

# THE BRITISH WEST INDIES AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR

By Washington Alcott and Ralph Young

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# **1. THE WEST INDIAN COLONIES AND THE GREAT WAR AND ITS AFTERMATH 1914 to 1923:**

## **A Timeline**

1914

- September: the first contingent of the recently formed British West Indian Regiment arrived at Seaford training camp in Sussex.

1915

- The West Indian Contingent Committee formed. Its key function was to act as an intermediary between donors in the colonies and men at the front. It was successful in raising £32,000 in England to help look after the needs of West Indian soldiers serving overseas.

1916

- January: First West Indian soldiers arrive in Egypt for engagement in the Middle East campaign.
- March: The tragedy of the SS Verdala.

1917

- Establishment of the Spanish Town and Rio Cove Homes for destitute children of BWIR men. The children were taught domestic and agricultural work.

1918

- March: The Central Supplementary Allowance Committee was appointed in Jamaica to assist men returning to the islands.
- Recruitment for the BWIR ended in Jamaica on 21<sup>st</sup> August.

- December: Mutiny by West Indian soldiers at Taranto port (Italy) over conditions – a ‘red letter day’ in the history of Britain’s relationship with the West Indies colonies regarding support for the war.

1919

- The last of the BWIR troops were returned to the Caribbean in September.

1921

- British West Indies Regiment disbanded.

1922

- 11<sup>th</sup> November: the unveiling of a 29 feet high memorial in Kingston with the words inscribed “To the men of Jamaica who fell in the Great War 1914-1918”

1923

- A home for disabled soldiers was established by the Central Supplementary Allowance Committee from funds provided by the British Red Cross Society and Order of St John in England

## **2. THE WEST INDIES 1913 – 1914:**

### **The Socio-Political and Economic Conditions in the Region**

#### **Economic and political outlook**

By the time the First World War started in 1914, the majority of the British West Indies population was in a state of subordination to British overlordship, having known almost three hundred year of direct colonial rule (sometimes initially under France or Spain). Despite the experience of colonization and the suppression of resistance in various forms, the West Indies colonies remained loyal to the British Empire at the outbreak at the World War I, for British rule and culture were by that stage deeply embedded in the everyday consciousness of these island communities. Hence, little demand evident by that point for cutting political or economic ties with Britain many decades after the abolition of the British Atlantic slave trade (1807), and of slavery itself (1837); these developments had immeasurably influenced almost all aspects of the West Indies' colonial development, but by the opening of World War I, demands for independence were hardly beginning to impact on public agendas. <sup>1</sup>

Many of the islands of the West Indies at this time had relatively small populations. The 1911 census in Jamaica recorded the black population at 330,000, or 76% of the total population. A similar situation existed elsewhere in the region where the share of the population represented by black people was almost three quarters. The white minority, in terms of occupation, income and social privileges, held the dominant position throughout the West Indies at the time. The white segment of the Jamaica's population was just 2% in 1914.

The average daily wage for men was 1 shilling 6 pence for men, while women were paid 9 pence. And for those who were not subsistence or tenant farmers, day labour was the most common form of employment, and there were few legal protections ensuring the conditions and security of the work force. Limited numbers of black

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<sup>1</sup> The following discussion is particularly indebted to the excellent account provided by Glenford Howe's *Race, War and Nationalism* (Oxford: James Currey Publishers, 2002).

people were employed in the lower sections of the colonial civil service and in some trading concerns. The poverty which was the daily experience of the great majority in the West Indies was deeply entrenched.

The existing system of colonial government assumed a broadly similar form throughout the islands. The key responsibilities resided in the governors (or governors-general, where two or more islands were administratively linked together); these were appointed from London. By 1914 most (but not all) islands had representative assemblies, with voting rights largely reserved for the whites and the privilege sections of the non-white population. In 1912 only one in every hundred black Jamaicans enjoyed the right to vote.

The colonial history of the West Indies had been marked by periodic outbreaks of discontent – both before and after the abolition of slavery. The period of World War I was to prove no exception. Initially, however, the colonies responded with impressive support for the war effort, with pledges of material as well as financial contributions to the British government. The different colonies made gifts of sugar, rum, oil, lime, cotton, rice, clothing, logwood, 11 ambulances (with adequate funds for their maintenance), and even 9 aeroplanes. These were in addition to over £2m. raised through public donations, and individual governments delivered additional funds for the war effort through new taxes.

**The Bahamas** had been through a period of relative economic stagnation before the war, and its key sponge industry was now cut off from Germany, its most important market. Moreover, its sisal industry was already in decline over problems of profitability. The nascent tourism industry (with links to the United States) also suffered after America entered the war in 1917. The **Barbados** colony was regarded as the most 'British' in the West Indies. It maintained a buoyant economy during the war due to the increased demand for sugar, which accounted for 93% of its exports before the war. The government of Barbados was able to offer of 1,000 tons of sugar at the war's outset, while charities on the island also raised considerable funds from the public for the war effort. **Bermuda** was an outlier on the edge of the West Indian region, and its manpower contributions were enlisted in separate Bermudan military units. Its economy was based on tourism and agriculture, though it also had the advantage of

providing the location for a major British naval base. As with the Bahamas, its nascent tourism industry was badly affected by the entry of the US into the war. The economy of **British Guiana** (modern **Guyana**) was originally based on sugar cane, but from the 1880s rice became an increasingly important sector, and the colony made a gift of 25 tons of rice to the British government in late 1914. British Guiana was one of the few locations in the West Indies with a significant minority of German and Austrian inhabitants and, as elsewhere, these were quickly rounded up and imprisoned for the duration of the war. **British Honduras** (modern **Belize**) had the smallest population among the West Indies colonies, with little more than 40,000 inhabitants. However, its mahogany industry was to prove of strategic importance during the war because of the use of mahogany for airplane propellers.

