

Trinidad and tobago by world war ii history essay



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World War 2, also known as the Second World War was the largest and most violent armed conflict in history which lasted for more than six years from 1939 to 1945, which produced approximately 50 million deaths. This war involved the most countries compared to any other war and introduced many weapons and ended with the first use of nuclear weapons. It began in Europe on September 1st, 1939 when the Germans invaded Poland without any formal declaration, while Britain and France as allies formally declared war on Germany and the latter was aided by Italy and Japan. However in the early 1930's, the war began earlier with Japanese interventions in China. In Europe the war ended on May 8th 1945 with Germany surrendering and in Asia on September 2nd, 1945 when the Japan officially surrendered.

The purpose of this paper is to critique the view that World War II ushered in radical changes in Trinidad and Tobago, firstly I provided a brief history of World War II and how Trinidad became apart of it. Lastly I discussed the social, infrastructure, economic and cultural changes it brought in Trinidad and Tobago. The research method employed in this paper was a form of non-experimental research as secondary data was collected in order to evaluate the changes World War II to brought to Trinidad and Tobago. In carrying out this research, a major limitation was that information on the research topic was not easily available both on the internet and libraries and it is therefore recommended schools and national libraries encompass more resources on Trinidad and Tobago's history.

History of World War II

On September 1st, 1939 Adolf Hitler and his German Nazi's invaded Poland and attacked from their battle ship. The Germans were equipped with a

substantial and well-organized general and soldiers causing Poland to surrender. In turn the next day Britain and France formally declared war against Germany and swore their allegiance as a result of defending democracy. Germany was later on joined by Japan and Italy to suppress the rest of the world, they were known as the Axis powers. Against them were the allies; the United Kingdom, France and many others that came later. The United States of America remained neutral with the passage of the Neutrality Act of 1937, making it unlawful for the United States to trade with combative groups. However on December 7, 1941, the Japanese attacked the American base of Pearl Harbor in the Hawaii islands thereby the Americans entered into war against the Axis.

The United States of America was determined to restrain the Axis powers with their massive economic resources and in the end won the war for the Allies and collapsed the Axis powers. The Germans surrendered to the United States of America and their allied forces and the war in Europe was over and a couple months after Japan surrendered after attacking Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In order for United States of America to defeat the Axis powers, they outsourced countries to set up base, Trinidad was one of them in which had a major impact on the country socially, culturally, economically and racially. World War II today continues to receive much interest as it left many political, social and military implications throughout the World.

Trinidad and World War II

Trinidad played an important role in the Allied war effort, in doing so World War II had a significant impact on the social, economic, racial and cultural development of Trinidad. On September 2, 1940, nearly a year after the

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World War II began, British government, Prime Minister Winston Churchill agreed to allow the United States of America military to establish and operate bases in several British Caribbean territories. On October, 10 1940, a memorandum was sent to the Governor of Trinidad and Tobago by Admiral John W. Greenslade of the United States of America stating his visit to Trinidad for the purpose of investigating the location and facilities to be leased to the United States of America for naval and air bases and army establishments. The memorandum included the request for location near shore, areas for defence, training, and storage of supplies, hospitalization, landing fields, and fleet anchorage. The Governor of Trinidad and Tobago, Sir Hubert Young along with his advisors Mr. Grinnell and Mr. Beard questioned a number of facilities requested by the United States and proposed an alternative site, the Caroni Swamp. The United States engineer, Commander Bragg, stated that the current state of the Caroni Swamp at the time was unfeasible for military intent and would take fifteen years to drain and construct to meet the requirement for the military use. In addition Governor Young was aware that the local population would resent the idea of using North West Peninsula and as a result cause friction, however the United States government were adamant on setting up their bases on Wallerfield / Sangre Grande and Chagaramas.

The British Government and the United States of America agreed on a Bases for Destroyers Agreement in which the United States was granted British islands to establish their naval or air bases on ninety-nine year free leases on the Newfoundland, Eastern side of the Bahamas, Southern coast of Jamaica, Western coast of St. Lucia, West coast of Trinidad, Antigua and British Guiana

in exchange for fifty destroyers which was also referred to as the “ flush-deck” destroyers or the “ four-pipers”. In Trinidad the North West Peninsula including the Five Island in Chaguaramas (See Appendix A) and Waller field were leased to the United States for naval and air base, this resulted in the removal of North West Peninsula residents.

