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# Between Propaganda and Facticity: News Reporting of Non-White Service in the World Wars

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## ABSTRACT

*The expanding interest in the non-white experience of the World Wars is engaging a growing number of scholars within military history. However, the challenge of documenting the historically marginalised non-white voices remains. This Research Note specifically examines news-reporting of non-white soldiers from South Africa and examines the challenges of colonial and imperial reportage. For this, the Note critically analyses articles published by The Cape Standard (a non-white South African news weekly) on the experiences of non-white soldiers from South Africa who were captured during the Second World War. The Note considers the importance of wartime reporting to bridge the source-gap and to reconstruct subaltern histories of non-white military service.*

Over the past two decades, a combination of renewed interest in penning soldiers' war narratives and the decentring forces of Subaltern Studies has forwarded the fervent agenda of documenting non-white experiences in white colonial wars.<sup>1</sup> Scholarship across the academic spectrum is challenging the previously established homogenous accounts of diplomacy and politics that remove agency from the anonymous actors of conflict. To do this, innovative methodologies are being employed which, in turn, are inspired by previously neglected sources. Peter Jackson's film *They Shall Not Grow Old* (2018) represented this ideational shift most explicitly in

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<sup>1</sup>Coined by Antonio Gramsci, 'subaltern' refers to any class of people who are subjected to the hegemony of another powerful class. The term was adopted in post-colonial studies by a collective of South Asian scholars who used it to classify colonial populations who were excluded from socio-political and geographic power-structures of the imperial system.

relation to the World Wars as a documentary film focused on soldiers, and not leaders, inspired much excitement among academics and military history enthusiasts. Naturally, such a de-centring has also placed a spotlight on non-white experiences which, due to institutional prejudice and neglect, had not only been erased post-war(s) in public memory but the previous lack of scholarly enthusiasm has also led to a loss of valuable oral and autobiographical accounts that could have been collated in the decades following the war(s).<sup>2</sup> With such handicaps, historians of the World Wars must turn to alternate primary sources that can reveal embedded histories of non-white actors. This research note discusses one such source – newspapers – focusing on the coverage given to the South African ‘Coloured’ (‘mixed-race’) soldiers as part of the imperial forces in the Second World War.<sup>3</sup>

South Africa’s ‘Coloured’ community bears a long history of military service in colonial armies. First recruited by the British in the frontier wars in the Cape Colony, they subsequently served in the South African War (1899-1902), the World Wars, and in the Border Wars of the 1970s-80s. However, throughout these broken periods of service, like other non-white soldiers, they experienced military inequality with lower rates of pay, limited opportunities of promotions, reduced benefits, and swift demobilisation at the end of conflicts. Within public histories and memory, the experiences of colonial soldiers were abated – their service for the Empire reduced their legitimacy within nationalist narratives, while imperial proponents heavily engaged in the ‘white-washing’ of war narratives, marginalising the memory of non-white participation.<sup>4</sup> Within the World War compendium, South Africa suffered the

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<sup>2</sup>Nevertheless, there are, of course, attempts by some scholars to record these voices. For example, Nancy Lawler, *Soldiers of Misfortune: Ivoirien Tirailleurs of World War II*, (Ohio University Press, 1992); Suryakanthie Chetty, “‘Our Victory Was Our Defeat’: Race, Gender and Liberalism in the Union Defence Force. 1939-45”, in Heike Liebau, Katrin Bromber, Katharina Lange, Dyala Hamzah & Ravi Ahuja (eds), *The World in World Wars: Experiences, Perceptions and Perspectives from African and Asia*. (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), pp. 457-481.

<sup>3</sup>The term ‘Coloured’ has been strictly used in its historical context to describe South Africans with a ‘mixed’ parentage of ‘white’ and ‘non-white’ (usually African) lineage.