**Grenada** was among the smaller of the West Indies colonies in terms of population, but at the time of World War I was one of the few West Indies colonies enjoying a modicum of prosperity. Despite some local opposition to providing support for the war and concerns over the potential scarcity of food, Grenada's economy benefitted from the war due to the increase in prices of cotton, cocoa and nutmeg (it nowadays produces 40% of the world crop). The island contributed to various war charities, notably the Red Cross and the Prince of Wales' Fund, and also made a gift of £6,000 worth of cocoa. **Jamaica** was one of Britain's oldest and most valuable colonies, and was second only to Trinidad and Tobago in terms of population; its emergent black middle class was probably the best established in the West Indies by World War I. By 1914, sugar had displaced bananas as its major export. When war broke out, Jamaica donated £50,000 worth sugar to the British government and set aside £10,000 for the island's defence against marauding German cruisers. As the only island in the West Indies with a permanent Imperial garrison when the war began, Jamaica led the campaign for the British Government to allow West Indians to participate in frontline action, and was to prove the backbone of the British West Indies Regiment, with Jamaicans representing two-thirds of its fighting strength. The high prices enjoyed by the exports of **St. Lucia** – notably sugar, cocoa and lime juice – ensured the economy remained relatively healthy, although the coal trade did suffer. The economy of **St. Vincent** was tied to a cotton export industry, which as was severely affected, as its main markets were disrupted as the fighting engulfed Belgium and the industrial areas

of northern France. However, some major benefits were gained (after October 1917), when the colonial government purchased the entire cotton output on behalf of the Admiralty to be used in the manufacture of aeroplanes. The island's arrowroot and maize markets also performed well due to a shortage of imported flour and arrowroot. **Trinidad and Tobago's** population was the largest in the West Indies at the beginning of the war, and its contribution of manpower to the military was second only to Jamaica's. Its substantial oil and gas resources had been identified in the 1850s, and though these were not to be exploited on a large scale until the 1930s, Trinidad and Tobago was able to provide an important source of oil for the Royal Navy, which had a significant presence on the island.

### **Reactions to the Outbreak of War: Controversy and Division within the West Indies**

The war did provoke a heated debate within the West Indies, though key institutions like the press (including even the more radical papers) as well as the main-line churches gave voice to what were probably the dominant currents of opinion that war was an occasion that needed a strong affirmation of support for Britain and the Empire.

But certainly among spokesmen for the black community the argument quickly emerged that this was also an important opportunity to demonstrate equality with the dominant white community and to directly challenge the racist narratives that were so deeply woven into the fabric of colonial society. And from the outset of the war the issue of political reform was placed on the public agenda, including the idea of postwar moves towards a West Indies federation.

As an editorial in *The Federalist* insisted:

“As coloured people we will be fighting to prove...that we are not so vastly inferior to the whites that should not be put off of at least political equality with them. We will be fighting to prove that the distinction between God-made creatures of one Empire because of skin colour or complexion difference should no longer exist and that some opportunities should be afforded to the Coloured subjects of the Empire as fall by right of race to its citizens. We will be fighting to prove that we are no longer merely subjects but citizens – citizens of a world Empire whose watch-word should be Liberty, Equality and Brotherhood.”

Such arguments were in turn challenged in public debates that broke out as the war started – most markedly in Jamaica, Trinidad, Grenada and British Honduras. Opponents of participation in the war viewed the conflict as a ‘white man’s war’ in which the non-white communities had no stake. Some separatist churches like the Shakers and more especially the Jehovah’s Witnesses had strong pacifist views, and were strongly opposed to what they felt was a headlong rush to war.

As religious groups like the Jehovah Witnesses intensified their opposition to the war, *The Globe* newspaper in Barbados referred to them “as preying upon the feelings of the weak and leading them away from their inborn patriotism under the guise of religion”. *The Sun* in Antigua was also vigorous in its condemnation of the Shakers, and even accused them of being a public nuisance and religious fanatics. Those who resisted making contributions to the War Relief Fund in Jamaica received similar denunciations. In most territories laws were passed requiring the licensing of foreign preachers, while in British Guiana Jehovah Witness organisers were deported. Harassment of the Shaker activists was common, and especially severe in Montserrat, St. Vincent and Trinidad. The Anglican Church took the opportunity provided by the war fever (though also with covert encouragement by the authorities) to actively attack the annual Carnivals as a threat to public order, and several colonies passed measures forbidding the wearing of masks during these celebrations. Despite such public denunciations and restrictions, the Carnivals continued throughout the war, though on a reduced scale.

The formation of the United Negro Improvement Association in August 1914 by the Jamaican Marcus Garvey presented the colonial authorities with a fresh challenge because of the ambition of his vision of uplift for black communities in the United States and the West Indies as well as his evident organizational abilities. This organisation was able to generate a very wide national and international appeal in a short time against all forms of colonialism while calling for Black self-government. Yet Garvey was to soon give support for the British war effort with a resolution that brought relief to the Colonial Office:

“That we the members of the Universal Negro Improvement and Conservation Association and African Communities League...being mindful of the great protecting

and civilizing influence of the English nation and people of whom we are subjects, and their Justice to all men, and especially to their Negro Subjects scattered all over the world, hereby beg to express our loyalty and devotion of His Majesty the King, and Empire and our sympathy with those of the people who are in any way grieved and in difficulty.”<sup>2</sup>

### **3. THE WEST INDIES IN WORLD WAR I**

#### **The West Indies Enters the War**

Many West Indians flocked to Britain at the outbreak of war intending to join the British army. However, British Secretary of War, Lord Kitchener, was opposed to black soldiers from the colonies serving with the regular British regiments at the front. The ostensible concern of the War Office was that troops recruited from tropical climates would have difficulty in coping with the European winters – an argument belied by the fact that from the first weeks of the war, soldiers from British India and French West Africa were already serving on the Western Front. The underlying and more important concern was that if black soldiers were to fight side by side with white soldiers in Europe, the whole mythology of ‘white superiority’ would be undermined. Thus no regiments from colonial Africa were to serve in the European theatre, and Kitchener was even opposed to the formation of a new regiment in the West Indies, being formed to draw on the enthusiastic support for war service being shown by West Indians. In the end, however, the extent of the West Indian agitation over their participation in the war effort – transmitted to London by the West Indies governors – the devastating losses suffered by the Allies in the early battles, and the personal intervention by King George V in April 1915 eventually forced the War Office to backtrack on this decision. In the subsequent negotiations, the Colonial Office also won an important concession, that West Indian recruits would be enlisted on the same conditions, and with the same pay, as British soldiers. The British West Indian Regiment (or BWIR) officially came into existence six months later, in October 1915.

