



Article

Tirailleurs Sénégalais in Modern Hebrew Poetry: Nathan Alterman

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Abstract: This article expands on a poem written by one of the central figures in modern Hebrew literature, Nathan Alterman (1910–1970), entitled “About a Senegalese Soldier” (1945). Providing the first English translation of this poem and its first (academic) discussion in any language, the article analyzes the poem against contemporary geopolitical, historical, and literary backgrounds. The article’s transdisciplinary approach brings together imperial and colonial studies, African studies, and (Hebrew) literature studies. This unexpected combination adds originality to mainstream post-colonial perspectives through which the agency of the Senegalese riflemen [*Tirailleurs sénégalais*] has been often discussed in scholarly research. By using a rich variety of primary and secondary sources, the article also contributes to a more elaborated interpretation of Alterman’s poetry. This is achieved through embedding the poem on the *tirailleur* in a tripartite geopolitical context: local (British Mandate Palestine/Eretz-Israel), regional (the Middle East), and international (France-West Africa). The cultural histories and literary traditions in question are not normally cross-referenced in the relevant research literature and are less obvious to the anglophone reader.

Keywords: Senegalese riflemen [*Tirailleurs sénégalais*]; Nathan Alterman; Modern Hebrew Poetry; colonialism; British Mandate in Palestine/Eretz-Israel; Middle East; French West Africa (AOF)



Citation: Bigon, Liora, and Edna Langenthal. 2023. *Tirailleurs Sénégalais* in Modern Hebrew Poetry: Nathan Alterman. *Humanities* 12: 142. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h12060142>

Received: 26 September 2023

Revised: 21 November 2023

Accepted: 25 November 2023

Published: 1 December 2023



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1. Introduction

Scholars in the field of modern Jewish literature agree that considering the multiplicity of geographies, languages, cultures, and socio-political experiences involved, there is no such distinctive body of literature or even a universally accepted definition for this literature (Jelen et al. 2011; Wisse 2003; Levy and Schachter 2015). “What unites the subjects of these studies is not a common ethnic, religious, or cultural history”, argue specialists in the field, “but rather a shared endeavor to use literary production and writing in general as the laboratory in which to explore and represent Jewish experience in the modern world” (Jelen et al. 2011, p. 2). While within this multiplicity, modern Hebrew literature constitutes a sub-category, which is naturally more limited in extent in terms of writers and readership because of its language choice (Alter 1975), this sub-category is not less diversified in every respect. Modern Hebrew literature (as developed over the last 200 years in Eastern and Western Europe and in pre-state Israel) is mostly a secular tradition based on a constant dynamic of continuity and innovation and also features considerable fragmentation. Some of its overlapping themes, nonetheless, include the relationship between the modern Hebrew language and biblical Hebrew, reflections on the politics of identity, places and events, reflections on Zionism between romanticization and de-romanticization, and modern urban existence (Anidjar 2007; Bar-Yosef 1996; Govrin 2019). This new or secular Hebrew literature, as Dan Miron has pointed out, “always regarded itself as the true and legitimate custodian of national literary creativity”, appointing itself as “a watchman unto the House of Israel” [*tsofe leveyt Israel*], that is, “an institution responsible for the moral and cultural well-being of the nation” (Miron 1984, p. 58). In addition, following pogroms in Eastern Europe, the migration of Jewish communities and the Holocaust, Ottoman and

British Mandate Palestine, and independent Israel by the 1950s became the main center of Hebrew language creativity.

Considering these thematic concerns and the geographic backdrop of modern Hebrew literature, it is safe to say that sub-Saharan Africa, together with the Far East and most of southern America, were not normally included within its cultural spheres of activity and linguistic consciousness. The familiarity of Hebrew-speaking communities with modern European colonialism was also limited beyond the direct experience in British Mandate Palestine/Eretz-Israel, especially regarding tropical Africa and its bilateral relations with the dominant European powers. This political and socio-cultural situation naturally affected the meagre representation of southern geographies in modern Hebrew literature, especially by the 1940s—and therein lies the contribution of this article.

