

Responses to the black presence in Britain during the First World War

The First World War gave rise to an increasingly visible black presence in Britain and became of fundamental symbolic significance, particularly in relation to ideas of 'race' and masculinity.

The suffering wounded or traumatised soldier could underscore narratives of heroism and courage. Equally, trauma, anxiety and helplessness in the face of modern warfare diluted ideals of white masculine superiority founded on rationality, stoicism and self-control.

Some portrayals of black men offered hope of renewed masculine vigour or emotional energy. However, despite rising casualties, declining voluntary enlistment and concerns about the physical and mental condition of white recruits, the military remained ambivalent towards black volunteers. This stance was echoed in the responses of local populations to the presence of black soldiers and war workers.

Reports of black volunteers sustained the image of a united empire. Many commented on their apparently robust physique, particularly after the British West Indies Regiment was established in October 1915. At the same time, the fighting qualities of black volunteers was questioned and many were turned away by recruiting officers.

As black seafarers and war workers appeared in greater numbers, newspaper reports became increasingly hostile, focussing on relationships between black men and white women which were seen to undermine the racial order. Some correspondents even suggested South African racial segregation should be adopted in Britain. Black war veterans responded by writing to local newspapers pointing out the sacrifices they had made and the loyalty of imperial subjects.

Nevertheless, black men were increasingly subject to physical hostility from mid-1917, culminating in the 1919 race riots in East London, Cardiff, Liverpool and Tyneside. A disturbance took place in Winchester in April 1919 between West Indian and American troops, anticipating the imposition of US-style race relations in Britain during the Second World War.

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Whose Remembrance? : a study of available research on communities in Britain, and the colonial experience of the FWW.

This investigated the state of research into the experiences of the peoples of Britain's former empire in the two world wars, and assessed the understanding and availability of this research to audiences and communities today.

The AHRC-supported project was conducted by the IWM research team with an advisory group of academics and specialists.

Outputs are available via IWM's website (<http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections-research/research-programmes/whose-remembrance>):

- A discussion paper
- Databases covering
 - scholarly works
 - exhibitions and resources developed by museums and cultural organisations
 - films and television
 - novels and plays
- Programmes for workshops held in July 2012.

IWM received follow-up AHRC funding for further outreach and dissemination activity. This included a 20-minute film by Alastair Uhlig for IWM about the project and to encourage further exploration of its themes. This featured several academics and community historians who had contributed to the project, and made extensive use of IWM collection resources.

Roger Smither, Imperial War Museum

Localities, nations and Empire; Britain and Ireland in times of crisis, 1912-1922.

Over 60 years ago a distinguished historian stated that Britain's imperial history could be written from the plaques on the walls of parish churches. Local history is not an isolated study; obviously the past of each locality is linked with both national and international history. This is clearly so for the First World War. Every war memorial in town or village records a death for a national cause on a foreign field or a distant ocean. But there is another element of the war story often forgotten: the role, and often the presence in Britain, of non-European soldiers and sailors from the colonial Empire.

Indian troops were not only on the Western Front by late 1914, but shortly afterwards injured men from the sub-continent were convalescing in hospitals in Brighton and Hampshire towns. Folkestone was a major base for thousands of African and Chinese labourers in uniform employed in France, and a port of transit for even larger numbers of African American GIs by late 1917. In these situations, and elsewhere, international and national history impinged on localities as British men and women met and related to soldiers from far flung parts of the world. These personal interactions, strongly discouraged by officials and many politicians, provide a fascinating glimpse into how the Great War touched the lives of ordinary black and white people. It can also be seen in major ports where an increasing number of colonial and foreign seaman settled and married local women - and the race riots that occurred in several cities in 1919. The Great War was a global conflict, a World War, fought not only in Europe but also in Africa and Asia. The contributions of people from the Empire and beyond to the defence of Britain's interests is an aspect that should not be ignored

as an effort is made to remember the millions who were killed and maimed in body and mind as a result of the great blood-letting that engulfed the world between 1914 and 1918.

David Killingray, Goldsmiths, University of London; ICwS

Using the National Archives colonial records

The final session introduced records relating to the contribution of the colonies and their peoples to the war effort. In particular, Colonial Office correspondence relating to the British West Indies, with entries in the Caribbean catalogue series giving a brief description of each item within a volume. Snapshots include

- Nominal rolls of enlisted men, with next of kin sometimes given. Some men of the British West Indies Regiment and the Bermuda Volunteer Force listed next of kin in London, Maidenhead, Belfast and Aberdeen. Men enlisting in England had wives in Manchester, Hull, and other UK cities.
- Details of military units to which West Indians were recruited. These ranged from army, navy, and air force to the Indian Medical Service, and the Canadian and United States armies.
- The War Office ban on the commissioning of men not of pure European descent. Records indicate that this was difficult for officials in the West Indies to accept and they attempted to get exemptions for educated men and for officers in the local militias.
- Conditions experienced in conveying enlisted men from the Caribbean to theatres of war.
- A few accounts of military operations, notably the part played by the British West Indies Regiment in final operations in Palestine. Subsequently these troops were sent to Taranto, Italy, and used as labourers. Resentment at this decision led to some 50 to 60 sergeants forming a 'Caribbean League', viewed by one officer as intended to cover '... seditious designs for execution on return to the West Indies'.
- Other West Indian contributions to the war effort included gifts of the main produce of the dependencies including sugar, cocoa, arrowroot and rice, as well as financial donations.
- India's contributions were huge: as well as over one million soldiers and other personnel India gave field ambulances and hospital ships, ammunition, plant and rolling stock, raw materials and food. Over £100 million was given outright as a gift, and a further £20-30 million raised each year.

CO records are also a rich source to explore issues that arose after the war, notably lack of provision for demobilised personnel, the consequences of the war for divided families, and the impact of informal education provided by foreign travel and interaction with people from around the world.

Mandy Banton is author of Administering the Empire. 1802-1968: A Guide to the Records of the Colonial Office in The National Archives of the UK (University of London School of Advanced Study, Institute of Historical Research, in conjunction with The National Archives of the UK, 2008).

Mandy Banton, ICwS