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<sup>2</sup> Howe, *Race, War, and Nationalism*, p. 3.

The institutional as well as the day-to-day racism which British West Indian soldiers were to experience during their war service were in evidence from the outset. In the West Indies, for example, whites and mixed-race West Indians proved reluctant to enlist in the BWIR except as officers or non-commissioned officers. In any case, British army regulations introduced in 1914 required commissioned officers to be 'of European decent.'

In Britain there was already a significant West Indian minority, many of whom were eager to enlist, and these were joined by the many West Indians who paid their own passage in these early months to come to Britain to sign up for war service. In their many hundreds, they suffered outright rejection at recruiting centres. One of the few who did succeed in enlisting was Norman Manley, a young Rhodes scholar from a mixed-race family in Jamaica who was studying law at Oxford when the war broke out; he saw service in the Royal Artillery, and ended up as a sergeant (he was to see his own brother blown up by a German shell, which was to leave deep scars in his memories of his wartime experience). Manley was to go on to have a distinguished legal career in Jamaica, entering Jamaican nationalist politics in the 1930s and becoming the first prime minister of Jamaica when it achieved its independence in 1962. Another such case was Walter Tull, the son of a Barbadian carpenter and an English mother who had joined the ranks of English professional football by 1908; only the third mixed-race footballer to reach the senior football league by that time, he played as a forward for Tottenham Hotspur and later for Northampton Town. When war broke out, he enlisted in the 'footballers battalion' of the Middlesex Regiment, and like Manley saw extensive service on the front lines. Already a sergeant by the time of the Battle of the Somme in 1916, he earned a commission as a lieutenant in 1917 but died in action in March 1918. Ivan Shirley, from Jamaica, was the first black to be given a commission as a lieutenant in the BWIR (the date is uncertain but was probably in 1918).

In 1914 the West Indies already had a military unit that was regarded as a formal part of the British military establishment – the West India Regiment. Founded in 1795 and recruited from freed blacks and slaves purchased from local plantations, it quickly expanded to 12 battalion-sized regiments to provide security for the West Indies colonies against attacks by the French during the Napoleonic wars (the slaves in its

ranks were all freed in 1808). In 1800 one regiment had been dispatched to Freetown, capital of the recently established colony of Sierra Leone, to help put down a local rebellion; ever since, a battalion of the WIR had been stationed there (on a rotational basis) to help Britain protect its West African imperial interests. The fact that a new formation, the BWIR, was now being raised underlined the intention of the War Office that this expansion of West Indies military forces was intended only for the duration of this new European conflict.

Over the course of World War I, 15,601 officers and men served in the BWIR. This force was drawn from all parts of the West Indies, though the actual participation rates varied sharply. Jamaica and Trinidad, the two largest islands in terms of population, contributed almost 75% of this total; in Jamaica in particular, a high proportion of the men between 20 and 35 applied for enlistment. In British Guiana, on the other hand, a population that was not far behind Jamaica's in size, produced only 700 recruits (see table at end of discussion). A study of the first 4,000 recruits makes clear that at least initially, the BWIR was drawn heavily from the urban working class and small-scale independent artisans; only 250 were clerks and 40 were school teachers.<sup>3</sup> The rejection rates of recruits by medical staff provided a stark commentary on the widespread poverty and the inadequate diets which many West Indians experienced at this time. Whereas about 40% of British recruits were rejected for front line service in the Great War, the figure for British Guiana was just over 70%, while in Jamaica the figures for the first four contingents were, respectively, 53%, 53%, 58% and 66%.

Throughout the war, the BWIR remained a volunteer army, with recruitment based mainly on 'moral persuasion' (via the press especially, the churches and government agents). During 1917, Jamaica, Grenada and British Honduras each introduced conscription measures, but these were never applied in practice. Recruitment, however, did suffer an early and massive blow in March 1916 when the third West Indian contingent numbering 1140 troops set off for England on the SS *Verdala*. The Admiralty diverted the ship to Halifax (Canada) to await a place in a protected convey because of German submarine activities in the Atlantic. The *Verdala* had wholly

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<sup>3</sup> Howe, *Race, War and Nationalism*, 45.

inadequate heating equipment for the intense cold and a blizzard that were encountered, and the men lacked proper clothing. Consequently, over 600 men suffered frostbite, while at least five died and 106 others required amputations. The British press was silent about this tragedy, but news reached the West Indies via Canadian newspapers, and for a period recruitment had to be suspended.

## **The British West Indies Regiment Overseas**

The Great War followed a course for the BWIR that appeared almost perversely dictated by narrow War Office priorities. The first four of what were to be 11 battalions had passed through their training centres in England by mid-1916 but were then dispatched to Egypt rather than France. In late November 1916, a conference in Cairo of senior military commanders decided that the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> battalions could be prepared for combat duties. But by that stage 500 men from Battalions 1 to 3 had been detached for service in the German East Africa campaign (where they were further fragmented into small detachments protecting the extended communications routes). Moreover another detachment of 100 men had been sent to Mesopotamia to assist in railway construction, while in December 1916 a further draft of 328 (mainly British Honduran) soldiers was dispatched to Mesopotamia, where they served as guards for Inland Waterways Transport encampments. It was not until August 1918, after the abatement of the great Spanish Influenza epidemic, that 2300 men from Battalions 1 and 2 were sent into combat in Palestine, where their distinguished service in the campaign to capture Jerusalem received official recognition at the highest levels.

