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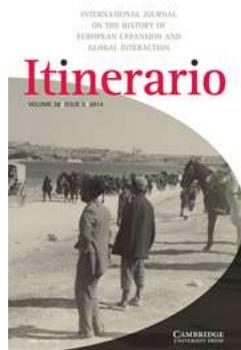
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# Introduction

## Colonial Volunteerism and Recruitment in the British Empire during the Great War

ANDREKOS VARNAVA AND MICHAEL WALSH\*

The 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the Great War seemed a timely occasion on which to call a meeting of leading international scholars to conduct a critical investigation into some lesser-known aspects of the relationship between the conflict and the British Empire. That the conference, entitled *British Empire and the Great War: Colonial Societies/Cultural Responses*, took place in Singapore, and was organised by a Northern Irish academic resident there and a Cypriot domiciled in Australia, again, seemed most relevant.<sup>1</sup>

The *problematique* of the conference focused on a decentralisation of sociocultural analysis, away from the more predictable metropolitan perspectives, to make way for an analysis of contrasts and complementarities of ideology throughout the geographical and ethnic extremes of both the “formal” and “informal” empire. From Singapore to Australia, Cyprus to Ireland, India to Canada, South Africa to Mesopotamia, New Zealand to Argentina, and around the rest of the British imperial world, further complexities and interlocking themes were addressed relating to an array of subjects including: imperial and colonial history, war and society, war and culture, art history, cultural studies, diaspora, loyalties/disloyalties, music history, photography, propaganda, education, pacifism, gender studies, class and race structures/relations. Of particular interest was how different strata and subsets of imperial society shaped and were shaped by the experience of total war; and how disparate societies and cultures—in all their manifestations and on their various “home fronts”—shaped and were shaped by it.

The conference, in part, emanated from questions raised in an earlier study, *London, Modernism and 1914*, in which Michael Walsh tried to understand imperial and cultural responses to the outbreak of war at the very heart of the vortex (that is, within London).<sup>2</sup> The results of this study, predictably, ruled out any chance of creating or establishing a single identity or unified response for a city, let alone a country, or empire. London’s response to war was as varied as the people who lived in it. That established, and bearing in mind that the strongest shock waves are not always felt at the epicentre, further investigation about cultural and intellectual responses, far from Whitehall and Downing Street, seemed essential. This seemed a crucial line of enquiry to understand (in what is now deemed somewhat old-fashioned terminology) the reciprocal relationship between the centre and the periphery, and the diverse cultures and societies that inhabited both.

The second inspiration was Andrekos Varnava's current research into the role of Cyprus and Cypriots during the Great War. This started with his monograph *British Imperialism in Cyprus, 1878–1915: The Inconsequential Possession*, which explored, in the final chapter, the role of Cyprus, which had only been annexed by Britain in November 1914 after it had been under British occupation and administration since 1878, as a pawn, when Greece rejected the offer of Cyprus in October 1915 in exchange for immediately entering the war in aid of Serbia.<sup>3</sup> This was followed by an article on British military intelligence in Cyprus during the Great War, which examined the conflict between the civilian colonial administration and military intelligence over the introduction of martial law and the loyalties and disloyalties of the Cypriots.<sup>4</sup> The primary inspiration was the current project that Varnava was working on, on the Cypriot Mule Corps during the Great War, which is the subject of his contribution here.

In addition to the timing and location of the conference, and the previous and current research of the two organisers, their personal backgrounds also mattered. Walsh, a Northern Irishman, remembers that as a child, remembering the Great War was more or less a Protestant thing to do. Any doubt about that was removed when the IRA bombed the Enniskillen cenotaph on Remembrance Sunday in 1987 killing ten Protestant pensioners and a student nurse. It was clear, even seven decades after the conflict, that "involvement" in the Great War was still contested and divisive—neither celebrated nor resolved. On the one hand, for many in Ireland (both north and south), voluntary enlistment in the British Army is still a source of familial embarrassment and shame, and the poppy is never worn in November on principle. For other families, often sharing the same town or village, it is a source of pride and belonging, to the point that enormous murals of the Somme still decorate exterior walls within Protestant communities in Belfast. If this dilemma was true of Ireland, Walsh wondered, where else might enlistment, recruitment, and remembrance remain so potent? More than that, how might such a question be explored without allowing the knowledge of what happened next to interfere with the understanding of actions which took place "then"? Now we know that during the Great War the empire prevailed and was enlarged, during the interwar years it was challenged but remained intact, it prevailed again in another global conflict but, fatally weakened, collapsed during the nuclear era that followed. But none of those enlisting in the second decade of the twentieth century knew any of what was to come. What was *their* motivation? Could grinding poverty really be the sole (albeit plausible) reason for joining the army to fight a distant war? These papers set out to investigate the complexities and subtleties associated with enlistment, weighing up what Varnava has referred to as the "push" and the "pull" factors. Indeed, for Varnava, understanding these enlistment factors was not a mere academic exercise, but a personal one as well, since his paternal great-grandfather and the grandfather of his wife (and two of his brothers) served in the Cypriot Mule Corps. Although he had known that his great-grandfather had "been to the war," he had only found this out after talking about the Great War with his father. With regard to his wife's family, there was as much absence from their story and history as there was from his own. He wondered not only why this was the case, but also why they went in the first place.

