First World War Veterans and the State in the French and British Caribbean, 1919-1939

As demobilization gathered pace in 1919, the colonial authorities in both the British and French Caribbean fretted about the reintegration of thousands of men imagined to have been rendered volatile and dangerous by their time overseas. By 1939, however, the situation appeared quite different. Veterans in the British islands were restive and dissatisfied, while their French Caribbean counterparts were comparatively settled. This contrast was not simply about disparities in state generosity. Rather, the article explores how differing conceptions of the relationship between military service and citizenship shaped the actions of the colonial and imperial governments. Where the governments of Martinique and Guadeloupe helped to foster the growth of veterans' associations which were then incorporated into local policy-making and, more broadly, an imperial network of state aid, the British colonial authorities sought to suppress veteran identity in pursuit of the ultimately unachievable ideal of a final settlement with the demobilized men. An analysis of the interwar veterans' movements therefore opens up questions of colonial governance, citizenship, and identity.

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On 6 February 1938, the governor of Guadeloupe, Félix Éboué, addressed the annual congress of the island's veterans' associations at Pointe-à-Pitre. Éboué outlined a utopian vision for Guadeloupe, pledging through labour reform, workers' housing estates, and agricultural credit to bring about the future for which the gathered ex-servicemen had so heroically fought during the Great War. Noting their fruitful collaboration with Éboué over the previous year, the associations unanimously renewed a vote of confidence in the governor and his programme for Guadeloupe.[1] In the same year, an undated letter from a group of Jamaican ex-servicemen to the West India Royal Commission expressed rather less faith in the colonial administration. The utopia these men had been promised on enlistment had never materialized: 'up to now we are not settled we also know that as soon as this Royal Commission leaves Jamaica for the Mother Country, we are going to be classed a enemy by this our government and liable shot or go to prison [*sic*]'.[2] Some twenty years after the Armistice, while Guadeloupe's veterans pledged their faith in the colonial administration, their Jamaican counterparts feared persecution from it.

For all that the situation in 1938 was very different, the colonial authorities' fears in 1918 had been rather similar. Some 16,880 men had been sent from the French Caribbean to serve in the war; for the British Caribbean, to the 15,601 men of the British West Indies Regiment (BWIR) we must add some 2000 for the two battalions of the West India Regiment (WIR), and an indeterminable number of wealthy, light-skinned men who travelled to Britain to enlist in metropolitan regiments, bringing the total closer to 20,000.[3] That most of these men would return emboldened or even radicalized by their military service had seemed clear to colonial officials in the French and British islands alike.

In neither case were these fears realized. Veterans' paths, though, diverged from here to 1939; as they did so, most striking was a profound contrast in associational life. Mirroring in a more acute form the metropolitan situation, Antillean associations dwarfed their British

Caribbean counterparts in size, number, and longevity.[4] The largest, Martinique's *Association Générale des Anciens Combattants* (AGAC), was founded in 1919 and peaked at almost 2800 members before administrative changes in the veteran welfare system cut its membership to some 1655 in 1937. The Ex-British West Indies Regiment Association (EBWIRA), by contrast, the largest association in Jamaica, the British colony which had contributed the greatest number of men, was only established in 1932 and had at most 500 members in 1938.[5]

Veterans have come to occupy a canonical place in longer histories of Caribbean decolonization without ever being subject to any real historiographical attention. Instead, in both the British and French contexts, the literature has focused on a period from about 1912-1920, and then projected its conclusions forward into the interwar years. In the Antillean case, historians have been content to gesture towards veterans' overwhelming commitment to assimilationism, a political doctrine which found its ultimate realisation in 1946 when the island colonies attained the status of French *départements*.[6] In the British Caribbean case, the claims have been rather grander. For W.F. Elkins, BWIR soldiers quite literally 'began the national liberation struggle that eventually led to the demise of open colonial rule in most of the British Caribbean'.[7] By rarely straying in any detailed sense beyond 1920, subsequent work has left this assertion remarkably unchallenged; veterans' anticolonial nationalism has become a truism. What little attention has been devoted to the post-1920 years has been undermined by its desire to seek evidence for this narrative, rather than to engage in a long overdue critical assessment of it.[8]

But far from being the automatic product of wartime experiences as much of this work suggests, veteran identity was dialogic, produced and shaped in interaction with other identities as ex-servicemen sought to return to civilian life. When, where, and how this individual identity became collective depended on national (sometimes nationalist),

international, and transnational contexts.[9] Comparison, in the hands of historians like Deborah Cohen, has offered a fruitful means of explaining these national differences.[10]

Focusing on the Caribbean's main contributors of manpower – Martinique, Guadeloupe, Jamaica, Trinidad, and Barbados – this article applies a comparative lens to the Caribbean, where veterans' relationship with the state was paramount. Since colonial veterans could not help but read their post-war situation through the lens of their contested citizenship, it mattered enormously to them from whom they received their post-war compensation, and the nature of the compensation they expected was often such that only the state could provide. Veteran identity, veterans' associational life, and imperial and colonial state policy were interrelated, dynamic factors which shaped ex-servicemen's post-war path. At the heart of the interwar veterans' movement therefore lay questions of colonial governance, citizenship, and identity.

Les Antilles

Writing to *Le Nouvelliste* in August 1919, Anselme Cécilia, a disabled veteran from Guadeloupe, spoke for Antillean ex-servicemen more generally when he demanded 'equality of rights because there was equality of duty, which is to say that we want to be treated like our metropolitan brothers-in-arms'.[11] This idea that Antillean veterans should benefit from the same laws as their metropolitan counterparts was not simply a function of having served in the same integrated regiments and so endured the same hardships. Rather, these demands formed part of a bigger calculation about military service and citizenship which tied together France and its Caribbean colonies. More than a means of supplying the army with troops, compulsory military service had been elevated under the Third Republic to become the greatest of a citizen's duties, a corollary of the right to vote, a vector for republican values and citizenship itself.[12]