In July 1916, the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalions, having only recently reached Egypt, had been suddenly ordered to return to France. Given the heavy losses which the British Army was suffering in France, the War Office had decided that in order to get the maximum number of its troops into the trenches, special labour battalions were to be recruited from across the British Empire to play vital roles behind the lines in ensuring that the necessary logistical and physical infrastructure could be maintained and moved forward whenever British army captured ground from the Germans. It was to this labour force that the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> battalions were added, despite the fact that they

had been trained as soldiers – and were being paid on the same terms as British troops. The same fate awaited the 6<sup>th</sup> through 11<sup>th</sup> battalions as these reached France. Whereas there had been perhaps 1,500 West Indian soldiers in France in 1916, this number rose steadily to over 6,000 during 1917. The West Indians found themselves unloading and loading ships at various ports, building roads, maintaining repair shops, undertaking postal duties, working in factories, driving ambulances, and, nearer the front, laying telephone lines, digging and repairing trenches, carrying shells forward for the artillery batteries, and acting as stretcher bearers for the wounded. Any activity near the front exposed the soldiers to German snipers, artillery and planes making strafing runs. And the casualties could be heavy; in 1917 during the allied offensives at Arras, Messines and Ypres, the BWIR lost 79 men killed and 453 wounded. As one soldier was able to record his experiences:

“We spent about thirty-five days more or less in the same position. During this period our experiences were innumerable, and very grave, for at any moment anyone of us could have been hurled into eternity. We were face to face with high explosives and Wizzbangs and Shrapnel too, bursting over trenches which could have cut us to pieces at any moment. One of the first awful sights I witnessed was seeing the high explosives fall in a dug-out and blow two of my chums from British Guiana to pieces; another was severely wounded and another driven mad.”<sup>4</sup>

The courage of these men was certainly recognized, and BWIR soldiers on the several fronts earned a total of 161 individual citations for bravery, while particular units were mentioned in dispatches on 49 occasions – figures which appear quite remarkable since, save for the participation of the two battalions in the Palestine campaign, the West Indians were elsewhere confined to supporting roles in the conflict.

Overall, the BWIR suffered 185 men killed in the war or died of wounds (or 1.2%) and 697 wounded (4.5%). On the other hand, 1071 died from disease (6.9%), while 1771 had to be invalided home because of their wounds or because disease had shattered their health; because this latter figure may have overlapped with that for men wounded, no precise figure has been calculated, but it is likely that the total permanent loss of the BWIR’s manpower may have approached 20%. In this total, those affected

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<sup>4</sup> Letter from C.H. Jenkins, the British Honduras *Clarion*, September 5, 1918; reprinted in Howe, *Race, War and Nationalism*, p.157.

by disease in unfamiliar environments were perhaps the major factor causing deterioration of the West Indian units. The BWIR detachment stationed in East Africa had seen 700 men pass through their ranks by October 1917, but by this stage there were only 300 men fit for service, while no fewer than 300 (or 42.7%) had been invalided home. In the case of the 2300 officers and men sent to the Palestine campaign, only 319 were fit for service when the unit reached Jerusalem. Malaria, dysentery and pneumonia were to take a terrible toll on the West Indian forces. Because of the fragmentation which the BWIR had suffered during the war, its scattered units had suffered from the lack of a core administrative centre which could look after the logistical and supply needs of the troops, who frequently found themselves experiencing a lack of adequate uniforms and shelter. Pneumonia was to prove a particular problem in France, especially during the unusually severe winters of 1916 and 1917. On one occasion the chaplain of the 10<sup>th</sup> battalion made a night-time visit to a building sheltering BWIR troops and found that German prisoners being kept in the same building had been provided with stoves which the West Indians were lacking. The Honduran detachment in Mesopotamia had suffered deplorable neglect and housing conditions, and had been made to use the native labour battalion hospitals – generating a bitterness that was to find an outlet in the riots that broke out in Belize, the capital of British Honduras, soon after the return of its BWIR contingent in July 1919.

#### **4. THE BLACK SOLDIER'S LAMENT**

Stripped to the waist and sweated chest  
Midday's reprieve brings much-needed rest  
From trenches deep toward the sky.  
Non-fighting troops and yet we die.

(A poem written by an anonymous trooper, showing how bitter was the disappointment of the ordinary West Indian soldiers over their conditions.)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2002/nov/06/britishidentity.military> Retrieved 21/1/15

## The Taranto Mutiny

With the Armistice, the BWIR battalions stationed in France, Italy and the Middle East were assembled at the Italian port of Taranto, to await ships to bring them home. There was already a marked though simmering discontent as the battalions began to assemble at Taranto, for it had become known that the War Office had earlier had implemented a pay rise for British troops (from 1s. per day to 1s.6d.) that not been extended to the men of the BWIR, as it should have been automatically under their contracts. (This decision was finally reversed under Colonial Office pressure in late January 1919, but only after the Taranto crisis had occurred.) The regime they then encountered at Taranto had been placed under the command of a South African officer who singled the West Indians out for openly discriminatory treatment. They were forbidden to enter the YMCA tents and the cinemas that the British troops were using, and they were now forced to go to the Native Labour hospitals, which were far inferior to those available for British soldiers. They were also ordered to undertake kitchen and other daily fatigue duties, including cleaning the latrines used by an Italian labour battalion. The men in the 1st and 2nd battalions were particularly outraged by these demands in view of their combat experience in Palestine.

On December 6, 1918, the 9<sup>th</sup> battalion mutinied and attacked their officers, to be joined the following day by some of the men of the 10<sup>th</sup> battalion. Also on the 6<sup>th</sup> 180 sergeants had signed a petition that was sent to the Secretary of War raising complaints over the pay issue, the separation allowance allowed by the army, and discrimination in promotions. Reinforcements quickly arrived and by December 10<sup>th</sup> the rebellion was over. The 9<sup>th</sup> battalion was immediately disbanded and its men absorbed into other battalions. Some 60 soldiers were subsequently tried for mutiny, with those convicted given sentences of from 3 to 5 years; one man received a 20 year sentence, and one was executed by firing squad. But this proved not the end of the matter. On December 17<sup>th</sup> and again on December 20<sup>th</sup>, some 60 non-commissioned officers met in secret to discuss the question of black rights, self-determination, and closer union of the West Indies colonies. A new organization, the Caribbean League, was formed at these meetings to push for these objectives. Though the League did

not in the end surface in the West Indies, reports of the two meetings did leak out, causing considerable concern about colonial officials in the West Indies,

## **5. THE IMPACT OF THE WAR ON THE WEST INDIES**

### **The Role of Caribbean Women**

Many women found grounds to give active support the involvement of the West Indies in the war, and made substantial contributions to efforts to rally public support for the war effort. Women played significant roles in the recruitment drives in Jamaica, while women also gave strong support to fundraising campaigns almost everywhere in the West Indian colonies. The work of the Jamaican Ladies' Committee was so effective that the local government considered making them permanent when the war came to a close. The Kingston Women's Fund Committee also was very active in fund raising activities, while the Montserrat Local Ladies Committee not only raised funds but served as nurses for returning soldiers. The role of the West Indian women was thus undoubtedly a significant factor affecting the state of public opinion regarding the war from the outset.

