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Reseña de "Race, war and nationalism: s social history of West Indians in the First World War" de
Glenford Howe

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Is there more to say about the book? Of course there are always things which could have been done better. The weakest part of the book is the part dealing with the history which does not concern the Saramaka. A note could have been added to the information about the Kwinti referring to articles about this group as they are rather more unruly than the Prices suggest on page 35. Little has been published about the history of the Paramaka, but the group certainly did not exist in 1780 as stated on the same page. It was not until 1830 that small groups of escaped slaves began to gather together in the Commewijne area to form the Maroon group we now know as Paramaka. The 'forefather' of the Paramaka, Dauphin, was still a slave on the Lustrijk plantation in 1820. And then there is the section on pages 39-43 giving a résumé of the Boni wars. The Prices mention that these pages are quoted from Kenneth Bilby (1990), but forget to add that Bilby had in turn quoted the material from my own 1985 dissertation which was published in English in 1990 under the title *The Boni Maroon Wars in Suriname*. That left me with a somewhat sour taste in my mouth.

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Glenford Howe. 2002. *Race, War and Nationalism: A Social History of West Indians in the First World War*. Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 270 pp. ISBN: 976-637-063-X (pbk).

As Glenford Howe reminds us in his introduction, the history of the British West Indies Regiment (BWIR) 'has remained largely untold' (p. xiii). The contribution of West Indians to the war effort was ignored by historians until the pioneering work of Joseph and Elkins in the late 1960s and early 1970s, even

though C.L.R. James highlighted the need for a comprehensive study in his *Life of Captain Cipriani*, published in 1932. During the war itself however, as efforts were made to stress Imperial unity, much was made of the West Indian contribution (and that of other colonial subjects), as the pages of the *Times History* or *War Illustrated* testify. The military potential of black volunteers, from both the West Indies and Africa, had some notable champions, including the colonial administrator Sir Harry Johnston, Algernon Aspinall of the West India Committee and Sir Charles Lucas, who later edited the *Empire at War*.

But many in the War Office and the Colonial Office were hostile to the deployment of battalions from the West Indies. When the BWIR was created, in November 1915, it was after considerable pressure from the West Indian colonies and the intervention of George V. Even then, there was great reluctance to deploy the West Indian battalions in the front line. Three battalions did eventually see front-line service in Palestine and Jordan against non-white Turkish troops. The remaining nine battalions were deployed for the duration of the war in auxiliary roles in France and Italy—unloading supply trains or carrying ammunition to the front line and undertaking menial tasks for white troops, such as cleaning latrines.

Segregated medical and welfare facilities and other forms of discrimination, compounded the resentment felt by West Indian troops, culminating in the mutiny of December 1918, at Taranto in Italy. Simultaneously, some black non-commissioned officers formed the Caribbean League, producing a program for independence and socio-economic reform—a landmark in the development of West Indian nationalism.

Although subsequently given little attention by historians, the legacy of West Indian involvement in the First World War was not entirely erased. Most students of Anglophone Caribbean studies will have been aware, if only anecdotally, of the involvement of West Indian ex-servicemen in the nationalist protests and pro-Ethiopian sentiment that engulfed the region during the 1930s.

Glenford Howe's timely attempt to recover the lost history of the BWIR, and to establish links between wartime experience and postwar nationalism, has provided the first book-length study of the BWIR. Howe has developed the earlier empirical and far briefer studies by Elkins (1970) and Joseph (1971). But he has also undertaken social historical enquiry to shed light on the daily experiences of black West Indian servicemen.

Howe begins his study by examining the extent to which West Indians were gripped by pro-Empire feeling at the outbreak of the war in 1914. His broad contention is that the majority of West Indians had succumbed to an hegemonic acceptance of Imperial values. From the outset West Indians were enthusiastic supporters of the war effort, rushing to volunteer, or to provide funds and supplies for the Imperial cause (pp. 1-3, pp. 7-8). In some ways this is quite a mechanistic explanation and neglects the history of struggle waged against the plantocracy since emancipation, clearly still evident in anti-colonial protests such as the Jamaican tramcar riots of 1912.

Nevertheless, Howe does later address resistance to recruitment and anti-war attitudes, emanating from non-conformist religion and the poor treatment meted out to wounded and discharged men. The neglect of frost-bitten casualties discharged after the *Verdala* disaster of March 1916 provided the most public example (pp. 78-80).

