Decolonising the immortal heritage:
Empire, war and history in contemporary Britain

Blog for the Society for the History of War

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The culture wars were fought on many fronts in 2021. Skirmishes over history, empire and identity were staples of outraged commentary across media and politics. However, despite the generally febrile climate, 2021 witnessed at least one noteworthy moment of (more or less) collective, national contrition. The occasion was the publication by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) of a report prepared by a 'special committee', of which I was a member, convened to investigate historical inequalities in the treatment of colonial and commonwealth war dead.

Our report found that many thousands of First World War casualties had been discriminated against in death. Whereas European soldiers and officers, and indeed the vast majority of those who died in Europe, were commemorated in marked graves or by name on collective memorials, thousands of colonial troops were treated differently. Some known graves were abandoned while others were deliberately destroyed, along with the records which would have allowed for the naming of individual graves. The report concluded that "imperial ideology influenced the operations of the IWGC", confirming claims made by Michele Barrett, as long ago as 2007, that the Commission had failed to honour its core principle of providing equality of treatment in death.

The Prime Minister offered an "unreserved apology" on behalf of the government, declaring that "Our shared duty is to honour and remember all those, wherever they lived and whatever their background, who laid down their lives for our freedoms at the moment of greatest peril". Some went further still: the Defence Secretary, Ben Wallace, acknowledged that prejudice had played a part in the non-commemoration and committed to explore "decolonising" the teaching of war, lamenting the fact that his own education was limited to the western front and the war poets.

These sombre responses stand in marked contrast to the confected outrage generated by other attempts to reckon with Britain's imperial legacies – not least the rumbling statue wars, which neatly illuminate the priorities of colonial memorialisation *and* the contemporary *kulturkampf*. The National Trust's acclaimed 'Colonial Countryside' project, which examined connections between empire, slavery and National Trust properties, prompted an outcry by 'Common Sense Conservatives' and a well-publicised, but ultimately unsuccessful, rebellion by a minority of the Trust's members. In spite of much-vaunted commitments to free speech, Churchill College abruptly cancelled a seminar series examining discomfiting elements of their namesake's writing and thinking. Meanwhile, the government's Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities asserted that there was little evidence of institutional racism in Britain, provoking a chorus of execration from across academe and from many of those consulted in the preparation of the report.

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What special power do the long-dead soldiers of the British empire hold over public and political life that they can extract such contrition from a government so performatively unapologetic to the victims of contemporary racism? What

does this episode tell us about the intersections of empire, war and British history?

Despite, or perhaps because of, the contemporary 'culture war', real conflicts – and the soldiers who fight them – continue to occupy a special place in the Britain's historical imaginary. Faced with an awkward choice between acknowledging the existence of historical racism and denigrating the service of those soldiers who were victims of it, the politicians sombrely withdrew from the cultural battlefield.

Predictably, a handful of commentators did rally to the defence of Britain's imperial past. Zareer Masani wrote to the *Times* to suggest that the "storm over the Commonwealth war graves misses the point that the contribution of colonial troops is deliberately ignored by postcolonial regimes in their home countries" (24 April 2020). Developing this *whataboutery* in a longer piece for the *Telegraph* (26 April 2021), Masani complained that the "woke left" were trying to use the CWGC report to buttress a "narrative that the Empire was inherently evil and its peoples inevitably victims".

In a similar vein, Nigel Biggar worried that: "Casual onlookers could readily be forgiven for walking away confirmed in their conviction that British colonialism was essentially racist…".[1] In place of racism, Biggar wondered whether colonial cultural sensitivity might explain the unequal treatment of the colonial war dead? As "African peoples did often eschew burying their dead in marked graves", perhaps unmarked graves were deemed more appropriate? However, despite a trawl of colonial ethnography, Professor Biggar finds no evidence to substantiate his proposition, nor to account for the fact that Africans' burial locations (and records of their names) were deliberately 'sent missing' (i.e. erroneously said to be unknown). It is therefore hard to find much merit in Biggar's proposition that the IWGC was guided by "close attention to African burial customs". Sean Lang's suggestion (*Times*, 23 April 2021) that metropolitan controversies about commemoration might help to explain the "little enthusiasm for enforcing [burial] on soldiers from cultures with very different funerary traditions" is equally speculative – and similarly unconvincing.

A less selective reading of the report, and of the evidence it rests on, presents a more straightforward account: colonial soldiers were commemorated unequally because they were thought to be unequal, to be different from (and in various ways inferior to) their European comrades. In Mozambique, European graves were concentrated in permanent cemeteries, while Africans and Indians were left in situ, and their cemeteries abandoned.[2] Whereas significant effort was expended to identify European graves, by 1925 the IWGC's principal Assistant Secretary, Arthur Browne, had directed that "in the case of native African soldiers… we should not undertake research with a view to identification".[3] "Pagan Natives", it was said, had "no regard for graves".[4] Elsewhere, records of graves of colonial casualties, which

[1] https://unherd.com/2021/05/how-racist-was-the-british-empire/.

