

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Garna L. Christian. *Black Soldiers in Jim Crow Texas, 1899-1917*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1995. 223 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-89096-637-2.

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Published on H-South (July, 1995)

In this detailed and illuminating volume from Texas A&M University Press, the Fifty-Seventh in the Centennial Series of the Association of Former Students, Garna L. Christian traces the “little remembered” history of black soldiers in Texas from the end of the Spanish-American War to the entrance of the United States into World War I. Concentrating on confrontations between local whites and black military units, Christian chronicles “the collision of racial discrimination with racial pride that portended the urban riots during and after World War I” (p. xv). Although he focuses strictly on the State of Texas, Christian offers a window from which to view the larger historical question of black participation in the military. In particular, Christian joins others in recent memory by challenging those who have overlooked the accomplishments and hardships of black troops.

While many may be familiar with the infamous Brownsville raid of 1906 and the bloody Houston riot of 1917, Christian’s detective work has unearthed a chain of violence between 1899 and 1917. Over and over again, the same patterns emerge. Whether in Texarkana, Laredo, Rio Grande City, El Paso, Brownsville, San Antonio, Del Rio, Waco or Houston, these Texas communities wanted soldiers for the protection they would offer or for the revenue they would generate. But at the same time, these communities did not want ‘black’ soldiers.

African Americans in uniform posed a double threat to white southern values. In fact, white Texans often objected to the mere presence of black troops. Anglos, Christian argues, “viewed uniformed blacks as an authority symbol challenging white supremacy” (p. 48). More than a mere symbol, however, black soldiers held Jim Crow in obvious contempt and often made direct attacks on legal segregation. These symbolic and direct viola-

tions of southern white customs combined to enrage local communities, creating an environment ripe for explosion.

And explode they did. In East Texas, the return of the 10th Calvary from action in the Spanish-American War “both challenged and stiffened racial sentiment” (p. 15). After black soldiers tore down “colored” signs in train stations, local whites unloaded their rifles into the train transporting the soldiers. Once the soldiers reached their assignments on the south Texas border, they upset the region’s uneasy system of race relations, provoking clashes with local police. Although no serious injuries arose out of controversies in Laredo or Rio Grande City, the strain between police and black soldiers erupted into violence in El Paso. After local officials had imprisoned two blacks for drunkenness and disorderly conduct, a group of armed men attempted to free the prisoners and, in the process, killed two people. Although the prosecution could present virtually no evidence, a jury eventually convicted one soldier of murder and sentenced him to life at hard labor.

These early incidents, however, pale in comparison to the violence that erupted in 1906. In the early 1970’s, John D. Weaver and Ann J. Lane brought to light the tragedy of the 1906 Brownsville raid. In a miscarriage of justice, the federal government discharged 167 black troops when the soldiers refused to break a supposed “conspiracy of silence.” While Christian does not alter our understanding of the Brownsville raid itself, he adds to the tragic legacy of Brownsville by discovering that the memories and fear created by Brownsville continued to dog the steps of other black soldiers in Texas. In particular, Christian argues that the court-martial of Cpl. Edward L. Knowles in mid-1907 could be directly traced to



the fallout of the Brownsville raid. "Convicted on questionable and perhaps contrived evidence," Christian intones, "[Knowles'] nation never conceded him an opportunity for reenlistment or considered a posthumous honorable discharge" (p. 91).

After Brownsville, tension between black soldiers and local whites became more frequent and more violent. Weary of the ramifications of an incident in their city, white San Antonions worked to defuse racial anxiety. Although soldiers in San Antonio entered town and broke Jim Crow laws, white officials did not react with direct confrontation. Owing to "enlightened self-interest," white San Antonions used political and military connections to get the soldiers transferred out of the city. Other cities, though, did not possess the sophisticated self-interest of San Antonio and resorted to violence. In Del Rio, a confrontation between townspeople and black soldiers resulted in the death of one African American soldier at the hands of a Texas Ranger. In Waco, black soldiers and local whites clashed over the sanctity of Jim Crow in the street. Although no one was seriously hurt in the ensuing violence, the disgust for Jim Crow evidenced by the black soldiers and the hostility towards armed blacks displayed by the whites foreshadowed the more deadly riot that occurred only a few days later in Houston. Beginning with yet another incidence of police brutality, a murderous mob of perhaps one hundred angry black soldiers took to the streets of Houston. Not until seventeen whites had been killed and martial law imposed was order restored. In the aftermath, the white community sated their need for revenge by securing swift and vengeful punishment.

The strength of Christian's book lies in the author's attention to detail and thorough research in federal, state, and local records. A workmanlike style gives careful attention to each incident. Christian is not afraid to draw conclusions in his narrative but is candid when the evidence conflicts. Although the organization of the book is at times confusing (one of the ten chapters is only 4 pages), readers will also appreciate a useful conclusion that brings together some of the principle themes running throughout the text.

While Christian's book is a solid contribution to both southern and African American history, he leaves several important questions unanswered. For example, although Christian argues that whites saw blacks in uniform as a sign of resistance to white supremacy, he offers far too little on the opinions of local African Americans to the black soldiers. Did blacks in Waco, Houston, and San Antonio see these soldiers as brothers in arms or as a disruptive element that would make life harder for them after they were gone? Christian hints that local blacks looked up to these soldiers for their ability to strike back at segregation but he offers little in the way of proof. Second, by allocating each city a chapter in his book, Christian seems to acknowledge the diversity of Texas cities. But, his analysis offers little help to readers hoping to distinguish why certain cities acted quite differently from others.

These criticisms aside, Christian makes an important contribution to the literature of African American resistance during the age of segregation. Black soldiers in Texas opposed Jim Crow both directly by tearing down "colored" and "white" signs or refusing to sit in the back of the trolley, and indirectly by wearing a uniform that suggested black assertiveness and authority. More importantly, black soldiers often refused to back down when abused by whites. Even when their actions had begun a cycle of violence, and even amidst one of the most oppressive periods in African American history, black soldiers continued to insist that they would not tolerate the southern racial caste system. "These military activists," proclaims Christian, "anticipated the later civil rights movement" (p. 173). Indeed, they did more than "anticipate" the civil rights movement. These soldiers were part of a tradition of resistance, as Vincent Harding in *"There is a River"* documents, that dated backwards in time to slavery and formed a continuous part of the African American struggle for freedom.

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Citation: William D. Carrigan. Review of Christian, Garnal L., *Black Soldiers in Jim Crow Texas, 1899-1917*. H-South, H-Net Reviews. July, 1995.

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