



Kalifa (Dominique), *Biribi : Les bagnes coloniaux de l'armée française*

Paris, Éditions Perrin, 2009, ISBN 978-2-262-02384-0, 348 p.

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/chs/1337>

DOI: 10.4000/chs.1337

ISSN: 1663-4837

Publisher

Librairie Droz

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 May 2012

Number of pages: 127-129

ISBN: 978-2-600-01594-3

ISSN: 1422-0857

Electronic reference

Georgina Sinclair, "Kalifa (Dominique), *Biribi : Les bagnes coloniaux de l'armée française*", *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés / Crime, History & Societies* [Online], Vol. 16, n°1 | 2012, Online since 12 March 2013, connection on 23 March 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chs/1337> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/chs.1337>

This text was automatically generated on 23 March 2022.

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- ¹ *Biribi* was the generic name given to the French army's disciplinary and penal institutions that existed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Predominantly based in North Africa, the French military described these institutions as '*corps spéciaux*' (literally special corps) whilst the press named them '*bagnes militaires*' (literally military penal servitude). Indeed the term *Biribi* became synonymous with mental and physical punishment and abuse metered out by the French Army : the last disciplinary unit was transferred from Southern Tunisia to France only in 1962, its surviving forty members were still living in Savoy in 1970 and the unit was finally disbanded in 1976. Certainly the numbers of those men forced to join the ranks of *Biribi* is impressive. Dominique Kalifa has suggested that a staggering 600-800,000 men were subjected to this '*épreuve longue*' during the *Biribi* lifecycle. If Kalifa's calculations are correct then *Biribi* represented 1-2 percent of the entire French Army and, in Africa, this figure rises to between 10 and 15 percent of those undergoing 'correction' for often minor crimes. Overall there exists little evidence of the entry and exit criteria for *Biribi* and the average duration is also undetermined, though Kalifa suggests that the typical profile was of a thirty year old man with five year's military service, drawn from the urban working classes and often without a stated profession.
- ² Dominique Kalifa, one of France's distinguished historians of policing, crime and punishment has in this book opened Pandora's box of France's obsession with the penal system. This revealing and highly disturbing account of the French military (and by

extension the state's condoning) of the use of 'disciplinary units' to maintain order is reflected to some extent within other European empires. In the case of France, the roots of *Biribi* first appeared during the Restoration drawing on the concept of absolute power inherited from the *Ancien Régime*. Formally *Biribi* emerged under the legislation of April 1818 to reform and restructure the French Army following the demise of the Napoleonic Empire. Instigated by the Maréchal Gouvion-Saint-Cyr, the premise was that the ill-disciplined members of the French army would be suitably punished and indeed placed in a permanent 'state of punishment': the law initially distinguished between two grades – 'fusiliers' and 'pionniers', paving the way for the different sections that would comprise *Biribi*. *Biribi* recruits were often made up of drunkards, the 'headstrong' and those raw recruits who had tried to get out of military service through self-mutilation as well as hardened criminals. From the 1830's, these units were extended to North Africa, first to Algeria and then to Tunisia. It was at Gafsa that George Darien would experience *Biribi* life which inspired his novel published in 1890: '*Biribi ; Discipline militaire*', triggering the French public's awareness of a powerful symbol of torture and oppression. *Biribi* would also become the term used for the numerous military prisons and forced labour camps spread through North Africa and further afield in New Caledonia, Senegal and Madagascar. These institutions contributed to the French enterprise of empire with the building of roads, fortifications, ports, sewage systems and so on.

- 3 *Biribi* highlighted France's imperial and military expansion and comprised the notorious *Bat' d'Af*, an African light infantry regiment set up in 1832 that recruited men who had spent time in the 'formal' disciplinary sections or military prisons for a further period of correction. The *Bat' d'Af*, paradoxically known as '*les petit joyeux*' became part of the regular French colonial army, helping to conquer Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, as well as being used as a fighting unit further afield in China and Mexico. *Bat' d'Af* also recruited men from the wider social spectrum of potential French army recruits creating a fighting body of hardened criminals, misfits and miscreants as well as the 'ordinary' soldier. By the end of the Third Republic, the *Bat' d'Af* comprised five battalions of approximately 5,500 men. In the 1860's *Biribi* had expanded to include further disciplinary units: the '*compagnies disciplinaires coloniales*' or '*cocos*' as they became known in military jargon and, the so-called special corps.
- 4 *Biribi* existed predominantly outside the French metropole which may have contributed to its rapidly fading image within public memory. Kalifa reminds the reader that the French people did not traditionally make overseas journeys; *Biribi* was 'an experience of exile far away from the Metropole'. When it did come to their notice, the media was particularly scathing of the harsh system of punishment yet there were no persistent attempts to bring about its dismantling. In 1909, for example, the *Société Générale des Prisons* organised a discussion of the status and treatment of condemned men in all major European armies, concluding that France had a far higher number of 'disciplinary units'. Indeed the British, Danish, Swiss and Austrian armies simply did not employ disciplinary units. This may have aroused public interest though no change occurred. Some years later, in February 1912, almost 300,000 people demonstrated in Paris against the military's blatant mishandling of the Aernoult-Rousset case, where two *Biribi* had died in dubious circumstances. Whilst reminiscent of the general wave of sympathy that had spread through the country during the Dreyfus Affair there was once again no debate at government level.