As *vieilles colonies* (old colonies), Martinique and Guadeloupe enjoyed universal male suffrage and representation in the *Chambre des députés* and *Sénat*, but their failure to pay the so-called *impôt du sang* (blood tax) through conscription left this entitlement increasingly vulnerable to challenge. Antillean politicians, whose ultimate goal was the islands' decolonization through their assimilation as *départements*, therefore campaigned from the 1870s to have military service extended, finally succeeding in 1913.[13] The language of republicanism meshed neatly with that of assimilationism; military service, in fact, was a bridge between them.[14] In sacrificing their lives for France, Antilleans would secure their title as French citizens and, as citizens, it was imperative that they enjoy the same laws, institutions, and rights as metropolitans. A similar calculation fuelled a great deal of pre-war, wartime, and post-war political action across the empire, and an equally determined reaction from metropolitan officials and commentators who questioned its applicability to colonized populations.[15]

Cécilia's demand, with its melding of republicanism and anticolonial assimilationism, was inscribed in the main associations' founding statutes. The AGAC, for example, committed itself to 'ensure the protection of the privileges which present and future laws confer on *anciens combattants*'.[16] It was no coincidence that the 1925 visit of the Le Conte Commission, tasked with enquiring into the possibility of the *vieilles colonies'* further assimilation, saw these calls reach fever pitch, and a collective demand from Martinique's associations for *départementalisation*.[17]

This political commitment provided the associations with a strong foundation by establishing a basis for cross-class sociability. It appealed on the one hand to the worldview of a leadership drawn, as in France, from the middle classes rather than those with glittering military careers. To give just one example among many, Camille-Alcide Ricler, a senior clerk at the *Service de l'assistance publique*, dominated the *Union Guadeloupéenne des Anciens*

Combattants (UGAC) during the interwar years despite spending only 43 days in a combatant unit.[18] Like their metropolitan counterparts, when Ricler and others spoke for their members in speeches and official publications, they did so as both *anciens combattants* and members of a middle class shaped by a secular education which had taught them to venerate military service as a citizen's highest duty.[19] In calling for equality of rights for equality of sacrifice, they were therefore articulating something not only about their members' individual rights, but about those of the French Caribbean as a whole.

The rank-and-file of the membership was much more mixed in social terms. Of the 91 members of the AGAC's Fort-de-France branch who attended the annual general meeting of 26 July 1931, we can trace the pre-war profession of 69: 37 of these had been either agricultural workers, manual labourers of some description, or fishermen; and 21 had practised what we might consider to be artisanal trades as carpenters, bakers, and so on.[20] Yet even for these men, many of whose schooling had been at best rudimentary, the importance of legislative equality with their metropolitan comrades was similarly clear. Assimilation as legislative integration was a principle embedded in the Antillean labour movement, and in popular politics more widely. The associations' goal appeared natural and desirable to ex-servicemen belonging to a colonial labouring class who had long believed that the extension of French social and labour laws would be their best weapon against exploitation by local employers.[21]

Importantly, the members of the islands' principal elected legislative bodies, the *conseils généraux*, were largely drawn from precisely the same black and mixed-race middle-class milieu as the associations' leaders, and so shared an identical view of military service and its broader political resonance. Local politicians realized that if compulsory military service was to fulfil its promise as the final piece of the puzzle which would bring about the Caribbean's complete assimilation, it would have to be bound by exactly the same terms as metropolitan

military service. Antillean veterans' enjoyment of the same privileges as metropolitan *anciens combattants* following their service, proof of their unquestionable status as French citizens, was therefore crucial to the crafting of a narrative which the bulk of the *conseillers généraux* hoped would lead to assimilation in other areas. Quite apart from mutual aid and sociability, no less important to the associations' members, Antillean associational life therefore had a strong political *raison d'être*, one recognized by *anciens combattants* and local authorities alike.

Consequently, despite fears about the returning *poilus'* 'rebellious spirit' which had been strengthened by the conduct of men returning on leave from 1917 onwards, the *conseillers généraux* made the political choice to foster the growth of these associations, important new civil bases of assimilationism.[22] To allow the islands' most important political bargaining chip to disperse and to abandon the identity which gave them such leverage would have been to abandon the final piece in a political project whose origins lay in the 1870s, and so the *conseils généraux* almost immediately voted an annual subsidy for the largest associations, using them as a channel for a variety of welfare payments. In devolving responsibility for administering welfare to the associations, the authorities made it clear that access to the benefits of military service meant actively identifying as an *ancien combattant*, and that the only way to do this was to become a member of a recognized association. The local government subsidy was vital, representing well over half of the AGAC's income in the 1920s, the rest of which came from membership fees and, to a lesser extent, philanthropic donations.[23] This grant increased over the course of the decade, the AGAC's subsidy from Martinique's *conseil général* tripling from 10,000 francs in 1920 to 30,000 francs in 1929.[24]

Although underpinned by colonial government funding, the associations' range of operations nonetheless reflected their place in a much longer tradition of Caribbean mutual aid societies, providing their members with medical fees, funeral expenses, and a variety of other small

emergency welfare payments.[25] All, however, saw their associational life, whatever the parallels to mutual aid societies, as rendered unique by their status as *anciens combattants*. The major associations' payment of *primes à la natalité*, for example, a pronatalist measure common in metropolitan state and industrial circles but not in the Antilles, spoke to their conscious identification as *French* veterans, and so as central to France's post-war recovery.[26] The associations' affiliation to metropolitan parent bodies reinforced this sense of belonging to a larger collective of French *anciens combattants*, and, on a more practical level, these transatlantic connections also greatly reinforced the associations' assimilationist lobbying. The tenth anniversary meeting of France's largest body of disabled veterans, the *Association Générale des Mutilés de la Guerre*, for example, voted at Niort in August 1925 to appeal to the government to have all laws relating to veterans extended to the colonies and protectorates, a motion proposed by Martinique's representative, André Boy.[27]

The associations could never entirely live up to their claim to stand above the febrile world of local politics, particularly in Guadeloupe where the UGAC and *Union des anciens combattants du deuxième arrondissement* were separated geographically along the boundary of the island's two constituencies. But if, as François Idylle of the UGAC's Pointe-Noire branch noted, 'no group of demobilized men has ever actually come together to support any candidate, still less to put one forward, thereby leaving every man the free choice to vote for whomever he wants', it still did not pay for any politician to slight the powerful associations.[28] André Debuc, mayor of Lamentin, did not host the re-establishment of the local AGAC branch on 3 April 1927 simply out of respect, nor was it by chance that the Lamentin war memorial bore a prominent plaque recording for posterity that it had been erected by his administration.[29]