[2] See CWGC Report, pp. 31-2.

[3] See CWGC Report, p. 34.

[4] See Barrett, 'Sent Missing in Africa', p. 10. Browne thought that headstones on native graves might be appreciated "in perhaps two or three hundred years' time, when the native population had reached a higher stage of civilization…", p. 13. Carriers were especially liable to be overlooked – partly because they were generally deemed 'inferior' to fighting troops, and partly because they died in such numbers that their commemoration implied significant additional costs for the Commission. Major George

would have allowed for the erection of individual headstones, were 'sent missing' and known graves abandoned. In the Morogoro cemetery, 49 marked graves were obliterated in the Native Christian areas, while the graves of BWIR and Cape Corps casualties in the (largely European) section, were marked with individual headstones, lest the visible difference make clear imperial hierarchies of creed and colour. Here, as elsewhere, colonial graves were marked where their location made memorialisation convenient. Where this was not the case, inequality in death was readily explained away: few visitors were expected at colonial graves and Africans were thought not to have reached the "stage of civilization" required to appreciate memorials. Ideology and pragmatism, not geography or colonial ethnography, shaped the IWGC's selective approach to memorialisation.

This reading is entirely consistent with the literature produced by historians of empire in recent decades, as recent works on the Indian Army makes clear. While the colour bar which forbade Indian troops from deploying against European enemies was overcome (partly to appease 'advanced' Indian opinion) the War Office continued to oppose recruitment from the West Indies until 1915. When Indian troops were deployed to Europe, their correspondence was immediately censored, while British troops' letters were not subject to detailed censorship until 1918. When wounded Indian troops were brought to England to convalesce, racial and gender hierarchies were preserved: doctors were Europeans (and white); medical assistants were 'Anglo-Indian' (of mixed heritage) and menial roles were performed by South Asians. White women were forbidden (unsuccessfully) from nursing brown soldiers.[5] The same hierarchies informed imperial medicine: for much of the interwar period it was suggested that Indian troops did not suffer from 'shell shock' but rather from 'dishonest malingering', a slur which recycled discredited reports that Indian Army regiments suffered disproportionate rates of self-inflicted wounds.[6] Men from the British West Indies Regiments – whom the IWGC generally commemorated as 'Europeans' on account of their (presumed) Christianity – were nevertheless thought to be afflicted by "cases of severe hysteria of a type unfamiliar amongst white men". Irish troops were also thought to suffer disproportionately from 'lunacy', typically ascribed to their state of civilisation or tumultuous politics; a reminder that colonial hierarchies were never indexed to skin colour alone. As these examples suggest, while imperial ideologies were contested and critiqued, they nevertheless shaped the organisation, deployment and management of imperial armies, affecting who was recruited and who chose to enlist, the roles performed in the field, the treatment offered to the wounded and compensation provided for veterans. While race and racism were never the *only* factors at work in imperial armies and conflicts, they were rarely (if ever) absent from them.

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Evans thought that erecting permanent graves to African followers would be "a waste of public money", p. 6.

[5] David E. Omissi, "Europe Through Indian Eyes: Indian Soldiers Encounter England and France, 1914-1918," *The English Historical Review* 122, no. 496 (2007): 371–396.

[6] Hilary Buxton, "Imperial Amnesia: Race, Trauma and Indian Troops in the First World War," *Past & Present* 241, no. 1 (November 1, 2018): 221–258.

Why then did colonised peoples enlist to fight for powers which subjugated them? How should we commemorate those who fought alongside the British, and other colonial powers, in the global wars of the twentieth century?

For Zareer Masani, the contributions of colonial troops are evidence of the case for colonialism: "imperial discipline inculcated an esprit de corps and professional loyalty that mostly overrode the usual, local caste and sectarian differences. The result was a force whose discipline, traditions and integration helped enormously with eventual nation-building by the post-colonial successor-states". Instead of criticising British institutions (like the CWGC), we should "celebrate the professional loyalty of Britain's black and Asian troops. Instead of casting them as neglected victims, we should honour them with new monuments, especially in their home countries".[7]

While a call to celebrate the professionalism of colonial troops – necessarily including their role in the bloody suppression of anti-colonial protest – seems wilfully obtuse, it is true that the soldiers who fought on behalf of the British empire were, for the most part, professionals who had volunteered for imperial military service. It is also true that these soldiers have often been overlooked. In South Asia, as in Ireland, more attention has usually been paid to those who fought against, rather than on behalf of, the British empire. However, the condescending posterity proffered by Masani is no less ahistorical than the selective amnesia of postcolonial nationalists.

