CHAPTER THREE

ON THE TRAIL OF THE BLACK NAPOLEON, 1897–1899

In September 1897 Henri Gaden embarked on the steamer La Cordillère bound for Dakar. He was accompanied by Henri Gouraud, and by the Governor General Chaudié, who was returning to the Governance in St Louis. Disembarking at the port of Dakar, the party of seventeen officers of various rank headed for St Louis by train, crossing the flat Cayor region now green with vegetation following the rains. The air was still thick, humid and oppressive at this time of year, and the temperatures at night remained high, giving Gaden cause to complain that his first night was as bad as that three years ago when he had first landed in Africa. Arriving in St Louis, he found warm hospitality at the Devès household, and he breakfasted in the morning with Lieutenant Obissier, who filled him in on the current situation in the Soudan. He explained a new initiative to Gaden to recruit 1,000 auxiliary rifleman for new campaigns, and how he, Gaden, would be responsible, in the first instance at least, for training and commanding a company of these new auxiliaries. This was not what he had envisaged. Nor did he take kindly to having to pay 80 francs customs duty to bring his effects into the country – ‘a distasteful imposition’, an exploitation of the people who came to work in the colony, he complained (JHG-F, 4.10.97). His mission had yet again been tarnished from the start, but he hoped this time to see some serious action, as his friend Gouraud had done on his previous tour of duty.

At the behest of Eugène Etienne, the Government had decided in 1892 to bring an end to Almamy Samory Toure’s activities in the southern Soudan.

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1 Eugène Etienne, who started life as a shop assistant and later acquired a fortune in Algeria, a master of both political and business negotiations, was Under Secretary of State for Algeria (1887, 1889–92). In 1889, with the support of Gabriel Hanotaux, Head of the Protectorates Office, he pushed for a programme to establish ‘the African France’ (La France Africaine), a vision of a territory under French influence from Algeria to the Congo, from the Atlantic coast to Lake Chad. At the same time Le Comité de l’Afrique Française was established to overview and direct French policy on the continent. Founded by the Prince of Arenberg, and including well-known public figures, officers and specialists on colonial issues, the Comité also took as its goal the union of French North African territories with those in West Africa and the Congo in central Africa. (Gaden paid his subscription to the Comité to receive its publications.)
Lieutenant-Colonel Humbert, of the Marine Artillery, had been charged with the conduct of operations, and his campaign had been to deliver the final blow to Samory’s sphere of influence. Humbert’s mission had turned out to have been one of the most difficult of all the campaigns in the Soudan. This was because Samory’s soldiers or soldiers had been particularly tenacious, and pursued a guerrilla strategy against the French troops by hiding in the vegetation along river banks to ambush columns, then disappearing into the thick bush only to emerge again later for another raid. Humbert’s column had eventually taken two of Samory’s villages, one of which was his capital at Kerouané in the headwaters of a tributary of the Niger. Humbert had also reached his mountain hideaway, where Samory had established a keep to store his provisions and an arsenal of weaponry; among the supplies found there was a bust of M. Grévy in Sèvres porcelain. Samory was certainly an enigma to the French. Humbert’s campaign ultimately failed in its attempt to crush him, and it was followed by the debacle at Kong in 1895 under Lieutenant-Colonel Monteil’s command.

The new campaign being organised in 1897 was another attempt to snuff out what the French saw as the threat Samory posed to the security of their future colonies in a southern West African belt running from the upper Volta region across into Guinea. Officers were aware that Paris was keeping a close eye on expenditure in the colonies, and that the French press and public opinion could easily turn against them. Those on the ground, however, saw increasingly the need to act. By the late 1890s, Samory had changed tactics in the face of superior French firepower, and pursued a scorched-earth policy,

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Etienne was also a founder member in 1892 of Le Groupe Coloniale, an influential lobby pushing for colonial expansion. Many Bordeaux traders supported this group in their campaigns to promote greater access to the territories of the French colonies. (See Zeldin, 1973 & 1977, Volumes One and Two, for further details.) Gaden regarded Etienne very highly, and seems to have used his influence, and that of Auguste Terrier, to promote his own position.

Samory Toure was born around 1830 in Manymbaladougou, the son of a Dyula itinerant trader, a career that Samory followed in his early years. In the 1850s he took up arms after his mother had been taken captive, and by the 1860s he declared himself a war leader, marking the start of his political career. He arrived on the Niger in 1876 and from there began a series of campaigns against local rulers, and eventually clashed with the French in 1882. He took the title ‘Almamy’ (or al imam) in 1884, styling himself as a religious as well as a military leader. At its height, Samory’s Wassulu Empire stretched from present-day Guinea and Mali to Sierra Leone and northern Ivory Coast.

See for further details Yves Person, Samori. Une révolution dyula (1968, 1970, 1975) (not for the faint hearted at almost 3,000 pages); or the more manageable volume by the same author: Samori: La renaissance de l’empire Mandingue (1976); see also Ibrahima Khalil Fofana, L’Almami Samori Touré (1998).

See Gouraud, 1939: 45; this was no doubt a bust of Jules Grévy (1807–1891), a lawyer and politician, and President of the Republic from 1879–87.