Such patronage was routine. Municipal bodies threw their financial weight behind a programme of memorialization which, as Eric Jennings has shown, came to sustain multiple

meanings among the population at large, but which was intended to inscribe in stone the link between military service and French citizenship supposedly cemented by the war. These memorials, ‘designed by the island's elite as assimilationist bridges between Guadeloupean and metropolitan allegiances’, appeared in almost every town and village and were often more elaborate than those in similarly sized French settlements.[30] Placed in the very heart of civic space, close to the *mairie* or the church, the memorials connoted the centrality of the war, its memory, and its survivors to public life.[31]

More personally, veterans were given a central role in major public events which heralded their status as French citizens, notably 14 July and, of course, Armistice Day. In Martinique, the AGAC was even given the role of organising the Armistice Day programme at Fort-de-France in 1919, and veterans remained heavily involved here and elsewhere throughout the interwar years.[32] The national holiday quickly took on a similar appearance in Fort-de-France, Basse-Terre, and Pointe-à-Pitre. Members of the associations were invited to the solemn mass which opened proceedings, where they honoured the dead alongside members of the colonial authorities. Marching behind the flag of their local section to the sound of drums and bugles, wearing their medals and associations’ insignia, the men next attended a ceremony at the war memorial at which the associations’ presidents laid wreaths, before departing for a members-only reception hosted by the governor or mayor at which they mixed further with the civil, religious, and military authorities.[33] In collaborating with veterans’ associations in these national celebrations, the authorities did much to strengthen these groups’ claim to representative status, giving them official sanction as both the voice of ex-servicemen and as French citizens. Together, they made Armistice Day a day not so much of veterans, but of veterans’ associations.

Consistent local government support provided neither uniform growth nor freedom from setbacks. A shared language of French republican imperialism, however, ensured that local

efforts on the part of the *conseils généraux* would soon be bolstered by support on an imperial scale with the 1929 extension of the *Office national du combattant*. The *Office national* was a body established under the auspices of the *ministère des Pensions* in December 1926, and given responsibility through its *départemental* committees for veterans' employment, financial aid, legislative rights, and housing.[34]

Writing to the colonial governors in August 1928, the *ministre des Colonies*, Léon Perrier, described the new veteran identity card, the *carte du combattant*, issued by the *Office national* as not only 'an absolute right for all Frenchmen residing in the colonies', but 'equally for *indigènes* who took part in the war'.[35] In practice, of course, as Perrier well knew and as would soon become apparent in French West Africa, strictly applying a bureaucratic process designed for the metropolitan context to most colonies would be impossible.[36] The Antilles, though, were not most colonies. On a practical level, there were fewer hurdles in terms of record-keeping, and the associations were on hand to guide their members through the process. Just as importantly, the islands enjoyed many of the trappings of full legal citizenship, like parliamentary representation and compulsory military service, and tended to occupy a unique space somewhere short of 'colonial' status in the French imperial imagination.[37] In Guadeloupe, this principle had been apparent since 1921 in the form of the *Comité colonial des mutilés et réformés de la guerre*, a branch of the *Office national des mutilés et réformés* (1916), which assisted disabled veterans with their pensions, provided small grants and loans, worked with the associations on re-education and medical expenses, and lobbied for the extension of metropolitan laws.[38]

The *comités coloniaux des anciens combattants*, presided over by the governor, consisted of fourteen other members, seven of them elected from among their own number by the islands' *anciens combattants*. Their budgets ranged well beyond what the associations themselves had previously enjoyed: Martinique's *comité colonial* received 260,000 francs from the *Office*

national in 1933, 120,000 francs from the *conseil général*, and 15,000 francs from the *conseils municipaux*.[39] The addition of this imperial funding allowed for an enormous expansion in the range of benefits available. Through the *comité colonial*, veterans could now apply for loans and grants to purchase land and tools, renovate their homes, or simply to provide relief in times of hardship.

As in France, the associations now represented only the first tier in a social care network formed from overlapping levels of private and state aid which covered disability, illness, unemployment, housing, and family provisions. If in the metropole the *Office national* represented perhaps the most extensive system of social aid available in the 1930s, in the Antillean colonial context its scope was truly unprecedented.[40] That the islands' *anciens combattants* and their families were so swiftly and easily assimilated into a system as wide-ranging and comprehensive as the *Office national* was therefore a striking reaffirmation of the islands' special status compared to most colonies. It was, however, a system which visibly rewarded a specific group of Antilleans at a time when the rest of the population had scarcely benefited from a shift in metropolitan social policy, driven by the war, towards more statist, universalist forms of welfare.[41] This selective assimilation therefore spoke as powerfully to the centrality of military service to French republicanism as it did to Antillean citizenship, still not yet beyond question for some metropolitan commentators.[42]

As the imperial government took on direct responsibility for veteran welfare, so too did it claim from the associations the right to define what it meant to be a veteran, and so eligible for state support. The *carte du combattant* was only available to ex-servicemen who had been wounded or had served in particular combatant units for at least three months. The new benefits were not means-tested, for their purpose was not only to relieve want but to recognize and reinforce a direct link between military service and full citizenship rights. Pierre Padra, for example, a fisherman from Trois-Îlets in Martinique requested only 'a little

aid to live off', anxious to care for his wife who had recently been hospitalized, and unable to work due to his own ill-health. Padra's application was rejected outright for want of the *carte du combattant*, whereas Léon Pompière, who earned some 36,000 francs per annum as the headmaster of the *École* Perrinon in Fort-de-France, was fully considered for loans totalling 24,000 francs.[43]