<sup>4</sup>Months before the liberation of Paris in 1944, several top French, British and American officials clambered to create an ‘all-white’ division to liberate the fallen capital. General de Gaulle did not want an army of colonised ‘natives’ to liberate the city even though they had fought, bled, died, and won back France. The ‘white-washing’ of the Free French Army was successfully carried out before the August liberation. Moreover, the *Senegalese Tirailleurs* were not just removed from their victory march, they were also stripped of their uniforms and repatriated. De Gaulle’s ‘white-washing’ continued post-war in academia (until the 1970s when a new generation of scholarship

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additional brunt of scholarly isolation by global academic communities with the advent of Apartheid. Thus, even today, most overarching histories on the Second World War have reduced South Africa's contributions to no more than a page.<sup>5</sup> This Research Note is part of a larger project that seeks to reconstruct the neglected experiences of the Union of South Africa's Coloured, Indian and Malay soldiers in the Second World War. Collating first-person accounts of these soldiers has been challenging given that most soldiers were illiterate and uneducated and, post-conflict, no efforts (comparable to projects in the West) were made to collect and preserve these voices. However, in this hunt for the non-white voice, an important source has been uncovered, a non-white South African weekly newspaper, *The Cape Standard*.

*The Cape Standard* weekly was published from 1936 to 1947 by an Indian company (Prudential). It had an approximate readership of 45,000 among the Coloured, Indian and Malay communities.<sup>6</sup> The newspaper was sympathetic to anti-segregation causes, critical of the ruling United Party, and frequently highlighted the contributions of non-white South Africans to civil society. It also gave space to Communist groups within these communities and regularly published non-white protest poetry. Facing financial set-backs, the weekly was forced to reduce its production in its final years (with only two issues per month and an over-load of advertisements) and ultimately had to close shop. However, its short life coincided with the most traumatic conflict of the twentieth century and resulted in a robust coverage of the Second World War that ranged from news from the front to the contributions of South Africa's non-white communities.<sup>7</sup> One of the most unique aspects of the weekly's reporting was its

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began to push back against this racial exclusion) and in popular historical memory (existing to date).

<sup>5</sup>Bill Nasson identifies five causes for South Africa's 'shrinking history' of the Second World War in academia and public imagination : (i) frontier wars and rebellions, and not World Wars, are usually the subject matter of local historical dramas; (ii) academia's preoccupation with interpretations of segregation and Apartheid; (iii) rising international condemnation of Apartheid in the post-war years resulted in the marginalisation of South Africa from commemorative events; (iv) within South Africa, remembrance of these wars has indubitably been linked to politics and the World Wars were not politically 'usable'; (v) South Africa's role in international histories was first reduced to Jan Smuts' role as Field Marshal in the War Council, and then entirely neglected, save for some scant references. Bill Nasson, *A Jacana Pocket History of South Africa at War 1939-45*, (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2012), pp. 20-22.

<sup>6</sup>Gavin Lewis, *Between the wire and the wall: a history of South African 'Coloured' politics*, (Cape Town: David Philip, 1987), p. 184.

<sup>7</sup>The *Standard's* cooperation and aid in DNEAS' press campaigns, as well as the popularity of their war reporting, enabled their access to returning soldiers (those on

emphasis on representing the non-white voice. They regularly interviewed returning soldiers and veterans, published 'letters to the editors' (and excerpts of personal letters) from deployed and captured soldiers, meticulous lists of men who had been recruited, caught, killed, and those who had been awarded, and photographs. Under then Editor, George Manuel, the weekly coordinated with the Directorate of Non-European Army Services (DNEAS) for recruitment and press campaigns, sourcing several articles and photographs from the Directorate. Despite its occasional (yet lengthy) Communist-leaning articles, its issues were also distributed amongst soldiers in transit camps within the Union.<sup>8</sup>

At first glance, the *Standard* appears to be a treasure trove of neglected non-white accounts, particularly from the interviews. However, closer inspection reveals the layers of filtration that the accounts were sieved through before being published. These layers can be discerned by analysing the motives of both, the interviewer and the interviewee, the motive of the newspaper to publish the piece, its intended audience, the prevailing socio-political circumstance, and even the structure and format of the piece.

As with print journalism, the weekly was promoting an agenda – that of the valorous, competent, and sacrificial service of non-white communities to the cause of the Empire and the Union of South Africa. This was part of the communities' struggle to gain first-class citizenship of the Union. This in turn meant that the narratives of soldiers were presented through a politicised lens. For example, take the case of prisoners of war (POWs). Post-war, within public history and memory, repatriated Allied European POWs did not receive a 'Hero's welcome'. Previous historians studying war and captivity have discussed the 'sense of shame' that soldiers felt on being captured, and during the period of captivity. This translated into post-war memory of their experience as they shied away from vocalising their stories.<sup>9</sup> Contrary to this trend of

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leave and repatriated ex-POWs) for interviews. Department of Defence Archives Pretoria (DOD): DNEAS, Box 36, 8/21, Cape Corps: Propaganda and Press Matters.

