The Borden administration adopted a Janus-faced approach to African Canadian involvement in the Great War. On the one hand, the Canadian government urgently needed men on the front lines. On the other hand, remembering the clamor witnessed over black immigration in the years prior to the war, the Borden government feared objections to an integrated militia from white Canadians. In other words, the federal government suspected that the discontent registered in the Prairies over black migration was neither fixed in the West nor just a riposte to an influx of foreign-born blacks. Rather, the deep-seated resolve against black enlistees voiced by white commanding officers and soldiers alike clearly demonstrates that negrophobia had become a ruling concern for the federal government, this time in its armed forces.

In a 1916 poll of the Department of Militia and Defence, commanding officers repeatedly opposed black enlistment, insisting that black would-be soldiers were unsuitable for the mission. They posited that climatic unsuitability and a detrimental effect on white recruitment disqualified African Canadian men from service.¹³ Time and again, commanding officers ridiculed the idea of blacks’ service in the militia, as evidenced by the 173rd’s commander, who resolved, “Sorry we cannot see our way to accept [Negroes] as these men would not look good in Kilts.”¹⁴ The commander of Toronto’s 95th battalion wrote his superiors, “Thank goodness this batt. is over strength and does not therefore need a ‘colored’ platoon, nor even a colored drum-major!”¹⁵ In truth, all but three of Canada’s officers commanding recruitment zones vetoed the enlistment of blacks in the armed forces, citing that the “introduction of a coloured platoon into our Battalion would undoubtedly cause serious friction and discontent . . . [and] would be detrimental to recruiting throughout the Country.”¹⁶ In a rare instance of disarming candor, one lieutenant colonel prophetically remarked, “I would object very strongly to accepting the Platoon mentioned for the reason that the prejudice against the negroiss [sic] in this country is extremely bitter.”¹⁷

Faced with a diminishing number of recruits yet in desperate need of more soldiers, the Canadian government passed the 1917 Military Service Act, a deeply unpopular law especially among French Canadians. The new law mandated conscription and as a consequence forced commanding officers to accept black enlistees, their objections notwithstanding.¹⁸ After conferring with the British war office in London and being assured that “these niggers
do well in a Forestry Corps and other Labour units,” the Borden government resolved that “our authorities . . . might be induced to try the experiment” of pooling black conscripts into a segregated battalion.\textsuperscript{19} Thus began the No. 2 Construction Battalion, Canada’s experiment in Jim Crow military service.

In a strange twist of events, Canadian military commanders who had earlier resisted the introduction of blacks in the military now complained to headquarters that since the draft “a large number of coloured men” of military service age had absconded to Michigan and other American border states.\textsuperscript{20} They alleged that within months of conscription as many as two hundred African Canadian draft dodgers had escaped to Detroit and New York.\textsuperscript{21} By 1918, the Department of Militia and Defence further worried that “now that America has come into the war, most of these darkies, if they are doing any flocking at all, will flock where the better pay is, namely the American army.”\textsuperscript{22} Lieutenant Colonel Young, a commanding officer in Ontario, dreamed up a solution to Canada’s new problem and explained, “In the ordinary way these men will not come in of their own accord . . . [as] the average negro is rather ‘afraid of the Army.” In language and reasoning reminiscent of antebellum slave catchers, Young stressed that “they have to be sought out,” insisting that “if no effort is made to obtain these men that rightfully belong to us, they will be lost without hope of recovery.”\textsuperscript{23}

Then, in a real turnaround, some Canadian military officials even encouraged singling out African American and West Indian recruits for Canada’s proposed black battalion. In May 1918, the British-Canadian Recruiting Mission in New York reported that “over two thousand black British subjects registered . . . at various depots as willing to serve” in the Canadian armed forces.\textsuperscript{24} In July 1916, the Canadian government had selected Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Hugh Sutherland, a white railroad contractor from Nova Scotia, to head its segregated unit, the No. 2 Construction Battalion. Only months later, Sutherland petitioned his supervisors for permission to round up recruits in the West Indies, confident that he could return with several hundred men, demonstrating that like Canadian railway and steel companies, the Canadian military envisioned the Caribbean as a pool of readily accessible muscle easily herded north to serve Canadian interests.\textsuperscript{25}

