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Race and Recruitment

"Race and Recruitment in World War I," an article by James W. St G. Walker, appears in History of the Canadian Peoples.

During the first year of world war one, a considerable number of minorities made effort to join the allied armies. Due to various philosophical notions based upon white conceptions of other races, this effort was largely opposed by high command. Since all the world, it was finally reasoned, would benefit from an allied victory, including the subjugated world, it was ultimately decided that other races should indeed do their part. This part was deemed to be the provider of a labour pool. In Canada, with the supply of volunteers exceeding demand during this period, recruitment was greatly selective, with race being a noticeable and significant criteria, and this re-evaluation was slow to effectuate concrete results. If the attitudes of the officer class was, by and large, homogenous, so too was the motivational reasoning responsible for non-western assiduity in joining the armed forces. In Canada, this motivation stemmed, in part, from endemic unemployment; from the appetite of youth for adventure; but mostly expressed the aspirations of ethnic minorities who wished to obtain recognition, respect and finally equality for their communities. Canadian minority

groups rejected their ubiquitous rejection, though the intransigence of official policy was difficult to overcome since high command denied any such policy existed.

Subsequent to the early stages of the war, a compromise was offered. If whites and minorities could not fight shoulder to shoulder, then separate units might be formed. Early attempts soon floundered due to projected problems of logistics: it was doubted whether sufficient levels of minority volunteers could maintain large units; and, due to problems of integration, members could not be used to reinforce other white units. As casualty rates reached alarming levels, with the possibility of a quick war gone, recruitment policy was relaxed and special regiments began to be formed. The 114th Battalion provided, in 1915, the first major advance in minority acceptance. Formed entirely of Indians, its ethnicity soon became a point of pride rather than a sign of white bigotry. This was followed by the establishment of the 107th Battalion. With the pressures of war increasingly felt, both groups were later denied their racial constitution, with white soldiers providing half the contingent. If Indians were beginning to make inroads, blacks fared less well: it was not until 5 July 1916 that a black Battalion was formed; even then, the No. 2 Construction Battalion was to be strictly a source of labour and would see no combat service. As with the 114th, its racial makeup was seen by its members as an opportunity to demonstrate the calibre of their community. Although military command demonstrated a preference for collectivisation of

ethnic groups, the Canadian Japanese Association's offer to form a battalion was rejected. All minorities were now being accepted, but in the case of the Japanese, it was thought advisable to avoid large concentrations and incorporate volunteers into already established battalions. The practical opposition to minorities saw a diametrical change of position during the latter months of 1917 and a "recruitment race"(267) ensued--sometimes offering varied incentives to encourage minority enlistment. If Canadian military command was suddenly warming up to minority enlistment, minorities were themselves simultaneously cooling off to the idea. Japanese Canadian involvement never reached estimated figures, in part because they were prevented from forming the homogenous group necessary for the promotion of their collective rights. Indian enlistment fervour also cooled, but this was in reaction to their early rejection and its racist basis, intimidating recruitment practices, the acceptance of underaged boys, and, of course, their exclusion from the nations political process. A similar effect took place amongst blacks, whose race based rejection had perhaps been most acute and whose treatment once enlisted was still tinged with prejudice. Finally, reports of the awfulness of war from front line troops served to mitigate the fervour of ethnic Canadians. Once conscription was announced in 1997, ethnic opposition became entrenched. Indians, in support of their own exemption, suggested their status as wards of the state--effectively making them minors--with, unlike Canadian citizens, neither rights nor freedoms to

uphold upon the European killing fields, as well as previous treaties that exempted them from obligatory military service. By January of 1917, an order of council released everyone of limited citizenship rights--including those temporarily deprived of the franchise by the War Time Elections Act--from conscription obligations. Black Canadians, who already possessed the franchise, were not part of this general exemption; but, ironically, it was the black recruit that top brass saw as least desirable of visible minorities. No. 2 company, demoted to a labour force, saw all its efforts to augment its numbers to combat battalion proportions vigorously blocked.