The *carte du combattant* alone represented the state's recognition of the holder's rights as a veteran, allowing applicants to dispense with lengthy, florid appeals. Joanès Théobal of the Fonds-Brûlé quarter of Robert in Martinique successfully applied for a loan with an application letter which read in its entirety: 'Mr President, I am writing to request a loan of FIVE THOUSAND francs from the *comité Colonial*. Please accept, Mr President, my very best wishes'.[44] Traditional petitioning language remained important for widows, but even here it was secondary to the registration number of their deceased husband's *carte du combattant*. It was only after Marie Sylvanie Chopin had established her credentials in this way that she made a gendered appeal to her vulnerability in outlining 'how the precious support which the *Comité Colonial* has always brought me since the death of my husband relieves me greatly, because it allows me each year to cope in part with my many obligations as a penniless widow'.[45]

The *carte du combattant* was, however, a marker of eligibility not a guarantee. The available figures for Guadeloupe in 1931-1932 suggest that just over 60% of applications for *secours remboursables*, small loans of 1000-2000 francs, were successful, and a little over 20% of applications for larger loans.[46] The *gendarmerie* investigated each case to assess the applicant's ability to repay, preparing a dossier which was then judged by the *comité colonial*. No state operation such as this could avoid coming across at times as unfeeling, inconsistent, and inefficient, but, rather than a faceless bureaucracy, the *comité colonial* was a semi-representative body in which veterans had a direct voice. In channelling funds through a

process in which the *anciens combattants* themselves reviewed and adjudicated on their former comrades' applications, the authorities put a measure of distance between themselves and any friction which naturally arose.

Dissatisfaction instead found an outlet in the fiercely contested elections, open to those who were both holders of the *carte du combattant* and members of a recognized association. Rivalries in Martinique ran particularly deep, the arrival of the *Office national* producing a lasting split in the AGAC over whether the associations or the state should define who could claim veteran status.[47] At election time, the associations put forward lists of candidates, and employed propaganda, campaign tours, and allegedly even voter intimidation. Even so, the clear evidence of voting by bloc spoke to deeply entrenched loyalties.[48] Those shut out by the AGAC's dominance complained of how the *comité colonial* operated in 'the most absolute silence and mystery', and suggested that there were 'two weights and two measures' for AGAC members and others.[49] The regularity of elections, however, ensured that the *Union Nationale des Combattants* and others directed their dissatisfaction back into the system rather than against it. *Anciens combattants* and their dependents, a considerable proportion of the entire population, had become a moving part in a welfare system which was at once local and transatlantic, Antillean and imperial.

The British Caribbean

A submission to the West India Royal Commission in 1938 captured the attitude of the demobilized men of the BWIR in 1919 perfectly: 'we were told that we must leave all our belongings and go to the war and if we live to return we would be given a plot of land for ourselves and a cow and money and the government would treat us good and give us even work in its department so that we can live happyly until our services are required again [*sic*]'.[50]

The vast majority of BWIR men returned home expecting not, as Cécilia had, the extension of metropolitan legislation or even direct equality with British ex-servicemen so much as the fulfilment of certain local promises which they imagined would benefit them individually. The political logic of republican citizenship and assimilation which tied the Antilles to France did not exist to yoke the British Caribbean to Britain. Recruitment, although reliant on the weaponization of social, economic, and racial inequality, had been voluntary and, rather than a national institution into which the islands had been integrated, mass military service had been a strictly wartime measure, overwhelmingly carried out in distinct Caribbean regiments. Ex-BWIR soldiers therefore saw themselves as enacting a claim on the local rather than imperial government, and their occasional references to metropolitan veterans were designed not to equate but to shame by comparison.

For its part, the imperial government proved reluctant to match the interventionism and generosity of the *Office national* even in the metropole, ceding its responsibility to voluntary, philanthropic initiatives; as such, it was more than content to leave the colonial authorities to deal with these local demands.[51] For the BWIR's political backers, however, the men had served their purpose from the moment they set sail for the front. There had certainly been talk during the war of using the BWIR as leverage to gain greater political rights and economic reforms within the empire, but without a clear framework of equal rights for equal duties, or a shared sense of how military service related to citizenship, their fate on returning home was essentially irrelevant to these long-term political calculations. Indeed, after the revolt at the Taranto demobilisation camp, the formation there of a mysterious and apparently anticolonial 'Caribbean League', and the violent military-civilian clashes which had marked the BWIR's time in the islands, veteran identity and associational life seemed positively dangerous.[52] As such, where in the Antilles reintegration meant a long-term process of becoming *anciens*

combattants, in the British Caribbean the colonial authorities pursued the ultimately impossible goal of suppressing veteran identity altogether.

1919-1920 therefore saw a flurry of activity to facilitate the ex-servicemen's complete reintegration into civilian life. The 321 men who arrived back in Barbados on 23 May 1919 as part of the first draft of demobilized BWIR soldiers were issued with a form by the island's Returned Soldiers' Committee (RSC) to assess their wishes: 181 men desired to emigrate, 136 of them to Canada; 50 wanted assistance finding local employment, another 45 to become seamen; 20 expressed an intention to train as chauffeurs, and 15 to join the police; 6 requested tools to allow them to recommence their lives as tradesmen, and 4 grants of money for other purposes.[53] As Reena Goldthree has shown, the story of BWIR recruitment was in part one of labour mobility and long-established migration patterns in the circum-Caribbean, and the mass exodus which followed the war suggests that this story continued into the post-war years, driven by the ex-BWIR men themselves but willingly assisted by the colonial authorities.[54] Having sent 831 men overseas as part of the BWIR, the Barbadian authorities assisted 422 to travel to Cuba for work in the booming sugar industry, and another 20 or 30 to Canada within eighteen months of their returning home.[55] 7232 men were demobilized from the BWIR to Jamaica after the Armistice, and the government issued 4036 free passages to Cuba to these men by the end of its emigration scheme in March 1920.[56]

Provision for those that chose to remain varied from island to island, but largely followed the model outlined in the RSC's form. In Jamaica, Trinidad, and other islands with plentiful Crown Lands, settlement schemes were established in the hope that the BWIR veterans would retreat to some rural area to beat their swords into ploughshares.[57] In Jamaica, the Central Supplementary Allowances Committee (CSAC) ran a three-year loan scheme which provided 452 ex-BWIR men with some £9312 to purchase land or build properties. Free grants of land were also offered in a remote area of the Rio Grande Valley to those with £10

of their own money to spend on tools, seeds, and their own maintenance while awaiting the first crop.[58] By the beginning of 1921, the authorities considered their obligations fulfilled. The RSC's final report prior to its dissolution concluded that it did 'not consider that any soldier who was a good citizen before he enlisted and who still desired to be one, should find any difficulty in fitting in satisfactorily somewhere or other in this community'.[59] The implication was that to be a 'good citizen' and to be a 'soldier' were not one and the same, and that to continue to cling to this latter identity was the mark of an outcast or an agitator.