In the end, more than six hundred black servicemen defended the British Empire during World War I in Canada’s segregated No. 2 Construction Battalion.\textsuperscript{26} Though estimates place their number at about three hundred, the exact number of foreign-born black enlistees in the Canadian militia is unclear. It is known, however, that the majority of the African American men who fought under the Union Jack were southerners who immigrated to
Canada in the wake of the 1906 Brownsville, Texas, riots and Oklahoma statehood in 1907. They were also the men who had poured into Western Canada during “Prairie Fever,” the 1906–12 homesteading movement. These turn-of-the-century southern African American migrants came of age in a Jim Crow South and learned the full meaning of citizenship upon immigrating to Canada. African American sleeping car porters working in Canada also accounted for many of the foreign-born black servicemen in the Canadian military. They came to the No. 2 Construction Battalion ripened by a decade of trade union insurgency—a fact that would prove central to their experiences as Canadian soldiers.

On 17 March 1917, just one month before Americans joined the war, the No. 2 Construction Battalion—a multinational company of African Canadians, West Indians, and African Americans dressed in Canadian military uniform—paraded through Dartmouth, a suburb of Halifax. Mabel Saunders, an African Canadian girl at the time, remembered, “I saw that parade on Prince Albert Road. I was standing by my gate when they came marching by with their chests stuck out and the Band playing. I can’t tell you exactly how many [there were], but there was a large crowd of soldiers marching up the street.” Saunders recalled that “everybody was watching: Black people and white people, waving their hands, cheering and clapping” as black soldiers “proudly march[ed] off to war,” proving to their communities that “they were men the same as everybody else.”

This sense of pride in manhood and community became extremely important to African Canadian communities, who bore the dysgenic cost of war just like their white counterparts without always winning the rewards for loyal service. On 28 March, the No. 2 Construction Battalion sailed to Liverpool on board the SS Southland, a segregated troop ship specially commissioned by the Department of Militia and Defence in order to avert “offending the susceptibility of other [white] troops.”

If African Canadian great expectations for the war peaked on that March day in 1917, the dismal outcome of demobilization in Great Britain toppled hope that after the war life for blacks in Canada would improve. For Canadian servicemen stationed in Europe, 1919 was the winter of their discontent. The Ministry of Overseas Forces announced armistice on 11 November 1918, yet a quarter of a million Canadian soldiers still languished in Europe at year’s end. War-worn Canadian servicemen had one wish: prompt return to their families and loved ones in Canada. The Great War took a great toll on Canadian lives. More than 200,000 men had fallen at Ypres, Festubert,
season of rioting, Canadians gave those soldiers a cooler welcome upon their return in late spring 1919.

Back in Europe, General Arthur Currie warned Prime Minister Borden of low morale in Canada’s demobilization camps. Senseless bureaucracy, cramped housing in makeshift tents, poor nutrition, irregular disbursement of wages, outbreak of influenza, fuel shortages, biting cold, unyielding rain—and worse still, boredom—created an explosive climate in Canada’s six military compounds surrounding Liverpool.35 Just one fortnight after armistice, General Currie wrote the minister of overseas forces, “I cannot dwell too strongly on this matter of discipline. I know its value.” The general cautioned that discipline had “been the foundation of our strength . . . and the source of our power.” He stressed that this discipline “is worth preserving for the national life of Canada after the war” and beseeched Prime Minister Borden, “For God’s sake do not play with it, for you are playing with fire.”36 The men were jumpy, and Canadian military commanders on the scene braced themselves for a difficult winter.

Gunfire broke out within a month of Currie’s forewarning. A riotous mood descended on Canada’s military camps much like the rain clouds that kept the region soaked and muddied. Just days after Christmas, Canadian soldiers ransacked “tin towns,” overpriced shops encircling the Witley and Bramshott camps. On 2 January 1919, Canadian and British soldiers exchanged fire outside Ripon and shot 150 rounds at each other.37 An investigation into the matter revealed that engineers and railway troops had led the brawl. Canadian military commanders had an even harder time controlling their younger soldiers. Kinmel Park, the largest military depot and last stop in Great Britain before boarding for Canada, housed railway troops, the Young Soldiers Battalion, and the Forestry Corps, including the No. 2 Construction Battalion made up entirely of black Canadian servicemen.