Yet although the extent of this phenomenon cannot be determined exactly, it is evident from press editorials criticizing women who stood against participation in the war that a significant number were indeed opposed if this meant losing their husbands or sons to the Army. Press editorials targeted them with derogatory remarks (such as 'slackers' or 'shirkers'), and one Grenada paper culled an image from an official recruitment poster of a child asking his father 'what did you do for the war, daddy?'

The separation of men from their families, and especially where they were the main bread winners, was a serious challenge where the family economies were subject to such a variety of risks. Furthermore, the separation allowances granted to soldiers' wives were barely sufficient for maintaining their dependents, especially when it was likely (as did happen) that wartime conditions would stimulate high inflation. The most important divisions between women and local authorities, however, arose over another

aspect of the separation allowances, for originally these made no provision for the 'illegitimate' children of unmarried mothers. *The Gleaner* in Jamaica took up the cause of the unmarried mothers, and urged men not to enlist if this left their partners and their children exposed in this way. In the end the War Office made concessions on this issue, and public anger died down.

## **The Home Front**

The initial opposition to the war that was evident in Trinidad, British Honduras and other colonies had persisted, and in some (like Grenada) had appeared to be on the increase by the start of 1918. The arrival home of men invalided out of the service or sent home from the training camps as unfit had had their inevitable impact on public awareness of the human and social costs of the war – the invalided men, though eligible for a pension, often found lengthy delays in receiving these, and in any case often faced destitution given the surging inflation; those judged unfit were eligible for no support at all. The *Port of Spain Gazette* in Trinidad complained in both May and October of 1917 of incidents in which unruly groups had shouted insults as groups of recruits were being marched through the streets. Similar incidents were reported in British Guiana and British Honduras. In January 1917 in Kingston the crowd had actually assaulted the recruits, which led to a major riot.

In part the emergence of such tensions reflected the social strains imposed by the war on the economies of the West Indian colonies. The outbreak of war in August 1914 saw an immediate spike in inflation, and inflationary pressures continued throughout the conflict. The large-scale estates producing crops for export had done well during the war, profiting from increased prices for their production; while, for example, there had been only 6 motor cars in Grenada in 1914, this number had climbed to around 200 in 1919. In Grenada, Barbados and Montserrat, small-scale and peasant farmers were also reported to be doing well. In Jamaica, however, lower income groups, especially in the urban centres, faced jumps in food prices of 126% and for clothes of 216%, but wages had only increased by 33.5%; Grenada had faced similar price surges. Faced with such inflationary pressures, the economies of Jamaica, Trinidad,

Barbados, Grenada, Antigua, St. Lucia and British Honduras were all disrupted by major strikes (in some cases violent) during the war years.

The colonial authorities in the different West Indies colonies had been considerably concerned at the prospective return of BWIR veterans, given the setting already marked by a potential turmoil in which class discontents and racial tensions were both present and mutually reinforcing. The arrival home of the first contingents of BWIR men in June and July 1919 had coincided, as it happened, with the repatriation from Britain of several hundred West Indian seamen following serious racial disturbances in London and five provincial port cities as British servicemen returned home and sought to reclaim former jobs. For the BWIR men, the sources of disgruntlement were numerous, and stemmed from frustration at being treated, on most fronts, as second-class soldiers who couldn't be relied on for front-line service, from the incidents of the racial abuse which were a daily pinprick (and sometimes worse) and the discriminatory treatment they had received over housing and promotion.

Although political awareness had been mainly confined to the West Indian middle classes before the war, the West Indian veterans were to emerge as a distinctive group within the West Indian setting in the postwar years precisely because of the extent to which they had become politicized by their wartime experience. This new self-awareness was to be given a sharper focus by the greater radicalization of parts of the West Indies press, who were now drawing directly on ideas of black consciousness and black nationalism associated with Marcus Garvey's movement as well as the radical demands by European socialist parties, which, after 1916, were becoming more outspoken as public disillusionment with the war grew. A wave of unrest broke out in July 1919 - in Jamaica on the 18th, Trinidad on the 19<sup>th</sup>, and British Honduras on the 22<sup>nd</sup> - in which the BWIR returnees were highly visible (and in the British Honduras case, a key group in the leadership); the unrest then resurfaced in Jamaica that October, in Trinidad in December, and in British Honduras in 1920. The various island governments struggled to set up programmes to accommodate the job needs of the returning veterans, and in the end were forced to fall back on to measures to encourage migration to other parts of the Caribbean or Latin America. Nearly 4,500

of the veterans from Barbados and Jamaica alone thus ended up migrating to Cuba to work on the sugar plantations.

## **6. LEGACIES OF THE PARTICIPATION OF THE MEN AND WOMEN OF THE WEST INDIES IN THE GREAT WAR**

### **The Post-War Years in Perspective**

The West Indians who served in the First World War were all volunteers despite the opposition which was initially shown by both men and women to participation in a 'white man's war'. Having enlisted to fight for the British Empire, their war service should be remembered within the broader context of Pan-Africanism as well as West Indian Nationalism. However, within recent times these two currents of ideas have tended to be overlooked, particularly in the context of the community projects associated with the centenary celebrations of this experience in the Caribbean (and the West Indian Diaspora overseas). The memory of the war service of West Indian men and women in the Great War has nowadays been seen more as a tool to encourage a sense of belonging and purpose within many contemporary ethnic diverse countries in which the West Indian Diaspora has registered a presence. Britain is a prime and probably the most important example.

West Indian participation in the war was indeed a significant event in British, Caribbean and world history. Their contribution has left a legacy which remains as one of the significant milestones in the development of the West Indies during the 20<sup>th</sup> century – particularly so from the standpoint of identity formation, its economic development, and not least its migration history.

The intervention of King George V in April 1915 to brush aside the opposition of the War Office to the idea of West Indian men serving the Great War made it all possible. Over 15,000 West Indians volunteered directly for war service, and were mainly absorbed into the new British West Indies Regiment. Women took up key organisational roles in the community and other civic groups supporting the war effort. Everyone's contribution has left its legacy in the region's unfolding history.