At the heart of this article stands a poem of one of the key figures in modern Hebrew literature and poetry, Nathan Alterman (1910–1970), entitled “About a Senegalese Soldier” (written in 1945). Providing the first English translation of this poem and its first (critical) discussion in any language, the article scrutinizes the poem in light of contemporary geopolitical, historical, and literary trajectories. By embracing a transdisciplinary approach that combines (Hebrew) literature studies, African studies, and imperial and colonial studies, the article adds to mainstream postcolonial perspectives in an original way through which the agency of the Senegalese riflemen [*Tirailleurs sénégalais*] has been often discussed in scholarly research. It also provides an unconventional interpretation of Alterman’s poetry through the intertwining of this poem with local (Palestine/Eretz-Israel), regional (the Middle East), and international (France-West Africa) histories. The involved geopolitical histories, cultural backgrounds, and literary traditions are not normally brought together, and their cross-referencing is less obvious to an English readership.

2. The Poem’s Background

Nathan Alterman, one of Israel’s most renowned poets, was also a playwright, translator, and journalist who reflected on contemporary political events. Although he spent most of his life in Tel Aviv while never holding any elected office, he boasted a transnational background that included a childhood in Warsaw (then Russian Empire) and studying Life Sciences at Sorbonne and Agronomy in Nancy (Laor 2013) (Figure 1). Alterman was extremely active and influential in the local cultural and political arena both during the British Mandate in Palestine and after the establishment of the modern State of Israel in 1948. Following the end of the Second World War, in June 1945, he wrote the poem “About a Senegalese Soldier” [*tirailleur sénégalais*], which is the focus of this article. The term “*Tirailleurs sénégalais*” refers to the colonial infantry recruited in sub-Saharan Africa (initially from Senegal and subsequently from other sub-Saharan regions of the French colonial empire) from 1857 to the early 1960s to take part in the colonial campaigns led by France. During the two World Wars, the *tirailleurs* played an active role in the defense and reconquest of French national territories, with close to 400,000 recruits (Echenberg 1990).

Alterman’s poem on the *tirailleur* constituted part of his long-running (24 years) publication of a weekly column in the daily newspaper *Davar*. This column appeared regularly on Fridays from 1943 to 1967 on the second page of this popular daily, was entitled “The Seventh Column” [*Hatour Hashevi’i*], and was eagerly read by the contemporary Hebrew-speaking audience. According to a historian–biographer, every Friday at dawn, there was already a queue of thirsty readers waiting at the door of the printing house in Tel Aviv to be the first to obtain his column (Naor 2006). This series of Alterman’s poignant poems were deeply engaged with events that had an influence on the destiny of Jews both globally and nationally, such as diaspora pogroms, the Holocaust, the Jewish community in America, British colonial policy and diplomacy, and the Arab–Israeli War of 1948/War of Independence. The “Seventh Column” series is also characterized by an abstract, sensual quality, often intertwined with creative word plays, puns, and biblical linguistic forms and imagery—to provide essentially humanistic, secular messages.