Kinmel Park proved a recipe for disaster. With shipments stopped by striking British mariners, dockers, and coal miners, demobilization had come to a virtual standstill by January 1919. Recruits kept pouring into Kinmel hoping that when ships moved again they would be well stationed for prompt return home. The Department of Militia and Defence also pursued an ill-advised policy of dismantling platoons at Kinmel and reorganizing the men into units based on regional Canadian military divisions.38 Never before demobilization at Kinmel had the Canadian military peppered its white units with so many black soldiers. Sir Edward Kemp, minister of overseas forces, fought the plan in vain. He admonished Prime Minister Borden that when “you mix up all kinds of combatants and noncombatant troops into drafts to fit demo-
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bilization necessities in Canada and these men are held pending shipping arrangements, they become most difficult to control.”

The conflict, when it came on 7 January, exploded as a racial riot. When Edward Sealy, a black sergeant major, arrested an unruly white soldier and charged him to a “colored escort,” fighting ensued. A band of white officers went on a rampage, attacking any black serviceman unfortunate enough to cross their path. Then, enraged white soldiers assaulted a unit of Sealy’s men on route to their baths. The race riot left soldiers on both sides of the color line nursing wounds that would not heal for some time. Disturbances at Kinmel had barely been quelled before a black soldier became the focus of another riot in nearby Witley.

White Canadian servicemen rioted their way through the winter and spring of 1919, acting out their frustrations on black Canadian soldiers. Canceled shippings and beer shortages in March set off another three days of rioting at Kinmel in which eight to twenty-seven soldiers lost their lives and up to seventy-three landed in hospital. The Toronto Daily Star’s front-page headline declared that Kinmel camp soldiers had exploded in rage when 4,800 “Colored Troops [were] Shipped to the States while Canadians Are Held” in England. Canadian newsmen rationalized that white Canadian servicemen rampaged “due to preference being given to United States negro troops in returning home.” The Daily Star interviewed a veteran who confirmed, “When I was at Rhyl the men knew about the big ships carrying Americans and were very sore... There was a lot of discontent [and] men I know personally were about to riot.” The same soldier warned, “Find the man who was responsible for taking the Olympic, Aquatania, and Mauretania off the Canadian transport route and you will find the man responsible for the Rhyl riots.”

Frustrated with Americans for taking control of returning ships, this veteran’s response demonstrates how black men became scapegoats for the perceived affront to white Canadians, a reaction that would become more prevalent during the interwar years.

The threat of ten years’ imprisonment at a hard labor camp or death by firing squad did little to discourage future lawlessness. Soon after Easter, three more battalions raided Witley canteens and surrounding small businesses. In early May, fighting moved to Seaford, temporary home to engineers and machine gunners returning from France. The Montreal Gazette headlined that an “Outbreak Started over [the] Arrest of a Colored Soldier” on the evening of 10 May. A white guard on picket duty harassed private George Beckford, a black conscript, and demanded that “he adopt a more soldierly demeanour in public.” Beckford, who worked as a sleeping car
porter and chauffeur in Winnipeg before the war, disregarded the sentry’s orders. Tensions mounted and fists flew before Beckford’s eventual arrest. News of the fight quickly spread to the rest of the camp; before long, a crowd of one thousand servicemen gathered demanding Beckford’s release. They eventually stormed the jail and stole the black soldier away to hospital, where he remained under examination overnight. Rioting continued well into the next day; seventy more men were arrested and fined for the outbreak before calm settled over Seaforth. Although soldiers publicly lamented the slow pace of demobilization, their frustrations, racialized once again, quickly turned on black soldiers. The Canadian commanding officer on the scene wired headquarters with news of the recent unrest, warning that “if our men get these wild ideas [here], they will carry them to Canada.”

