

# Whose Remembrance?: Communities and the experiences of the peoples of Britain's former empire during the two world wars

## A scoping study of the available research

Suzanne Bardgett, Emily Fuggle, Lucy May Maxwell and Roger Smither, IWM

### Introduction

During the First World War, tens of thousands of East Africans were drafted into a non-combatant Carrier Corps to support the British campaign against the Germans in Africa. By October 1917, almost 29,000 of them had died of 'disease or accident'.

A Chinese Labour Corps of some 100,000 men and an Egyptian Labour Corps, with over 55,000, were at the same time providing essential support to British forces in France and the Middle East.

A South African Native Labour Corps provided some 70,000 personnel for service in both Africa and Europe, 616 of whom died when their ship, the *Mendi*, sank following a collision in the English Channel on 21 February 1917.

During the Second World War, some 90 West Indian men serving as aircrew with the RAF were decorated for bravery, including 64 DFCs and 7 DSOs.

90,000 West African soldiers travelled more than 6,000 miles to fight in the Burma campaign against the Japanese.

By the end of the Second World War the Indian Army, with a strength of over 2.5 million, had become the largest volunteer army in history, and had served on three continents.

These facts are little known in Britain today.

**Whose Remembrance?** was IWM's first AHRC research project. It sought to investigate the state of research into the experiences of the peoples of Britain's former empire in the two world wars, and the understanding and availability of this research to audiences and communities today.

**'What most national public institutions, including the media, have done is to present a history that reflects how the Empire sees the story, a history written and presented by British conquerors. Today we have a generation of Britons, a younger generation that is changing things for the better – working for a better and more inclusive Britain.'**

Arthur Torrington of the Windrush Foundation, looked at IWM collections and what they might illustrate about the experiences of servicemen from the British West Indies during the First World War



Images from left *Together* poster from the Second World War © IWM (Art.IWM PST 15795); men of the British West Indies Regiment, cleaning their rifles, Albert-Amiens Road, September 1916 © IWM (Q 1201)

### Materials and methods

The project was carried out by the Imperial War Museum Research team in consultation with an advisory group of academics and specialists.

Three researchers worked on the production of **three databases** looking at **published works** produced by academics and community historians over the last thirty years; exhibitions, online resources and teaching packs developed by **museums** and **cultural organisations**; and cultural outputs such as **films, TV documentaries, novels, poetry anthologies** and **plays**.

Two workshops were held at IWM London, the first with historians and the second with museum professionals, community representatives and social scientists.

The team also included **three specialist researchers** who assessed the accessibility and usefulness of IWM collections for understanding and interpreting their chosen topic.

A specially commissioned film made by Alastair Uhlig summarises the study's findings.

**'Awareness of this history is regrettably still unknown by the majority of society today. Even where the history of the contribution of British colonial soldiers has been researched in academic circles, there is an uneven distribution of attention. Consequently, perhaps as a result of the lack of academic work on this area, there is also very little if any mention of African and especially West African soldiers in school curricula. There is also very little (if any) information provided in London's public museum displays.'**

Ndieme Ouleye Ndoeye, an MA candidate in Social Anthropology at the University of Oxford, explored IWM collections and their potential to answer questions about migratory experiences in the 1930s and 1940s

### Research findings

Until the mid-1970s, research tended to take the form of 'top down' history, focusing on the higher direction and conduct of war. The war as experienced by ordinary people received little attention. 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 or 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 greater awareness of this history is long overdue. Many of the speakers at the workshops, working to raise awareness of these marginalised historical experiences, spoke of the alienation they felt when visiting some of Britain's national museums only to find their own community'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.

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 from the former empire shared many aspects of the British war experience, and that Britain's armed forces relied on men and women from the colonies for more than two centuries.

**'My own view is that people will only feel part of an identity if they are made to feel part of that concept. And one way of addressing the issue of identity of minority communities in Britain would be to document the heritage and history of these communities as Britain's history and then disseminate that information amongst the general population.'**

Ansar Ahmed Ullah of the Swadhinata Trust explored the potential of IWM collections to tell the story of the experiences of South Asian seamen in both world wars

### Conclusions

The story of colonial troops' experience of the two world wars provides rich territory for researchers keen to unearth the stories of hitherto 'invisible' people.

Areas of research ripe for investigation include: an exploration of transnational migratory spaces, such as the Indian Ocean; the experiences of people from the British Empire on the home fronts; and the potential of photographic collections for understanding the topic. 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.

Cultural organisations need to forge links with communities and with their 'brokers' in order to make these wartime narratives more representative of and relevant to the diverse communities they serve. All these activities might assist in a better understanding of the wartime experiences of the peoples of the former British Empire, and the more successful dissemination of this knowledge to the wider British public.

To learn more about the project, contact the project team at [research@iwm.org.uk](mailto:research@iwm.org.uk).



Images from left *Recruiting* by S Okello, painted in Uganda during the Second World War © IWM (Art.IWM LD 2742); an Indian nurse at an ARP First Aid Post in Calcutta during the Second World War © IWM (IB 1875)

### Acknowledgments

With thanks to the AHRC Connected Communities programme, Ansar Ahmed Ullah, Arthur Torrington, Ndieme Ouleye Ndoeye, Stephen Bourne, Patrick Vernon, Clifford Pereira, Dr Santanu Das, Professor David Killingray, Dr Catherine Souch, Professor Humayun Ansari, Dr Caroline Bressey, Dr Augustus Casely-Hayford, Dr Gemma Romain, Dr Richard Smith, Dr Toby Haggith, Helena Stride, Anna Lotinga, and the workshop participants.

Thanks are due also to Alastair Uhlig and team, and many colleagues at IWM for their assistance and support.

