

Connected Communities

Whose Remembrance?

A scoping study of the available research on communities and the colonial experience of two world wars

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Background

Executive Summary

This Scoping Study looked at how far there is an awareness of the history of colonial troops and how they contributed to and were affected by service in the two world wars.

Two workshops were held which concluded that this marginalised subject needs and deserves to be more assiduously pursued and permanently included in mainstream narratives. Community historians have an important role to play: oral history projects are a vital means of recording the experiences of veterans in cases where more traditional forms of documentation and first-hand primary sources do not exist or are hard to access, and community historians are well placed to collect and process such reminiscences.

The experiences were wide-ranging and, like other war stories, evoke a range of responses. Commissioners of television programmes and publishers would do well to appreciate the untapped riches of this subject. A number of people descended from those who served have tried to trace their ancestors' service, asking 'why am I only hearing this now?'.

Museums, as public spaces where demanding past histories can be negotiated, have an important role to play in holding and displaying this subject. A radically improved representation in public institutions could achieve a greater sense of belonging for visitors with a family connection to the history.

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Introduction

Whose Remembrance? was a scoping study that sought to investigate the state of research into, and representation of, the experiences of the peoples of Britain's former empire in the two world wars, and its availability to a wide variety of audiences. The project has strengthened the network of academics from different disciplines, museum professionals, independent researchers and representatives from community associations who have a mutual interest in this history being told.

Reframing the terms of reference

Initially the parameters of the project excluded states that were Dominions by the outbreak of the First World War, but it became clear that each of these Dominions had groups of their own who had been excluded from mainstream representations and narratives in the past and it was felt that their stories should be included in the Scoping Study as well. These groups include the non-white population of South Africa, the First Nations of Canada, the Maori of New Zealand and the Aboriginal people and Torres Straits Islanders of Australia.

Reframing our investigation, therefore, we agreed that our focus should be the stories of those people who, through racial prejudice or lack of interest from institutions and historians, had been marginalised from an accurate, integrated representation of the two world wars.

The research team also questioned whether it was correct to assume a relationship

between specific communities and particular ethno-centric histories of war. We agreed that to approach the history from a broader perspective (for example of all colonial subjects drawn into specific kinds of labour or armed service) might be useful, reflecting the complex methods through which peoples' identities are constructed today.

Community historians, however, provide accessible and engaging mediators of this history and community organisations well-organised and visible entities for cultural institutions, such as IWM, to partner. Many of the most relevant works listed in the database were published by individuals from within communities who had investigated their own people's memories of the Second World War (e.g. Bourne 1999, Choudhury 1995 and Murray 1996).

Methods

The project was carried out by the IWM research team in consultation with an advisory group of academics and specialists. The team included three specialist researchers, contracted to look into a particular historical case study using IWM's collections and to assess the accessibility and usefulness of archival material on their topic.

Two workshops were held at IWM London, the first with historians and the second with museum professionals, community representatives and social scientists. Both were rich and intense days, showcasing an abundance of innovative work.

Outcomes

- An **address book** of relevant academics, independent historians, community representatives and museum professionals
- Two **workshops**:
 - » The **historians' workshop** addressed the current state of research into the topic and in particular the availability of sources that allow the study of the experiences of colonial soldiers and civilians;
 - » The **workshop for museum professionals, community representatives and social scientists** discussed the representation of this marginalised topic in museums and the different ways that museums have sought to collaborate with veterans through exhibitions, oral history projects, resources for teachers and activity days for children.
- Three **online databases**:
 - » **Published works** produced by academics and community historians over the last thirty years. Works by social scientists, which address how the visibility, or otherwise, of these stories has affected a sense of belonging for people of Britain's former empire living in Britain, were an important inclusion.
 - » Exhibitions, online resources and teaching packs developed by **museums and cultural organisations**.
 - » Cultural outputs such as **films, TV documentaries, novels, poetry anthologies and plays**.
- **Reports by the three specialist researchers** working with IWM's collections:
 - » Ansar Ahmed Ullah on the experiences of South Asian seamen in both world wars
 - » Arthur Torrington on the British West Indies Regiments in the First World War
 - » Ouleye Ndoeye on using the life stories of British missionaries and soldiers to understand the complexities of their relations with Nigerians in the Second World War.

