

How the government's portrayal differed from Black activists' portrayal of the African American soldiers in the second world war

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Abstract:

This article is about the difference between the portrayal from black activists and the government of the African American soldiers in the Second World War, focusing on the real situation of human right of the African Americans during the second world war, when the United States was still in the Jim Crow System. Through comparing the film made by the War Department, which represent the government and the pamphlet made by black activists which call for equal rights, we can have a comprehensive understanding of the Black's human right.

Keywords: human rights, the African American soldiers, the Second World War, portrayal.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The second world war served as one of the most important events in human history, in which the allied nations including the UK, the Soviet Union and the USA finally defeated the Nazis. During the war, hundreds of thousands [1] of African Americans served in the army and contributed to the final victory. Despite the contribution they have made, they were in a strange position: on one hand, they were risking their lives fighting against Nazi racism, as thousands of them sacrificed their life for the victory; on the other hand, their home country, where they were born and raised in, was itself still deeply racist in which Black people were still separated but "equal" (as it was still in the same era of Jim Crow). Thus, contrary to the modern perception that all the soldiers in US army, including African American soldiers, have one unified identity as "heroes", this dilemma was in fact handled differently by government propagandists, who were eager to celebrate the victory of Army, and by the Black activists, who hoped the war might be a chance for gaining more freedom and equality. This paper argues that while government sources portrayed Black soldier as heroes who were equal to those white soldiers, especially the officers. Black activists pointed out many ways in which Black soldiers in fact were still oppressed by racial inequities inside and outside the military.

1.2 Dilemma

During the second world war, the United States was still in the Jim Crow system, the system enforcing racial seg-

regation, in which African Americans could be separated and discriminated legally by the white. They were not really having freedom and equality at that time. In Leiker's 2012 article "Freedom, Equality, and Justice for All? : The U.S. Army and the Reassessment of Race Relations in World War II", Leiker pointed out that the African Americans were thought to have low intelligence since they didn't do well in the test of the army. As a result, there's little opportunity for them to become military officers.[2] However, the fact is that the reason of having a low score was simply not having good education. Though being discriminated, there were still hundreds of thousands of African Americans took part in military actions both as soldiers and logistics workers, like the famous 761st tank group. Despite the contribution they have made, they were separated and were prevented from taking part in celebrations after victory. Moreover, they were even accused for sexual assault towards more than 1000 German females in Stuttgart incident although people soon discovered that it was not those African American soldiers who did this crime.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Exploring the real situation

Many historians have done research on the real situation for African Americans in the army and the society during the World War II. In Leiker's 2012 article "Freedom, Equality, and Justice for All?: The U.S. Army and the Reassessment of Race Relations in World War II", he argues that these African Americans were fighting for democracy when they were living in an undemocratic society, writing that "The United States Armed Forces, to fight for World

Democracy, is within itself undemocratic.” [3] Leiker further pointed out that “the role of the Negro in the armed services must be publicized more than it is” because “the war must be interpreted in such a way that the Negro feels he is fighting for something, too—a strengthening of democracy at home and abroad, greater rights under the law, a greater opportunity to improve his conditions.” [4] This can tell the reason why the government’s portrayal of the African American soldiers was almost all positive and exaggerated.

Similarly, Rolland-Diamond’s 2013 article “‘A Double Victory?’ Revisiting the Black Struggle for Equality during World War Two” states that Black people were in a difficult situation to gain a double victory: victory against nazi and racist in the United States. They were facing too much resistance to find jobs and get the equality in the society such as the discrimination in both the factories, schools and army. Focusing on the Harlem riot in 1935 in which a Black soldier was killed by a policeman, Diamond shows that the real situation African Americans, especially the soldiers were in.

2.2 Defect

Although both scholars have done comprehensive research to address the inequality of African Americans in the army, they didn’t focus on the difference between the government portrayal and Black activists’ portrayal of the same group of people. In this essay, I will therefore be focusing on popular and public sources in both cases aiming to understand the real situation of the African Americans, especially the soldiers rather than the experiences of simply white soldiers. Specifically, I will be looking at a pamphlet by an important Black leader, juxtaposing that with a popular film, and associated advertisements, produced by the American government. Since these two sources each represent a specific kind of community, I will also compare two sets of sources in order to understand how these two communities offered substantially different accounts of race and the war effort.

2.3 Primary sources

I have two primary sources respectively represent the government and Black activists’ portrayal on African American soldiers. The 1944 movie was made by the war department called the Negro Soldier which was very popular during the war among the African Americans since it was only shown in Black cinemas. It was in the scene of a church where the Black priest stated that the Black had made achievements and called on people to join the army by describing the meaningfulness to win their own victory leading to freedom and equality. On the contrary, the 1941 pamphlet was called “Old Jim Crow Has Got To Go” written by Henry Winston, a Black activist who call for

equality for all the African Americans, in which he pointed out that the Black men were still oppressed everywhere and were treated differently. They couldn’t find jobs even if thousands of jobs had been made in war factories. They were also prevented from having good job training; and even if they were well-skilled, they were still rejected to work simply because of the skin color.