This special issue of *Itinerario*, therefore, focuses on "Colonial Volunteerism and

Recruitment in the British Empire during the Great War” and explores recruitment policies, controversies, and colonial volunteerism in these formative and transitional years. The articles presented here examine what motivated subjects and citizens of the British Empire to enlist, identify the multicultural mix in colonial contingents, and reflect upon subsequent and resultant controversies. Articles comparing the experiences of Australians, Canadians, Newfoundlanders, New Zealanders, and South Africans, are featured alongside other studies that explore Maoris and Cypriots, as well as diaspora and multicultural recruitment and enlistment. Imperial identity and loyalty, as well as political and socio-economic colonial conditions, are important themes, as are military questions revolving around manpower, labour, and “martial races.” The articles of course cannot claim to be either comprehensive or exhaustive, but they can surely be strongly indicative of the highly complex nature of the investigation. Selected carefully, this collection of essays intentionally challenges the reader to abandon any hope of finding the type of easy answer and generalisation that had fuelled the propaganda campaign in the first place.

### **Historiography**

This special issue is the first attempt to compare colonial recruitment across a number of geographical and settler and non-settler locations in both the formal and informal British Empire. The historiography on colonial recruitment and volunteerism, whether on settler or non-settler, is healthy, but not particularly strong in some areas, especially as regards the latter. There are two plausible, though not conclusive, explanations for why this might be the case. The first is that there has generally been a greater focus on settler histories and recruitment and volunteerism as a focus of those aiming to produce “nationalist narratives” in order to “set up” nationalist histories for the former settler colonies and dominions: Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and to a lesser extent South Africa. The second is that this was the opposite of non-settler colonies, where nationalist discourses aimed at distancing the reality of the past from the British connection, certainly as regards war. Why the local populations of Malaya, Kenya, Cyprus, the West Indies, and in India enlisted to fight or labour as part of the British war effort is hard to explain when anticolonial movements aimed to create a longer-term anticolonial and nationalist discourse.

Soon after the war, a number of “official” histories were prepared largely with a view to glorifying settler and occasionally indigenous contributions.<sup>5</sup> More recently, historians have produced accounts on the Australian,<sup>6</sup> New Zealander<sup>7</sup> (including the Maori<sup>8</sup>), Canadian,<sup>9</sup> and South African<sup>10</sup> experiences, as well as comparative accounts.<sup>11</sup> Research on the recruitment and experience of the nonsettler colonies varies in both quality and quantity, since there is a great deal published on India, the West Indies, and China (part of the informal empire), but very little on African cases, Fiji, and nothing on Cyprus and Malta. There were, of course, several official and personal accounts published during and immediately after the war, mostly celebrating the Indian contribution.<sup>12</sup> In more recent times there have been numerous publications, mostly articles, on the fighting and labouring contributions of the nonsettler colonies to the British war effort, especially on Indians,<sup>13</sup> West Indians,<sup>14</sup> and Chinese,<sup>15</sup> but also on a smaller scale on Africans,<sup>16</sup> and Fijians.<sup>17</sup>

## Synopsis

Barton Hacker's essay serves as a good starting overview, introducing the reader to, among other things, the sheer scale of support operations: 92,000 Chinese, 82,000 Egyptians, 48,000 Indians, 30,000 South Africans, 8,000 West Indians, 1,000 Mauritians, and smaller contingents from Fiji and other Pacific islands, Malta, and the Seychelles. He also introduces the reader to institutional prejudice inherent in the allied armed forces, especially in Britain and her empire, which was "anxious to avoid the employment of coloured citizens in a warfare against whites." To be permitted into the firing line (Indian soldiers were an exception) would be inappropriate in a war "which has its origin among the white people of Europe;" but to support it, by working the docks, building roads and railways, maintaining equipment, producing munitions, digging trenches, and even burying the dead, was tolerable. Was this high-minded idealism or merely a fear of "the return, after peace, of a large body of trained and disciplined men who would create obvious difficulties and might seriously menace the supremacy of the whites"?<sup>18</sup>

