Introduction

David Lambert and Tim Lockley

During the Easter 1816 rebellion in Barbados – often known as ‘Bussa’s Rebellion’ – the decisive engagement at Bayley’s plantation in the parish of St Philip saw around 400 enslaved rebels clash with 150 men from the 1st West India Regiment under the command of a Major Cassidy. This was one of a series of military units that had been raised by the British in the mid-to-late 1790s during the war with Republican France. They were largely made up of West African personnel who had been purchased from slave traders, or – after the abolition of the British slave trade – who had been ‘liberated’ from foreign slave ships. The Regiments were commanded by white officers like Cassidy. With the British force closing on their position at Bayley’s, some of the rebels called out, urging the black soldiers to join with them. As an officer serving under Cassidy wrote: ‘The insurgents did not think our men would fight against black men, but thank God they were deceived’.¹ The rebels’ hopes were badly misplaced and they were fired upon by the West India Regiment soldiers. Many of the rebel leaders were likely killed in this action, which brought an effective end to the rebellion. Yet despite the decisive role of West India Regiment men in Barbados – as James Stephen put it: ‘they were the troops put in advance, and by whose fire the insurgents were dispersed’ – unfavourable reports reached London about their conduct during the rebellion.² They almost certainly originated in the correspondence of local white slaveholders with their metropolitan contacts and agents. Such reports were rebutted by the authorities and there was no evidence of any misconduct among the West India Regiment soldiers.³ Yet, the circulation of such negative reports illustrates the opprobrium that black soldiers faced – even after they had ‘done their duty’ against other people of African descent.

This special issue explores various historical themes around the creation and deployment of armed units of men of African descent by European empires and their successor states. Focusing on both the Americas and Africa from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth century, it encompasses not only the earliest creation of such armed bodies during the ‘Age of Revolution’, but also the increasing European imperial presence in Africa and the violent climax of the ‘Age of Empire’ in the First World War. There is a long history of such
arming in a range of historical and geographical contexts, from ad hoc practices to concerted policies. The focus of this special issue is the establishment of formal, usually permanent, military formations from the American Revolutionary War onward and the social and cultural consequences of such practices.

The arming of people of African descent over the ‘long’ nineteenth century occurred amid a complex interplay of imperial expansion, settlement and colonisation; slavery and slave trading; abolition, formal emancipation and suppressionist policies; warfare undertaken by, against and between European empires; and anti-colonial revolts, rebellions and civil wars. This context offers rich comparative opportunities, allowing historians to examine similarities and differences in how soldiers of African descent were viewed, treated and deployed. For example, soldiers from North Africa served France in the Crimean War (1853–1856), as well as in a series of subsequent European and colonial campaigns, yet a request from one of Britain’s West India Regiments to be sent to the Crimea was rejected. During the First World War, almost half-a-million soldiers from Africa served in the French forces (in addition to colonial settlers of European descent), while the British authorities were much more reticent about using black soldiers, particularly against white enemies.

Armed units made up of men of African descent played a significant role in the history of European expansionism and were often vital for the maintenance and extension of their empires, be that through suppressing rebellions in slave and post-slave societies (as West India Regiment troops did in Barbados, 1816; Demerara, 1823; and Jamaica, 1865) – or participating in frontier wars and punitive expeditions, such as those against the Asante Empire over the course of the nineteenth century. Yet, their presence and service could serve to undermine the ideological basis for imperialism, not least by revealing the limitations on the white manpower available for military tasks or the apparent vulnerability of white personnel to disease, especially in the tropical environments of Africa and the Americas. Such facts on the ground ran contrary to ideas about white superiority that were central to European imperialism in the long nineteenth century, and in this way the employment of black soldiers could create or reveal tensions and contradictions within the imperial project.

Indeed, the arming of men of African descent by European powers was often controversial. White colonists in those societies where the soldiers were based were often strongly opposed to the policy. For instance, the Barbados Assembly feared that if enemy troops landed on the island they would easily turn the arms of these black troops, against the inhabitants of their native spot, not only to the murdering of their former owners, and the destruction of their estates and properties, but to the wrenching the dominion of the colony out of the hands of the British Empire.