This was not fertile ground for veterans' associations to take root in. The relatively late emergence in mid-1921 of the British Legion, arguably the first metropolitan association institutionally capable of extending its reach overseas, meant that the initial impetus for associational life had to be generated from within the islands themselves.[60] However, ex-BWIR numbers had been slashed by more than half in Barbados and Jamaica, and those that remained had good reason to believe, at least initially, that wartime promises were to be honoured. Indeed, this tendency to see military service as an essentially individual endeavour for which one might expect personal recompense hindered the type of cross-class sociability which underpinned the day-to-day operations of the Antillean associations. Jamaica's ephemeral War Veterans' Improvement Society (WVIS), for example, exhibited much of the same paternalism towards the importance of the rank-and-file as had the Caribbean League from which it apparently emerged, both assuming that a cadre of educated NCOs could and should speak for the masses.[61] Similarly when white West Indians, many of whom had sooner sailed to Britain to enlist than serve alongside black men, came together as veterans for occasional social events, they did so in ways which preserved this racial and social exclusivity.[62]

The militaristic rituals which came to define Armistice Day perpetuated the inequality manifest in wartime mobilization. The official programme itself was a municipal affair in

which the figure of the veteran was relatively unimportant; those ex-servicemen who participated did so more as members of colonial high society than as veterans and, as such, the war memorial ceremony and the religious services which followed tended to quietly elevate the sacrifice of the white elite over that of the black and mixed-race rank-and-file of the BWIR. Ordinary veterans, Jamaica's *Daily Gleaner* reflected in 1925, found themselves pushed to the fringes:

> This function yesterday was purely an official affair: but it should not have been so. Armistice Day is a National Day. It concerns every man that has served in the war, and all his family...but where were they all at the function? What provision was made to accommodate them?[63]

Similar critiques, coming from the press and from former BWIR officers like A.A. Cipriani, ultimately gained veterans a reserved space at the islands' ceremonies. However, they remained spectators, denied the public acclamation and recognition enjoyed by their Antillean counterparts, and marginal to the vision of imperial patriotism which the colonial authorities sought to project.[64] The Antillean programme of memorialization went similarly unmatched.

Financial support for the men themselves was hardly more forthcoming. The relatively small number of disabled ex-servicemen in most islands enjoyed free medical treatment for war disabilities and drew their pensions from local funds, except in Jamaica which only took on liability for its pensioners in 1934 in return for the suspension of its annual £60,000 contribution to Imperial funds voted during the war years.[65] Pensioners from the WIR and other regiments were still paid from metropolitan funds.[66] The colonial authorities, however, expected most other veterans to rely on philanthropic sources after about 1920, a view at odds with wartime public opinion, and one unlikely to chime with potential middle-class

philanthropists among whom the BWIR's reputation was at best mixed.[67] As the Antilles built a sophisticated state-association aid apparatus, the British Caribbean authorities made veteran welfare an arm of poor relief, itself a mixture of state aid and private philanthropy. Indigent ex-servicemen found themselves on the charge of municipal or parochial funds, or bodies like the Kingston Charity Organization Society.[68] In Jamaica, the CSAC administered its financial support to poverty-stricken ex-BWIR men through the Inspectors of the Poor, and in Trinidad the Ex-Servicemen Relief Fund Committee, which disbursed the colony's share of the annual Poppy Day sales, operated from the Poor Relief Office in Port of Spain.[69]

To borrow from Deborah Cohen, however, 'the state's largesse did not secure, nor did its absence preclude, the loyalty of veterans'.[70] In fact, in the 1920s the CSAC, whose budget was drawn in part from the local government and in part from philanthropic sources raised during the war and subsequently invested, gave Jamaican veterans access to a level of aid not dissimilar to that enjoyed by their Antillean counterparts.[71] The great genius of the Antillean model, however, was the voice it gave to veterans and the insight it provided them into the mechanisms of welfare through their associations and representatives, a glaring contrast with the British Caribbean where the local authorities remained determined to avoid dialogue. Writing in 1935, the local command paymaster noted 'a strong desire amongst [the legislative councillors] that a British official, as apart from a Jamaican, should deal with their pensioners. The officials of the Local Government are also anxious that they have nothing to do with it'.[72] Opaque to those it was intended to serve, the CSAC was the subject of rumours which said much for the ex-BWIR men's sense of whose sacrifice had been valued and of the corruption at the heart of colonial governance. It was alleged in 1937, for example, that widows had been coerced into exchanging sex for small grants, and that 'European ex-soldiers have been given rather generous aid from this fund and without having to undergo the indignities such as some of the men to whom this fund is credited'.[73] In the same year, an

EBWIRA petition made clear the association's preferred solution: 'Your petitioners are inclined to the belief that were there a system of collaboration between Government and the ex-soldiers, particularly through their Association, that a better understanding and satisfactory adjustment would come about'.[74]

In the absence of such collaboration, direct action was veterans' only recourse. Philip Casimir, for example, a Trinidadian BWIR veteran, sent more than 40 petitions to the governor and colonial secretary alone between 1920 and 1943. Having pleaded his case in person so frequently as to be 'chased' from the colonial secretary's office and threatened with arrest as a habitual idler, it was no surprise that Casimir came to believe that the office staff had intervened with the warden of Saint George county to prevent his getting a 'permenant Pauper allowance [*sic*]'.[75] Casimir was an extreme case, but amid worsening economic conditions his plight was by no means unusual. The patronage of former BWIR officers could secure a job here and an emergency grant there, but neither this type of informal network nor the state's limited official channels could withstand the pressures brought about by the Great Depression and a steady stream of returnees from Cuba. By 1934, the CSAC was receiving some 30-40 applications for relief each day from ex-soldiers and their dependents, and its president, the former legislative councillor and mayor of Kingston, H.A.L. Simpson, complained that applicants had begun 'to attend at my office in large numbers, lose their tempers, become grossly rude, use violent threats on my life'.[76]