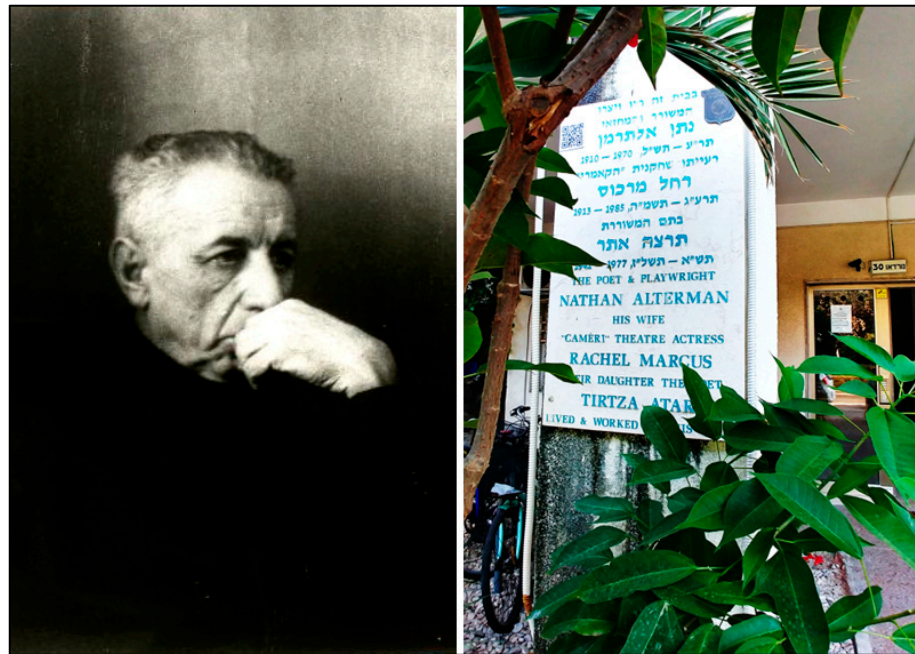


Figure 1. **Left:** Nathan Alterman sitting in Café Kasit where he used to meet friends and work on a daily basis (courtesy of Meitar Collection, The Pritzker Family National Photography Collection, The National Library of Israel). **Right:** The marble plaque at the front of Alterman’s home in Nordau Boulevard, Tel Aviv (photo by L. Bigon and E. Langenthal, September 2023).

As artfully featured by Gideon Nevo, a researcher in modern Hebrew literature, this series “[d]ealing with all things public, large or small, written with brilliantly lucid poetic diction, deftly combining wit and pathos, seriousness and jest, empathy and humor, it earned Alterman unprecedented popularity and prestige among the Jewish population in pre-state Israel (the *Yishuv*) and in the early decades of the Israeli state” (Nevo 2011, p. 237). Through Alterman’s translations of classical works (from German, Russian, Polish, English, and French) and through his critical interpretation of global news, he was the one who made the world accessible to the contemporary educated audience. The “Seventh Column” series constituted the “eyes and ear” of the *Yishuv* on the world. These qualities brought, and still bring about, a thriving discourse in Alterman’s work and extensive coverage in a variety of Israeli popular and scholarly platforms.

However, as Alterman’s poems are widely celebrated, to the authors’ surprise and to the best of their knowledge (L. Bigon and E. Langenthal), the poem, “About a Senegalese Soldier”, has never been discussed so far on any platform. The authors can only assume that the reason for this historiographic void is that the subject of the poem is focused on a phenomenon (specific riflemen), politics (world level), and linguistic spheres (franco-phone) beyond an immediate relevance, general knowledge, and daily acquaintance by the average pre-state/Israeli reader (then and now). In Israel, the associated histories (and daily media coverage) of sub-Saharan Africa in general or French-speaking West Africa, in particular, are normally unknown unless someone makes a conscious, special effort to explore them. Moreover, at the time of the writing of the poem on the *tirailleur*, the dramatic consequences of the Second World War in terms of the systematic genocide of Jews in Europe were garnering attention in pre-state Israel, which overlapped with the British colonialist combat against “illegal” Jewish refugees who fled to Palestine, as well as growing Israeli–Arab nationalist tensions (Halamish 2016). Therefore, this poem has bypassed the local radar and never obtained the attention it deserves. For this reason, and also because so little of Alterman’s literary output ever appeared in any language other than Hebrew, the authors are enthusiastic to revive the poem through the current translation for the anglophone reader (Figure 2).

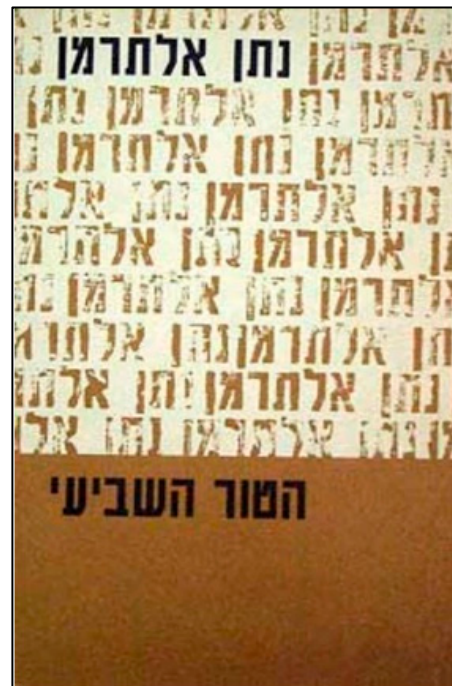


Figure 2. The book cover of *The Seventh Column* [Hatour Hashevi'i]; Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House Ltd.: Tel Aviv, 1977 (Alterman 1977) (courtesy of Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House).

