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Dunkirk, *Dunkirk*, and the Representation of non-British People

The evacuation of the Allied forces – primarily British and Commonwealth troops, but also tens of thousands of French soldiers as well – from the beaches of Dunkirk, France in 1940 is one of the most captivating stories of the Second World War. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers, encircled by the German army and seemingly doomed to spend the war in captivity, were as if by miracle saved by the Royal Navy, with the famous – if overstated and involuntary – assistance of English pleasure craft and fishing vessels. In total, some 338,226 soldiers were ferried across the English Channel during Operation Dynamo, the official name for this action.¹ The film *Dunkirk*, being a British production, written and directed by a British man, Christopher Nolan, and starring actors from the British Isles, understandably focuses on British perspectives of Operation Dynamo.² However, the historical Dunkirk was never a solely British affair. With regard to the other nationalities and armies that fought alongside the British in 1940, *Dunkirk* is a mixed bag. The French appear only briefly, but their ephemeral presence nonetheless acknowledges their wider involvement and the instrumental role their brave and stubborn defense played in allowing the British and some of their countrymen to withdraw and fight on. Commonwealth soldiers of African origin are featured in crowd scenes in small numbers, though their presence in London in 1940 is historically questionable. Finally, there are only a handful of

¹ Imperial War Museum, “What You Need to Know About the Dunkirk Evacuations.”

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-dunkirk-evacuations>.

² IMDB, *Dunkirk* Full Cast and Crew. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5013056/fullcredits?ref=tt_ov_st_sm Nolan is English. The starring cast is primarily English, with some Scots and Irishmen also appearing.

Commonwealth soldiers of Indian origin shown in the film, a massive underrepresentation of the largest all-volunteer army ever assembled in world history.

That Dunkirk is a *commune* of France might suggest that the French had something to do with the battle that took place there. This is certainly true but, if one were to go solely from the popular recollection of Operation Dynamo, the French would find no place in a wholly British narrative. *Dunkirk* focuses on the British experience at Dunkirk, not the French, so expectations for French leads would be somewhat unreasonable in the same way that complaints about the tasteful exclusion of German forces – save for the terrifying drone and strafing of a dive-bomber and a handful of silhouettes – would be unreasonable. Dunkirk was an international story, but *Dunkirk* is a British story. In spite of these self-imposed national limitations, the French experience at Dunkirk is referenced clearly for those with a knowledge of the Battle of France. French troops appear only twice. Once, they are seen silently guarding a barricade in the city as the British troops flee towards the sea, referencing the brave French delaying actions around Dunkirk and Lille. French troops are also seen loitering at the Dunkirk beachhead, waiting to be evacuated alongside their British comrades. The squad depicted stands in for the roughly 110,000 French soldiers that were evacuated as part of Operation Dynamo.³ Interestingly, it is historically accurate for the French squad to have soldiers of European and African origin in the same unit, as the French army had been fully integrated since the First World War.

During the time period in which *Dunkirk* takes place, the population of African origin was no more than 20,000 in the whole of the United Kingdom, which had a population of 41-46,000,000 people in 1940, meaning that people of African origin made up a miniscule 0.0005%

³ Imperial War Museum, “What You Need to Know About the Dunkirk Evacuations.”

of the British population.⁴ It is extraordinarily unlikely, then, that there would have been any significant number of soldiers of African origin in the British Army in 1940. The so-called “colour bar” – that is, official segregation in the British Army – was abolished in 1939, but there was not a significant enough existing population of African descent in the United Kingdom in 1940 to make much use of it.⁵ Men from the British West Indies in particular would begin to enroll in the Royal Air Force in large numbers, but not until 1941 and afterwards.

