

Chinese Labour Corp

History

Lesson 4 of an enquiry of 6 lessons

Enquiry: What do the stories of the 'often forgotten armies' reveal about the Western Front?





Situation in Autumn 1916

The Battle of Verdun was drawing to a close.

The Battle of the Somme was drawing to a close.

Almost 2 million men had been wounded or killed.

Both sides were seriously weakened.



Chinese Labour Corps

“Of all the peoples who ventured to the Western Front, the Chinese are among the most forgotten.

Almost the moment the gunfire stopped, their part in the story of the war was airbrushed out, and their presence in Belgium and France- which continued into 1919 and 1920 on the orders of the military authorities- was almost instantly resented”

The World's War, David Olusoga



The South African Native Labour Corps

The Chinese Labour Corps weren't the only group of labourers on the Western Front.

British Imperial War Cabinet wanted to use black labour from South Africa and other colonies because of the shortage of labour at the front.

The South African government agreed, but only if no black men had a combat role and would be kept separate from white people.



What does the story of the Chinese Labour Corps reveal about the Western Front?

Weapons and technology	Military strategy
Treatment of troops and life on the front line	The psychological effects of war



The story of the Chinese Labour Corps

China's government was excited by Britain's declaration of war. They were desperate to modernise the nation. In 1914, the Republic of China was only three years old. It had been established after the overthrow of the Chinese royal family.

China was 'semi-colonised'. This meant China had been forced by Europe and America to sign trade deals that were very unfair on China. The trade deals made European countries rich at China's expense. By playing some role in the war, the leaders of China hoped Europe would start to see China as a strong nation: a nation worthy of fair treatment. So the Chinese offered soldiers to fight for the British and French.



The story of the Chinese Labour Corps

The offer was rejected: the British didn't need them. They preferred soldiers from the more modern Japan. China's government tried again in 1915. This time, they offered Chinese labourers rather than soldiers. The French accepted but the British were still uninterested.

Then the Battle of the Somme started in 1916. The huge scale of losses at the Somme shook British confidence. In July 1916, the British finally accepted China's offer. The British recruited men from the North of China. These men were told to strip naked and were examined for 21 medical conditions. If they qualified, they were covered with disinfectant and had their head shaved.



The story of the Chinese Labour Corps

The first group of the Chinese Labour Corps arrived in France in April 1917. The Chinese became specialists in digging trenches and were soon regarded as being very quick and capable. Other labourers became involved in the following: artillery maintenance, maintaining railway lines, repairing motorbikes, tank maintenance. After each battle, the tanks were cleaned, stripped and repaired at a 'tank hospital' in a place called Erin. Many Chinese labourers worked here.

In the frantic build-up to the Battle of Cambrai in November 1917, the Chinese Labour Corps worked non-stop. A total of 476 machines were prepared for the battle. The Chinese mechanics built 110 tank-towed sledges which were used to carry equipment into battle.



The story of the Chinese Labour Corps

Great efforts were made to keep the Chinese segregated. The Chinese were often housed in separate huts, away from the British. Even Chinese hospitals were sealed off. The Chinese still needed to go into shops. Sometimes this caused problems. Racial prejudices, national rivalries and personal differences combined with alcohol and shell-shock to create violence behind the front lines. There are graves in Northern France of men killed in bar-room fights.

In total, around 140,000 Chinese labourers worked behind the lines in Northern France in 1916-20.



Questions

1. Which country were the labourers we studied today from?
2. At first, the British turned down the offer of workers. What happened that changed their mind?
3. What sort of work did the Chinese Labour Corps do?
4. What battle did they really help prepare for and how?
5. How were the Chinese Labour Corps treated?



What does the story of the Chinese Labour Corps reveal about the Western Front?

The story of the _____ reveals several things about the _____ Front. That the British didn't accept them until after the Battle of the _____ suggests how significant that battle was for shaping _____. It also gives us an insight into the _____ attitudes at the time. We also see this when the Chinese Labour Corps was kept _____ and experienced racial prejudice.

segregated

Somme

military strategy

Chinese Labour Corp

racist

Western