<sup>8</sup>Perhaps the officers-in-charge in the DNEAS were not reading the newspaper themselves and therefore did not notice the 'proletariat' cause that the weekly occasionally championed. Files from the 'office' that handled propaganda also only talk about the printing of the DNEAS' pieces. It seems they mostly relied on George Manuel writing to them and confirming publication. In any case, it is difficult to assess how many soldiers actually read the newspaper, how they perceived its content and, whether this had an(y) impact on their experience of service.

<sup>9</sup>For example, see Karen Horn, *In Enemy Hands: South Africa's POWs in World War II* (Jeppestown: Jonathan Bull Publishers, 2015); Clare Makepeace, *Captives of War: British Prisoners of War in Europe in the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Frances Houghton, "'To the Kwai and Back": Myth, Memory and

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concealment, the repatriated non-white Coloured prisoners' interviews were given a full front-page coverage. The *Standard's* focus on Coloured soldiers' internment in Europe (and not in other theatres of war such as North and East Africa, and the Middle-East) demonstrates the importance of 'Coloured' soldiers having participated, even in the capacity of a captive, in the 'white man's war' on the white man's land. The *Cape Standard* was concerned with the story of the soldier (and not the person). Their reporting focused on the collective experiences of the troops, intending to translate these experiences into a singular narrative for the front page. For the weekly publication, these were *men of the Cape Corps*. Thus, these first-hand accounts are incomplete as the information they narrate has been coaxed by external actors, reducing the agency of the soldier who recounts it.

The interviews seem to have been led by specific questions on life in European campaigns, questions about segregation, treatment at the hands of Germans, and their experiences with other white nationalities. In compiling these stories, the published piece presents a narrative of loyalty, of physical and mental capability, of service, and of hardships suffered by the Coloured soldier for King and Empire. By leading the interview and coaxing certain features of their captivity, POWs were manoeuvred to present an account that was symptomatic of the communities' political motivations. During this period, South Africa's Coloured leaders were pushing against the government's 'Coloured Affairs Department' (CAD) initiative that, along the lines of the Native Affairs Department, sought to separate the legislation of the Coloured community from the White populace. By presenting a narrative of common hardship, the *Standard* was making the case for continued unified governance of the Coloured and White sections of society.

Still, despite this management of narratives, there are embedded moments in the piece of soldiers asserting their agency. For example, concerning their identities - while some ex-prisoners were forthcoming with their name and addresses (thus allowing other members of the community to reach out to them), most preferred to refer themselves by their initials (such as 'Private W', 'Private A'). This can be construed as the soldiers' desire to protect the privacy of their experience. Considering that within the article there was a variation in the names, and the accounts of the ex-POWs were extensive - it is unlikely that this lack of information of the interviewees was caused by journalistic negligence. Perhaps the anonymous soldiers were deeply traumatised and did not want to re-live this trauma repeatedly in the public domain, or perhaps they did not want to publicly associate their identity with the label of 'captured soldier'. Nevertheless, the information acquired through a non-white publication is far more extensive than that presented in white publications during this period. The most

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Memoirs of the "Death Railway" 1942-1943', *Journal of War and Culture Studies*, (2014), pp. 223-235.

robust coverage given to Coloured soldiers by white South African newspapers was of an incident of indiscipline in 1943.<sup>10</sup> 500 CC soldiers were being transferred from Cape Town to a camp near Pretoria by train. The soldiers boarded the train in a state of intoxication which got worse as the journey progressed. They were rowdy and violent and de-boarded several times to get liquor from bars near the stations. To control the situation the police were called in at Laingsburg where the detachment was alighted. Unable to manage the men, the police fired, wounding three soldiers, one of whom died. The incident occurred against the backdrop of the highly politicised establishment of the 'Cape Coloured Permanent Commission', or the 'Coloured Affairs Department' (CAD) as it was popularly known. The Anti-CAD Committee, which was gaining political traction, argued, 'these proposals are based upon the despotic idea that we are not fit to be governed by ordinary law...' <sup>11</sup> The unfortunate episode provided white political parties the necessary political ammunition to 'kill' the anti-CAD movement.