Britain’s motive for entering into the bases for destroyers’ agreement was an attempt both to strengthen its forces and to enlist the United States in the defense of its colonial territories. British Prime Minister Churchill cautioned American President Franklin D. Roosevelt that if Britain was defeated, its’ colonial islands close to America could become as threat to America if they became German territory. Therefore the United States of America was initially a neutral party during the first two years of the war and their aim for the deal was made not only to better the Allies’ chances against the Axis but also to ensure that no other European power gained a stronghold in the Americas.

Trinidad was the assembly point for the vital oil tankers; the government’s political alliance with the United States did not directly put at the country at risk however the construction of the American bases had a remarkable socio-economic impact on the country. According to Brereton, Trinidad played the following significant roles during the war in assisting the United States; it was the convoy-assembly point transmitting tankers from the Caribbean oil ports across the Atlantic to North Africa and Europe, secondly the Gulf of Paria was used by US carriers and airplanes for their final exercises before going to the Pacific Battleground via the Panama Canal. Thirdly planes for the Eighth Army in North Africa were ferried through Trinidad and lastly

vessels and civilian planes from South America had to stop at Trinidad for clearance to proceed to North America and European destinations (Brereton, 1982).

Economic Changes

The American Base in Trinidad had a number of positive and negative effects on the country's economy, infrastructure, social and cultural aspects, each one will be discussed separately. Locals were thrilled by the opportunities in which the American Base would bring, according to Neptune (1970) both Indo-Trinidadian cane cutters and Afro-Trinidadian domestic servants were ready take advantage of what they expected to be more remunerative U. S. employers. He made reference to Ralph De Boissier's Rum and Coco Cola narration " the rosiest illusions about the chances awaiting them". (Neptune, 1970). At the same time planters were disgruntled since they believed workers would abandon the state to work on the American base.

To assist the planters, Governor Young consulted the American authorities to implement the " prevailing wages" policy in which they agreed to adhere to the local pay scale that preceded their arrival in the colony, Trinidad employers were pleased however workers were disappointed (Neptune, 1970). In May 1942, the Americans requested authorization from the Trinidad Governor to increase wages, stating it was necessary to acquire base labour. According to Neptune, some ignored the colonial administration by paying unskilled and semiskilled labourers the rates of a skilled worker.

There were a number of major positive effects of the American base in Trinidad. According to Neptune although the base did not offer high wagers

as workers expected the Yankee in which locals referred the Americans as enticed the locals to work on the American base as the American boss were rewarding, they offered overtime and holiday bonus. The American base employed more than 15, 000 workers in formal positions within six months of construction of the base, the number working informally from show-shine boys to portraits artist was incalculable. The number of employees rose to 25, 000 six months later including clerks, teachers and policeman. Neptune went on to say where trained teachers had a salary of \$30 a month, they made between \$80 and a \$150 dollars per month clerking for Americans. In addition in 1940 only 5 officers left the service , where as in 1941 a total of 21 left and for the first two months of 1942 the figure had already reached 24 (Neptune, 1970). The construction of the American base created a large opportunity of employment for the locals According to Brereton, 1982 between 15 and 20 percent of the labor force were employed on the American base. The wages increased thereby increased rural-urban migration causing a shortage of agricultural labor as sugar employment dropped from 30, 000 in 1939 to 18, 000 in 1943 (Brereton, 1982).

World War II resulted in a slower trade around the world and thereby changed production in Trinidad and Tobago, agricultural exports decreased. According to the Library of Congress, 1987 during the 1950s, agriculture's share of total output dropped from 17 to 12 percent Trinidad and Tobago was a crown colony and therefore it served as a market for British products. According to Horne (2003) a large number of foods was imported along with books, fabrics, footwear, equipment and tools. Furthermore the Americans occupied agricultural areas such as Valencia which provided fruits;

vegetables and carenage for fishing however German submarines invaded the waters during the war and ships were torpedoed causing a shortage in food. This led to a new system of retailing fish and crops and the cost of living rose.

On the contrary, the oil industry experienced a boom, according to the Library of Congress (1987), the real gross domestic product increased an average of 8.5 percent annually from 1951 to 1961 and growth averaged 10 percent annually from 1956 to 1961. The real per capita income increased 15 percent. Oil, construction, and manufacturing emerged as dominant industrial sectors. In 1956 a United States oil company, Texaco, entered Trinidad and Tobago and consolidated several holdings of other companies. Oil production jumped from under 60,000 barrels per day prior to 1950 to 80,000 barrels per day toward the end of the decade. In addition, the price of oil continued to rise, allowing for increased oil earnings and growing government revenues (Library of Congress, 1987).

