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Carmela Patrias

Volume 75, 2015

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1030903ar>

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Patrias, C. (2015). *Race-based Discrimination in Bomb Girls*. *Labour / Le Travail*, 75, 195–199.

Race-based Discrimination in Bomb Girls

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FANS OF THE TELEVISION SERIES the *Bomb Girls* believe that one of its great strengths is the historical perspective it provides on the lives of Canadian working women on the home front during World War II. In their protests against the show's cancellation, some fans note in particular the show's willingness to tackle "provocative" themes such as racial and sexual discrimination.¹ One of my goals here is to explain that despite its wide popular appeal, from the perspective of academic historians, the show obscures more than it reveals about the experiences of racialized minority group members in wartime Canada. My second goal is to suggest why, as professional historians, we should publicize the discrepancy between the popular views conveyed by the show and the conclusions of scholarly reconstructions of the fate of minority workers in wartime.

The main representative of groups subject to racist prejudice and discrimination in *Bomb Girls* is Marco Moretti, an Italian Canadian worker at Victory Munitions, the show's fictitious bomb factory. Marco, we are told, was two years old when his family immigrated to Canada. He identifies himself as a Canadian. Nevertheless, others, including many of his co-workers, view him with suspicion, as a "foreigner," an Italian with loyalties to fascist Italy that jeopardize Canadian security. Marco's father is interned in Petawawa, according to Marco, for no other reason than that he is Italian.

It makes good cinematic sense to use a worker with origins in an enemy territory to represent the hardships experienced by so-called foreign workers in Canada during the war. The fate of enemy aliens, especially those among them who were unjustly interned during the two world wars, is the most dramatic manifestation of the difficulties that minority group members experienced in wartime. Canadian audiences, moreover, are likely to respond to the incarceration of Italians during World War II because by now most have some familiarity with wartime internment in Canada. The popular media have paid considerable attention to this subject thanks to lobbying for apology and redress for Japanese, Ukrainian, and Italian Canadians interned during the two world wars.

This focus on fears of the threat that "enemy aliens" posed to Canada's war effort, however, distorts the reality of the wartime experience of minority group members. In contrast to Japanese-Canadians, only a small fraction of "enemy aliens" of European origin were interned. The most pervasive form of discrimination against those of eastern and southern European origin was employment discrimination. As far as immigrants from eastern and southern

1. www.savebombgirls.com, accessed 2 September 2014; <http://www.change.org/p/global-tv-network-renew-bomb-girls-for-another-season-2>, accessed 2 September 2014.

Europe were concerned, many Canadians paid no attention to the wartime alliances of the countries from which so-called foreigners came. All of them were deemed unsuitable for many wartime jobs. Some employers explicitly called only for “Anglo-Saxons” to apply for jobs, others specified that no aliens or Jews need apply. Training programs for war industries turned away applicants whom they considered problem cases, such as Jews, Blacks, Chinese, Canadian children of non-British origin, and prospective trainees with relatives in enemy territory. In Toronto, such applicants were admitted only if they could show evidence of a sponsor who would employ them at the end of the program. Even people of southern and eastern European descent who had received training in western Canada for work in war industries were turned away by some Ontario employers. State officials in charge of channelling workers into war production complied with racially exclusive requests from employers. Once the thriving wartime economy increased job prospects to workers of British and northern European origin, state officials directed the members of some minorities into menial, low-paying service, agricultural, and manufacturing jobs that no one else wanted.²

Their “race” rather than their national origin determined the suitability of workers for different types of jobs in the eyes of employers, state officials, and other Canadians. Employment discrimination on the home front owed far less to wartime alliances on the international stage than to long-standing associations between race and fitness for certain types of employment and for citizenship in Canada. In times of scarce employment, like the war’s early years, “foreigners” were deemed less entitled to jobs than “real” Canadians; once their labour in menial occupations became indispensable owing to labour shortages, employers considered minority workers less entitled to skilled jobs than Canadians of British descent. Such discrimination demonstrated that during the 1940s many Canadians believed groups that we would describe today as “white,” such as southern and eastern Europeans, to be racially distinct and inferior to groups originating from Great Britain and Northwestern Europe.