John Connor looks at a different aspect of recruitment and notes that as each dominion began creating their expeditionary forces at home, the issue arose as to whether these expatriates, especially those resident in the United Kingdom, should (or could) join the British Army or enlist in their dominion's force. It is an intriguing discussion that emphasises how Canada and New Zealand allowed recruiting for the Canadian Expeditionary Force and New Zealand Expeditionary Force in the UK and shows how Anglophone White South Africans joined a "colonial" battalion of the Royal Fusiliers, while the Australian Government refused to allow Australians in the UK to join the Australian Expeditionary Force, despite repeated requests from the Australian expatriate community. Questions are therefore raised about British and sub-imperial dominion identities as well as practical policy considerations. Is there some evidence of nascent dominion nationalism or were decisions on this issue based on cost and domestic political considerations alone? Additionally, can nationalist historiographies ignore the extent to which the British Empire, and particularly the self-governing dominions, had a shared experience of the Great War in which the development of "national" identities was generally seen as complementary to, and not in conflict with, a wider "imperial loyalty"?

Alison Fletcher turns to a particular case study, that of New Zealand, and focuses on the Maori experience exclusively. She draws attention to the fascinating debates surrounding the opposition (and support) from within the Maori community and from British High Command, which led to the First Maori Battalion sailing for Egypt in February 1915. Maoris who opposed recruitment believed that volunteering to fight in a foreign war distracted Maoris from dealing with the difficulties in their own communities, and that serving in a support role was, in any case, unworthy of a warrior race. Conversely, there were those who argued for participation in the war believing that their contribution would lead to *utu* (justice), and that only by including Maoris as soldiers in fighting units could all New Zealanders claim to belong to an authentic nation. In addition, Fletcher shows how, through recruitment but not conscription, fascinating debates about honour, identity, sexuality, class, pacifism, and mixed parentage also emerged.

Shifting the geographical focus to the eastern Mediterranean, Andrekos Varnava

offers an insight into the establishment of the Cypriot Mule Corps (officially the Macedonian Mule Corps), composed of both Christian and Muslim Cypriot muleteers and interpreters, and employing almost 12,000 men. His article explores three main themes: the formation of the Cypriot Mule Corps; the numbers involved; and the recruitment strategies, through which the issue of “push and pull” factors that caused the staggering enlistment of almost 25 per cent of peasant and labouring men aged between 15 and 39 on the island of Cyprus can be observed. Is it possible, the author wonders, that there was no Christian-Muslim divide in the Cypriot Mule Corps? He goes on to consider how this might square with the notion that war is a reflection of the society that wages it and vice-versa.

Trevor Harris takes the reader beyond the formal empire to an even more unlikely destination—the Welsh colony in Patagonia, Argentina. This community had intentionally isolated itself from the Anglicisation of a hegemonic Victorian England. When the Great War broke out, however, the question of loyalty to Britain re-emerged. Using a range of sources, not least the Welsh language newspapers *Y Gwerinwr* and *Y Drafod*, Harris observes the division of opinion that existed and speculates that the war might even have acted as a unifying factor in a community that was, in reality, starting to drift apart. It is certainly startling to read in 1915, and in South America, of the sentiment that many still believed that they had in their veins “the blood of the most energetic and progressive race the world has ever seen, or is likely to see—the British.”<sup>19</sup>

The final article in this special issue is presented by Steve Marti and concentrates on the fascinating case of “Jugo-Slavians” in three of the settler colonies (Australia, Canada, and New Zealand) who were needed to reinforce the Serbian Army in Salonika. Though the Imperial War Cabinet hoped to mobilise the nationalist aspirations of the South Slavic diaspora in the dominions to fight against the Central Powers, many potential recruits, it appears, originated from within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. They were therefore classed by dominion authorities as “Enemy Aliens,” when they insisted that they were as “loyal to the British as any British born.”<sup>20</sup> The dilemma faced by dominion governments therefore was between fulfilling the demands of the imperial war effort and jeopardising domestic stability by empowering a culturally distinct minority that was already the object of public paranoia. South Slav community leaders also walked a fine line between integrating themselves into the dominion and imperial polity and maintaining their distinct national identity. Marti uses a comparative approach to examine how dominion policies shaped the manner in which South Slavs negotiated their place in dominion society as they responded to this call-to-arms.