Prior to the Americans in Trinidad, more than 10,000 poor women were employed in domestic work, by teenage years; girls had already mastered cooking, cleaning, ironing, and laundering. According to Neptune domestic work accounted for 36% of the island's wages-earning females in the 1930s; however these women endured terrible working conditions in which they worked from dawn till late night for \$4 to \$10 dollar. In the midst of American arrival where no prevailing wages policy, they offered higher rates than the British and thereby servants began deserting the British colonial employers. According to Neptune, the colony's housewives were "in a frenzy causing "social friction" between Americans and understaffed Trinidadians.

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However it drove the administration to establish a vocational education committee to oversee the training of domestic workers to improve the dispute between servants and their employers. The American base also brought on a spending economy where there was a boost in the services such as hotels, bars and small businesses.

The American base in Trinidad also brought on negative effects on the economy, according to Horne (2003) the government of Trinidad and Tobago incurred a number of expense during the stay of the American Base. The government had to maintain and upkeep the roads used freely by the American official vehicles stationed at the bases, because the agreement exempt from license and registration fees. Secondly the government had to maintain the airport and maintenance cost increased due to the damage to the runways from heavy military planes. Thirdly the landing and parking fees of the aircraft were free, moreover Trinidad revenue suffer since the government lost 1 million dollars in revenue from excise duties through the delivery at each Base of 10 million gallons of gasoline, 1 million gallons of kerosene duty free(Horne, 2003).

Infrastructure

The building of the American base launched extensive infrastructure projects for example construction of better roads, causing construction to more than double in over ten years. The American Navy Construction Brigade constructed road to Maracas Bay as compensation for the loss of North West Peninsula (Brereton, 1982) Manufacturing's output, encouraged by generous fiscal incentives since 1950, also increased rapidly, although its share of

gross domestic product rose from 11 to 13 percent. (Library of Congress, 1987).

Culture

The American culture also impacted on Trinidad such as their dress mode in which locals admired and adopted. According to Harvey Neptune in November 1939, a small number of Port of Spain office workers issued a plea for “ cooler dressing”; their request was ignored until the arrival of the Americans. On September 16 1941, a policy was created declaring coat, tie and long pants optional work wear and the acceptance of open neck shirts and short pants. Neptune stated that the some expressed grief, saying it was a breakdown of standard respectability and policy for dress reform showed the government supported social disorder. A number of critics who were committed to the British dress style protested against the government’s decision, a Port of Spain layer and city deputy, Leo Pujadas, expressed his anger with the dress reform policy saying it was a drastic change and would weaken the social standard of traditional dress.

The dress reform was linked to the Yankee culture, in which they would go to church wearing short-sleeved shirts that was out of their pants and no coats. According to Neptune, Pujadas viewed that it was a way of emulating the irresponsible Americans and hoped that Trinidadians continued to adopt the Europeans fashion style. Another critic expressed his view that with the dress reform people would not be able to distinguish the “ lads from the grownups” and others saw it as a decline of civilization (Neptune, 1970). In today society, Trinidadians dress code is unconventional and westernized;

this is dated back from World War II and has become prominent with easier access to westernized culture particularly the United States of America.

Social Changes

The American base did not only trigger drastic economical and infrastructural changes in Trinidad, it also generated substantial social transformation. Traditionally women who bears a child out of wedlock was looked down on, however to the people who came to work on the bases held that position that a young woman did not have to wait till marriage to carry a child. Secondly with the large number of American soldiers entering the country, prostitution became prominent, and brothels were constructed nearby the base. Calypso in Trinidad was a medium of story telling events in the society, Calypsonians during this time sang about the increase of prostitution with the building of the American base. Lord Invader's song, Rum and Coca Cola (See Appendix B) in 1943 proclaimed women in Trinidad working for American money which referred to the enormous increase in Trinidadian women who were making their living as prostitutes with American soldiers as their clients. His lyrics stated " If a Yankee comes to Trinidad, they got the young girls all going mad, Young girls say they treat them nice" and " Both mother and daughter, Working for the Yankee dollar" (ITZCaribbean, 2004). These lyrics illustrate the locals referring the American soldiers as Yankees, and it talks about women working for American soldiers referring to prostitution. In 1945, an American group called the Andrews Sisters sang over the song which became a hit in the United States.

