

“The Black Shame” – DICK VAN GALEN LAST

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The term civilisation is only defined in terms of its antithesis: barbarism. The barbarians are the others who rattle at the gates of civilisation. They are easier to identify as barbarians the less they resemble us and more dangerously if they threaten to invade in large masses. For this reason the 'tidal flows of bestial Africans' were gratefully used by Imperial Germany in its war propaganda as a topic to mobilize its own population and public opinion in the rest of the world. By the same token, both sides in the conflict accused each other of barbarism throughout the war.

The First World War fundamentally challenged the inherent social and cultural ideas of the previous century, including traditional views on race. The acute manpower shortages caused by the First World War forced the major western Allied powers to reappraise their policies on the deployment of black (African and African American) troops in conflicts between white European powers. Only France chose to allow black soldiers to fight alongside their white comrade-in-arms. At one extreme, the French defended the idea of black soldiers fighting for 'the Greater France', while at the other, Germany condemned the deployment of 'black savages' in white men's wars as 'die schwarze Schmach' (the black shame). From the second Moroccan Crisis onwards, the German press had portrayed African soldiers as bloodthirsty barbarians. During the First World War, Thomas Mann and Max Weber spoke for many Germans and non-Germans when they expressed indignation that western civilization would be betrayed if the white civilized nations made use of the inferior races. The horror stories about charcoal black Africans cutting off the ears, noses and heads of German soldiers found a large German audience. Over time, race became the common coinage of war propaganda, with stereotypical images appearing in both French and German presses. I will examine the changing image of the black soldier in the different forms of war propaganda, with specific reference to the iconography. The topic as a whole raises a series of important analytical issues. How did the propaganda create or exacerbate

racial prejudices? To what extent has this issue served as the basis for the subsequent history of race relations in the various former imperial states? In France, the positive experiences of the black troops provided an image of Africans as 'grands enfants', (big children), and contributed to the identity formation of the French state. In Germany however, the victors' deployment of black soldiers at a time of defeat and occupation meant that 'racial other' was identified with national defeat and humiliation and was therefore represented as a 'brutal savage'.