The authors' (L. Bigon and E. Langenthal) English translation of the poem is based on the Hebrew original published in Nathan Alterman, *The Seventh Column* [Hatour Hashevi'i]; Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House: Tel Aviv, 1977 (pp. 171–74). This book volume (A) brought together all of Alterman's columns that appeared in the *Davar* newspaper between 1943 and 1948. Its first edition was published by the same press in 1948 as a gesture to Israel's independence. The Press promised its audience a free copy of the book in return for an annual subscription to *Davar*, which immediately doubled the number of subscribers for that year. The authors warmly thank the Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House and Alterman's grandchildren, Nathan Slor and Yael Slor Marzuk, for their authorization to translate and publish the poem. The authors are also indebted to Alan Clayman for his revision of our English translation and good advice. The Hebrew original is printed in parallel to the English translation.

3. The Poem on the *Tirailleur*: Original and Translated Versions

<p>“על חיל סנגלי” לנתן אלתרמן (תרגום המחברות) שגיס למלחמת העולם ואחרי הנצחון. שלחחו למערבולת המהומות והתנגשות האינטרסים הבריטיים-צרפתיים בלבנט.</p>	<p>“About a Senegalese Soldier” by Nathan Alterman (translation by L. Bigon and E. Langenthal) Who was recruited for the World War and after the victory he was sent into the maelstrom of riots and the clash of British–French interests in the Levant.</p>
<p>א בקצוי סנגל, בקצוי סנגל, סנגלי קטן גדל, גדל. עלי תמר טפס ורחץ בגל. צוננים הגלים בקצוי סנגל.</p>	<p>A In deepest Senegal, in deepest Senegal, A little Senegalese Grew up, grew up. He climbed a palm tree and bathed in a wave. Cold are the waves of deepest Senegal.</p>
<p>אחר כך בא פקיד, בא פקיד קולוניאלי, וקשר עליו חבל עבה סנגלי.</p>	<p>Then came an officer, a colonial officer came, And tied a thick Senegalese rope on him.</p>

אחר כך הוא עבד במטעי אננס, ותבות-על-תבות על גבו עמס, וככלות כחותיו מן הפרך נס.	Then in pineapple plantations, he worked, And boxes upon boxes on his back he loaded, And when his strength expired From forced labor, he escaped.
אחר כך הוא בשוט עלי ארץ גלגל. ארכים השוטים בקצוי סנגל. אחר כך, בהזעק העמים את חילם, הוא גיס להציל את תרבות העולם.	Then with a whip, he rolled on the earth. Long are the whips in deepest Senegal. Then, when the nations called their armies forth, He was called up to save the civilization of the world.
ב הוא חתר בעשן, הוא כרע ברעמים, ושפתיו השחורות נתכסו דמים. אך בכובע סובטרופי, בכובע סובטרופי, הוא צעד בתוך חיל השחרור האירופי, והסבר לו היטב, כל העת, כל העת, כי בשביל התרבות הוא לוחם והוא מת. ועת פתע הקטל נפסק ונדם, הוא הבין כי נצלה כבר תרבות האדם.	B He strove in smoke, he knelt beneath the thunder, His black lips were covered with blood. But in a subtropical hat, in a subtropical hat, Within Europe's Liberation Army, he marched, And it had been explained to him well, at all times, at all times, That for civilization He fights and he dies. And when suddenly the slaughter stopped and fell silent, He understood that human civilization had already been saved.
ג אז אמר אל נפשו: "למנוחה לא הסכנת. נוחי קצת..." והיה זה בליל בלבנט.	C Then he said to his soul: "You are not used to rest. Rest a little bit"... it was at night In the Levant.
והיה זה בליל סכינים ופגיון, ליל קונצסיות, ליל נפט, ליל אכספרטים והון. לילה בריטי-ערבי-צרפתי בלבנון. כן, אחד מלילות המזרח התיכון.	And it was a night of knives and daggers, Night of concessions, night of oil, Night of experts and fortunes. A British-Arab-French night in Lebanon. Yes, One of the Middle Eastern nights.
ד ...עת גררוהו אל בית החולים עלי גב, הוא נסה להבין מה קרה, אך לשוא... בראשו הזב-דם נתערבו בגלגל יריות, הפגנות ותימרות סנגל. סנגל וצרפת! סנגל ואנגלים! סנגל של קטנים, בינונים וגדולים! סנגל של אתמול, סנגל של עתיד, סנגל של נצחון בעלי הברית!	D ...When on his back they dragged him to the hospital, He tried to understand what happened, but in vain... In his bleeding head were mixed in a circle Shootings, riots and billows of Senegal. Senegal and France! Senegal and Englishmen! Senegal of adults, youths and children! Senegal of yesterday, Senegal of the future, Senegal of victory for the allies!
"אבא, שמח, — הוא דמדמ — אבא, שמח נא וצהל. השלום סנגל! העולם סנגל! ואימפריות שלמות — הה, שמחה וגילה לי! — מדברות ומבינות אך ורק סנגלית! ועולם נאבק וגבר ונגאל, בשבילך, סנגל! בשבילך, סנגל!"	"Father, be happy, — he was hallucinating — father, be happy and rejoice. The world is Senegal! The peace is Senegal! And whole empires — ha, to my joy and gladness! — Speak and understand only the language of Senegal! And the world has struggled and won and been redeemed, For you, Senegal! For you, Senegal!"