These sentiments were most intense where racial slavery was the dominant institution, central to the economy and to colonial culture itself. Such opposition reflected not only the difference between the priorities of military and civilian
interests, but also between metropolitan and peripheral perspectives that would become increasingly at odds over the issue of slavery from the late eighteenth century onwards. In the face of such resistance and the broader tensions that arming men of African descent provoked, limitations were usually placed on how black soldiers operated. Efforts were made to ensure that supposedly more reliable white soldiers were available, perhaps out-numbering their black comrades-in-arms who were garrisoned in out-of-the-way and unhealthy spots and used in minor colonial campaigns or conditions deemed unsafe for white regulars. Crucially, the black soldiers were led by white officers and there were limited opportunities for their promotion. In this way, wider racial hierarchies were maintained within and reinforced by the organisation of these military units, which became a synecdoche of emerges.

The preceding discussion points to one of the central issues that emerge from the history of arming men of African descent by European empires and their successor states that is explored in this special issue: the potentially ambiguous and contradictory status that these martial figures occupied. After all, raised from ‘alien’ populations or those under colonial rule, they were used in the maintenance and expansion of empire, sometimes against their ‘own’ populations. Such contradictions were particularly apparent when enslaved men provided the bulk of forces thus raised, leading scholars to talk about the ‘paradox’ or ‘oxymoron’ of military slavery, something that Roger Buckley described evocatively as ‘Slaves in Red Coats’. Even after these arming practices were no longer entangled with slavery, contradictions remained around the use of and reliance on black soldiers in social formations that were characterised by a strong white supremacist. Their intended military role in disciplined, regular units also sat uneasily with white racist stereotypes of people of African descent as either dishonourable cowards incapable of serving as soldiers, or as savage brutes who were, therefore, uncontrollable and dangerous.

At the heart, then, of the white arming of black men is what can be termed ‘martial liminality’: these men occupied a series of ideological thresholds – between enslaved and free, colonised and coloniser, civilised and savage, friend and foe. Like other liminal groups in slave and post-slavery societies, such as free people of colour, poor whites and people of ‘mixed race’, they occupied a position of ‘in-betweenness’ and were often subject to projects of racial reinscription intended to put or keep them in their place. Indeed, many of the practices and discourses associated with the arming of men of African descent – some of which are discussed in this special issue – can be understood as attempts to manage their liminal status.

**The articles**

Most of the contributors to this special issue participated in a two-day conference ‘Armed people of African descent: Africa and the Americas, 1750–1900’
at the University of Warwick in 2017. The conference was one product of a four-year project, ‘Africa’s Sons under Arms’, funded by the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council.\(^\text{10}\) What particularly pleased us, as conference organisers, was the intellectual dynamism of the exciting new academic talents undertaking cutting edge research on this topic. Each of the authors clearly benefitted from the roundtable discussions that allowed them to place their own work within wider currents and contexts. The eight articles presented here range from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, and encompass the Caribbean, North and South America, Europe, and West and East Africa. Gary Sellik’s article is the earliest of the pieces chronologically, and deals with a little-known unit of black soldiers emerging from the latter stages of the American Revolutionary War – the Carolina Corps. After impressing British military commanders, the unit was evacuated from Charleston with the rest of the British army in 1782 and posted to the West Indies. Sellik’s careful reading of Colonial and War Office records establishes how the Carolina Corps conceived of themselves as fundamentally British. Alongside the claim of Britishness came a demand for certain rights and privileges, as well as an assertion of superiority over other black men in the Caribbean, both enslaved and free. Ultimately the proactive stance of the Carolina Corps successfully secured their unique status in the West Indies.

The transplanting of military ideas and tactics, from Africa to the Americas, is the focus of Manuel Barcia’s comparative study of Cuba and Bahia. Often overlooked in the study of armed men of African descent is the extent to which they armed themselves rather than being armed by others. Enslaved men not only used their prior knowledge (usually gained in Africa) to fashion weapons, but also creatively adapted both weaponry and tactics to make the most of their new circumstances and environment. In Cuba and Bahia, slave revolts were events that many people experienced but, by contrast, the North American mainland was unusual for the infrequency of servile insurrections. In the only article in the special issue to concentrate exclusively on the United States, Rosalyn Narayan gauges the reaction of US residents to the prospect of Britain using the West India Regiments to foment slave revolts on the mainland. Although the threat from Britain was real enough, and indeed had occurred during the War of 1812, southern slaveholders greatly magnified the capacity of the West India Regiments to undertake this during the antebellum era. This, Narayan argues, reflected their own innermost fears about the risks posed by holding people in bondage.

