

Fighting for Britain: African Soldiers in the Second World War

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In the last thirty years, in reaction to a predominantly white, Western and metropole-biased discourse of the Second World War based solely on the 'official' record, there have emerged a growing number of historians who have sought to redress this imbalance by documenting the experiences of colonial men and women in that conflict, utilising oral history in an attempt to give voices to these 'voiceless' individuals whose contribution has been disproportionately sidelined. At the forefront of this movement have been studies of African soldiers serving the British Empire, and an important distinction that has been argued is that for Africans the war did not in fact begin in 1939 but in 1935, when Italy invaded Abyssinia (p. 7). It is no coincidence that the timely emergence of this historiographical revisionism has dovetailed with the period post-decolonisation. The Second World War was a watershed which marked a hegemonic reordering of the world, seeing the decline of the old European colonial powers left financially-crippled by the conflict and struggling to find relevancy in the emerging bi-polar international system of the Cold War. Consequently, one of the major points of debate has been the extent to which colonial ex-servicemen were active participants in anti-colonial movements and nationalist politics, and the degree that these are depictions born retrospectively out of nationalist mythologies.

Fighting for Britain is the natural evolution of this now firmly-established historiographical trend, and the most comprehensive work attempted on the subject thus far. The majority of studies produced to date have largely been regiment and regional focused; *Fighting for Britain* seeks to consolidate these disparate accounts into a comparative examination of 'Anglophone' Africa as a whole. Though the author sets out to 'tell in their own words the story of African soldiers who fought for Britain and South Africa' (p. 1), primarily through oral evidence and soldiers' letters, these are analysed in relation to the major theories and historiography to demonstrate their wider significance. In each area, the author provides an excellent survey of his peers' existing work, in doing so offering the less well-versed reader with a vital contextual framework for interpretation, but it is through this transnational approach that the author is able to take the debate into new territory, both geographically and methodologically. Though African soldiers served overseas, as far afield as Palestine, Ceylon, India and Burma, in the process becoming exposed to new cultures and new ideas, the author is keen to emphasise that such contact zones also existed between Africans themselves. Not only did war throw East Africans together with West Africans, but regiments themselves became a melting pot of different tribal allegiances within these colonially-defined hierarchical structures. It is only through examining these cross-cultural interactions, and not in isolation, that one can truly assess the means and

measure by which African soldiers became shaped by their wartime experiences.

The author interrogates the notion that wartime service acted as a unifying force which forged national identities, arguing that because of this 'close association with other soldiers men became more conscious of their cultural and social differences' (p. 214). In critiquing the involvement of ex-servicemen in Ghana's 'nationalist struggle', he concludes that 'soldiers' interests remained solidly sectional' (p. 217), and as far as active political involvement was concerned, asserts that 'soldiers enlisted from and returning to the rural areas were more likely to be involved in local rather than territorial politics' (p. 222). Significantly, the author attests that the relative neglect of 'micropolitical activity' has been symptomatic of the fact that 'academic attention was given to writing a 'nationalist' history that inevitably focused on the role and activities of territorial parties' (p. 215).

The author's comparative approach allows colonial inconsistencies to be highlighted and assumptions that the war had the same affect on all Africans to be expunged:

By 1946 the Gold Coast had a new constitution and a legislative council with an elected African majority. In sharp contrast, in Kenya, on the other side of the continent, only a single African had been appointed by the governor in 1944 to the otherwise all-white legislature (pp. 257-8).

At the same time, the author warns that 'we should not think African soldiers' experiences to be markedly different from those of soldiers from other parts of the world' (p. 246). For example, grievances regarding levels of pay, rations, and conditions of service are not uncommon in the history of most armed forces, though roots of such inequities in this context lay in colonial perceptions of Africans, and in the way 'racially discriminatory proscriptions pervaded the military' (p. 210). Again here, the author is keen to highlight such attitudes varied between different African regiments, and 'overt discrimination which although part of daily colonial life in settler East, Central and South Africa, was at least largely absent from the West African colonies', which translated into the fact that 'West African soldiers received higher pay than did East African, and white soldiers were paid more than Africans' (p. 210). In some instances, wartime experiences broke down these racial distinctions:

Among the shells and bullets there had been no pride, no air of superiority from our European comrades-in-arms. We drank the same tea, used the same water and lavatories, and shared the same jokes. There were no racial insults, no references to 'niggers', 'baboons' and so on. The white heat of battle ... only left our common humanity (p. 158).

The notion that 'white prestige' was eroded by such cross-cultural contact, including Africans mixing with white women, is one which is contested by the author, however. He argues that such a construct rested mainly within the minds of Europeans themselves, and that 'the history of 20th-century colonial Africa does not reveal many instances where Africans thought or acted as if white men were 'supermen' (p. 204), and the fact that 'strikes, riots and challenges to white authority steadily grew in the late 1930s throughout Africa' (p. 31) are seen as evidence of this. Consequently, it should not be considered as a major factor undermining colonial authority and turning African thoughts towards self-determination. Neither did it shake British self-belief argues the author, and by the late 1940s 'the colonial emperor was then still well clothed and officials and officials were overwhelmingly confident that ... it would be many decades, generations possibly, before colonial territories were able to rule themselves' (p. 204). Though maybe not believed to be racially superior by African soldiers, British superiority was accepted in other ways. For example, although the Japanese possessed superior numbers, it was considered that 'in training and equipment we were definitely ahead of them' (p. 159).

