

World War I

The documents in this volume provide an unique insight into the impact of the Great War on nationalist and pan-African sentiment in the Anglophone Caribbean and its diaspora in the United States, Central America, and Cuba. The documents present a detailed picture of Garvey's attempts to place African self-determination on a par with other claims for sovereignty in the post-war order.

The demand for African nationhood was partly a response to Woodrow Wilson's "Fourteen Points." In mapping out US policy on a future peace settlement in 1918, Wilson had asserted the rights of subject peoples within the Empires of the combatant powers, Britain, France, Austria-Hungary, Germany, and Russia. The 1917 Balfour Declaration in favour of a Jewish homeland and the continuing campaign for Home Rule in India and Ireland were also important in this regard. But most significantly, the collection reveals how Garvey's understanding of the experiences and expectations of black war veterans transformed the symbol of sacrifice for freedom, democracy, and civilization—the rallying cry of Empire—into the watchwords of world-wide African liberation and self-government.

The documents also capture the mood of discontent that developed among those who did not participate directly in the war effort. A temporary boom in the plantation economy, resulting from the wartime demands of Europe and the United States, did not percolate through to the black peasantry and working class. Rather, the black masses were disproportionately affected by wartime inflation—fuelled by speculation and shortages—compounding existing economic exploitation and political disenfranchisement. By the end of the war, strikes and disturbances had broken out in Jamaica, Guyana, Trinidad, St. Lucia, and Antigua as workers demanded pay increases to match inflation that topped 145 percent for some essential commodities.¹

When war broke out, there was enthusiastic, but not universal, support for the Empire among all classes, races, and colors. The UNIA, founded on the eve of the war, issued a statement of loyalty "sincerely pray[ing] for the success of British Arms on the battlefields of Europe and Africa, and at Sea, in crushing the 'common Foe,' the enemy of peace and further civilization."² Amidst reports of atrocities in Belgium, Garvey viewed British rule as preferable to German occupation. Indeed, when the West Indian contingents began to be assembled in 1915, the threat of a return to slavery in the event of a German victory was regularly mooted at recruitment rallies to encourage volunteers. As the documents show, Garvey and his supporters later used, to great effect, the Allied claim that the war had been fought for "the sacred principle of democracy."³

At first, the British military rejected offers of West Indian contingents for the front. Despite the impressive record of the West India Regiments, who had served in numerous colonial and Imperial campaigns since the American War of Independence, black soldiers were regarded as lacking the necessary self-control and intelligence to cope with the demands of modern warfare. Considering the

deployment of black soldiers, members of the Army Council, its executive body, declared “coolness, courage and initiative are at premium [in the front-line]—qualities of which the ordinary coloured labourer is deficient.”⁴

The Colonial Office believed West Indian volunteers should be retained for local defense and the colonies’ main effort should come in the shape of supplies and monetary contributions. However, white West Indian volunteers seeking commissions in the British Army were not discouraged and units formed from the white elite were favorably received. One hundred and thirty men of Bermuda Volunteer Rifle Corps were incorporated into the 1st Lincolnshire Regiment from June 1915. Later that year, Trinidad dispatched the Merchant and Public contingents, totalling around 400 white men, to the metropole. This situation mirrored the everyday reality of West Indian life that institutionalized the exclusion of non-whites from positions of power and prestige. This had been illustrated by the exclusion of black candidates from the Jamaican Civil Service examinations in 1911.⁵

Nevertheless, black and brown West Indians were eager to match declarations of loyalty and material support with military sacrifice. In the words of one Barbadian, “We have put up sugar and money . . . but that won’t win our battles. It’s lives we desire to give . . . and it is only fair to give these colonies the opportunity of showing the true spirit of patriotism that they have always evinced in the past.”⁶ Non-white supporters of the war insisted that they too should be able to prove themselves on the battlefield, generally regarded as the supreme test of manhood. The arrival in Europe of Indian troops, portrayed within British Imperial and military ideology as “martial races,”⁷ spurred the advocates of West Indian recruitment. But it was local press reports detailing French deployment of West and North African troops on the Western Front that really caught the imagination of potential black volunteers. The French, Germany’s superior manpower since the Franco-Prussian war, deployed around 170,000 West African troops alone, with little hesitation.