ה	E
כך דמדם, עד נדם במסוה-כלורופורם,	That's how he hallucinated, until he died under a mask of chloroform,
ושאלת הלבנט	And the Levant Question
אז עלתה אל הפורום.	Was then raised to the forum.
והתחילו בזו השאלה מדינים	And in this question Senegalese representatives
נציגים סנגליים,	Had started to discuss,
אך	But only
לבנים.	Whites.

4. Poem's Analysis

In its topic and subject, Alterman's poem provides an unexpected, exciting Archimedean point regarding three geographic and cultural spheres: the local (the Jewish population in Mandatory Palestine/Eretz-Israel), the imperial-colonial (France and its overseas territories in sub-Saharan Africa), and the regional (Middle-East). Concerning the local sphere, founded at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Hebrew Israeli literature of the late 1940s and 1950s was essentially modernized and creative, but at the same time, in a confused state. As portrayed by Dan Miron, the thriving centers of this literary production in Eastern Europe came to an end due to the repression of Hebrew and Zionism by the Soviet Union and the Nazi invasion of Poland. Following the destruction of European Jewry in the Second World War and the establishment of independent Israel literary thinkers were in turmoil (Miron 1984, pp. 57–58). As a result, these thinkers were preoccupied with substantive questions about the nature of this body of literature, its identity and future prospects, and its affiliation to previous literary traditions, history, Eretz-Israel, and the Diaspora. These Hebrew writers, thus, "[were] lacking in the resonance provided by European and wider Jewish cultural resources", says Miron, and "[t]heir writing was assumed to be limited to their immediate experience, which did not reach even to the various aspects of the *Yishuv*" (Miron 1984, p. 58). This local background highlights not only the innovative aspect of Alterman's choice of the *tirailleur* but also partly explains the relative silence of the poem in terms of winning public attention.