This does not automatically mean that the presence of soldiers of African origin is anachronistic. Many thousands of men from the British colonies in Africa and the West Indies were under arms in colonial regiments during the Second World War. However, these units would likely not have been stationed in England at this time, as colonial units were being massed in Africa for operations there, first against the Italians in eastern Africa, commencing on June 10th, just one week after the end of the Dunkirk evacuation. There were hundreds of West Indian pilots of African descent in the Royal Air Force, and countless thousands of people of African descent employed in war industries, as firefighters, as air-raid wardens, and as (overwhelmingly female) nurses. Each one of these jobs was absolutely essential to the Allied war effort, but none of these roles were portrayed in *Dunkirk*. To portray a combat infantryman of African descent in London in 1940, but not any of the countless critical civilian and support roles filled by such people, invites charges of historical inaccuracy.

⁴ Wikipedia, “Black British People: World War II,”

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_British_people#World_War_II Estimates that the whole non-European population of the United Kingdom was no more than 20,000. Similar figures are given for 1918 and 1948, indicating that the community remained miniscule throughout the period; HuffPost, “UK Population Survey of 1939 Holds Secrets of Pre-War Life,” https://www.huffpost.com/archive/au/entry/history-world-war_n_8485272. Includes total population estimate of United Kingdom; University College London CLOSER, “Estimated Annual Population,” <https://www.closer.ac.uk/data/estimated-annual-population/>. Includes a higher estimate of 1940 population.

⁵ The Barnet Group, “UK Black History – World War I and World War II,” <https://thebarnetgroup.org/tbg/uk-black-history-world-war-i-and-world-war-ii/>.

In similar train station crowd scenes, *Dunkirk* features a small complement of soldiers of Indian origin. The historical circumstances of soldiers of African and Indian origin, however, differs immensely. The role of soldiers of African origin in the British war effort was very important, with their civilian and support roles being even more vital. The role of soldiers from the Indian subcontinent was so massive and so vital to the Allied war effort that portraying soldiers of Indian origin to the same degree as soldiers of African origin simply does not make sense historically. The British Indian Army in World War Two was the largest all volunteer army ever arrayed in world history, with more than 2,500,000 soldiers under arms by the War's end, with many millions more engaged in vital war production and similar civilian and support roles as occupied by people of African origin. In 1940, the British Indian Army was more akin to a rural gendarmerie and police force than a proper 20th-century army, due in large part to underfunding by the colonial administration during the Great Depression. In addition, the British Indian Army would be deployed primarily in Burma, East and North Africa, and Italy, campaigns those forces were singularly instrumental in winning. The same objection to the presence of Indian soldiers as soldiers of African origin in London in May-June 1940 may be raised, that those units were stationed in Africa and Asia, but the sheer weight of numbers of the British Indian Army demands their greater acknowledgement.

Dunkirk presents itself as a British story, but the historical Dunkirk was anything but one nation's story. Soldiers of many flags, such as Frenchmen, soldiers of African origin, and soldiers of Indian origin, alongside Belgians, Dutchmen, Poles, and numerous others, were instrumental in ensuring the success of Operation Dynamo and preserving the British Army's fighting capacity in its frightful year as the only major force opposing the Axis until the Soviet Union's forced entry into the Second World War a year later, in June 1941. The film *Dunkirk*

dramatizes the heroic evacuation of 338,226 soldiers that made this possible and, while there are historical criticisms to be made of numerous facets of the film, one of the most salient in the treatment of race in the film. *Dunkirk* is not about race, but writer-director Christopher Nolan nonetheless includes nods to the role of non-British soldiers in his country's direst hour. The depiction of non-British soldiers is not always perfect, or proportional, but as this is not the main thrust of the film, that the diversity of the Allied forces is acknowledged at all is a welcome break from habit for the woefully Eurocentric military period piece genre. With salutations to the brave and thankless French defense of the British perimeter and crowd-shot inclusions of soldiers of African and Indian origin, Nolan manages to represent – to a degree – the global nature of the Second World War without overwhelming the primary themes or plot points of his film. *Dunkirk* handles these matters about as well or a little bit better than can be expected from a major studio production not consciously focused on the intersection of race and war.