Black West Indians began to make their way to the metropole to volunteer. Some paid their own passages, costing between £17 and £25, a considerable outlay. Others stowed away, only to face ridicule and punishment on their arrival. In May 1915, at a court in West Ham, London, nine black men from Barbados, who vowed they “had come to fight” were charged with stowing away on the S.S. *Danube*. Dismissing the case, the magistrate still mocked the men, suggesting they had stowed away in “a dark corner” in order to join the “Black Guards.” Three Jamaicans, tried by the court for the same offense in 1917, were rewarded with seven days imprisonment for their attempt to support the war effort.⁸ Military law classified black British subjects as aliens, limited to a ratio of 1:50 in any army unit, and refused admission to ranks above non-commissioned officer. Black volunteers were routinely rejected at recruitment offices, although there were notable exceptions, including the footballer Walter Tull, born in England of a Barbadian father and English mother. Tull was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Middlesex Regiment and died during the second battle of the Somme in April 1918.⁹

Despite the lack of metropolitan encouragement, contingents were formed through local initiatives in the West Indies. The British were forced into a more pragmatic approach, especially after King George V suggested it would be politically expedient to do so. The creation of the British West Indies Regiment was formally announced in the *London Gazette* on 26 October 1915. By this stage, the first of the West Indian contingents had arrived in the metropole and had made their way to Seaford on the south coast for training. By the spring of 1916, sufficient men had arrived to enable the dispatch of two battalions to Egypt. At the end of the war, the BWIR numbered twelve battalions and over 15,000 men from the West Indies, Honduras, the Bahamas, and Bermuda had passed through its ranks.

Although BWIR battalions were frequently deployed within range of the German guns, British commanders insisted that black troops could not actively engage with a white opponent. As late as May 1918, the British War Cabinet refused to incorporate black United States troops into British formations for front-line training. The black divisions were instead absorbed into the French command structure.¹⁰

Given the pressing need for personnel, racism alone—usually expressed in terms that derided West Indian military potential—could not explain the exclusion of most BWIR battalions from front-line action. The image of white masculine prowess, characterized by heroic endeavor, stoicism, and self-control, had been shattered by the epidemic of psychiatric disorders, usually termed “shell shock” or “neurasthenia,” that afflicted the British Army, particularly from the start of the Somme offensive in July 1916. No less a concern was the poor physique of many recruits, who were regarded as symptomatic of the racial degeneration said to be afflicting the British “race” as a result of urbanization, immorality, and immigration. The underlying fear was that black soldiers might outperform their white counterparts, causing repercussions for the hierarchy of Empire.¹¹

The first two battalions and members of the fifth (reserve) battalion eventually saw frontline action in the campaign against the Turks in Palestine and Jordan, where they received much official praise. A small detachment of the regiment also served alongside the 2nd West India Regiment in the East African campaign. However, the remaining battalions were deployed as labor battalions on the Western Front and later at the port of Taranto in Italy. Their duties included road-building and railway construction, digging trenches, unloading ships and trains, and carrying ammunition to the front-line batteries. One hundred Honduran members of the regiment served with the Inland Water Transport Section of the Royal Engineers in Mesopotamia. Particularly in Italy, the men were forced to undertake more menial duties, such as cleaning latrines, for white soldiers.

Discrimination permeated all aspects of military life. Even BWIR battalions having served in the front line were routinely excluded from social facilities, such as camp cinemas and estaminets (soldiers’ cafés). Men requiring medical services were usually sent to “native” hospitals reserved for South

African, Chinese, Egyptian, and Indian labor contingents, where treatment and accommodation were inferior to those given to German prisoners of war. Deaths from disease were disproportionately high as a result.

From its inception, the BWIR was classed as a British infantry regiment, entitled to the same pay and conditions as other British troops. However, commanders and officials tended to regard the BWIR as a “native” unit, like the older West India Regiment, issuing lower pay and allowances as a result. Army Order 1/1918 awarded a fifty per cent pay increase to all British regiments, effective from September 1917. The BWIR was excluded from these provisions and it was not until mid-1919, after vigorous protest, that the matter was redressed. Decades after the war, veterans were still claiming that they had not received their full entitlement.

Aggrieved by the conditions under which they were forced to work, and encouraged by concessions made by the British military to Italian and Maltese civilian labor, the men of the BWIR struck. In early December 1918, nearly a month after hostilities had ceased, Lieutenant-Colonel Willis, commander of the 9th Battalion, a notoriously brutal officer, was attacked when he ordered his men to clean latrines used by the Italian Labour Corps. A number of men, surrounded his tent and slashed it with their bayonets. They eventually dispersed, but the following day, 7 December 1918, the 9th and 10th battalions refused to work and were disarmed. The unrest spread and one man was killed by a sergeant, later convicted for “negligently discharging his rifle.”¹²

The mutiny was swiftly brought to an end and harsh sentences were meted out to the forty-seven men found guilty of mutiny. Private Sanches, apparently the leader of the mutiny, received a death sentence, commuted to twenty years imprisonment.¹³ The 9th battalion was dispersed in an effort to separate the ringleaders.¹⁴ White labor battalions replaced the BWIR and Italian laborers took over sanitary duties.¹⁵