As for the imperial-colonial sphere, Alterman's viewpoint on the *tirailleur* is important as an external commentator to the phenomenon, which was highly sensitive since the Senegalese regiments were large, ethnically diverse, and experienced contradictory situations in the French colonial army (Echenberg 1990; Mabon 2002). The artistic repertoire of the almost essentially bilateral conversation during the 1940s between France and its French West Africa territory (AOF) concerning the *tirailleurs* was somewhat unbalanced. On the one hand, in retrospectively, it took the form of a bulk of visual and literary representations in the exoticist-infantile manner. Examples of these are, inter alia, the "petit-nègre" (Ruolt 2017; Amedegnato and Sramski 2003), "Ya bon Banania" (Donadey 2000; Dufour and Laurent 2008), and "Tintin au Congo" (Abomo 1993). As a cultural icon in France, the original advertising of the "Ya-bon-Banania" logo used by the food company in 1915 was reproduced in the decades to follow, and, to this day, the original black and white publication of Hergé for *Tintin au Congo* (1931) (Hergé 1931) has been revived in color since 1946. On the other hand, the contemporary artistic repertoire took the form of subaltern, small though vociferous voices, such as Senghor's call to his brothers-in-arms (in *Poème lumineux*, 1948) to stand tall in front of French humiliation, while angrily "tearing the Banania's laughter from all the walls of France" (Senghor 1964). By the 1990s, the latter voices had been crystalized to create an intellectual movement of ethnic literary studies (including other African, Asian, Hispanic, and Native American writers). Celebrating difference while asserting their cultural heritages in opposition to the mainstream literary canon and assimilation, these writers were "boldly claiming their place in the academy, demanding critical attention and respect for neglected literatures that they jealously claimed as their own" (Kramer 2011, p. 303).

By the 1940s, however, the Franco-African political and socio-cultural negotiations regarding the *tirailleurs*—including the derivative artistic expressions of these bilateral

negotiations—had already engaged much of the in-between gray tones, for instance, the Thiaroye massacre in 1944 and its critical postcolonial representations [10] [24]. Yet, the postcolonial critique of the contemporary atmosphere, including many voices in the intellectual movement of ethnic literary studies, had become rather predictable and repetitive, if not boring (e.g., Ruolt 2017; Amedegnato and Sramski 2003; Donadey 2000, among other publications). While “About a Senegalese Soldier” opens with a seemingly colonialist, romanticized, idealistic, and naive bias about the pre-colonial past in Senegal, this prelude has a purpose. Alterman designs this pre-colonial atmosphere to highlight the contrasting, subsequent human suffering, both physical and emotional, of colonized populations under European imperialism: suffering that accelerates for the indigenous infantry during the (Second World) War (Echenberg 1990; Scheck 2005; Diop 1981). With great empathy for the challenging destiny of the *tirailleur*, who in this case was positioned in the remote, disconnected environment of the Middle East, merely to serve European strategic and economic interests, Alterman mocks both the French *mission civilisatrice* (Conklin 1998) and, more generally, Western hypocrisy and racism.

This positioning of the *tirailleur* by Alterman takes the reader to the third geographic and cultural sphere to which Alterman’s perspective contributes, that is, the Middle Eastern context. Here, his perspective is not only literary but is also based on direct and indirect personal experiences in the face of regional events and politics. As for the presence of the *tirailleurs* in this region, as aforementioned, these troops served French military interests on many fronts. During the Second World War, they participated in the Battle of France in 1940 as well as in all the battles led by Free France, including actions in Gabon (1940), Bir-Hakeim (Italian Libya, 1942), and Provence (1944). In addition, the *tirailleurs sénégalais* constituted part of the Armée du Levant during the French Mandate (including of Vichy France) of Syria and Lebanon, especially between 1920 and 1941 (afterwards till 1945, locally recruited Arab and Circassian troops took the heavy share, to be merged in the armies of post-independent Syria and Lebanon) (Albord 2000; Mollo 1981). Upon the establishment of this Army, which constituted four divisions in all, an infantry division from southern Anatolia was mobilized in the Middle East and included the seventeenth regiment of the *tirailleurs*. Interestingly, this military episode is echoed in the semi-autobiographic short story “Sarzan” (a typo of “Sergeant”) of the celebrated Senegalese writer Birago Diop, which opens with the hero’s itinerary as a *tirailleur*: from Dougouba and Kati in French Sudan (Mali) to Dakar, Casablanca and then to Fréjus in southern France and, finally, to Damascus (Diop 1961, p. 174). In this story, inspired by the indigenous traditional literary genre of the “conte” (a short narrative with a moral lesson), this geography serves the hero to state his international experience gained through military service, from the “margins” of the French colonial empire to its “center”, as one who has seen the world.