## **The Birth of a New Politics**

From the 1920s into the 1930s, the contributions of West Indian ex-servicemen were to play an important role in the invigoration of trade union movement as well as other civil society organisations. One can mention here the Trinidad Working Men's Association, the British Guiana Labour union, and the Soldiers and Sailors Union (with branches on various islands). They were also to play a significant role as political activists in the laying of foundations for the nationalist politics that took shape in the 1930s.

The Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and the African Communities League, founded by Marcus Garvey in Jamaica on the eve of the war, had initially pledged its support to Britain, but was to become a driving force in the spread of black nationalist ideas throughout the Americas. The organisation was certainly not keen on continuing the acutely dependent relationship with Britain entailed by the Empire system, and wanted that the West Indies region to be managed by its majority African population. Through the war years the UNIA never lost focus on political independence and self-government as its primary goals, and following the Armistice, under Garvey leadership the campaign for self-government was intensified with very strong support from the ex-service men themselves. Self-government and self-reliance were overriding aims of the UNIA, and the colonies in the region were to see the growth of movements that took up these ideas while also giving them their own particular identity. As the Garvey movement's arguments for self-government became popular within the West Indies, BWIR veterans were certainly prominent among those who were highly active in promoting self-government throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The outbreak of a new world war in 1939, however, temporarily halted pressure from the West Indies colonies for self-government, though this struggle was to quickly resume after peace was restored in 1945. It took Britain a further 17 years to grant the first of the West Indies colonies its independence in August 1962, and the collective efforts of the West Indian soldiers remain one of the major underlying causes which resulted in the decision to give up control of one of their most important colonial possessions in the New World after more than 300 years.

## **Economic Legacies**

The extent of the economic costs or the opportunities gained for the colonies through their participation in the Great War remain difficult to establish. However, the region had clearly made significant economic contributions to the war effort which could have been otherwise used for the islands' own development. The West Indian colonies contributed nearly £2 million from tax revenue and voluntary donations as well as providing war supplies such as planes and ambulances for the British Red Cross. West Indian produce such as sugar, rum, cocoa, and rice continued to be sent to Britain, and Trinidadian oil production increased three-fold to meet wartime demand while Sea Island cotton was used for aircraft production.

Throughout decade of the 1920s the Caribbean regions were not spared the debilitating impact of the Great War and the economic depression it shaped. In many of these islands unemployment skyrocketed, while many ex-service men found that their pension payments fell behind. Many West Indians were forced into migration by the threat of destitution, as the islands' governments put pressure on thousands to emigrate to Cuba, Columbia, Venezuela or North America for work and there were no visible improvement in investment in public services to improve employment possibilities or the quality of life in the West Indian colonies. While the planter class and wealthy merchants could afford to send their offspring back in Britain for their education, education locally was a major area of neglect and illiteracy rates shot up on many islands. Many civil service positions requiring people of substantive educational qualifications continued to be filled by whites from Britain.

With the 1930s of global economic depression during the 1930s, many former West Indian soldiers had to return home following their post-war labour migration to Cuba and Central America. Veterans began to adopt more overtly anti-colonial positions, although land resettlement programmes and, in colonies like Jamaica, employment on Jamaican government projects were promised. In Jamaica, members of the ex-British West Indies Regiment Association resolved that no member would take no part in any war in which the empire was engaged until their demands for support were met,

suggesting that the loyalty to British imperial rule was now conditional, rather than unequivocal.

### **Support for Ethiopia**

The failure of the League of Nations to African to intervene after Mussolini's Italian army invaded independent Ethiopia in 1935 stimulated Pan African currents in the West Indies that had been set in play by the Garveyist movement, and West Indian veterans petitioned for intervention and to be allowed to fight in defence of the pre-eminent symbol of African statehood. A petition to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, organised by Jamaican veteran William Grant, demanded 'that in the same way as we helped to safeguard the integrity of other races, we are asking that our race be protected at this crucial moment.'

Although the petition was unsuccessful, the Ethiopian crisis revealed how the memory of West Indian war service could be reworked to take account of new political circumstances. It also underscored that the World War I generation had become conscious of seeing the importance of allegiance to their race in shaping their own commitments when faced with power struggles on the global stage.

### **Cultural Legacies: Public Remembrance of the Servicemen in the Colonies**

Despite all the promises made by King and country for volunteers in the war, the sacrifices of West Indian volunteers were not to receive more than a small token by the general public then and soon after they returned projects giving public recognition to their participation and sacrifices in the Great War began to be initiated. Through public subscriptions the contributions of West Indian servicemen were commemorated in the years following the conflict in large (albeit sometimes expensive) format. Jamaica's initial memorial was a Portland stone calvary unveiled at Montego Bay in September 1921. Memorial tablets were erected in other parishes by public subscription. But its principal memorial was dedicated in Church Street, Kingston on

Armistice Day 1922 by Acting Governor Bryan, who spoke of Jamaicans as part of an imperial brotherhood whose graves 'girdled' the world. In 1953, the memorial was re-located to the newly inaugurated George VI Memorial Park, which was renamed National Heroes Park following independence. It could be said, therefore, that the Kingston memorial embodies the journey of West India's war memory through imperial military service to independent nationhood. British Guiana dedicated a memorial in Georgetown in August 1923. A Memorial Park with a central cenotaph was laid out in Port of Spain, Trinidad and was dedicated in June 1924.

## 7. FURTHER READING

- A.A. Cipriani, *Twenty-Five Years After: The British West Indies Regiment in the Great War,, 1914—1918* (London: Karia Press, 1993).
- W.F. Elkins, “Black Nationalism in the Caribbean: The Revolt of the British West Indies Regiment at Taranto, Italy,” *Science and Society, Vol. 33, No. 2* (Spring, 1970).
- Glenford Howe, *Race, War and Nationalism* (Oxford: James Currey Publishers, 2002).
- C.L. Joseph, “The British West Indies Regiment, 1914-1918,” *Journal of Caribbean History, Vol. 12* (May, 1971).
- John H. Morrow Jr., *The Great War: An Imperial History* (London: Routledge, 2004).
- David Olusoga, *The World’s War: Forgotten Soldiers of Empire* (London: Head of Zeus Press, 2014).