The evidence we have suggests that many of these 'professional' soldiers enlisted not *despite* the inequities of colonial rule but *because of them*. As the principal beneficiary of government investment, the army – 'the peasant's university' – was probably the most important redistributive institution in colonial India. It is little wonder that access to military service, and its benefits, was jealously guarded by favoured communities – and coveted by others. Gandhi's enthusiastic efforts to recruit on behalf of the British war – "who amongst you cannot spare a son" – were calculated to leverage post-war concessions from the imperial government. Only after these failed to materialise did Gandhi abandon loyalism for non-violent resistance. Meanwhile, in the loyalist Punjab, thousands of soldiers were rewarded with land grants and almost one-third of the interwar electorate qualified to vote because of their military service. The Jallianwalla Bagh massacre of 1919 – ordered by a white man, enacted by South Asians – was the product of these post-war currents; a sign of growing discontent with colonial rule and the readiness of the imperial state to mobilise indigenous labour to deploy violence in its defence.

The realities of colonial military service have been wildly misrepresented in some of the commentary on the CWGC report. Despite the report's prominence, British military historians have maintained a curious silence on the report – and the opportunities it offers to think through the histories and historiographies of empire and war. While there are few who deny the global, imperial nature of the conflict, and those who do are rightly derided, the diversification of the "colour memory" of the First World War has often been tokenistic, as Santanu Das has noted. Indian soldiers have been 'bolted onto' existing narratives while little attention has been paid to the wider historical contexts from which colonial troops were recruited, and into which veterans returned. Too much military history remains rooted in tropes – "doing your bit for Britain" – which offer limited insight into the experiences,

[7] https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/04/26/honour-britains-imperial-troops-heroes-empire/

motivations and calculations of colonial soldiers. It is perhaps partly for this reason that some of the most incisive accounts of imperial war have been written by those (like Das) from disciplines where national frames are less entrenched. Historians, of all stripes and none, need to do more to convey the complexity and nuances of colonial military service, including in the global wars of the 20th century. If the Defence Secretary can dabble with decolonisation, perhaps it is time for more military historians to do the same? [8]

The Imperial War Graves Commission, (like the Imperial War Museum), was conceived as an inclusive institution, a mechanism for commemorating, and celebrating, the *imperial war effort*. In making the empire's war dead into the nation's 'immortal heritage' the Commission sought to flatten – and sometimes even to confront – distinctions of class, status and privilege. However, the same determination was not shown to overcome racial hierarchies and distinctions; as the CWGC's report noted, the "promise of equality had limits". While the IWGC's senior management was drawn from across the dominions its membership was entirely white.[9] A proper accounting for the history of such institutions – and of the wider history of imperial conflict – demands attention to both the universalist rhetoric of liberal empire, and the realities of imperial racism. Somewhere in between are the reasons that colonised subjects chose to enlist and to fight so effectively in imperial armies (and why they were also prepared to turn their guns on their colonised countrymen). Therein we might also understand the reasons that colonial soldiers were long overlooked, and why they are still so often still misunderstood (and misappropriated). This is what decolonising the First World War – and its legacies – means, and this is why it matters.

Despite the ministrations of latter-day apologists, the colonial war effort was steeped in the hierarchies, prejudices and principles of a contested imperial world. There is little evidence that the colonial soldiers and labourers who served the British empire in the global wars of the 20th century "fighting for our freedoms", as the Prime Minister claimed, nor that they were "doing their bit *for* Britain". At the same time, neither were they fighting for their own freedom, at least not of the sort imagined by nationalist critics of empire. Their choices were framed and delimited by the colonial world into which they were born (like the European officers who commanded them, and the European rank and file they fought alongside).

The urgent work for historians now is to understand these choices not to celebrate empire's contributions or anachronistically apologise for its racism. We also need to understand how the living power – the *immortal heritage* – of the nation's war dead was constructed, and recognise the role that race has played, and continues to play, in the narration of stories about empire, war and British history. The making and remaking of historical memory was, and is, a process which happens in the present, not the past. Those interested in remembering the imperial war dead, should seek to understand how they lived, and why this has so often been forgotten.

[8] For alternative views on the value of decolonising, see the keynote discussion between Gary Sheffield and Catriona Pennell at the Western Front Association's 2021 conference. https://www.crowdcast.io/e/ed-conf_keynote/1.

[9] Connelly, Mark, and Stefan Goebel. "The Imperial War Graves Commission, the War Dead and the Burial of a Royal Body, 1914–32." *Historical Research* 93, no. 262 (December 21, 2020): 738.