

Samory Touré Biography

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Biography

The African ruler and state builder Samory Touré (1830-1900) held the French at bay for 15 years and created one of the most powerful, best-organized states in the western Sudan. His military and administrative genius was compared to Napoleon's.

Samory Touré was born in the Milo Valley of the western Sudan. His family owned cattle and traded, but their once strong ties to Islam had been loosened for over a century. Traveling widely over western Africa in 1846-1851, Samory came into contact with Islam and was reconverted to the faith.

From 1870 to 1875 Samory succeeded in creating a large empire through military victories. Influenced by the example of African empire builders like al-Hajj Omar, in 1880 he began a new *jihad* (holy war) to convert the pagans and push out the Europeans if necessary. His first armed conflict with the French occurred in February 1882.

As the result of a series of battles lasting until 1885, Samory negotiated a treaty ending hostilities. He agreed to send his son to France as a hostage. In addition, Samory agreed not to cross the Niger River in search of further conquests. In 1891 war broke out again between Samory and colonialists, and this time hostilities continued bitterly for 7 years until the fall in 1898 of Sikasso, a great walled city of 40,000 inhabitants. Samory, captured alive, was exiled to Gabon, where he died on June 2, 1900.

By the time of his fall Samory had created an administrative structure of 162 former chiefdoms organized into 10 provinces. He invented tactics of guerrilla warfare reminiscent of modern insurgent tactics and also opened an arms factory with 300 to 400 men turning out modern weapons that supplemented those from Europe. He maintained an intelligence network that kept him informed of developments from what is today Mauritania to Nigeria at a time when other great African leaders were driving independently in holy wars against the Europeans. Had princes of the caliber of the sultan of Sokoto, to this day a power in Nigeria, accepted Samory's proffered invitation to unite, the story of colonial conquest in Africa might indeed have been quite different.