Howe also discusses some of the complexities surrounding West Indian support for the war effort. The concept of common sacrifice was often deployed to support claims for racial equality and constitutional change, motivating figures like Marcus Garvey, who in the early days of the war issued a proclamation of loyalty and declared his support for West Indian contingents. The right of self-determination, included in Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, presented on 8 January 1918, increased the confidence of early West Indian nationalists to demand greater involvement in government as a reward for wartime sacrifice (p. 22).

But as Howe clearly shows, despite early declarations of

patriotic intent, black and brown West Indians were denied the opportunity to contribute to the war effort on equal terms. The colonial governments in the West Indies were reluctant to send black volunteers overseas. They doubted the ability of black soldiers to acquit themselves in battle, fearing they lacked the discipline, stoicism and self-control to make good soldiers. They were also reluctant for black men to gain confidence and military skills that might undermine colonial authority after the war (pp. 23-24, pp. 33-34). Although some in the colonial establishment held that military service would be character forming for the black population (pp. 26-43).

The West Indies, and to a much greater extent Africa, provided a potential reservoir of cannon fodder to meet increasing demand at the front. However, the War Office remained firmly entrenched in its refusal to accept the military potential of black volunteers and issued dire warnings of the severe consequences if 'semi-civilized' black soldiers were unleashed on white Europeans (pp. 29-31). Ultimately, the acquiescence of the War Office to the formation of the BWIR was due to political expediency—the reluctance to generate resentment in the West Indies—rather than an attempt to address the manpower shortage on the Western Front (p. 38).

Unfortunately, apart from discussing the early obstacles to West Indian recruitment, Howe does not discuss why the deployment of black soldiers continued to be so problematic, even after the appalling attrition of the Somme and Passchendaele. There is a tendency to fall back on fairly simplistic, social science explanations that do not benefit from a thorough analysis of race relations.

To explain the exclusion of black soldiers from the front line, a greater awareness of the tensions created by the apparent shortcomings of white masculinity in the face of modern warfare would have been useful. No attempt is made to engage with the racial significance of shell shock for example (p. 158). Did the military fear that perhaps black soldiers would outperform their white

counterparts? This would have had the potential to increase racialized sexual anxieties which certainly became more acute during this period, as is evident in the British race riots of 1917 and 1919, and to which Howe only fleetingly alludes (p. 169). Why was it so important for black soldiers to be segregated from white women (p. 142)? Why was the thought of a black soldier being nursed by a white woman so repugnant (p. 113)?

Howe's theoretical weakness is also revealed in the chapter, 'Military Relations'. He draws on the work of Michel Foucault and Cynthia Enloe to explain the function of military discipline, but does not develop or contextualize their work to take account of race. In the chapters, 'Military Selection and Civilian Health' and 'Service and Conditions Overseas', comparative data are not introduced that might give the reader some insight into the impact of racial discrimination.

Howe's work is at its strongest in the crucial task telling the story of the British West Indies Regiment, from its early days in November 1915 to the increasingly discontented and disillusioned unit it had become by the demobilization period. Drawing on an impressive array of West Indian newspapers, he has not only catalogued the injustice and discrimination experienced by the battalions, but uncovers many incidents of resistance to the military hierarchy.

But there are also moments of empirical weakness. Howe has made very little use of battalion war diaries. These provide far more extensive and relevant evidence of declining morale in the BWIR than the example we are given of James Mitchell, a Jamaican executed for the rape and murder of Egyptian civilians (p. 155). Howe also repeats the mistaken claim, initially made by Elkins, that a soldier was executed for offences relating to the Taranto mutiny. Examination of records now available reveal that the single death sentence passed was later commuted to twenty year's imprisonment (p. 165). More importantly, Howe does not address the racial implications of the death penalty in the army. He asserts that 'there were only a few cases among the BWIR'

(p. 156). But as Gerald Oram (1998: 111-112, 123) has shown, disproportionate numbers of non-white soldiers had their death sentences carried out. Commutations were far more common among white soldiers.

Rather disappointingly, and despite the title, Howe only touches briefly and with little conviction on the long-term impact of the war on West Indian nationalism. He does, however, note the importance of BWIR in sowing some early seeds of West Indian identity (p. 136). But in spite of its shortcomings, Glenford Howe's book is a welcome and much-needed volume that should be read by Caribbeanists and Imperial and military historians alike.

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