up his position. At this point, the classic narrative suggests that Voulet and Chanoine were clearly insane and had repudiated France to live as African warlords, but they were killed by their own soldiers shortly thereafter. The junior subordinates of Klobb and Voulet (Meynier and Joalland) then together carried the expedition to a successful conclusion in Bornu, and through victory escaped further scrutiny of their own brutality.

After the first chapter retells the tale of Voulet and Chanoine, the remainder of the book is devoted to understanding and analyzing its context and content. Taithe states clearly that his purpose is to show the so-called "insanity" of Voulet and Chanoine "in its true light, in the midst of many such 'incidents' and as a reflection of what power and weaponry do to men far away from home" (43). As an accomplished historian of the French military and late nineteenth-century European culture, Taithe is well equipped to explore the French colonial military experience as an extension of European society and culture. Through a bevy of examples from other French expeditions and military actions of the period, he establishes that atrocities were relatively widespread and not peculiar to Africa. Succeeding chapters address broader features of European culture, prevalent ideas about Africa, and the paradoxes of metropolitan and colonial mores about slavery and civilization both in France and among other European powers, clarifying the preconditions and precedents for military excess. Ultimately, the metropolitan connection circles around the Dreyfus Affair, as Julien Chanoine's father, the influential Gen. Jules Chanoine, was a consistent opponent both of Dreyfus and

of critics of his son in the wake of the disaster of 1899. Taithe's discussion of this intersection—and the crisis of reputation in the French military at that moment—is adroit, engaging, and enlightening.

The re-examination of Voulet-Chanoine for the deeper meaning of particular acts and utterances, and the demonstration of necessary connections to a bigger picture in France and Europe more widely, thus comprise the scholarly importance of *The Killer Trail*. Although the French cases and their attendant literature are certainly less familiar to English-speaking readers, most of Taithe's interpretations regarding the period in general are well known to historians: for example, the instrumentality of violence to European colonial conquest.¹ Historians some time ago also recognized the prolongation of slavery in Africa (and beyond) under other names and in other forms, whether or not to support colonial rule and the self-aggrandizement of imperialism's adventurers.² The "moment of revulsion" against colonialism's visible excesses right around the turn of the twentieth century is well recognized. This found expression in critiques of colonialism in London and Paris, the humanitarian urgings of the Congo Reform Association (including Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* [1899]), the *Ethische Politiek* of The Hague, and, in the United States, Mark Twain's radical shift to anti-imperialist writing. For a more general readership, however, many of these points may not be familiar, and Taithe's analyses have an added currency in light of more recent U.S. and European military adventures and scandals abroad.

The major weakness of *The Killer Trail* is that, despite the presence of Africans and Africa in the narrative, this is clearly a history of Europeans, at whose door Taithe ultimately lays the impulses behind colonial military excess.³ Nor does the author claim to be writing an African history, despite some welcome glimpses of the cultural effects of Voulet-Chanoine and colonial violence upon African cultures and societies, as in his brief discussions of *Hauka* spirit possession (134–35) and of later literary and film treatments of the Voulet-Chanoine mission (esp. 222–28). He is also clear that the literature he consults usually ignores African narratives, understandings, and viewpoints, and, though he is sympathetic to their importance, that limitation shows. For instance, despite his recognition of colonial policies favoring tribalization in some colonial systems (81), Taithe uses the term "tribe" uncritically for African identities with no note of the complex (and for colonialism, very relevant) baggage the word carries or the contingent reality it obscures.⁴ He also unapologetically admits to using the archival renderings of the names of "institutions or places that no longer exist" instead of delving into Africanist orthography and usage (x). The wisdom of that particular decision aside, privileging the French colonial archive in this way complicates Taithe's search for the "true light."

Indeed, Taithe's reliance on archival reading (in France and Senegal) and period literature may account for some mischaracterizations relative to Africa. Examples include, in chapter five alone: the uncritical acceptance of highly dubious Central African slavery figures from 1889 (147), the disputable and uncited equation of Sierra Leone and Liberia with the *villages de liberté* as abject reservoirs of colonial forced labor (163), and a statement about the South African War ("Boer War") that places its start in 1898, misidentifies the Boer republics (the South African Republic and the Orange Free State) and wrongly labels them "slaveholding" (170). Such missteps contrast sharply with Taithe's meticulous handling of his French material, although non-academic readers are unlikely to notice the imbalance. In addition, much as in *The Heart of Darkness* (which Taithe seeks to link with the Voulet-Chanoine adventure), Africans themselves generally appear in *The Killer Trail* as objects to be acted upon, not as subjects. It is strange that those who bore the

1. See, e.g., Crawford Young, *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective* (New Haven, CT: Yale U Pr, 1994) 90–113.

2. A couple of geographically relevant early examples are Paul Lovejoy and Jan Hogendorn, *Slow Death for Slavery: The Course of Abolition in Northern Nigeria, 1897–1936* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993); Martin A. Klein, "Slavery and Emancipation in French West Africa," in Klein, ed., *Breaking the Chains* (Madison: U Wisconsin Pr, 1993) 171–96. Taithe cites Klein's *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998) on the subject at least twice, although the book does not appear in his bibliography.

3. I am aware that referring to "Africa" and "Africans" collectively (as with the terms "Europe" and "Europeans") implies monolithic, oppositional categories inadequate for analyzing the fine grain of the colonial encounter. I do so only in the interest of concision.

4. For a signal intervention on this point, see Leroy Vail, "Introduction: Ethnicity in Southern African History," in Vail, ed., *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (Berkeley: U California Pr, 1991) 1–19. More recently, see Thomas Spear, "Neo-Traditionalism and the Limits of Invention in British Colonial Africa," *Journal of African History* 44 (2003) 3–27.

brunt of colonial military culture—as victims, perpetrators, or otherwise—should have little direct agency or voice in this story.

Bertrand Taithe redirects our focus from an old notion of colonial military brutality as “insanity,” disease, or a fall into “darkness” contingent on the locale to the perception and reality of that brutality as arising from the colonizers’ own social and cultural contexts. Readers looking for a history of European military culture in the age of high imperialism or the forces then shaping French imperial adventures will find *The Killer Trail* a pleasure to read and a spur to re-evaluating their thinking about the period. But those expecting a full assessment of the African contexts with due attention to African voices will be disappointed. Taithe convincingly upturns some old and pernicious myths about colonialism and its heroes and scoundrels, but he reinforces the old centrality of the colonizers as prime motivators in so doing.