## **8. JAMAICA GLEANER EDITORIAL**

(Monday November 13<sup>th</sup> 1922)

### ***Lest We Forget***

On the afternoon of November 9, 1915 the transport Verdalla sailed out of Kingston harbour with the final contingent of Jamaica soldiers for the Front. No one who saw it will forget that scene; the ship steamed solely towards Port Royal, the light from the sinking sun streaming out across the water, the waving of hands, the tear stained face on the pier, the last strains of the band playing soldiers' songs. We were all soldiers of the King. Many years have passed since then.

"The War has been fought and won and from first to last more than twenty thousand men left the shores of Jamaica in the service of King and Country. Of these, a thousand have never returned, their bones lied buried in foreign soil, their memory lives with us, sanctified by the sacrifices they made. As the governor put it so finely yesterday, they die not in vain, for that statue today in Memorial Square will be forever a silent testimony to our appreciation of their devotion and courage, a testimony also that we remember them still, a mute but eternal reminder to Jamaica lest we ever she tempted to forget.

The memorial is their cenotaph; the words inscribe upon it are their epitaph, "Their name liveth for evermore," and surely it must lie in the records of this country, in the hearts and those who now serve our land, or who shall come after us. They gave everything they had to give, and the dust of their bodies, wherever it may be, forms part of Jamaican and a foreign soil, and mingle with us . . .

**9. A GEOGRAPHY OF THE WAR 1: WHERE THE MEN OF THE  
BWIR CAME FROM<sup>6</sup>**

<b>Colony</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>Officers</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Percent of Total</b>
Barbados	171,892	20	811	5.3%
Bahamas	55,944	2	439	2.8%
British Guiana	304,149	14	686	4.5%
British Honduras	41,543	5	528	3.4%
Jamaica	331,383	303	9,977	65.9%
Trinidad & Tobago	333,552	40	1,438	9.5%
Grenada	69,307	4	441	2.8%
St. Lucia	48,637	5	354	2.3%
St. Vincent	44,434	--	305	2.0%
Leeward Islands	127,189	4	225	1.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,028,030</b>	<b>397</b>	<b>15,204</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

**10. A GEOGRAPHY OF THE WAR 2: WHERE THE BWIR  
SOLDIERS SERVED**

The British Empire in 1914 covered almost 12 million square miles and included 421 million people. Of the 59 million who were not in India (including modern Pakistan and Bangladesh) and the UK, just over 2 million were in the British West Indies. The vast majority of these were black, with only 35,000 white people among them.

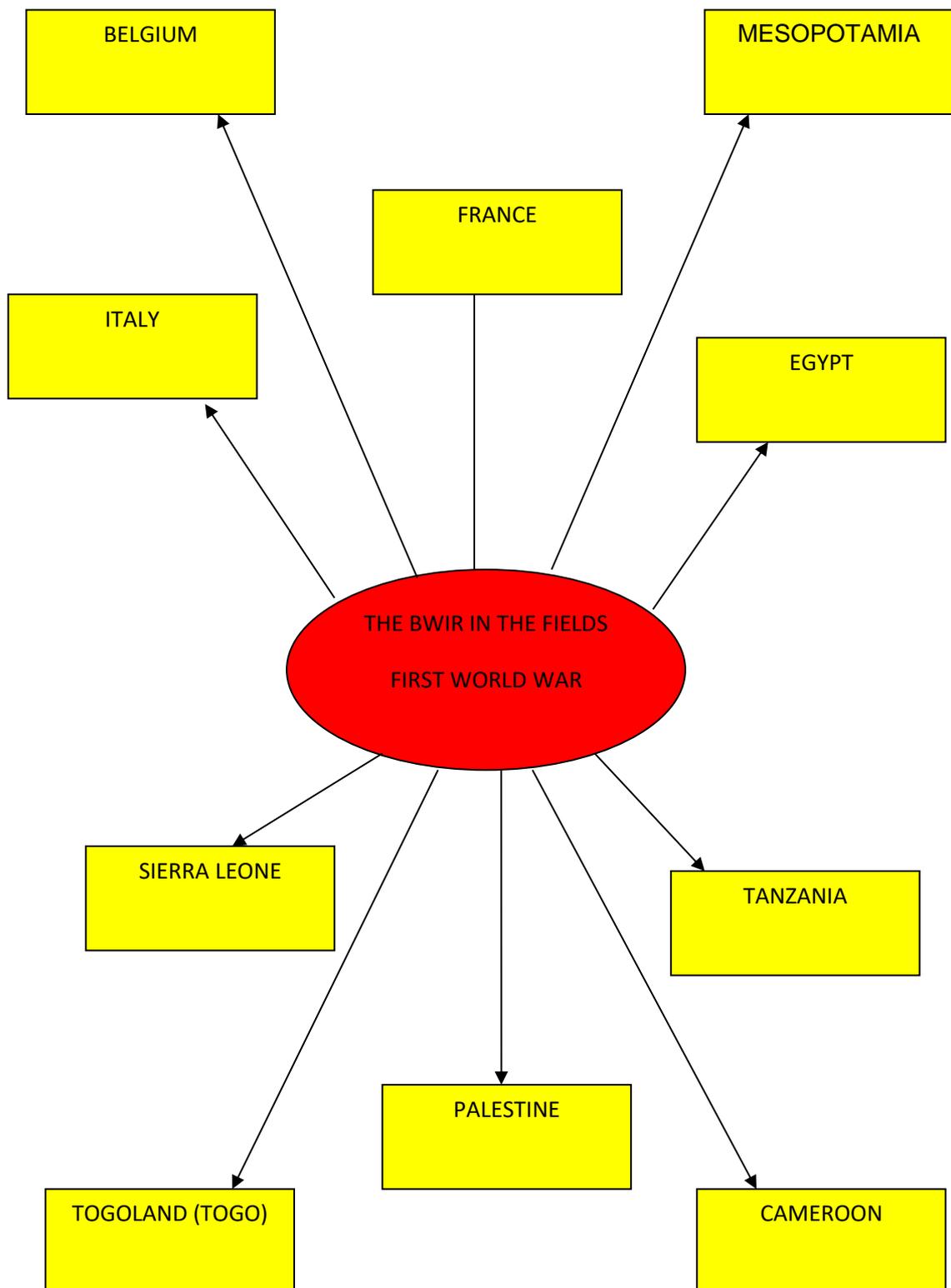
The West Indian men joining the British West Indian Regiment found themselves serving in a variety of countries abroad. Many West Indians ended up on the battle fields directly or indirectly, but even those who didn't played vital roles in supporting the war effort.