Research findings

Background

Histories of the Second World War from the late 1940s until the mid-1970s tended to be a 'top down' history, focusing on the higher direction and conduct of the war, with particular emphasis on wartime leaders, the diplomacy of war and major campaigns. The war as experienced by ordinary people – although very much to the fore today – received little attention. The colonial soldier was at the bottom of this hierarchy and was not encouraged to write about his role as part of the fighting force. Nor was there an appetite among British historians until relatively recently to examine Britain's reliance on her Empire.

An interesting observation from Dr Catherine Wilson, who gave a paper at the British Military History conference in Oxford, contributed to our understanding of how the Indian story came to be neglected. Wilson showed how Winston Churchill's six volume history of the Second World War seriously downplayed the role of the Indian Army, an omission which would have long-lasting consequences for its place in the historiography of the following decades (see Wilson 2012).

In the decades following the Second World War, history syllabuses and public discourse focused on the movements which had taken each country on a path to independence from the British Empire. Within newly-independent states themselves, there was a tendency to view service in the British armed forces as 'aiding the oppressor', with the result that the military service of thousands was ignored and even criticised.

In the last twenty five years there has been a gradual growth in interest in this subject and

some effort to recover first-person accounts from those who served. A notable pioneer was Geoffrey Hodges, a teacher based in Kenya and Zambia, who carried out a series of interviews with those Carrier Corps veterans still alive in 1969 and 1970.

Recent contributions from scholars have put the experience of the soldier from the colonies at the heart of their research (e.g. Killingray 2010, Ahuja et al. 2010, Das 2011 and Bourne 2013). Others have focused on the non-combatant roles that people from the colonies fulfilled and the memories of life in Britain during the Second World War (e.g. Bousquet and Douglas 1995, Rose 2003, Taylor and Bains 2010, Bourne 2010, Stadler 2012).

Impact and challenges of investigating this history

- Raising the profile of this history can encourage donations of primary source material from families who realise that their history 'matters' to the archives and museums of this country.
- Diaries and letters written by those put in charge of colonial labourers and soldiers can be 'mined' for incidental observations and insights into contemporary attitudes to race and 'difference'. Highly important to rebalancing the narrative are the vernacular presses, censored letters home now held in national archives, memoirs written by ex-servicemen or civilians who lived through the wars and oral testimony.
- Historians who undertook their own investigations and as a result added to the primary sources available to the wider research community include Professor David Killingray, Lt Gen Ian Gleeson of the

South African Defense Force (rtd), Dr Nancy Ellen Lawler, Professor Joe Lunn and Dr Melvin E Page.

- Collaborations between researchers and museums or other public-facing bodies have yielded strong outcomes:
 - » The Herbert Gallery conducted interviews with veterans of the Second World War which led to the film *Empire At War* (2005).
 - » *From War to Windrush*, an exhibition at IWM London, 2008-2010.
 - » Patrick Vernon of Every Generation Media directed a film called *A Charmed Life* (2008), about Jamaican-born RAF airman Eddie Noble, which was screened at the British Film Institute in November 2009.
 - » The exhibition *Keep Smiling Through: Black Londoners on the Home Front- 1945* (Cuming Museum, Southwark, 2008) was the result of collaboration with independent historian Stephen Bourne and included oral history interviews with members of PACO (Pioneer African Caribbean Over-50s) who remember the Second World War and its aftermath.

Unfairly forgotten history and communities' sense of alienation

Professor Stuart Hall has written, 'National heritage is a powerful source of meaning; those who can't see themselves reflected in the mirror are therefore excluded'.

A greater awareness of this history is long overdue. Many of the speakers, either representing particular communities or working to raise awareness of these marginalised historical experiences, spoke of the alienation they had felt when visiting some

of Britain's national museums only to find their own family's history under-represented. When museums have made the effort to uncover this shared history or showcase the work of independent researchers, there has been a positive reaction from visitors.

"...just because people didn't 'see' or recall black Britons or overseas migrants does not mean they were not there."

Tabili 2006, 56

The Parekh Report (2000) made important points about re-thinking national identity. A more nuanced, fairer depiction of the two world wars would demonstrate that the people of the former empire were an inextricable part of the British war effort in both world wars and that Britain had relied on men from the colonies serving in its armed forces across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, resulting in the formation of migrant communities in Britain (see Fryer 1984, Killingray and Omissi (eds.) 1999, Hall and Rose (eds.) 2006 and Tabili 2011).

During his presentation at the second workshop, Arthur Torrington said: 'History is like your shadow: you can't run away from your shadow'. We live in an age in which all lived experience is acknowledged to have value, and this gap in British history needs to be responsibly filled.