This restlessness must be distinguished from anticolonial agitation; if anything, as has been noted for other veterans, the ex-BWIR servicemen were interested in upholding the colonial structures which represented their best chance of finally realizing a return on their services.[77] Despite this conservatism, though, their actions simply fed the assumptions of the colonial authorities and local elected politicians who by and large viewed them as agitators. In Jamaica, it did not help that the EBWIRA had only imperfectly overcome the tensions which

had characterized the WVIS, representing an uneasy cross-class coalition of veterans united largely by their common grievances. Long-serving EBWIRA committee members like C.H. Eastwood and R.E. Sang, who trumpeted their 'decent families' and sought government employment which would allow them 'to live up to certain amount of respectability [*sic*]', struggled to marshal a membership base who were for the most part simply desperate for employment of any sort.[78] When on 17 May 1933 the EBWIRA staged a march to the very doors of the Legislative Council and was turned away at bayonet point, the politics of respectability had little sway over men who claimed to 'have seen better than the Police Guard at Flanders'.[79]

Direct action was effective, but it entrenched existing attitudes. The Cox Report commissioned to enquire into veterans' grievances as a result of this incident led to the reopening from 1933-1935 of Jamaica's land settlement scheme for veterans; by 1938 some 2506 ex-servicemen were in possession of their allotments.[80] However, that WIR veterans and, in stark contrast to the operations of the *comités coloniaux*, widows were explicitly excluded from the scheme reflected the continued desire to play down expansive readings of the link between military service and state benefits.[81] For all its recommendations, the report was a reaction to pressure from a specific group, not a policy shift:

> The Committee finds that the majority of ex-soldiers have long ago resumed their normal walks of life and…the present agitation by a small minority representing less than 5 per cent of ex-British West Indies Regiment soldiers, is caused by unemployment due to economic conditions, which are world wide[…]after a lapse of 14 years from the end of the War, there are thousands of other men who have acquired just as good claims for consideration as ex-soldiers.[82]

It was only with the wave of labour unrest which swept the region from the mid-1930s, a set piece moment in narratives of Caribbean anticolonialism, that it suddenly became politically expedient to recognize and encourage veteran identity, now a possible barrier against race and class-based identifications. Far from their restlessness being 'increasingly inseparable from the increasing militancy of the Jamaican workers and peasants', amid mass unemployment veterans were desperate to leverage their military service at the expense of the rest of the population.[83] When, for example, the governor agreed to an audience to hear ex-servicemen's specific grievances, the EBWIRA attempted to call off its demonstration at the Kingston Race Course on 14 August 1937 at the very last minute, even though the majority of the thousand-strong crowd which had gathered were not veterans at all, but simply unemployed men from Kingston. The crowd's displeasure at this lack of solidarity forced the association's leadership to seek refuge behind police lines before eventually being 'escorted from the Race Course by the Police in a Service Car still asking for personal protection'.[84] Dependent on the state's goodwill for employment and the redress of their various grievances, the EBWIRA's members were conspicuous by their absence in the unrest which followed in May 1938.[85]

For so long a nuisance, veteran identity had become politically useful, a means of taming a body of potentially dangerous working-age men at a time of industrial and social unrest. Insofar as Jamaican veterans acted as a coherent group, it was in allying with the colonial state against the nascent forces of anticolonialism. Ex-servicemen were routinely used to break strikes under police protection in Kingston in 1939, and were granted preferential employment with the Public Works Department, making them the target of considerable popular resentment.[86] Indeed, on 16 June and again on 18 June, a 600-strong crowd organized by labour leader Alexander Bustamante's unions attempted to burn the headquarters of the Ex Service Men's Trade and Labour Union No.1 in retaliation for their

strike-breaking activities at the Kingston docks.[87] At the same time, the authorities hurried to collaborate with the associations, putting in place measures familiar from the Antillean context. In May 1938 the EBWIRA was granted official representation on the CSAC, and the next month the CSAC determined that all applications for aid would thereafter have to be submitted through the association.[88]

These overtures, however, were too little, too late. The EBWIRA's representative found in the CSAC a body whose secretary monopolised its decisions and dispensed its funds as patronage rather than aid; months later, Jamaica's disabled veterans were no closer to understanding why repairs to their artificial limbs were no longer free.[89] But with no viable civil society alternative, most British Caribbean veterans, like many other colonial ex-servicemen, were restless but ultimately conservative. Driven through desperation into the arms of the colonial state, in 1938 the former soldiers of the BWIR and WIR still held onto the hope that Britain, ironically protected from their frustration by its complete lack of intervention since 1918, might save them if only it knew of their 'sorrows and suffering'.[90]

Divergent Paths

When it came to veterans, where interwar Britain clung to its liberal philanthropic traditions, France promoted the primacy of the *ancien combattant* and adopted generous, statist forms of welfare. This divergent understanding of the relationship between military service and citizenship played out in a comparable form in the Caribbean, but in ways which also reflected how the practice of imperialism differed between the two powers.

Animated by the ideology of French republican imperialism, the *conseils généraux* nurtured veterans' associational life, seeing that the men's post-war trajectory mattered not only to local stability, but to the future of the Antilles themselves. Testament to the centrality of military service to this ideology, and to the Antilles' special status in the French imperial

imaginary, here equal citizenship duties really would come to mean equal rights in the form of the *comités coloniaux*. This integration was all the more remarkable given Antilleans' otherwise patchy accession to the full benefits of citizenship. British Caribbean veterans, by contrast, never truly transcended their differences. Their ongoing political worth was understood to be limited in the absence of a comparable political logic able to link military service and citizenship, leaving them with few local champions until the colonial authorities found their desperation could be leveraged in the late 1930s.

Comparison with their Antillean counterparts, however, suggests that their restlessness was not only a function of relative levels of aid, although the *comités coloniaux* were doubtless appreciated all the more as the Depression began to bite. Just as important, if not more so, was the way in which the lack of a strong associational life and a working relationship with the state's welfare system left veterans feeling isolated and voiceless. *Anciens combattants*, by contrast, could imagine themselves in dialogue with the colonial authorities, with a national body of brothers-in-arms, and later with the imperial government itself. In this assimilation, or its absence, it is possible to catch a glimpse of the islands' slowly unfolding political futures.

