

A NUMBER of weeks ago, Pa Ezeagwu, an old man who called me his *onyocha son*, passed away after a protracted illness in Port Harcourt. Besides being a wonderful and giving person who raised his children to think of themselves as Nigerians first and foremost, what was special about Pa Ezeagwu was that he was a Burma veteran. Participating in a war half way around the world certainly transformed the world view of Pa Ezeagwu and other Africans who fought in World War II, making it impossible for them to return as the same men they were when they left. Although Nigerian World War II veterans did not have as much of a direct effect on the eventual decolonization of Nigeria as is often supposed, the outcome of the war and their part in it forced the British hand towards what after 1945 was nearly inevitable.

In the accounts of the great wars of the twentieth century, few history books acknowledge the roles of Africans in them. World War I and II were not even the first instances where West Africans were involved in fighting wars on the European side. The French had used West African troops in Madagascar already in 1828, and West Africans participated in a limited capacity in the 1871 Franco-Prussian War and the French war with Mexico. West African soldiers were involved in the colonial conquests of French Equatorial Africa and Morocco. The British also used West African soldiers to great effect in their colonial conquests, and a good percentage of the famous West African Frontier Force was made up of Hausa ex-slaves.

In World War I, following the previous trend, the French used West African troops far more than the British. A total of 161,250 West Africans fought for the French in Europe, while thousands more fought in campaigns within Africa. Hardly any soldiers from the British West African colonies fought outside the continent. However, they did contribute significantly to the British campaigns against the German colonies of Togo, Cameroon, and Tanganyika.

During World War II, in spite of the absence of German territories within the continent, Sub-Saharan Africa played an important strategic role. Since the Germans and Italians controlled the Mediterranean, the Suez Ca-

In memory of Pa Ezeagwu: Nigerians and World War II

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Perspective of a Nigerian-American

nal was no longer accessible. This forced the British to sail around Africa to reach the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Ports like Freetown and Lagos became strategic to the British war effort, and cities like Kano became launching points for Allied flights into North Africa.

After the capitulation of France, the neutral Vichy French government took control of France's African colonies, worrying the British that these territories might eventually fall into German hands. Felix Eboué, the only black French colonial governor, broke the Vichy dominance of France's African colonies and declared his territory – Chad – for General De Gaulle's Free French. A coup d'état launched from Nigeria placed a pro-Free French government in French Cameroon, and soon thereafter all of French Equatorial Africa was under Free French control. In fact, De Gaulle made Brazzaville, Congo, the capital of the Free French government in exile. Few realize that for a time an African city was the capital of the French Empire, albeit a much reduced one.

240,000 men from what were then British colonies in West Africa, mostly Nigerians, participated as soldiers in World War II, not to talk of the thousands more who served as labourers, drivers, and carriers. These soldiers contributed to Allied successes in Kenya, Italian Somaliland, and Ethiopia, the latter providing them with much pride due to Ethiopia's symbolic status as one of Africa's only independent states. Nigerians and other West Africans also played a



significant role in the British success in Burma. One commentator stated that these soldiers "gave the Allies the initiative they needed over the Japanese."

For many of the Nigerians who fought in Burma, the experience had a profound effect on the rest of their lives. As Danlami Gomwalk said about his father Jonathan D. Gomwalk, "Even forty years after returning from Burma, my father would tell stories about his experiences there all the time. The funniest was the one about the Nigerian soldiers who, after running out of jam and margarine on their voyage to Burma, put toothpaste on their bread. Needless to say, they became quite ill."

Nigerians from school children to Obas also participated through financial and other contributions to the war effort. The nation was

mobilized, and British propaganda successfully turned Hitler into the enemy of all.

How did World War II affect Nigeria's future? Peter Clarke, a man who has taught in both Bauchi and Ibadan, argues against those who suggest that Nigerian soldiers returned politically radicalized, filled with a realization of the inherent equality of all after observing that bullets killed white soldiers as easily as they killed black soldiers.

After all, no World War II veterans became significant players in the ensuing nationalist decolonization movement. Most of the soldiers returned to Nigeria, and with their wartime salaries, severance packages, and pensions, were able to climb into higher social classes than they had previously been. It is unlikely that men whose opportunities had

suddenly increased so dramatically would be radicalized as has previously been assumed.

Instead, the war offered nationalists, men who would not readily volunteer to fight in a war for the colonial oppressor, an opportunity to internationalize the movement for African independence.

The international political structure that emerged from the war with the United Nations at the center offered a forum for Africans to express their grievances. Perhaps most importantly, the major European colonial powers came out of the war greatly weakened. On the other hand, the United States and the Soviet Union, the two nations that emerged as the dominant post-war powers were themselves, at least in theory and rhetoric, anti-imperialistic in nature and origin.

As I have outlined in this article, Nigerians have participated in dramatic ways in the major wars of the twentieth century. Unfortunately,

most history books ignore their contributions. As more and more veterans like Pa Ezeagwu pass away, we are missing the opportunity of recording the stories and experiences of Nigerians who participated in an event as horrific as it was transformative for the geopolitical structure of the rest of the century. It is with that in mind that I encourage all of those who have relatives, friends, and acquaintances who fought in World War II to interview these men and document their stories for posterity.

For undergraduate history students, such an effort could be used to good effect as the subject of a final year project. Just because Eurocentric historians ignore the Nigerians who contributed to the Allied victory does not mean that Nigerians themselves should do the same. Ignoring them means ignoring those whose blood, sweat, and tears helped defeat Nazism and contributed to the demise of the colonial system.

*'Nigerians have participated in dramatic ways
in the major wars of the twentieth century'*