- 5 Overall Kalifa's book makes a valuable contribution not only to the history of crime and punishment but to the history of the French Empire. As such it is a representation of France's colonial past : an exploration of a troubled colonial past that should not be forgotten. Modern France is still considered to have been one of the major European colonial players and in parallel with other European Empires (for example Britain, Belgium and the Netherlands) had its darker sides that are now coming to light. In particular the harsh management of local populations through colonial armies, police and administrative structures and, in France's case, the maintenance of power over the French people themselves. Within the confines of the French army, *Biribi* was not just about the infliction of discipline and punishment to maintain an age-old concept of absolute power, but a mechanism of oppression to keep recruits in check and thus manage an ever-growing empire.
- 6 To discuss *Biribi*, this book employs a thematic rather than a chronological structure whilst covering the nineteenth and twentieth century lifespan. This journey does not spare the reader of the brutal details of *Biribi* life through the use of printed sources of that time. Kalifa is truly excellent in conveying the atmosphere not only of *Biribi* but also colonial life in Africa that created 'a deep lingering depression' in all *Biribi*. To penetrate the heart of the *Biribi* experience, Kalifa sets the pace and tone from the early chapters, exploring the full range of punishments inflicted : 'beaten like donkeys', constant physical intimidation, hunger, thirst and sexual violence between prisoners, many of whom suffered serious medical conditions. It is estimated that one third had tuberculosis, typhoid or venereal diseases. Kalifa reveals the escalating types of punishment and discusses with Foucauldian precision how power can be extended and maintained. Punishment could include in the first instance the '*silo*' : a deep ditch into which the guilty were 'lowered'. This was described in 1845 by *La Gazette de France* as where 'in the summer you suffocate, totally unprotected from the burning sun, in winter there is water or mud up to your knees, and always the insects and filth that builds up day in and day out ...' Then might come the use of the '*barre*' [wooden or metal rod] and thirdly, when presumably resistance was still apparent the infliction of the *crapaudine* [literally the toad position], where the prisoner's hands and feet were tied together behind their back rendering that person in the image of a toad. When left over lengthy periods of time in this position, the *crapaudine* caused atrocious suffering and Kalifa does not spare the reader any of the more gruesome details. The most severe form of punishment was deemed to be the '*supplice du clou*' [literally nail torture] which involved attaching a rope to the tied hands and feet of the prisoner already in the *crapaudine* position, who was then suspended from a hook where he 'would barely be able to breathe and soon his eyes would become engorged with blood'. This became known as the '*clou au rouge*' [literally red nail] and the prisoner would be lowered to the ground. This punishment if deemed insufficient could be repeated and the prisoner would be once more suspended, typically resulting in his face 'turning blue' : *le clou au bleu* : a very final form of punishment.
- 7 Despite the repeated nature of punishments inflicted, Kalifa demonstrates how a social and strictly masculine subculture emerged within the *Biribi* universe with its own set of values and rules. *Biribi* were subjected to constant humiliation : one example included forbidding the wearing (and indeed growing) of a beard or moustache considered in the French Army to have been a symbol of masculinity and virility. This emasculation resulted in very different expressions : through tattooing, for example, and through

some members seeking to prove their masculine worth as hardened *Biribi* by committing additional crimes in order to be sent to the most violent camps. Dominique Kalifa notes at the end of this exposé of France's 'carceral archipelago' that he hoped to provoke further research and investigation. Clearly this excellent book will be the trigger for a wider debate and continued fruitful searching on *Biribi* more specifically, and crime and punishment in empire more generally.

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