Some of the Taranto mutineers were involved in a further mutiny when they were transported back to the West Indies on the *Orca* in September 1919. Among the ship’s passengers were 650 BWIR veterans, together with black seamen and civilians, repatriated after the series of racial attacks that took place in London, Cardiff and other British cities during 1919.¹⁶ These men had assisted the Empire, in the army, navy, and munitions industries. For their sacrifices they were rewarded with abuse and violence on the streets of the metropole before, in many cases, being forcibly shipped back to the Caribbean where many vented their anger in post-war disturbances and agitation. The *Orca* mutiny broke out when the Taranto mutineers were placed in irons and BWIR veterans and seamen attempted to free them. The white military escort proved ineffective and had to seek the support of black military police to suppress the mutiny.¹⁷

In the wake of the events at Taranto, members of the BWIR formed a short-lived organization, the Caribbean League, marking a milestone in the development of Anglophone Caribbean nationalism. The chief aim of the League, “the Promotion of all matters conducive to the General Welfare of the

islands constituting the British West Indies and the British Territories adjacent thereto,”¹⁸ did not, at first, unsettle the military authorities, given a report of the inaugural meeting by an informer. However, the resolution of a subsequent gathering “that the black man should have freedom to govern himself in the West Indies and that force must be used, and if necessary bloodshed, to attain that object”¹⁹ sent shock waves throughout the region, as this collection shows. Some members of the colonial regime, however, maintained a self-satisfied belief that the virtues of Empire, especially compared to the treatment of black people in the US, would ultimately serve as a bulwark against nationalist and revolutionary sentiment.

The League was composed primarily of sergeants (significantly, all the mutineers were private soldiers) who debated whether literature and propaganda should be disseminated among the ranks “as they might not understand the objects and get excited.”²⁰ On the first day of the mutiny, 180 sergeants of the BWIR chose to present a petition demanding the extension of pay increase granted by Army Order No. 1 to the BWIR.²¹ Eschewing direct action at this stage, the NCOs of the BWIR nevertheless took advantage of the growing mood of discontent among the other ranks.

The League manifested a strong Jamaican orientation. Sergeants Brown, Collman, and Jones—all Jamaicans—took the key posts in the organization. This clearly had the potential to lead to dissatisfaction and dissent from men of the smaller and less populous territories and may even have motivated the chief informer, Sergeant Pouchet, who had argued against the establishment of the League’s headquarters in Jamaica.²² But despite its short life and internal contradictions, the Caribbean League assisted the formation of a distinct racial consciousness from the harsh experiences of war. In a poem written at the time of the mutiny, Sergeant H. B. Montieth, a former Jamaican teacher, encapsulated the mood:

Lads of the West, with duty done, soon shall we parted be
To different land, perhaps no more each other’s face to see,
But still as comrades of the war our efforts we’ll unite
To sweep injustice from our land, its social wrongs to right.
Then go on conquering—lift your lives above each trivial thing
To which the meaner breeds of earth so desperately, cling;
And Heaven grant you strength to fight the battle for your race,
To fight and conquer, making earth for man a happier place.²³

Failing to learn the lessons of the Taranto mutiny, the British military continued to discriminate against the BWIR. Even the battle-hardened veterans of the 1st and 2nd battalions, arriving in Taranto in April 1919, were not spared segregation, menial duties, and racial insult under the regime of the South African commandant, Carey-Bernard. Instituting what Captain Andrew Cipriani described as a “reign of terror” Carey-Bernard insisted that:

the men were only niggers and . . . were better fed and treated than any nigger had a right to expect . . . he would order them to do whatever work he pleased, and if they objected he would force them to do it.²⁴

The appalling treatment black soldiers experienced when they volunteered to defend the Empire, and the failure to deliver post-war justice for Africans world-wide, fuelled support for the Universal Negro Improvement Association. Garvey could urge his supporters to join the struggle for African liberation under the Red, Black, and Green, in the knowledge that many in his audience were deeply disillusioned by the sacrifices they had made under the Union Jack. Whereas the colonial and metropolitan governments dismissed the sacrifices of the black veterans, Garvey called upon them to anticipate future sacrifice, declaring “the negroes claim Africa and will shed blood for their claim.”²⁵

BWIR veterans went on to play key roles in the UNIA. Samuel Haynes became general secretary of the British Honduras branch of UNIA before travelling to the US at Garvey’s request, eventually becoming the national representative in the mid-1930s. Arnold Ford, a Barbadian, was appointed director of music at Liberty Hall and wrote the Universal Ethiopian Anthem.²⁶ Many veterans migrated from their homelands after the war through economic necessity. Government-sponsored passages to Cuba were taken up by over 4000 veterans in Jamaica alone. But, rather than diluting nationalist and Garveyite sentiment, this dispersal instead served to internationalize and strengthen the cause of pan-Africanism.