Notes

[1] Archives départementales de la Martinique (AdM), 4ºH11046.

[2] National Archives, UK (TNA), CO 950/93, 'Jamaica War Contingent, B.W.I. Regt.' to West India Royal Commission, [n.d.].

[3] Dumont, 'Conscription antillaise', 114; Howe, *Race, War and Nationalism*, 206.

[4] Martinique sustained as many as thirteen different associations in the interwar years, the majority of them proving impressively resilient, and some of which would federate in the mid-1930s: Association Générale des Anciens Combattants, Union Nationale des Combattants, Fédération Nationale des Combattants Républicains, Association des Vrais Combattants, Association Générale des Mutilés de la Guerre, Union Fraternelle des Blessés de la Grande Guerre, Fédération Nationale des Blessés du Poumon et des Chirurgicaux, Association des Fonctionnaires Anciens Combattants, Société Nationale des Médaillés Militaires, Fédération Nationale des

Combattants Volontaires, Association Générale des Anciens Combattants de l'Armée de Mer, Mutuelle Indépendante des Anciens Combattants de la Trinité, Mutuelle des Anciens Militaires du Carbet. Guadeloupe counted at least six, some of which formed a federation in 1933: Union Guadeloupéenne des anciens combattants, Union des anciens combattants et des victimes de la guerre du deuxième arrondissement, Amicale des Poilus, Association Générale des Mutilés de la Guerre, Association des Fonctionnaires Anciens Combattants, Société Nationale des Médaillés Militaires.
By contrast, Trinidad could speak only of the short-lived Returned Soldiers and Sailors Council, the Soldiers' Christian Association, and from 1933 the Trinidad Workingmen's Association affiliate, the Ex-Soldiers' Union. An Old Comrades' Association existed in Barbados in 1925. Jamaica had at least seven, only one of which lasted for more than a few years: War Veterans' Improvement Society, Ex-Service Men's Association, Old Comrades' Association, Ex-Service Men's Co-operative Association, Ex-British West Indies Regiment Association, Ex-Service Men's Trade and Labour Union No.1, Ex-West India Regiment Association.
[5] *La Paix*, 2 April 1919; AdM, 3R10311/A, 'Rapport moral présenté par M. Paul Siron…le 31 janvier 1932'; ibid., 'Etat des Effectifs des diverses Associations', 31 December 1937; TNA, CO 950/93, West India Royal Commission: Minutes of Ex-British West Indies Regiment Association testimony, 30 November 1938.
[6] Andrivon-Milton, *La Martinique*, 284-91; Broussillon, *La Guadeloupe*, 243-4.
[7] Elkins, 'A Source of Black Nationalism', 103.
[8] Smith, *Jamaican Volunteers*.
[9] Horne, 'Beyond Cultures of Victory'.
[10] Cohen, *The War Come Home*.
[11] *Le Nouvelliste*, 7 August 1919.
[12] Challener, *French Theory*; Forrest, *Legacy of the French Revolutionary Wars*, 246-8.
[13] Dumont, 'Conscription antillaise'.
[14] Betts, *Assimilation and Association*, 30-1.
[15] Fogarty, *Race and War*, 230-69.
[16] AdM, BRO 8°165, 'Association des Anciens Combattants de la Grande Guerre 1914-1918: Statuts (1919)'.
[17] AdM, 7M9891, 'Extrait du procès-verbal de la séance de la Commission coloniale', 14 December 1925.
[18] Archives départementales de la Guadeloupe, 1R55, 1001-1295 (1903), 1061; Archives nationales d'outre-mer (ANOM), FM 1AFFPOL/805, 'Liste des Membres du Comité Colonial des Anciens Combattants', 22 April 1932.
[19] Prost, *Les anciens combattants*, vol.2, 178-9; Fallope, *Esclaves et Citoyens*, 451-5.
[20] AdM, 3R11740/B, 'Extrait du procès-verbal de l'Assemblée Générale…du Dimanche 26 Juillet 1931'.
[21] William, 'Les origines', 50-61.
[22] Service historique de la Défense, GR 13 H1 d4, Registre de correspondence du commandant supérieur des troupes du groupe des Antilles, 1918-1921, 184.
[23] *La Paix*, 1 November 1924.
[24] *Martinique. Service Local. Projet de Budget. Des Recettes et des Dépenses. Exercice 1920* (Fort-de-France, 1919), 84; *Martinique. Service Local. Projet de Budget. Des Recettes et des Dépenses. Exercice 1929* (Fort-de-France, 1929), 126.
[25] AdM, 3R11740/B, 'Association Générale des Anciens Combattants. Rapport Moral', 25 January 1931.
[26] ANOM, FM 1AFFPOL/3385, 'Union Guadeloupéenne des Anciens Combattants. Statuts', 1923.
[27] *La Paix*, 19 September 1925. The Antillean associations' degree of integration set them apart from those in Afrique occidentale française and the Quatre Communes, where separate sections existed for metropolitans, *originaires*, and *tirailleurs*: Lunn, *Memoirs*, 192-4; Mann, *Native Sons*, 103-5.
[28] *Le Nouvelliste*, 2 March 1932.
[29] *La Paix*, 6 April 1927.
[30] Jennings, 'Monuments to Frenchness', 577-88.
[31] Laborie, 'Les monuments aux morts'.
[32] *La Paix*, 15 November 1919.
[33] *La Paix*, 8 November 1924; *La Paix*, 14 November 1925.
[34] Montes, 'L'office national', 71-83.
[35] ANOM, FM 1AFFPOL/2539, Ministre des Colonies to Gouverneurs généraux, gouverneurs des colonies et commissaires de la République, 6 August 1928.
[36] Mann, *Native Sons*, 98-103.
[37] Church, *Paradise Destroyed*.
[38] ANOM, FM 1AFFPOL/808, 'Rapport sur le fonctionnement du Comité en 1926', 20 September 1927; ibid., 'Rapport sur le fonctionnement du Comité en 1927', [n.d.]; ANOM, FM 1AFFPOL/807, Gouverneur de la Guadeloupe to Ministre des Colonies, 12 September 1931.
[39] AdM, 3R9141, 'Budget Comité Colonial d'Anciens Combattants de la Martinique pour l'exercice 1933'.

