

RACISM & CANADA'S DIVERSE COMMUNITIES IN WWI

In 1914, western countries saw many of their citizens in terms of 'race'. The 'white race' considered itself superior, and when the First World War broke out it was seen as 'a white man's war'. White majorities assumed that the 'subject races' would clearly benefit from the victory of their 'masters' and that second-class citizens should therefore do their bit for the cause. They also had definite ideas about the roles that other racial groups should play.

To a considerable extent Canadians shared this western concept of race and at the beginning of the war only white troops were given the 'privilege of killing Germans'. Canada's visible minorities were assigned lesser roles based on their perceived limited abilities. A major story of the First World War was the struggle of minority groups to be given equal responsibilities and opportunities.

In the surge of patriotism that swept the country when Canada declared war in August 1914, so many young men volunteered to join the army that enlistment officers could afford to be selective. These officers were given the freedom to make decisions, qualified by a secret directive forbidding the enlistment of people of German ancestry and of native 'Indians', as First Nations' people were called at that time. But many enlistment officers were unaware of the ban on 'Indians' and sometimes enlisted First Nations' young men who were volunteering with an enthusiasm equal to whites. Many men who got into the army this way were rejected later when their Indian status was discovered.

Other visible minorities were also rejected. East Indians were kept entirely outside the Canadian forces and, particularly in British Columbia, men of Japanese ancestry were rejected outright. The Chief of the General Staff of the Canadian Army asked in a memo: "Would Canadian Negroes [as Canadians of African ancestry were called at that time] make good fighting men? I do not think so." A group of about 50 black Canadians from Sydney, Nova Scotia, tried to enlist but were advised, "this is not for you fellows. This is a white man's war."



Many young men from Canadian minority groups refused to accept rejection. Their sense of adventure and patriotism made them persist. A group of young Japanese Canadians, turned away by enlistment officers in British Columbia traveled to Alberta and were finally able to enlist there. These young men felt that by contributing to the war effort they might overcome the disadvantages faced by their community in Canada, including being denied the right to vote.



These minorities offered to serve in ‘racially defined battalions’ composed only of their own people, but even this was rejected by the authorities. However, resistance diminished when casualties mounted in Europe and the Canadian army faced a manpower shortage on the battlefields.

In November 1915, an Ontario battalion composed of companies of ‘Indians’ from the Brantford, Ontario, region was formed. In March 1916, a platoon of black Canadians from the Toronto area was formed but no regiment, including the famed 48th Highlanders, would accept them. In April 1916, the Canadian army did accept a black ‘labour battalion’, to be stationed in Nova Scotia, on condition that they would not be sent into battle. In July of that year, the formation of the Nova Scotia No. 2 Construction Battalion (Coloured) was announced.

By September 1916 casualties were so severe that Canadian blacks, Indians and Japanese were all being actively recruited. Individual Chinese-Canadians were enlisted by under-strength battalions. As the war progressed, battalions actually competed with each other to enlist men from the previously rejected races, offering in one case a \$5 recruitment bonus and a free trip to Europe if the war ended before they were sent overseas. The No. 2 Construction Battalion (Coloured) was moved to Windsor, Ontario, with the aim of recruiting black Americans from across the St. Clair River in Detroit.

But as the need for visible minority manpower increased, the enthusiasm of minority young men to join their white brothers diminished. As the horror on the battlefields and the carnage on the western front became known, word was sent back to their communities about discrimination and inferior treatment in the armed forces. Letters from soldiers were published that openly advised against enlisting. The situation was worsened by an overall decline in recruitment among all groups in Canada. After July 1916 not one battalion reached full strength.

The experience of Canadian visible minorities in the First World War illustrates the nature and extent of Canadian race sentiment of the period. Many white Canadians shared the racism that existed throughout Europe and the United States. White superiority was not only assumed but was deemed respectable. Although visible minorities had made significant contributions to the growth of Canada, the stereotypes were more powerful than reality and many believed that there were scientific explanations for these stereotypes of inferiority. Such prejudices also diminished the quality of Canada’s war effort. Japanese-Canadian veterans of WWI, having fought heroically in Europe, were not given the right to vote until 1931, 13 years after the war.



The persistence of minorities in volunteering and demanding to know the reasons for their rejection suggest that they were not defeated by racism and were unwilling to quietly accept inferior status. Their loyalty to Canada and the British Empire included loyalty to an ideal that the dominant majority had forgotten.

A précis of an article by James W. St. G. Walker: “Race and Reconciliation in World War I: Enlistment of Visible Minorities in the Canadian Expeditionary Force” in *Canadian Historical Review*, 62/1, March 1989.



STORIES OF BRAVERY, LOYALTY IN THE FACE OF RACISM AND INTOLERANCE

FIRST NATIONS SOLDIERS IN WORLD WAR I

1. CPL. FRANCIS PEGAHMAGABOW – THE MOST HIGHLY DECORATED NATIVE CANADIAN IN WWI
<http://www.vac-acc.gc.ca/remembers/sub.cfm?source=history/other/native/peaceful>
2. LANCE CORPORAL HENRY LOUIS NORWEST – A MÉTIS MARKSMAN
<http://www.vac-acc.gc.ca/remembers/sub.cfm?source=history/other/native/peaceful>
3. CAPTAIN ALEXANDER SMITH AND CAPTAIN CHARLES SMITH - BROTHERS IN ARMS
<http://www.vac-acc.gc.ca/remembers/sub.cfm?source=history/other/native/brothers>

WORLD WAR I STORIES OF CHINESE & JAPANESE CANADIANS

CHINESE CANADIAN SOLDIERS IN WORLD WAR I

<http://www.vpl.vancouver.bc.ca/ccg/WWI.html>

JAPANESE CANADIAN SOLDIERS IN WORLD WAR I

<http://www.najc.ca/thenandnow/history6.php>

http://timtamashiro.typepad.com/the_differents/2010/04/my-grandfather-one-japanese-man-at-vimy-ridge.html

<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=A1ARTA0004108>

MILITARY MEDAL FOR BRAVERY RECIPIENT – PRIVATE MAMSUMI MITSUI

<http://www.canadiangreatwarproject.com/searches/soldierDetail.asp?ID=65118>

MILITARY MEDAL FOR BRAVERY RECIPIENT – PRIVATE TOKUTARO IWAMOTO

<http://www.calgarysun.com/news/memorial/2009/07/21/10213571.html>

<http://www.vac-acc.gc.ca/remembers/sub.cfm?source=collections/virtualmem/detail&casualty=316592>

NAMES ON MENIN GATE

<http://www.cwgc.org/search/certificate.aspx?casualty=1593651>

