

FOREWORD

Humble as we in Trinidad are in the sphere of the world, we nevertheless must pray fervently that the tide of war carries the Allies to victory”, wrote the editor of the *People*, a left-wing, pro-labour weekly in the British colony of Trinidad and Tobago soon after the surrender of France, when Britain stood virtually alone against the Axis powers. But a few months later, he insisted that Britain should make her war aims clear, especially in relation to India and the colonies: “a bold and clear-cut statement of war aims intended to bring about the democratisation of the Empire. . . . We cannot continue to fight for freedom and democracy while not enjoying the fullest benefits.” These editorials probably reflected the general viewpoint of “progressive” men and women in the British Caribbean at the time, and in the region’s French, Dutch and American colonies. But while World War II was a universal catastrophe, which caused broadly similar difficulties throughout the region, comparative analysis reveals unique and individual experiences.

These experiences are explored in this valuable collection. While nine chapters deal with the British Caribbean – four on Trinidad and Tobago (where the editors are based), two on Jamaica, one each on Antigua and St Lucia and one on public health in the subregion – there are also pieces on the Dutch colonies, the French Antilles and Puerto Rico (two), and one on German prisoners of war coming to the Caribbean. (It is especially useful to have English-language chapters on the Dutch and French Antilles, and on the German prisoners of war, particularly since they all summarize a great deal of literature and primary sources in French, Dutch and German.)

Some common themes emerge from these essays, which are mostly concerned with the unique and particular ways in which the war affected the different colonial territories (there are no chapters specifically on the three

independent countries, Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Haiti). One is scarcity: the severe shortages of all imported commodities, but especially food staples, caused by the disruption of shipping and largely by the brilliantly successful German U-boat campaign in the Caribbean throughout 1942.

By coincidence, just before writing this foreword, I read the little known novel *Liana* by the American journalist, writer and war correspondent Martha Gellhorn, originally published in 1944. It emerged, she tells us in an “afterword” to the 1987 edition, from a “lunatic journey” through the Caribbean she made in 1942 with her then husband, Ernest Hemingway. It is set on a small fictional French Caribbean island, probably modelled on Marie-Galante, during 1942–43. And food shortages, the possibility of outright starvation for the people of a small island remote even from Guadeloupe, of which it was a dependency, loom large in the novel. The protagonist/villain Marc Royer, the richest man on the island, takes matters into his own hands towards the end of the book, bullying his fellow sugar planters into making over most of their cane lands to food production, organizing distribution networks, setting compulsory price limits for milk, charcoal and vegetables, and generally getting ready for a period of enforced self-sufficiency. Similar measures, though usually by the colonial authorities rather than by an individual notable, were taken throughout the colonial Caribbean during the war to deal with severe food shortages, as several of the chapters reveal; yet the hardships were real, and the poor were, as ever, especially vulnerable.

Another theme common to many of the chapters is the movement of people within and to the region caused by the war. Many thousands of British and, especially, American servicemen were stationed in the islands with major Allied bases, including Trinidad, St Lucia, Antigua and Puerto Rico. The consequences of this influx are dealt with in several of the chapters here. Civilians flocked to the base islands, especially Trinidad and Puerto Rico, in search of jobs; others went to the Dutch colonies of Aruba and Curaçao to work in the large oil refineries there. Refugees from Europe, evacuees from Gibraltar, survivors from sunken ships, and prisoners of war, especially German and Italian merchant seamen, ended up in various Caribbean colonies, some for the duration of the war. And French Antilleans, stuck in Vichy-ruled Martinique and Guadeloupe after July 1940, went in their hundreds to nearby St Lucia and Dominica, both British colonies, hoping to get to Europe to fight with the Free French forces. Again, the protagonist/hero of *Liana*,

Pierre Vauclain, makes the dangerous night-time journey from the fictional French island, in a small, rickety dinghy, to Dominica in order to fight for *la patrie* in Europe.

Though the islands did not see direct combat, unlike, say, the islands of the Mediterranean, the dangers and horrors of war were brought home to their inhabitants especially by the unrestricted German U-boat rampage of 1942. Several of the chapters discuss the human consequences for the region of this period. Despite the human costs, and the dire shortages of essential food and other commodities, the war brought some benefits to the islanders: tangibly, in improvements in the public health systems of the British colonies, intangibly, in new ideas about identity, nationalism and the right to self-determination at the war's end. War is always an essentially masculine business, but the region's women were swept into its path; some servicing the American and British troops stationed on the Allied bases in time-honoured fashion – and being policed, harassed and blamed for the prevalence of venereal diseases among their clients – while others volunteered for myriad different kinds of war-related services and activities.

This collection gives a rich picture of the ways in which the Caribbean colonies experienced World War II, a period of turmoil, hardship and opportunities – “ravages and rejuvenation”, to quote one of the chapter titles – still remembered by some of the region's older inhabitants. It makes a valuable contribution to the historiography of the twentieth-century Caribbean.

Bridget Brereton
Emerita Professor of History
The University of the West Indies, St Augustine
Trinidad and Tobago