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<sup>6</sup> See Howe, *Race, War and Nationalism*, Table B.4, p. 206.

**FIGURE 1**

**Locations of troops in various countries**



## 11. WORLD WAR I: OVERSEAS SERVICE BY THE WEST INDIAN REGIMENTS

### BRITISH WEST INDIES REGIMENT

Countries	Period Served	Role Played	Battle Honours
<b>Flanders (Belgium)</b>	1917-1918	Behind the front, various support duties. At the front, digging and repairing trenches, laying telephone lines, supplying shells to artillery batteries, bringing wounded to aid stations, driving ambulances	Messines <span style="float: right;">3<sup>rd</sup></span> Battle of Ypres Polygon Wood Broodseinde Poelcappelle Passchendaele Pursuit to Mons
<b>France</b>	1916-1918	Unloading and loading ships; maintaining repair workshops; factory work; road repair operations; operating postal services	
<b>Italy</b>	1918	(See France above)	
<b>Egypt</b>	1916-1919	Protecting Suez Canal	
<b>Palestine</b>	1917-1918	Active combat service	Gaza campaign Jaffa Jerusalem Megiddo Mughar Ridge Nablus Nebi Samsil

### BWIR (CONT.)

<b>Countries</b>	<b>Period Served</b>	<b>Role Played</b>	<b>Battle Honours</b>
<b>Mesopotamia (modern Iraq)</b>	1916-1919	Railway construction; protecting Inland Waterways Service facilities	
<b>German East Africa (modern Tanzania)</b>	1916-1917	Protecting communications arteries  Active in combat	East Africa Campaign  Battle of Mahiwa
<b>German Kamerun (modern Cameroon)</b>	1915-1916	Active in combat	Cameroon Campaign

## **2. AREAS OF SERVICE – BRITISH WEST INDIES REGIMENT**

### **The Battalions**

#### **1st Battalion**

Formed at Seaford, Sussex, England from West Indies volunteers:  
A. Company from British Guiana; B. from Trinidad; C from Trinidad & St. Vincent;  
D. from Grenada & Barbados.

Served in Egypt and Palestine, January 1916 to April 1919

#### **2nd Battalion**

Served in Egypt and Palestine, January 1916 to April 1919.

#### **3rd Battalion**

Mainly recruited from Jamaica. Served in Egypt, France & Flanders, March 1916 to January 1919

#### **4th Battalion**

Served in Egypt, France & Flanders, May 1916 to November 1918

#### **5th Battalion**

A reserve training battalion for replacement soldiers, July 1916 to April 1919

#### **6th Battalion**

Served in France & Flanders, March 1917 to April 1919

#### **7th Battalion**

Served in France & Flanders, June to December 1917

#### **8<sup>th</sup> Battalion**

Served in France & Flanders, July to December 1917, and went to Italy in 1918

#### **9th Battalion**

Served in France & Flanders July to December 1917, and went to Italy in 1918

### **10th Battalion**

Served in France and Italy

### **11th Battalion**

Served in France and Italy

**Where the individual battalions were stationed immediately before the cessation of hostilities:**

Battalion	Locations
1	Palestine
2	Palestine
3	France
4	France
5	France
6	Italy
7	France
8	Italy
9	France
10	Italy
11	Italy
Honduras Contingent	Mesopotamia

## 12. HONOURS AND DISTINCTIONS WON BY MEN OF THE BRITISH WEST INDIES REGIMENT

Distinguished Service Order	15
Military Cross	19
Military Cross with Bar	11
Membership of the Order of The British Empire	12
Distinguished Conduct Medal	18
Military Medal	37
Military Medal with Bar	11
Meritorious Service Medal	13
Royal Humane Society's Medal	14
Medaille d'Honneur	11
Mentioned in Despatches	49 <sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Howe, *Race, War and Nationalism*, n. 50, p. 226.

### **13. ADVERTISEMENT FOR SUPPLIES**

#### **Notice from the West Indian Contingent Committee (1915)**

Directions regarding gifts - this is a list of articles which experience has shown to be useful to our soldiers:

Handkerchiefs

Boot laces

Cocoa (prepared)

Spices (prepared)

Chocolate

Peppermints and sweets

Dried fruits

Ginger (prepared)

Guava jelly and preserves

Hot sauces for salmagundi etc

Briar pipes and tobacco pouches

Tobacco (in thick tinfoil if possible)

Cigarettes, cigarette papers and cigarette tobacco

Automatic lighters (not containing oil, spirit or similar substances)

Safety matches (in sealed tins)

Antiseptic powder

Boracic ointment or borated vaseline for sore feet (in small tins)

Brompton cough lozenges

Jujubes

Notepaper

Envelopes and pencils

## **14. A GIFT FROM TRINIDAD – A WAR TIME CHOCOLATE TIN**

Between 1914 and 1918, the Caribbean islands of Trinidad and Tobago donated around £480,000 worth of money and goods – over half of the country's entire annual revenue. In October 1914, the colony authorities voted to spend £40,820 on cocoa, to be used in chocolate manufacturing in England.

Along with the islands of Grenada and St Lucia, Trinidad's cocoa was used to make chocolate, which was sent as a gift in a special tin (pictured above) to Allied troops in France. The oblong-shaped tin was manufactured in Mansfield by Barringer Wallis & Manners Ltd.

Covered in black enamel, the tin is decorated with elaborate gold medallions. Each medallion includes a Latin motto and an image of each island, for instance the picture of Trinidad features a mountainous island with a fort flying a British flag.

The following words are also printed on lid:

The Gift of the Colonies of Trinidad, Grenada and St Lucia to His Majesty's Naval & Military Forces. This chocolate is made from Cocoa grown in Trinidad, Grenada and St Lucia.