Turning again to Africa, Sarah Westwood explores the creation of the *tirailleurs sénégalais* in French West Africa. By utilising traditional methods of recruitment for these African corps via a military caste system, French colonial authorities actually operated within the parameters established by Africans over many centuries. Indeed, it was only because such systems already existed that the colonial powers were able to co-opt African military castes for their own ends.
Although the West India Regiments were, at times, one of the largest formally organised corps of black soldiers in the Americas and were certainly the most durable being continuously in service between 1795 and 1927, only two of the articles in the special issue put these British army units centre stage. Much remains to be written about the military achievements of the West India Regiments in the Caribbean and later in Africa, but these two articles instead illuminate hitherto completely unknown, and far more subtle, influences exerted by the Regiments. Music and cricket are often cited as two of the principal outputs of Caribbean culture, but Elizabeth Cooper highlights the vital role the West India Regiments played in development of musical culture and cricket as a national and regional sport. Instead of being imposed from above by arrogant white colonials, Cooper stresses that, in fact, these imperial traits were co-opted and refashioned by the men of the West India Regiments to aid the development of Caribbean identity. The West India Regiments, in this sense, helped to shape Caribbean society from the bottom up. And the influence of the West India Regiments was not only limited to the Caribbean. Melissa Bennett demonstrates how the ‘soft power’ imagery of the West India Regiments was utilised internationally (via the medium of imperial exhibitions and world’s fairs) to project an idea of the West Indies as a successful product of the civilising mission of the empire. Crucially, however, the images and the actual personages of the West India Regiment soldiers were co-opted by the islands themselves to promote inward investment and tourism. The black soldier thus became, somewhat paradoxically, a projection of stability and security in an era of virulent imperial racism.

Michelle Moyd’s case study of German imperial encroachment in East Africa in the later nineteenth century uncovers how trained African soldiers thought of these European interlopers. German incursions used native troops, but were led by white officers, something that could be a site of internal conflict. Moyd demonstrates that the authority usually claimed by whites could sometimes be contested by senior veteran African troops. Military experience was evidently sufficient grounds to challenge established notions of white supremacy.

The climax of the Age of Empire was the First World War, which serves as the backdrop for Anna Maguire’s study of the experiences of the men of the British West Indies Regiment. This new unit, only formed in 1915, served in an auxiliary capacity on the western front, and Maguire explores the gendered responses of the men to being treated differently to white soldiers, and even to those from India. Although not given weapons, the men emphasised to those back home the hazardous nature of the work they did, and it seems clear that overseas service helped to politicise veterans with lasting consequences for West Indian societies.

Taken together, the papers in this special issue explore the martial liminality associated with the arming of men of African descent in relation to three overarching themes. The first is soldierly (self-)identity. Questions concerning the loyalty and reliability of armed men of African descent were common: would
they follow the orders of their white officers or make common cause with the ‘enemy’; would they ‘do their duty’? Indeed, strenuous efforts were made by the military authorities to ensure the loyalty of their men through material and symbolic rewards – including the ‘military spectacle’ of the uniform – as well as violent punishments and the reduction of status. A persistent issue concerns how the soldiers viewed themselves and the extent to which they identified with their officers, or even the state or empire which they served. Michael Craton, for example, saw the men who fought in the West India Regiments as dupes who ‘misguidedly opted for the British imperial cause’. In contrast, Peter Voelz questioned why such men should be expected to demonstrate ‘race-consciousness’ or loyalty to ‘their’ race. After all, soldiers have often used their weapons against their ‘own’ people and it is unclear why soldiers of African descent might be expected to be different.

The answer has much to do with the value attached to resistance to slavery and colonialism, a perspective that can lead black soldiers fighting in the service of European empires and their successor states to be seen as collaborators or even traitors. A difficulty with addressing how they understood their own identity is the lack of sources created by the soldiers themselves for much of the period under question. Instead, other than the testimony gathered in courts-martial, which is not unproblematic, historians are often left to rely on the accounts of external observers or their officers, who can hardly be deemed objective witnesses, or else on comparing data on the frequency of desertions or mutinies. Some of the papers in this special issue that cover the late nineteenth century and beyond use sources that give real and fresh insight into soldierly self-identities.

The second theme explored here relates to the cultural meanings associated with armed men of Africa descent, or what can be termed their military symbolism. From the perspective of the empires that armed them, these men could stand for the success of the ‘civilising mission’ and the assimilation of racial ‘others’ to imperial culture. Indeed, these units of armed men of African descent and their white officers might serve as a microcosm and idealisation of empire itself. As such, they appeared in exhibitions and fairs, or in advertisements for commodities associated with empire, such as the (in)famous ones used to promote the French cocoa-based breakfast drink, Banania, that feature a Senegalese tirailleur. Yet, other more threatening meanings also accrued around these units, particularly stemming from the idea that they represented a subversion of, or challenge to, white supremacism. This was particularly acute in societies in which racial slavery was a central institution, such as the antebellum South.