2.4 Analysis

Firstly, in Winston’s pamphlet, all these race policies that were unequal were described to be ‘Hitlerite’ [5]. That also happened in the army where they fought bravely but were rejected to be called heroes and treated equality as the white. Henry Winston proved this using the statement issued from the White House through the President’s secretary Stephen Early, in which it said that “This policy has proven satisfactory over a long period of years, and to make changes would produce situations destructive to morale and detrimental to preparations for national defense. For similar reasons the War Department does not contemplate assigning colored reserve officers other than those of the medical corps and chaplains to existing Negro combat units of the regular army.” This statement described the Jim Crow system as satisfactory and kept this system in the army, which was definitely continuing the inequality of the African Americans. Thus, we can find out that the although the Black activists like Henry Winston supported the African American soldiers to fight for the United States against Nazi, they still pointed out that they were not as equal as the government said. Therefore, they needed to spend more effort on achieving the final equality.

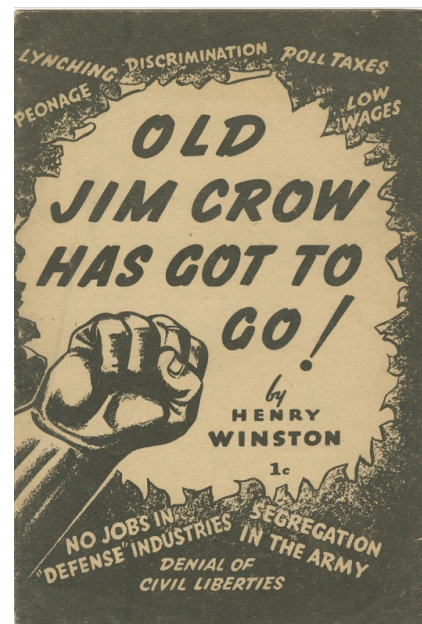


Figure1: Old Jim Crow Has Got to Go, the first page of the pamphlet

On the contrary, the government portrayals are about the famous movie: the Negro Soldier, which was made by the war department in which the African American soldiers' great characters were shown.

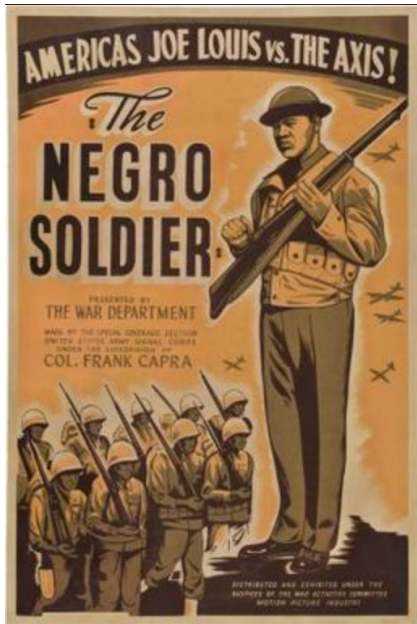


Figure 2: The Negro Soldier, the advertising page of the film

These sources are Program for The Negro Soldier from the war department and the movie itself. The movie described the life in the army speaking in the mother's tone of a new army officer [6] in which army life was described to be tough but meaningful and rewarding. They were doing the same training as white and were treated by the best doctors in the country. After she finished reading the letter, there's a scene that the mother showed that she was really proud of her son who joined the army. The others near the mother acted like they were jealous of the mother for having such an excellent son who would become an officer. This can definitely promote the young Black to join the army to get recognition of their families and to make them proud. In this movie, the relationship between the Black and the white was described to be equal in different fields like medicine, music, sports like the famous Black runner Jesse Owens' winning in Berlin Olympics [7] and the contribution of the African American soldiers were praised. [8] The African American's accomplishment and pride towards their race was shown in the movie and patriotism was aroused. All of these was to promote the African Americans to join the army by giving them the sense that they were all citizens of the United States with the responsibility to protect their homeland and to become heroes. Through comparing these two sources, we can find out the difference between those two portrayals that

the government's portrayal mainly focused on what the African American soldiers could do and gain in the army while neglected the discriminations the Black were suffering, which made serving in the army seem to be attracting to those African Americans. On the contrary, the black activists mainly focused on the inequality the Black were facing and thus called on every Black man to stood up, joined the army and fought for a double victory against the Nazi and inequality in the society.

3. Conclusion

All those comparisons shows that since the Black activists and the government had different expectation of the African Americans, they had the totally different portrayal of those soldiers. The government, on one hand, described African Americans as brave, equal soldiers can arouse their patriotism and the enthusiasm to join the army to fight against German racism using films like "The Negro Soldier". The Black activists, on the other hand, pointed out that the negro soldiers weren't equal at all, both in society and army. They called on the soldiers to beat Nazi while fight for equal rights at the same time for a "double victory". Although having praised those negro soldiers, the government still seemed like to use them only as tools to withstand the threat of the Nazi by describing them to be heroes only for more support instead of really appreciating them. Thus, it's not surprising that those Black activists exposed the real situation of the Black and call on every African Americans to stand up and end the unequal system. This is an urgent reminder that when discussing disenfranchised groups, we should always look for writings from those that are inside the group itself, rather than focusing only on the views of the powerful majority.

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