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2. Marcus Garvey, Universal Negro Improvement and Conservation Association and African Communities League, to Rt. Hon. Lewis Harcourt, MP, Secretary of State for the Colonies, 16 September 1914, PRO, CO 137/705 (MGP 1:77–78).

3. *The Workman* (Panama City), 2 April 1921.

4. Memorandum from Military Members of the Army Council to Commander in Chief, British Armies in France, 6 February 1917, PRO, WO 32/5094.

5. Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America* [London: Verso, 1998], pp. 38–41.

6. *West India Committee Circular* 421 [17 November 1914].

7. See David Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj: the Indian Army, 1860–1940* [London: Macmillan, 1994], pp. 12–24.

8. *Stratford Express*, 19 May 1915, p. 3, and 12 May 1917, p. 3. Blackguard was a contemporary term for scoundrel or villain.

9. Phil Vasili, “Walter Daniel Tull, 1888–1918: soldier, footballer, Black,” *Race and Class* 38, no. 2 [1996]: 51–69.

10. Arthur E. Barbeau and Florette Henri, *The Unknown Soldiers: African American Troops in World War I* [revised edition, New York: Da Capo Press, 1996], p. 139.

11. For a detailed discussion of the racial implications of “shell shock” see R. W. P. Smith, “Engendering Race: Jamaica, Masculinity and the Great War,” [Ph.D. diss., University of North London, 2000], pp. 48–90.

12. War Diary Taranto Base Commandant, 6–8 December 1918, PRO, WO 95/4255; War Diary 7 British West Indies Regiment, Italy Lines of Communication, 9 January 1919, PRO, WO 95/

4262; Sir Etienne Dupuch, *A Salute to Friend and Foe* [Nassau: Tribune, 1982], p. 78; Glenford Derooy Howe, *Race, War and Nationalism: A Social History of West Indians in the First World War* [Kingston and Oxford: Ian Randle and James Currey, 2002], pp.164–171.

13. Register of Field General Courts Martial and Military Courts, 11 January 1919 to 26 February 1919, PRO, WO 213/27.

14. Secret Telegram Base Commandant, Taranto, to War Office, 9 December 1918, PRO, WO 33/951/619; Secret Telegram from Base Commandant, Taranto, to War Office, 10 December 1918, PRO, WO 33/951/620; Secret Telegram Base Commandant, Taranto, to War Office, 10 December 1918, PRO, WO 33/951/621; Secret Telegram from Inspector General of Communications, Italy, to War Office, 11 December 1918, PRO, WO 33/951/625; Secret Telegram from GOC, Italy, to War Office, 13 December 1918, PRO, WO 33/951/630; Secret Telegram from War Office to GHQ, Italy, 15 December 1918, PRO, WO 33/951/631.

15. Secret Telegram from GHQ, Italy, to War Office, 19 December 1918, PRO, WO 33/951/635; War Diary Deputy Assistant Director of Labour, Taranto, 23 December 1918, PRO, WO 95/4256.

16. See Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* [London: Pluto, 1984], pp. 297–316.

17. Governor Barbados to Milner, Secretary of State for the Colonies, 25 September 1919, PRO, CO 318/349/59579; Hemsley to GOC, Jamaica, [nd], PRO, CO 318/349/59579; Hemsley to GOC, Jamaica, 29 September 1919, PRO, CO 318/349/59579; Major H. W. Hemsley, *Memoranda on Voyage of SS Orca*, 29 September 1919, PRO, CO 318/349/59579.

18. Notes of meeting held at Cimino Camp, Italy, 17 December 1918, PRO, CO 318/350/2590.

19. Major Maxwell Smith to Major-General Thullier, GOC, Taranto, 27 December 1918, PRO, CO 318/350/2590.

20. Major Maxwell Smith (8 BWIR) to GOC, Taranto, 3 January 1919, PRO, CO 318/350/2590.

21. Petition of M. Murphy (3 BWIR) and 179 other Sergeants of the BWIR based in Italy, 6 December 1918, PRO, CO 28/294/56561.

22. Notes of meeting held at Cimino Camp, Italy, 17 December 1918, PRO, CO 318/350/2590; Major Maxwell Smith (8 BWIR) to GOC, Taranto, 3 January 1919, PRO, CO 318/350/2590.

23. *Jamaica Times*, 28 June 1919, p. 8.

24. A. A. Cipriani, *Twenty-five Years After: The British West Indies Regiment in the Great War 1914–1918* [Port of Spain: Trinidad Publishing Co., 1940], p. 62.

25. Braithwaite Wallis, British Legation, Panama, to Austin Chamberlain, Foreign Secretary, 4 November 1925, PRO, CO 554/66/57659.

26. James, *Holding Aloft*, pp. 55–69.