The following week, Dr DF Malan, then Leader of the Opposition, moved the adjournment of the House of Assembly to debate the incident which, in his words, concerned the safety of life and property. The motion was allowed and Malan proceeded to detail his version of events where he repeatedly highlighted not only the disorderly conduct of the soldiers but also their blatant insubordination of their officers. Then Prime Minister, Jan Smuts, too went against his own fervour of 1942 (when he pledged to arm all 'non-Europeans' in SA) and expressed his disappointment in the accused soldiers. He assured the parliament that a thorough military inquiry would be conducted, and if there was any doubt over its transparency, a civil inquiry presided over by the House would be launched. 'This is something of first-class importance to the country,' he announced. <sup>12</sup> However, a key piece of information that was eliminated by all white public narratives (and falsified by Malan) was revealed in a letter by Lord Harlech (then High Commissioner of Southern Africa) to Clement Attlee (then Deputy Prime Minister of Great Britain). Harlech informed Attlee that of the 19 officers who were supposed to accompany the troop, 17 'European' officers opted for a more comfortable train journey at a later hour, leaving the group of 500 with two junior 'subaltern' officers [he most likely meant Coloured NCOs]. <sup>13</sup> Publicly, no mention was ever made of the absentee white officers-in-charge.

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<sup>10</sup>The UK National Archives, (hereinafter TNA), DO 35/1119/31, *Cape Times*, 'Coloured Troop Train Disorder', 24 March 1943

<sup>11</sup>'Document 2 - Against the C.A.D. for Full Democratic Rights [1943]' in Allison Drew, *South Africa's Radical Tradition, a documentary history, Volume Two 1943 – 1964*, (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1997).

<sup>12</sup>TNA DO 35/1119/31, *Cape Times*, 'Coloured Troop Train Disorder', 24 March 1943

<sup>13</sup>TNA DO 35/1119/31, Lord Harlech to C. R. Attlee, 29 March 1943, p.6

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It is curious that an inconsequential incident of drunkenness by Coloured soldiers that caused no civilian casualties and was no more rowdy than a bar brawl demanded the 'first-class importance' of the parliament. The incident itself was not that important compared to the severity with which it was dealt with. The issue at hand was not the disorderly conduct of Coloured soldiers, but that of Coloured soldiers themselves. Non-White recruits presented an uncomfortable reality, one which was a necessity but not in conformity with the existing power structure. These amnesiac tendencies were characteristic of the white South African media which ignored their presence until it was politically expedient to the Dominion's white government. On the back of this incident, proponents for the CAD reaffirmed the need for special legislation for Coloured communities. Briefly, a case was being made for enfranchising Coloured soldiers – this too was swiftly dropped. There was little concern for the report of the investigation that was so passionately demanded once these political objectives were achieved. The *Cape Times* aptly concluded its coverage of the proceedings with – 'The matter then dropped.'

Although both cases highlight the challenges concerning the reporting of non-white service, newspaper archives remain important sources for scouting histories as-they-happened. They allow a glimpse into the day-to-day experiences of the soldiers. In the case of *The Cape Standard*, despite being 'led' accounts, they are still idiomatic accounts of the soldiers, although it is difficult to assess whether those are the stories that the ex-prisoners wanted to recount or were they simply what the interviewer and readers wanted them to recount. Of course, the historian must be cognisant of the multiple layers of politics and social strains impacting reporting. However, by employing a diversity of primary material to corroborate and revise, newspapers can be used as a foundation to explore the subaltern histories of non-white service. Wartime reporting, with the exception of first-person accounts, allows the historian propinquity to the non-white soldier's life. It allows one to assume the role of a wartime reader – one that was not just interested in news from the front, but also awaited news of the men from one's own community, seeking stories of 'adventures', valour and honour. It allows the historian to consume news of the war as it came, to imagine a participation with the community as they perceived the conflict, and to have a sense of the soldier's space in society and in the greatest conflicts of the twentieth century.