The official though often denied attitude of top brass regarding minority enlistment circled inevitable about a nucleus of racism. Such bias was an essential aspect of British and US. philosophy, supported by pseudo science, and adopted by Canadian officers. It was generally believed that coloureds ". . . lacked [the] valour, discipline, and intelligence to fight a modern war."(259) Besides their general unsuitability, prevailing opinion suggested a danger in allowing groups that were largely subjugated through systems of European empirical imperialism to kill Europeans. Just as a lion tasting human flesh becomes an habitual man killer, it was feared that coloureds might, after the war, become habitual white killers. Although this two part axiom was re-evaluated in Canadian high command, results were mixed and often specific to individual groups. Blacks, for instance,

were most always a source only of labour in the war effort.

Although the officer class revealed attitudes that were clearly racist--according to 1990s sensibilities--there were nevertheless "pragmatic" as well as philosophical reasons for the official attitude. Indians, for instance, were rejected in fear of the inhumane treatment they might meet from German forces. Canadians of East Indian origin, Chinese, and most particularly blacks were likewise rejected for their own good, though here it was not ill treatment from Germans but their white countrymen that formed the basis of this consideration. In a similar vain, it was also thought likely that a considerable ethnic representation might discourage white enlistment. Just as minorities joined Canadian forces partly to further the collective rights of their community, their obstruction was similarly motivated. Indeed, the acceptance of Japanese Canadians was hindered almost entirely for fear that it would lead to their enfranchisement.

Walker makes use of both primary and secondary sources. Archive materials such as NAC is typically used as primary texts. Although Walker's research seems sweeping at first glance, closer inspection reveals certain omissions and therefore a certain bias. Firstly, the voice of the high officer class is capacious, though the attitudes of the common gunner is either absent or assumed. Certainly such sentiments are unlikely to be found amongst the dusty pages of national archives, yet this does not mean they are difficult to discover and displays something of a pedantic attitude all too

common in the purely academic historian. Indeed, not only is the common soldier largely excluded in the sources, but even officers of more modest rank.

Walker provides what is essentially a modest essay that can be neither greatly faulted nor greatly praised. In terms of structure, the first two paragraphs avoid the standard academic formula, providing neither a thesis statement nor indeed much indication as to the actual subject of the essay. Indeed, it is the third paragraph that finally provides the actual introduction, the subject of which is not general race and recruitment--as supported also by the title--but race and recruitment applicable specifically to Canada. Besides contextual material providing the introduction, which might or might not be seen as problematical, Walker generally recounts his history according to chronology and so steers a straight and secure road. Besides occasional platitudes, such as stating that world war one: "...was not intended as a liberal social instrument,"(257)--which is perhaps more laughable than *platitudinal*--Walker uses language which is clear if somewhat prosaic and any lack of clarity is owing to an equivocal thesis rather than problems of expression.

Indeed, it is the ambiguous thesis which provides for the general character of the essay, accommodating occasional contradictions and vague denotations. The point of allied forces insisting upon non-combative roles for non-European races is accordingly undermined by the fact that New Zealand sent Maori infantry to Gallipoli. French employment of black

soldiers is introduced with a feeble attempt at negation: "Typically contrary. . . ."

Although the third paragraph provides an indication of the thesis: namely that an examination of command policy sheds light upon racism endemic to all Canadian society, and that the response reveals the "determination and self-confidence"(260) of minorities to achieve equality with whites, Walker provides a conclusion which both explains and supports more his actual contextual introduction than his thesis. In stating that ". . . blacks and Indians, for example, had a proud record of military service prior to Confederation--but the stereotypes derived from Britain and the United States were more powerful than domestic experience,"(274) Walker not only introduces an hypothesis entirely outside the essay: that "*proud* record prior to Confederation"; but more damningly abjures blame for racism, placing the fault outside Canada and in the hands of mighty external influence. This of course is equanimous with the constant prevarication that presents Canadian high command as racist in the extreme, insisting though that England and the US were worse, as if racism might be placed upon some Orwellian scale where some are more equal than others. Similarly, according to common liberal ideology, the second subject of the conclusion is the representation of minorities as righteousness personified. "Their persistence in volunteering . . ."(275) is strangely contrary to the increasing reluctance presented in the essay itself and

presented questionably as a result of previous racist treatment, though strangely paralleled with increasing white hesitation. Similarly, the presence of racism between Indian tribes was offered as a passing sentence with neither comment nor analysis.

The vagueness of the misplaced thesis, as we have seen, is certainly the chief weakness of the essay and provides for some confusion and contradiction. Nevertheless, walker supplies enough material to convey a reasonable impression of both the motivational forces and the actual activities of the period.