The articles in this special issue highlight how the British Empire was not only truly global, but truly multicultural, both as regards the periphery and the metropolis. The first total war offered the people of this sprawling empire the chance to come together to contribute to the British war effort, and for a variety of reasons they did. Imperial recruitment was a complex issue as this first attempt at a transimperial scholarship shows. Imperial identity and loyalty, as well as political and socio-economic colonial conditions were important themes, in addition to military questions revolving around manpower, labour, and “martial races.”

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## Notes

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- 1 The organisers would like to acknowledge the generous support of the Centre for Liberal Arts and Social Sciences at Nanyang Technological University, which made this conference possible.
  - 2 Walsh, *London, Modernism and 1914*.
  - 3 Varnava, *British Imperialism in Cyprus, 1878–1915*.
  - 4 Varnava, 'British Military Intelligence in Cyprus during the Great War.'
  - 5 Cowan, *The Maoris in the Great War*; Bean, *Official history of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*; Bean, *Anzac to Amiens*.
  - 6 Robson, *The First A.I.F.*; Gammage, *The Broken Years*.
  - 7 Baker, *King and Country Call*.
  - 8 O'Connor, 'The Recruitment of Maori Soldiers, 1914–18'; Carkeek, *Home Little Maori Home*; Pugsley, *Te hokowhitu a tu: The Maori Pioneer Battalion in the First World War*.
  - 9 Cook, *At the Sharp End*.
  - 10 Nasson, *Springboks on the Somme*.
  - 11 For example, Winegard, *Indigenous Peoples of the British Dominions and the First World War*.
  - 12 Merewether and Smith, *The Indian Corps in France*; Alexander, *On Two Fronts*; Murray, 'Egyptian Labour Corps, January 1916–June 1917'; Government of India, *India's Contribution to the Great War*; Cundall, *Jamaica's Part in the Great War, 1915–1918*.
  - 13 Greenhut, 'The Imperial Reserve: The Indian Corps on the Western Front, 1914–15'; Saxena, *Role of Indian Army in the First World War*; Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*; Khalidi, 'Ethnic Group Recruitment in the Indian Army: The Contrasting Cases of Sikhs, Muslims, Gurkhas and Others'; Corrigan, *Sepoys in the Trenches*; Morton-Jack, 'The Indian Army on the Western Front, 1914–1915: A Portrait of Collaboration'; Singha, 'Finding Labor from India for the War in Iraq: The Jail Porter and Labor Corps, 1916–1920'; Omissi, 'The Indian Army in the First World War, 1914–1918'; Dendooven, 'Troops of British India in Flanders, 1914–1919'; Kaushik, *The Indian Army in the Two World Wars*; Omissi, 'Sikh Soldiers in Europe during the First World War, 1914–18'; Morton-Jack, *The Indian Army on the Western Front*.
  - 14 Elkins, 'A Source of Black Nationalism in the Caribbean: The Revolt of the British West Indies Regiment at Taranto, Italy'; Joseph, 'The British West Indies Regiment, 1914–18'; Smith, *Jamaican Volunteers in the First World War*.
  - 15 Griffin, 'Britain's Chinese Labor Corps in World War I'; Summerskill, *China on the Western Front*; Fawcett, 'The Chinese Labour Corps in France, 1917–1921'; Bailey, 'From Shandong to Somme: Chinese Indentured Labour in France during World War I'; Hagen, 'The Chinese Labour Corps'; Bailey, 'Semi-Colonialism and Cultural Interaction: Chinese Indentured Labor in World War One France and the Sino-French Connection'; Bailey, '"An Army of Workers": Chinese Indentured Labour in First World War France.'
  - 16 Savage and Munro, 'Carrier Corps Recruitment in the British East Africa Protectorate 1914–1918.'
  - 17 Pointer, *Tagi tote e loto haaku. My Heart Is Crying a Little*; Liava'a, *Qaravi na'i tavi, They Did Their Duty*.
  - 18 Grundlingh, *Fighting Their Own War*, 39.
  - 19 Similarly, Harris' article also rejects (17 September 1915, p. 4) the charges in another Buenos Aires daily, *La Razón*, concerning "a collective Welsh viciousness and incapacity."
  - 20 See note 25 in the article by Marti in this issue of *Itinerario*.