However, Alterman’s sharp anti-European critique, while empathizing with the *tirailleur*, does not represent the high moral tone taken by a white intellectual who stands for the subaltern, such as in the case of Jean-Paul Sartre, for instance (e.g., Jules-Rosette 2007; Etherington 2016); it rather comes from the position of a colonized subject who had been directly frustrated by the British regime and the fatalistic outcome of the Second World War for his people, for example, against the fact that during the British Mandate and with its permission, in 1941, the Mufti of Jerusalem Amin al-Husseini visited Hitler in Germany (Kessler 2023; Aderet 2017), and eleven days after the death of Hitler in Berlin’s Führerbunker, Alterman published a poem in his “Seventh Column” in the daily newspaper *Davar* (May 1945) entitled “And if it will be required—[we will combat] Alone!”; the poem borrowed the British rhetoric of the anti-Nazi fight to inspire the Jewish fight against the British regime in Palestine/Eretz-Israel (Alterman 1945).

The 38-year-old Alterman was recruited during the battles of the Arab–Israeli War of 1948/War of Independence at the end of August 1948. Despite his age and status (the military leadership sought to keep him away from the actual fighting), he refused to serve on the home front as a “culture officer” and so was posted close to the Egyptian front near Kibbutz Gat in order to repel the Egyptian invasion. His memories from this experience

were included in the poem “Parking Night”, published in 1957 in the collection entitled “The City of the Dove” [*Ir Hayona*] (Amior 2018). Alterman’s acquaintance with Moshe Dayan, a military leader and politician (1915–1981), on the eve of this War (Amior 2018) (Figure 3) brings us back to an almost unknown episode that is associated with the Armée du Levant and the *tirailleurs*’ part in it: while the eye patch became Dayan’s trademark, archival evidence that was released about seventy years after the events (in 2013) includes his injury and hospital reports (Hetzroni 2013). In the summer of 1941, Dayan was asked by the British Army to join a local unit that would operate together with British forces in Syria. The instruction was to seize strategic bridges in the area of the village of Iskenderun (today in Turkey) as part of the British invasion of Syria and Lebanon against the Armée du Levant under the Vichy regime. There, during a shootout, he lost his left eye.



Figure 3. Nathan Alterman (right) and Moshe Dayan (left) in the Negev Desert in 1948, following the Egyptian invasion of the Negev a day after Israel’s Independence (Courtesy of Nadav Mann, BITMUNA. From the Shmuel Dayan collection. Collection source: Zohar Betzer. The Pritzker Family National Photography Collection, The National Library of Israel).

According to Dayan, when they reached a built-up area that they were supposed to occupy, the force first encountered a French officer and a Senegalese *tirailleur* together with gunfire from other French forces. “I pointed the French machine gun that I had in my possession at them and looked through the binoculars in order to determine their exact location, at which moment a bullet from theirs hit my eyes and hands and I lost the ability to act.” Following Dayan’s shooting, the French forces were repulsed. “I hereby submit to you a full report on my above-mentioned actions and express my wish to continue serving as best I could in the British military forces”, he wrote (Hetzroni 2013). What could be learnt from this meeting between Dayan and the West African rifleman under such conflicting circumstances? Apart from teaching us about ever-unexpected international and transnational connections, this “crossing history”/*histoire croisée* (Werner and Zimmermann 2006) mostly highlights the shared fate of these two types of *tirailleurs*. Standing on both sides of the barricade and risking their lives on the front lines of the battles, these colonial soldiers well served the European imperial interests in the Middle East—in a vortex of blood and greed as artfully phrased by Alterman in the poem above.

Another shared fate, as noted, for instance, by the political philosopher Frantz Fanon ([1952] 1986) and Professor Ali Mazrui (1980) in his early career, who compared transatlantic slavery and the Holocaust, was that there is an affiliated destiny between African and Jewish histories. In the second half of the 1940s, Alterman's critique of the British government under the Labor Party became more strident. He often railed against the then Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, perceiving his positions as pro-Arab, anti-Zionist, and even antisemitic (Laor 2013). During these years, Alterman's poetry focused on the situation of the Jews in postwar Europe. A prominent poem, for example, which also opened the *Seventh Column*, was inspired by an article published in a local newspaper (1946) following a journalist's meeting with Jewish children who survived the Holocaust in Poland. It included a photograph of a boy nicknamed "Abramak" (in Polish, for Avram/Abraham) sitting on a staircase, where he slept on account of his fear of going to bed after seeing his family members murdered in their beds. The following week, Alterman published the poem "On the boy Abram (as notified by Laor 2013, pp. 311–12; based on Samet 1946; for the poem see Alterman 1977, pp. 15–18).