The author notes that not only were African soldiers conscious of others' racial perceptions of them, but they also appropriated and manipulated them for their own means, such as regarding Japanese beliefs that they were cannibals:

While they started to pretend to eat the 'meat' the other Japanese captives who survived would flee for their lives. This was intentional so that after they fled in terror they would spread the news that they were fighting against the cannibals who particularly enjoyed eating Japanese flesh (p. 158).

Yet, in the process, there was an admittance that war did have a dehumanising effect, and 'you became a different person. You leave behind every civilian attitude, every gentle attitude' (p. 164).

War also cultivated a sense of racial superiority within African soldiers themselves. Having witnessed the poverty and squalor in the subcontinent, one Ghanaian ex-serviceman returned with the view that Indians were 'lazy people ... always begging' (p. 208), and in East Africa and Natal which possessed large middle-class Indian merchant classes, many Africans returned to view those Indians with 'contempt as poor, vulnerable and despised' (p. 208). Such prejudices were not only racial, but social in nature, such as in the Gold Coast, where ex-servicemen were accused of possessing a 'Burma complex' and 'superiority complex' for not accepting the menial kind of work on offer (p. 195).

In many ways, most notably the country's extreme racial prejudice, its differing political status as a Dominion, and the fact that black South Africans were prevented from serving as combatants, South Africa sits somewhat separate from the other British African colonies in its wartime experience, something acknowledged in the author's introduction and sub-chapter structuring. As a consequence, its inclusion can at times appear to disrupt the fluidity of the narrative and distort the unifying concepts preceding it. However, by highlighting such contrasts the author is able to challenge generalised assumptions regarding the treatment of African soldiers. Furthermore, it helps to emphasise the transnational influence in shaping black South African perceptions of themselves and their own condition, notably how they viewed other African colonial soldiers that they came into contact with and the comparatively better pay, privileges, and attitudes they received.

The choice of title is a provocative one. Certainly it is demonstrated that there were those who consciously chose to 'fight for Britain' out of a sense of imperial patriotism and duty to the 'motherland'. It is inferred in the book, however, that one should not assume that patriotic attestations to 'my country' are necessarily indicative of loyalty to Britain and her sovereign; as the author points out, a large number of 'volunteers' were forced to enlist by their tribal chiefs, and British recruiters consciously exploited this collaborative relationship. When men such as Kofi Anane left to fight for 'king and country', this in reality meant fighting for chief and tribe, and was their primary allegiance. He enlisted in 1942 because his chief 'Nana Ofori Atta said that anyone who wanted to help the Akyem State should join up, so I volunteered' (p. 47). In some instances, however, these social structures which pressured Africans into fighting, unwittingly contributed to their own destabilisation, as war 'detribalized African minds' and 'ex-servicemen would be less inclined on their return to submit to chiefly authority' (p. 182). Yet, what such personal accounts demonstrate is the wide spectrum of motivations which led people to war, with military service offering, among other things, 'adventure, a chance to see the world – however poorly perceived – beyond the village, to earn money, and to prove manhood' (p. 45). Again, there is a certain universality to these ideals held by young soldiers which transcends Africa, though they were inevitably influenced by local conditions and power structures. Motivations were often a complex mix of push and pull factors, which could be simultaneously cultural, social, political, economic, and environmental in nature.

In his closing remarks, the author coins Kipling's famous phrase 'lest we forget' as one apt for the 'forgotten men of the African colonial forces' (p. 260). As true as this may be, it does not tell the whole story, and there were thousands of colonial servicemen who fought for the British Empire in the Second World War who are

still without a voice. This monograph, by its own admission, focuses solely on the experiences of black African soldiers who fought in the army. Yet, there were also black Africans who served in air and naval forces who have been largely neglected by the wider historiography, along with many men from Britain's other colonial dependencies in the Caribbean, Asia and the Pacific. As the author warns, the numbers of these veterans are rapidly dwindling as time takes its inevitable toll, and unless efforts are made to record their stories, voiceless is how they will forever remain. *Fighting for Britain* ensures that at least the recollections of some of these men will be remembered, but it goes far beyond that; by placing the relevance of these personal testimonies within a transnational comparative framework, it successfully demonstrates the academic value that such 'people's stories' or 'history from below' can carry in helping to broaden our understanding and interpretation of the 'big ideas'. Consequently, this book addresses issues which will not only appeal to African specialists, and military and imperial historians, but should interest many social, political, cultural, transnational and economic historians too in assessing the far-reaching impact of arguably the pivotal event of the 20th century.

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