The final theme addressed in these papers relates to how armed men of African descent could serve as military intermediaries, standing socially and culturally between colonised and indigenous populations on the one hand, and the apparatus of imperial rule on the other. There has been increasing interest across
a range of fields in the significance of intermediary groups in European empires, such as in the notion of ‘go-betweens’ that has been developed in the history of science. Such figures served to broker knowledge between more-or-less separate European and indigenous worlds and, in so doing, they could serve as conduits for cultural exchange. An issue that emerges from several of the papers here is how armed men of African descent might also serve as go-betweens, be it bringing the techniques and styles of African warfare to the Americas or acting as agents for the creolisation of supposedly European metropolitan cultural forms.

Overall, the articles in the special issue showcase not only the chronological and geographical breadth of the impact of armed men of African descent, but also how much that impact was determined by the men themselves. Although imperial power remained largely in the white hands of a comparatively small number of colonisers, we now understand, more than we ever have before, that this power was sometimes wielded (and occasionally challenged) by black hands.

Notes
1. Private letter, 27 April 1816, CO 28/85, The National Archives, London (TNA).
2. James Stephen, The Slavery of the British West India Colonies Delineated (London: J. Butterworth, 1824), I, 428–29.
3. Bathurst to Leith, 12 June 1816, CO 28/85; Leith to Bathurst, 15 August 1816, CO 318/52, TNA.
4. See, for example, Samson C. Ukpabi, ‘Military Recruitment and Social Mobility in Nineteenth century British West Africa’, Journal of African Studies 2 (1975): 87–107; Roger Norman Buckley, Slaves in Red Coats: The British West India Regiments, 1795–1815 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979); David M. Anderson and David Killingray, eds. Policing the Empire: Government, Authority and Control, 1830–1940 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991); Peter M. Voelz, Slave and Soldier: The Military Impact of Blacks in the Colonial Americas. (New York, London: Garland, 1993); Glenford D. Howe, Race, War and Nationalism: A Social History of West Indians in the First World War (Oxford: James Currey, 2002); Richard Smith, Jamaican Volunteers in the First World War: Race, Masculinity and the Development of National Consciousness (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004); Christopher L. Brown and Philip D. Morgan, Arming Slaves: From Classical Times to the Modern Age (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006).
5. James E. W. S. Caulfeild, One Hundred Years’ History of the 2nd Batt. West India Regiment from Date of Raising 1795 to 1898 (London: Forster Groom & Co., 1899), 109.
6. See, for example, F. Guerra, ‘The Influence of Disease on Race, Logistics and Colonization in the Antilles’, Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene 49 (1966): 23–35; David Patrick Geggus, Slavery, War and Revolution: The British Occupation of Saint Domingue, 1793–1798 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982); Michael Joseph, ‘Military Officers, Tropical Medicine, and Racial Thought in the Formation of the West India Regiments, 1793–1802’, Journal of the History of Medicine 72, no. 2 (April 2017): 142–65.
7. Minutes of the Barbados Assembly, enclosed in Gov. George Ricketts to General Abercromby, 18 January 1797, WO 1/86, TNA.
8. David Brion Davis, ‘Introduction’; Allen Isaacman and Derek Peterson, ‘Making the Chikunda: Military Slavery and Ethnicity in Southern Africa, 1750–1900’ both in Brown and Morgan, Arming Slaves, 1–13; 94–119; Buckley, Slaves in Red Coats.

9. David Lambert, ‘Liminal Figures: Poor Whites, Freedmen, and Racial Reinscription in Colonial Barbados’, Environment and Planning D: Society and Space 19, no. 3 (2001): 335–50.

10. The ‘Africa’s Sons Under Arms’ research project was funded by AHRC Grant AH/L013452/1. See https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/research/projects/asua/.

11. Scott Hughes Myerly, British Military Spectacle: From the Napoleonic Wars through the Crimea (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

12. Michael Craton, Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 171.

13. Voelz, Slave and Soldier, 7.

14. In his novel, Congo Jack, historian Roger Buckley provides a fictional account of the 1802 mutiny in Dominica among one of the West India Regiments and its aftermath, imagining these events from the perspective of those involved – a perspective unavailable to the historian. See Roger Buckley, Congo Jack (New York: Pinto Press, 1998).

15. See Jan Nederveen Pieterse, White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 85, 162–63.

16. Kapil Raj, ‘Go-Betweens, Travelers, and Cultural Translators’, in A Companion to the History of Science, ed. Bernard Lightman (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2016).

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