In light of the inclusion of (post-)colonial studies, cultural criticism, and subaltern studies within the mainstream of many disciplines in the humanities, including in general literature, it is interesting to examine the response of Hebrew literature and criticism to this fashionable trend. One of the prominent characteristics of the adaptation of postcolonial critique in the Israeli literary context is the impact of this critique on identity politics in Israel. While one might have expected the "projection" of key postcolonial works—such as Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon [1952] 1986)—on the Israeli–Palestinian relations or on Jewish–Arab relations within the Green Line, such literary expressions are actually rare (e.g., Monterescu and Monterescu 2011). Not only that Israeli scholars in the literature, like in most of the humanities, lack an adequate historical background in global European colonial and imperial studies and in world history (in contrast to Land of Israel studies and Middle East studies) but also African studies departments in most Israeli universities are non-existent or were recently closed. The more frequent result, however, of the projection of postcolonial literary critique on the politics of identity in Israel concerns the tension within Jewish society between those of Ashkenazi (European) origin, who take on the role of the elitist "whites", and those of Mizrahi (Oriental, or Eastern) origin, who take on the role of the marginalized "blacks." Mentions of "colonialism" in this context, or of Frantz Fanon, for instance, are numerous and include Hebrew literature criticism (Peled 2010), Hebrew children's literature (Keren-Yaar 2007), Mizrahi music (Oppenheimer 2011), and Mizrahi poetry (Snir 2011).

Even the most contemporary research on Alterman's "The Seventh Column" from a postcolonial perspective, conducted by the Hebrew literature scholar Gideon Nevo, also projects this politics of identity on Alterman's writing (Nevo 2021). This is against the background of the question of "Orientalism", a concept that has been developed in view of modern European imperialism. Yet, in its projection on the Israeli social reality, the concept lost most of its original imperial context. At the same time, Nevo's research is innovative precisely because he developed the concept of "Orientalism" in light of the intra-Israeli Ashkenazi–Mizrahi tension (Nevo 2021). This is after Edward Said, in his seminal book *Orientalism* (Said 1978), erased the history of Jewish communities from the history of the Middle East, along with erasing the history of other non-Arab minorities (Ibn-Warraq 2003, 2007). This is at the expense of creating binary opposition between Western Europe and the essentialized Arab Middle East (Ibn-Warraq 2007). Through the analysis of the poem on the *tirailleur*, this article, thus, contributes to bringing back the discussion of Alterman's work in the context of world history, imperial–colonial studies, and area studies.

5. Conclusive Note

As authors (L. Bigon and E. Langenthal) who are immersed in the cultures in question and disciplines, both professionally and personally (an Israeli-based collaboration between a (post-)colonial studies and African studies scholar and a philosopher of Eu-

ropean thought), we have been able to reframe the poem and put it in the foreground for the first time. This is in terms of the already rich literature concerning both Alterman (mainly in Hebrew) and the *tirailleurs* (mainly in French and English) and making the poem accessible to anglophone readership. Through an analysis of the poem using a rich variety of primary and secondary sources, the article has brought together unexpected geographies (British Palestine/Eretz-Israel, the Middle East, France, sub-Saharan Africa) while stretching historical, socio-political, and cultural trajectories around the poem. Against the present reality of a revival of antisemitism in Western Europe on the one hand (Alexander and Adams 2023; Cohen 2023) and, on the other hand, the metamorphosis of the “institution” of the *tirailleurs* under the umbrella of ECOWAS with a recruit of Senegalese *diambers*/soldiers to manage conflict in post-coup Niger (Rédaction Africanews and AFP 2023), we assume that the relevance of Alterman’s poetry will stay alive.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization and writing, L.B. and E.L. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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