The winter’s riots brought shame to the Canadian armed forces, especially since British and American newspaper reports drew attention to Canada’s racial skirmishes. Booze, boredom, and Bolshevism, reasoned the Canadian press, explained their soldiers’ disgraceful behavior. It seemed as though querulous servicemen always turned to liquor during the revolts. During Kinmel’s March affray, soldiers reportedly jumped a convoy of beer, busted open barrels, and sopped up the gushing brew in “firepails, saucepans, and mess tins.” Such reports scandalized British House member Sidney Robinson, who posited to then secretary of state for the imperial forces Winston Churchill “that had there been no liquor” in the camps, “there would have been no disturbance.” Churchill defended the troops’ time-honored right to grog, proposing instead that “far from proving a cause of disturbance, [alcohol] is believed to have had the contrary effect, as there was much discontent before [soldiers] were provided with regular supplies” of liquor.

The true source of the problem, contended The *Halifax Morning Chronicle*, was boredom. Canadian armed forces stockpiled in England without wages or diversions. The Canadian government had fallen behind on its daily stipend of a shilling, leaving the men unable to pay for local entertainment. The Khaki University, established during the war to help enlistees earn an education, the Salvation Army, and chaplain services provided options few soldiers found compelling on a Saturday night. Without wages, even small-time gambling fell off, leaving the men without other forms of recreation. The riots, rationalized the *Morning Chronicle*, seduced otherwise law-abiding citizens “who simply indulged in a weakness for horseplay, while others were inflamed by liquor.” The Borden government and Canadian newsmen also maintained that foreign disease and ideas had spawned the riots. Acting Prime Minister Thomas White explained away the violence at Kinmel before
Left: Beckford’s application. Beckford, a sleeping car porter, enlisted on 14 November 1917. He later served as oscp president during World War II (Library and Archives of Canada, RG 150-1992-166-577-2).

Below: World War I veterans from the No. 2 Construction Battalion. Private Cromwell (on the right) registered for the No. 2 Construction Battalion at the age of nineteen and died of tuberculosis in Europe. Private Brown (on the left) also signed up for this battalion. (Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia).
the House of Commons in March and justified the uproar as manifestations of “great privations, hardships and monotony.”

Canadian military commanders overseas flooded British newspapers with articles insisting that riot ring leaders were foreign-born servicemen taken into the Canadian militia. An article in the Times of London entitled “Kimmel Camp Riot: Attack Led by a Russian” blamed the recent turmoil on a Bolshevik cluster contaminating Canadian troops. Convinced that unrest could not have emanated from Canadians themselves, Canadian military officials overwhelmingly court-martialed white men with eastern European and French Canadian names. Court-martial records of the Department of Militia and Defence also reveal that, of the black soldiers arrested during the riots, the overwhelming majority were African American and West Indian railroad service men serving in the Canadian military. This suggests that these railwaymen applied the agency that they had learned on the rails to their defensive strategies in Europe. Given the stern reprimand they were sure to receive, working-class military men understood the cost of their defiance.

Canada’s demobilization debacle exposed the country’s preoccupation with race and class to the British Empire and the world. The 1919 Canadian race riots in Liverpool and Wales revealed that, like Great Britain, Australia, South Africa, and the United States, white Canadians were not immune to racism. The Borden government’s decision to favor white skilled workers for early return to Canada—leaving working-class white and nonwhite service men to live out their winter in weather-beaten diseased British military camps—made clear that the Great War had done little to equalize Canadian society. By singling out French Canadians, immigrants, and purported Bolsheviks for its problems abroad, the Canadian government demonstrated that it too adopted knee-jerk red baiting as its solution to postwar social upheaval. Throughout the 1920s, eastern European Canadians, like African Canadians, became the country’s convenient scapegoats for postwar labor unrest, peacetime economic recession, and urban demise.

A new rash of race riots in June presented Canadians with another rationale for insurrection in their armed forces. June proved a menacing month for blacks in Great Britain, particularly for those living in port cities. Throughout World War I, Liverpool and Cardiff experienced a large influx of black workers from Africa, the Americas, and the Caribbean. Demobilization added West Indian, African American, and African Canadian soldiers to the fold. In early June, Britons responded to the presence of black soldiers and black mariners by besieging Arabs and blacks in Liverpool. According to a confidential report produced by Liverpool’s head constable, organized gangs of