[40] Prost, *Les anciens combattants*, vol.2, 217-229. Like Mann, I am not arguing here for 'a generous colonialism'; it is possible to acknowledge the assimilationist dimensions of French republican imperialism without imagining them to have been benevolent: Mann, *Native Sons*, 9.
[41] Smith, 'The Two World Wars'.
[42] Church, *Paradise Destroyed*.
[43] AdM, 3R6592, 'P.V.No79 du 14 Avril 1936'; ibid., Secrétaire-général to Pierre Padra, 22 May 1936; 3R6501, 'Procès-verbal No-1913 du 29 août 1938'; ibid., Léon Pompière to Président du Comité colonial, 17 August 1938.
[44] AdM, 3R6501, Joanès Théobal to Président du Comité Colonial, 31 January 1934.
[45] AdM, 3R9077, Marie Sylvanie Chopin to Président du Comité Colonial, 30 September 1939.
[46] ANOM, FM 1AFFPOL/805, 'Rapport sur le fonctionnement du Comité Colonial des Anciens Combattants pendant l'année 1931'; ibid., 'Rapport sur le fonctionnement du Comité Colonial des Anciens Combattants pendant l'année 1932'.
[47] For the split between the AGAC and UNC, see *La Paix*, 4 February 1931; and the documents relating to the AGAC, FNCR, and Association des Vrais Combattants in AdM, 3R11740/B and AdM, 3R11664.
[48] *La Paix*, 17 June 1931, 24 June 1931, and 11 July 1931; AdM, 3R11664, 'Élection des membres du Comité Colonial d'Anciens Combattants. Procès-verbal de dépouillement', 1931.
[49] AdM, 3R10311/A, *Bulletin de l'U.N.C.*, January 1934.
[50] TNA, CO 950/93, 'Jamaica War Contingent, B.W.I. Regt.' to West India Royal Commission, [n.d.].
[51] Cohen, *The War Come Home*, 3-10.
[52] Barbados National Archives, GH 3/5/1, 60/1919, 11 February 1919.
[53] *Barbados Weekly Herald*, 13 November 1920.
[54] Goldthree, '"A Greater Enterprise than the Panama Canal"', 57-82.
[55] *Barbados Weekly Herald*, 20 November 1920.
[56] TNA, CO 140/254, Departmental Reports 1919-1920, 62.
[57] Singh, *Race and Class Struggles*, 20.
[58] TNA, PIN 15/1772, Colonial Secretary to C.H. Eastwood, William Bennett, et al., 15 February 1933.
[59] *Barbados Weekly Herald*, 4 December 1920.
[60] Barr, *Lion and Poppy*, 16-8.
[61] *Daily Gleaner*, 1 October 1919; TNA, CO 318/350, 6165, 29 January 1919.
[62] *Daily Gleaner*, 30 January 1920.
[63] *Daily Gleaner*, 12 November 1925.
[64] *Port of Spain Gazette*, 12 November 1930.
[65] TNA, PIN 15/1775, 'Report on the payment of pensions and other matters incidental thereto by the Colonial Treasurer of Trinidad', 7 February 1925; TNA, T 161/1018/3, F. Whittle to E.E. Bridges, 28 November 1934.
[66] TNA, PIN 15/1777, Command Paymaster, Jamaica, to Chief Paymaster, War Office, 13 February 1935.
[67] *Daily Gleaner*, 28 December 1917.
[68] *Daily Gleaner*, 1 November 1921 and 7 December 1933.
[69] TNA, PIN 15/1772, Colonial Secretary to C.H. Eastwood, William Bennett, et al., 15 February 1933; National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago (NATT), Colonial Secretary's Office Papers (CSOP), Box 1919:8024-8068, Trinidad Ex-Servicemen Relief Fund to Philip Casimir, 22 September 1936.
[70] Cohen, *The War Come Home*, 3.
[71] *Daily Gleaner*, 21 March 1928 and 22 June 1928.
[72] TNA, PIN 15/1777, Command Paymaster, Jamaica, to Chief Paymaster, War Office, 13 February 1935.
[73] *Daily Gleaner*, 6 February 1937.
[74] *Daily Gleaner*, 18 March 1937.
[75] NATT, CSOP, Box 1919:8024-8068, 'Précis of correspondence, etc. in M.P.8159/1919', 16 December 1926; ibid., Casimir to Governor, 7 November 1923; ibid., Casimir to Lady Byatt, 14 January 1927.
[76] *Daily Gleaner*, 11 May 1934.
[77] Mann, *Native Sons*, 23-4.
[78] Jamaica Archives (JA), 1B/5/77/63, C.H. Eastwood and R.E. Sang to Colonial Secretary, 15 July 1937.
[79] JA, 1B/5/79/672, Detective Corporal's report to the Detective Inspector on EBWIRA's march of 17 May 1933.
[80] TNA, CO 137/828/5, Minute by the Surveyor General, 10 January 1938.
[81] *Daily Gleaner*, 18 March 1935; ibid., 2 May 1935.
[82] *Daily Gleaner*, 11 August 1933.
[83] Smith, *Jamaican Volunteers*, 167.
[84] TNA, CO 137/820/13, Governor to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 20 September 1937; ibid., Confidential report on Meeting of the Ex-BWIR Association, 14 August 1937.
[85] *Daily Gleaner*, 30 May 1938. For the labour unrest in Jamaica, see: Post, *Arise Ye Starvelings.*

[86] TNA, CO 137/836/2, Minute dated 19 June 1939.
[87] Ibid., Governor to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 21 June 1939; *The Times*, 19 June 1939 and 20 June 1939.
[88] *Daily Gleaner*, 17 May 1938 and 13 June 1938.
[89] TNA, CO 950/93, Minutes of EBWIRA testimony, 30 November 1938.
[90] TNA, CO 950/93, F.L. Hanchard to West India Royal Commission, 7 November 1938.

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