

Discrimination in Canada: No. 2 Construction Battalion and the MS St. Louis



The Struggle to Enlist



When the First World War broke out in 1914, many men across Canada rushed to enlist. Among those volunteers were hundreds of Black men. However, despite being as eager to serve and as able-bodied as the white men, almost every single Black man was rejected strictly due to the colour of their skin. Racist beliefs about the inferiority of Blacks held by many Canadians at the time, including those in charge of military recruitment, made it so few Blacks were accepted.

Some recruiters bluntly told Blacks that this was “a White man’s war” and “we don’t want a checkerboard army.” Worse yet, many White soldiers refused to fight alongside Black soldiers. So, leaders of Black communities across Canada and Whites who did not support anti-Black racism began writing letters to the Minister of Militia and Defence, Sam Hughes, and the governor-general demanding to know why Black men could not enlist and calling for a change.

Creation of No. 2 Construction Battalion



As a result of this advocacy as well as a shortage of military labour units, on July 5, 1916, after almost two years of being denied, Black men were finally permitted to form their own battalion: No. 2 Construction Battalion. However, despite Black men's hopes of fighting on the frontlines alongside their white compatriots, this was to be a non-combat, segregated labour battalion: the men predominantly Black, the commanders White, with only one Black officer, the chaplain.

The battalion's headquarters was initially based in Pictou, Nova Scotia, but relocated to Truro, Nova Scotia in September 1916. Black men from across Canada volunteered to serve a country that not long ago turned them away. Over 600 were accepted, most coming from Nova Scotia, with others from New Brunswick, Ontario, the West, and even some from the United States and the Caribbean. The No. 2 Construction Battalion deployed to Europe on March 28, 1917.

Overseas Service



The men arrived in England on April 7, 1917. Since the group did not meet the 1,049-man requirement for a battalion it was reorganized as a labour company of 500 officers and men and renamed No. 2 Canadian Construction Company. (The rest of the company's personnel remained in England to serve as reinforcements.) On May 21, 1917, its members were sent to support the Canadian Forestry Corps' operations in the Jura Mountains of southeast France.

They cut down trees, moved them to the mills, sawed them into finished lumber, and moved the wood to the railway station. Plus, they did other tasks like operating and maintaining the water and electrical systems that supplied all the camps, using and caring for horses required for hauling lumber, maintaining the roads, and building a logging railway. But, in spite of their contributions, they had to live in segregated camps and without adequate food or medical care.

Significance



The gruelling work of No. 2 Construction Battalion members was essential to Canada's war effort. Lumber they cut provided boards for building and reinforcing trenches on the frontlines which protected troops from enemy fire. It also became railway ties which enabled supplies to keep moving to the front, and was even used to build French fighter aircraft. Thanks to their faithful and disciplined work, the mills produced double the lumber of other comparable units.

This effort was not without its cost. Twenty-three members of the battalion died in Europe, mostly from diseases and illnesses, their lives lost while serving their country. The end of the First World War did not signal an end to Black discrimination in Canada. On July 9, 2022, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau apologized on behalf of the Government of Canada for the racism that members of No. 2 Construction Battalion endured before, during, and after the First World War.

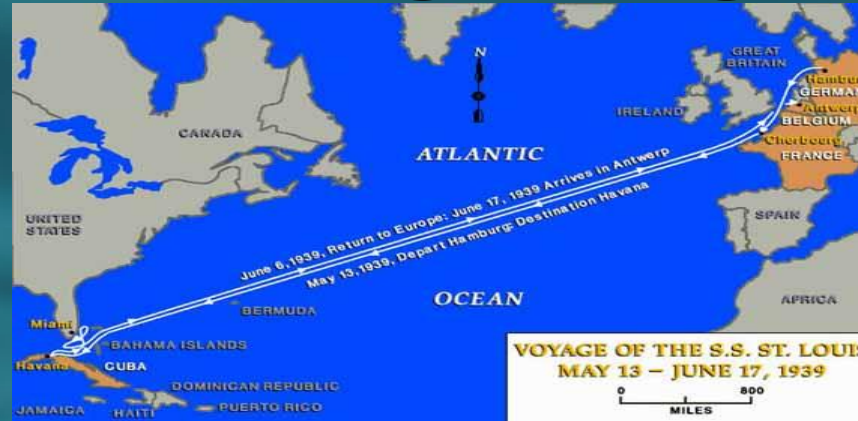
Refugees Flee Nazi Germany



During the 1930s, the Nazis, led by Adolf Hitler, came to power in Germany and began trying to rid the country of people they considered undesirable. These included Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, Roma ("Gypsies"), Slavic peoples (Poles, Russians, and others), Blacks, Communists, homosexuals, and people with mental or physical disabilities. As targets of Nazi brutality, many were forced to become refugees – people who leave their home country to escape persecution.

Jews were particularly desperate to escape the oppression of the Nazi regime because they were hit with discriminatory laws banning them from various professions, forcing them out of schools, and even stripping them of their citizenship. Anti-semitism intensified on the nights of November 9 and 10, 1938, known as the "Night of Broken Glass", when anti-Jewish rioters broke windows, vandalized, looted, and set fire to Jewish businesses, homes, and places of worship.

Seeking Refuge



On May 13, 1939, 937 mostly Jewish refugees boarded the ship, MS St. Louis, in Hamburg, Germany, and set sail for Havana, Cuba. This was to be their voyage to freedom. Nearly everyone possessed an entrance visa to enter Cuba. Since most of the passengers were already on a long waiting list to immigrate to the United States, most intended to live in Cuba temporarily while waiting for their U.S. visas to be approved so they could enter the U.S.

But, when the ship arrived in Havana Harbor on May 27, things took a turn for the worse. The Cuban president had cancelled the passengers' entrance visas in response to pressure by Cuban citizens demanding the government stop admitting refugees to prevent competition for scarce jobs as the country continued to struggle through the Great Depression. Fueling public hostility, Nazi agents in Havana spread rumours that the incoming Jews were Communists and criminals.

Rejection



The Cuban government admitted only 28 passengers. One further passenger, after attempting to commit suicide, was taken to a hospital and allowed to remain in Cuba. Several days of negotiations between the Cuban president, Federico Laredo Bru and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee failed. Ultimately, the MS St. Louis, carrying 907 remaining passengers (one had died of natural causes en route) was ordered by Bru to leave Cuban waters on June 2.

In Toronto, 41 prominent Canadians led by historian George Wrong sent a petition to Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King on June 7 requesting that Canada provide sanctuary for the refugees. But King believed the refugees were not Canada's problem. The Director of Immigration, Frederick Blair agreed. He pointed out that "if these Jews were to find a home [in Canada] they would be followed by other shiploads... the line must be drawn somewhere."

Significance



For many onboard the MS St. Louis, these rejections were a death sentence. Though England, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands made a last-minute agreement on June 13, 1939, with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee to take in the refugees, those who went to France, Belgium, and the Netherlands later came under German occupation when the Nazis conquered western Europe. 254 MS St. Louis passengers were murdered during the Holocaust.

The tragedy of the MS St. Louis can be seen as a cautionary tale about what can happen when refugees are turned away. It demonstrates how important it is for governments to act fast and decisively in response to international refugee crises. On November 7, 2018, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau apologized on behalf of the Government of Canada to the Jewish refugees on the MS St. Louis that Canada turned away, and for the country's anti-semitic immigration policy.