In 1956, another calypsonian known as The Mighty Sparrow released a song called Jean and Dinah (See Appendix C) also proclaiming prostitution during <https://assignbuster.com/trinidad-and-tobago-by-world-war-ii-history-essay/>

and after the closing of the American base. His words were “ Well the girls in town feeling bad, No more Yankees in Trinidad. They going to close down the base for good, Them girls have to make out how they could” and “ So when you bounce up Jean and Dinah, Rosita and Clementina, round the corner posing, Bet your life is something they selling, And if you catch them, You can get them all for nothing, Don’t make no row, the Yankees gone, Sparrow take over now” (elyrics, 2000) Again in sparrow lyrics American soldiers are referred to as Yankees, in addition he spoke about the large scale prostitution that the bases once supported and the desperation of these prostitutes following the closure of several American military bases in Trinidad in the post war period.

The American base did not only bring social issues to Trinidad but musicians were able to create music from American materials, according to Horne (2003) when the British captured Trinidad from Spain the Carnival festival was allowed to continue. Musicians at the time of poor areas used dry bamboo sticks as percussion instruments to accompany their parades however these illegal. With World War II and the entering of the Americans in Trinidad who brought fifty-five gallon steal oil drums, the Trinidadian musicians improvised and used these drums. They made dents, various cavities such as depth and shallow as well as different sizes which produced various musical sounds and scales. Musicians were poor and no formal musical training however they were able to coordinate and memorize the musical notes, thus the steel band was born (Horne, 2003). Today steel band is very popular and developed not only in Trinidad and Caribbean Islands but it is known throughout the world

Another impact of the American base in Trinidad was the locals view on the American status. Trinidadians were not only attracted to the wages offered by the Americans, locals were in elated of the American outlook towards the base, Locals drawn towards the American base because of the adventure of the employment in which the base offered. According to Neptune working for Americans presented the opportunity to participate in an exciting new world and the desire for liberty and novelty by young people were satisfied by working on the base. Neptune referenced Samuel Selvon's, *A Brighter Sun*, a story in about an Indo-Trinidadian called Bunsee become comically pompous and fancied himself as a man of prestige because had an office job with the Americans. The story demonstrated how American employment satisfied ambitions for progress into a modern world. Neptune also made reference to V. S Naipual's *Miguel Street* demonstrating the downside of the America base, in which the story talk about a character Hat, who appreciated that the American base was not here forever and it would not be smart to give up their jobs. Neptune also stated that other locals stayed away because base work was not in harmony with traditional concept of respectability (Neptune, 1970).

The American base also brought crime and violence, during the American stay in Trinidad, the governor allowed the entry of Barbados immigrants to work for the Americans, In March 1942, a totally of 2, 000 laborers came to Trinidad to work for the American at a rate of \$1. 19 (Neptune, 1970), with this the Americans layed off over a hundred locals thereby causing antagonism towards the Barbadians by the locals. On April 3, 1942, a group of Barbadians workers attacked and injured a number of locals at the Arima

Princess cinema. The U. S authorities in an attempt to keep peace among the locals and issued a public notice stating that Barbadians were not the reason for the laying off the locals however the British sent home the Barbados workers to reduce the risk of violence. Secondly, racial tension emerged; locals were aggravated with American men since women were lured to them and would prostitute themselves. American were seen as superior by locals since they earned enormous amounts of money, in addition, their fashion and language were all factors that the locals admired.

Conclusion

World War II profoundly transformed the economy and society of Trinidad and Tobago as an outcome of the Base for Destroyers Agreement between the United States of America and Britain. Both positive and negative effects of the American base were evident. The American base in Trinidad made immense changes in the trade industry in which agriculture decreased and oil boomed. A large number of employment opportunities were created on the base as well as increased wages for workers on the base as well as domestic workers. The American base created the rise in prostitution and violence however it also created development of steel pan, according to Brereton (1982) it dismissed the myths of white supremacy as they, too, performed manual labor and consumed their earnings alongside Trinidadians. Brereton also went on to state that the presence of the United States helped prepare the country for the new era of mass electoral political (Brereton, 1982). The Americans in Trinidad also influenced the local's style of fashion; locals also admired the American competence, technological advancement and status. Although the government suffered revenue due to

maintenance of road and airports, the beneficial influence the American had on Trinidad was much greater.