

Investigations: Research by Carol Pierre

Carol Pierre conducted research on the history and participation of the British West Indian Regiment in WWI as part of her History Masters degree. Please find below her findings which she kindly presented at CACOEU's Black History Month event:

The British Colonial Contribution to WW1

- Over 4 million colonial soldiers were employed by the British army from: The Falkland Islands, China, Canada, Newfoundland, Australia, Fiji, New Zealand, India, Africa and the Caribbean.
- The BWIR was established on October 26th 1915, as a new infantry formation within the British Army, comprised of 12 Battalions.
- Most battalions served in France, while others served in Egypt, Palestine and elsewhere.
- By the end of war over 15,000 West Indians had served.
- The British West Indian Regiment was a purely black regiment separate from other British regiments.
- Soldiers were not permitted on the front line, instead forced into labouring positions.
- No black soldier could rank any higher than a sergeant.

Recruitment

- King George V forced the War Office to recruit West Indians following allied losses and fearing that rejecting volunteers because of their race would cause agitation in the Caribbean.
- The War Office were hostile to the idea of large numbers of black men arriving in Britain, fearing enlisting black men would have short-term and long-term consequences on imperial hierarchies.
- Blacks could potentially outshine whites undermining colonial rule.
- A black soldier could use weapons against the the English.
- The 41% of West Indian soldiers rejected by the War Office, considered undesirable, and those injured were sent back to the Caribbean with no compensation upon their return.
- The Halifax incident: March 1916, a ship carrying over 1000 Jamaican volunteers encountered a blizzard, 5 men died and more than 700 were injured, due to a lack of adequate heating and sufficient clothing. This interrupted British recruitment campaigns in the Caribbean.
- Seeking support at wartime rallies, the British used the argument that a 'Prussian Victory' could terminate the 'benign rule of Empire' and lead to slavery once again.

Race

- BWIR Veteran Blackman: 'when the battle starts...we're all the same. When you're there you don't care about anything. Every man is under the rifle'.

- Reports from white officials praise the discipline, loyalty and devotion. Many black soldiers received medals.

However...

- Black soldiers were excluded from technical operations and the front line.
- They were not considered rational enough to undertake active duties.
- They were given below standard pay, living conditions, recreational and medical facilities
- Despite Caribbeans being considered British under the 1914 British Nationality Act.
- Army officials took the stance that 'to be British was to be white'.
- Wartime propaganda represented British colonials as children of Empire 'paternally led by Britain'.

The end of War

- Trade Unions demanded white English soldiers retain previous employment, leaving numbers of black men without work.
- Black men who had settled with white women and raised mixed race families faced abuse.
- The Taranto Mutiny, Italy, December 6th 1918, unfolded when black soldiers were ordered to wash the lavatories of white labourers.
- BWIR refusal and built up frustrations led to violence and intimidation against whites for four days, after which mutineers surrendered.
- BWIR soldiers were forcibly disarmed and court-martialled, many given harsh sentences and the ringleader received a death sentence, changed later to a twenty-year sentence in prison.
- More than 1000 Caribbean soldiers lost their lives in the war and nearly 700 were permanently injured.
- The BWIR were excluded from the Victory parades held in London and Paris in July 1919, celebrating the signing of the Treaty of Versailles. Indians and other British colonial troops marched.