Emerging trends

A public appetite for the stories of hitherto 'invisible' people has given an impetus to this field. Reports in the vernacular press of former colonies, films shot there, artefacts such as inscribed shell cases and other personal effects, and the sites (sometimes preserved and promoted locally) where colonial soldiers

were stationed can all be brought to bear on constructing a clearer narrative of their experience.

Historians are increasingly coming to understand the First World War as a colonial war. The experience, for African colonies especially, was of providing raw materials and manpower to support an imperial war waged, not just to resolve a short-term question of European dominance, but also as part of a long-term struggle by war and other means for control of colonies outside of Europe.¹ The continuities of empire across the first two decades of the twentieth century critiques the strict '1914-1918' delineation used by most UK museums when representing the First World War.

Recent online projects that aim to make the history of the people of the colonies more visible include *Making Britain: South Asian visions of home and abroad 1870–1950* (Open University, British Library, Kings College London and Oxford University); *Black Asian British Army* (National Army Museum); and the Memorial Gates Trust website.

Joint research and digitisation projects between universities, archives and museums are an important route to showcasing the latest scholarship carried out by academics and independent historians. The global reach of such initiatives, their relative low cost (compared to exhibitions) and the opportunity they offer for crowd-sourcing, in the former colonies as well as the UK, make this a logical next step for IWM.

Such developments need to be properly sustained. Many who attended the second workshop felt that the 'Black History Month' approach was tokenistic and perpetuated the notion of Black history being little more than an 'occasional diversion' from the mainstream of British history.

The school curriculum in Britain includes the history of African Americans in the United States, but has little on Black and Asian lives in Britain. Children are taught about Mary Seacole and Walter Tull, but do not generally learn about the wider communities from which they came. At the second workshop Peter Ashan emphasised the need to 'educate the educators'. If the history was more visible in museums, teachers would have greater confidence both to teach the subject matter and to influence the government to make changes to the national curriculum.

Encounters which increase inter-cultural understanding need to be actively nurtured. The point about building up trust through sustained relationships was made by many of the speakers at the second workshop. Patrick Vernon described people who work with both communities and museums as 'brokers' and felt that museums should give these brokers greater support with their projects. The AHRC Connected Communities Summit (Manchester, August 2012) was particularly useful for the insights it gave into the coproduction of research projects with groups which were either hard to reach or who had traditionally found it difficult to have their voice heard.

¹ This point was made by several of this historians present. It was directly discussed in the papers of Professor David Killingray, Dr Jan-Georg Deutsch, Dr James Kitchen and Dr Richard Smith, who, unlike the others, drew attention to the voluntary nature of service from the British West Indies whilst recognising the colonial extraction of raw materials.

Recommendations for closer engagement with this subject

Further research into understanding the issues surrounding this 'forgotten history' is less important than acting in a very practical sense to provide more and better displays and interpretation of the colonial troops' story. Museums need to invest in forging links with communities and with their 'brokers' in order to make their permanent narrative exhibitions more representative of and relevant to the diverse communities they serve.²

IWM specifically should build on its earlier work with the following relatively straightforward steps: learn from and collaborate with other organisations, especially with those which share similar 'imperial' pasts like the Royal Geographic Society; further develop relationships with participants in the project, with the Runnymede Trust and the British Asian Studies Association and with groups such as the UK Punjab Heritage Association; and encourage research-active staff at IWM to understand the richness of this subject area.

More ambitiously it was felt that IWM could:

- devise academic research projects which better interpret and make accessible IWM collections and make recommendations for public programmes which reflect the diversity of the collections and the global, interconnected nature of war in the 20th century;
- engage with the National Curriculum authorities and ask how Key Stage 3 can encompass the story of colonial troops within its 'End of Empire' Depth Study?

- convene a conference with the specific purpose of bridging the gap between academic history of the two world wars and representations of those conflicts in museums and community spaces.

Recommendations for further research projects

- Transnational migratory spaces – such as the Indian Ocean – were felt to offer rich potential for future research.
- Experiences of colonial troops on the Home Fronts is ripe for further understanding.
- IWM's photographic collections were felt to offer particularly good subjects for community-based projects. Crowd-sourcing approaches could be used for this – similar to that employed by The National Archives' Africa Through a Lens project.
- Externally, some of the (formerly hidden) Colonial Administration archives currently being transferred to TNA relate to emergency powers and related matters during the First and Second World Wars.

² eg. the Royal Indian Army Service Corps's post-Dunkirk incorporation into Local Defence Corps in Doncaster and Glasgow.

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