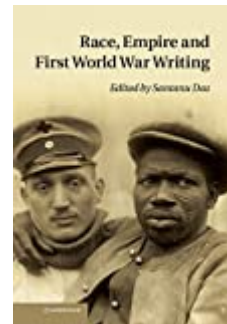




Santanu Das. *Race, Empire and First World War Writing.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 352 S. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-50984-8.



Reviewed by Michael Goebel

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S. Das (Hrsg.): Race, Empire and First World War Writing

There is these days a well-founded reluctance of university presses to publish edited volumes. Too many of them are little more than a fitful hodgepodge rammed in between a dust jacket (as paperback versions of them are dying out even more quickly), out of a misplaced sense of obligation to the demands of conference sponsors or one's own publication record. Those contributions likely to pass a more rigorous reviewing process would often have been better placed in a good journal. Yet the most annoying feature of many edited volumes is their all too frequent lack of methodological or thematic coherence.

By organizing this volume tightly around the topics announced in the title, Santanu Das has managed to elude most of these hazards and rightly found a publisher likely to offer this book its well-deserved publicity. It is all the more remarkable that he has done so while heeding all of the genre's common requirements, such as achieving a balanced mélange of various disciplinary perspectives (ranging from military history to literature), academic standings, and geographic backgrounds. Centering on the themes of empire and race during and after the First World War, the volume's fifteen short chapters ac-

tually add up to something meaningful. In a nutshell, the editor's thoughtful introduction as well as the book as a whole, by leaving enough scope for different perspectives while narrowing them down to a common concern, make a compelling case that WWI had momentous and truly global consequences for how race and colonialism were viewed.

Though focused on the British Empire, the experiences of Chinese laborers (in a chapter by Paul Bailey) and Vietnamese (Kimloan Hill), Senegalese (Joe Lunn) and German East African askari (Michelle Moyd) troops are also considered, as is the war's role for African American literature (Mark Whalan). New Zealand earns two chapters (by Christopher Pugsley and Jock Philips respectively), Australia (Peter Stanley) and Ireland (Keith Jeffery) one each. This unevenness of actors and spatial settings entails that the book's two central analytical categories, race and empire, are not always addressed to the same degree. For instance, race unsurprisingly does not play much of a role in the Ireland chapter, while empire was of little consequence to African Americans and arguably even the Chinese labor corps.

Sometimes the reader gets the impression that *race* is read into a context that perhaps could be better grasped with other categories, such as religion or nation. Heather Jones admittedly well-researched and fascinating comparison of prisoners of war in Germany and Ottoman Turkey, for example, juggles with too many variables to arrive at a persuasive conclusion. Her interpretation that German discourse was especially racialized in part seems to rely on the questionable translation of *Völkler* as *raças* (p. 179). Moreover, her two case studies incidentally remind the reader that Germany and the Ottoman lands were empires, too – as was, of course, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which goes unmentioned. Given the volume's quasi-conflation of *empire* with the British and French cases, I wondered whether the term *colonialism* might have proven a more fortunate choice for the title. Still, without agonizing over the conceptualization of its two key categories, the volume as a whole pursues sufficiently defined interests for its contributions to speak to each other.

There are two areas where the book makes a valuable contribution to the scholarship. The first one is the history of European racism. As the chapter by Christian Koller demonstrates with particular clarity, both the Allied and the Central Powers initially were anxious about the deployment of non-white colonial troops on European soil, since they feared that this might undermine global racial hierarchies and notions of European superiority and the *civilizing mission*. However, on the British and especially French side, such fears were gradually overshadowed by discourses that oscillated between exoticization, infantilization and an exaltation of these troops' supposed bravery and allegedly naïve loyalty to their European masters. Such attitudes, as Dominick Dendooven and Alison Fell reveal, were partially shared by European civilians, for many of whom the war offered the first opportunity of contact with non-Europeans. On

the German side, on the other hand, a strongly racist propaganda prevailed, which depicted non-white troops as *barbaric*.

The second area is that of anti-colonialism and nationalism outside Europe. Especially the pieces in the book's first part, but also Richard Smith's excellent chapter on the long-term repercussions of Jamaican participation, highlight the dynamics through which the war strengthened anti-colonial and nationalist discourses throughout the European overseas empires. After a recruitment process fuelled by promises towards colonial peoples, the war engendered a sense that Britain and France had, by drawing on colonial troops, incurred a *blood debt* that should be repaid through some sort of recognition of colonial peoples' rights as citizens. The chapters on Australia, New Zealand and Ireland constitute a welcome complementary perspective on this story, as they show that these countries' participation in the war was driven in good measure by imperial loyalty, while also fostering a sense of national distinctness from the motherland.

On occasion, I wished for even more communication between the chapters. For instance, while Stanley paints (white) Australian society and soldiers as distinctly racist, the preceding essay by Pugsley, based mainly on a few film reels, argues that New Zealand portrayals of Maori soldiers in the war were connoted positively. A few thoughts on whether this contrast is owed to the chapters' different approaches (which I would suspect) or fundamental differences between Australian and New Zealand attitudes to race would have been welcome. It is unfortunate, therefore, that the volume lacks a proper conclusion to draw together its many fascinating threads. Such minor quibbles aside, the book makes a highly compelling case for taking into account the extra-European colonial world, as we reassess the importance of WWI with one hundred years of hindsight.

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