Bomb Girls’ neglect of the more mundane employment discrimination in favour of the more dramatic internment is reminiscent of the decision by lobbyists campaigning for apology and redress over the internment of Ukrainian Canadians during the First World War. As Frances Swyripa has shown, these lobbyists ignored the disenfranchisement of Canadians born in countries at war with Canada – an injustice affecting tens of thousands of Ukrainian Canadians and others – emphasizing instead the historical wrong perpetrated against a much smaller group of internees they deemed more emotionally appealing.³

2. Carmela Patrias, *Jobs and Justice: Fighting Discrimination in Wartime Canada, 1939–1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

3. Frances Swyripa, “The Politics of Redress: The Contemporary Ukrainian-Canadian

Employers did not hesitate to fan the flames of racial suspicion and animosity to prevent collective action by their workers. At McKinnon Industries in St. Catharines, for example, where workers belonging to Local 199 of the United Automobile Workers voted to strike, a management representative enlisted group leaders and other English Canadian workers to form a secret organization – the Inner Circle Counter-Sabotage Committee – ostensibly to combat any form of sabotage in the plant by workers of foreign extraction. He urged Anglo Canadian workers to watch carefully for any disruption of production by “Quislings” or “fifth columnists.” His main target, however, was the union. He claimed that Local 199 was dominated by “foreign-born” people and argued that a strike by McKinnon workers would be tantamount to sabotage.⁴

In *Bomb Girls*, the only character from minority groups originating in countries not at war with Canada is “the Slav,” Ivan Buchinsky, who is of Ukrainian descent. Ivan, prevented from enlisting by asthma, is clearly “one of the boys” at Victory Munitions. His female co-workers view him as quite a catch, not least because he is an engineer. Nothing in the series indicates that in the 1940s Canadians of eastern European origin faced discrimination in attempting to enter the professions and white collar jobs. Consequently, Ivan was the exception; communities of eastern European origin – to whom many Canadians referred scornfully as “bohunks,” “polacks,” or “hunkies” – were made up overwhelmingly of farmers and manual workers.

Bomb Girls shows two examples of racist discrimination against people of colour. It does so, however, in an unnecessarily understated way. The first case is that of Leon Jones, who seems to be assigned to menial jobs throughout the munitions plant as the need arises. When one of his co-workers is caught stealing, Leon gets his job. The boss tells him: “this is a big opportunity for you Leon, don’t mess it up.” The second case – the only example of racist discrimination against a minority woman – is not work related. Reggie Hamilton, an African Canadian who comes to Toronto from the Maritimes in search of work, is able to secure only a vermin-ridden room in the city. Indeed, amid the wartime housing shortage, not only women of colour, but other “foreign women” encountered special difficulties in obtaining accommodations when they moved to take up jobs in central Canada. As Michael Stevenson points out in *Canada’s Greatest Wartime Muddle*, National Selective Service officials in Hamilton feared that Hamiltonians would object to billeting women brought to the city from Nova Scotia in their homes because these women would be “mingling at their work with other employees of foreign extraction and possibly quite a low social standing.”⁵ The series offers no indication, however, that

Campaign,” in Franca Iacovetta, Roberto Perin, & Angelo Principe, eds., *Enemies Within: Italian and Other Internees in Canada and Abroad*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 355–379.

4. Patrias, *Jobs and Justice*, 25.

5. Michael D. Stevenson, *Canada’s Greatest Wartime Muddle: National Selective Service and*

many factories with war contracts refused to hire African Canadians, male or female.

With the exception of Reggie Hamilton's housing troubles, however, discrimination against minority females remains entirely hidden in the show. *Bomb Girls'* leading female characters are all white. In an episode that focuses on an escaped German prisoner of war, we learn that one of them, Betty, is of German descent. She discloses that her family experienced hardship because of their national background during the World War I and that for ever after, they remained frightened. This information, which is only of minimal importance to the unfolding of the main story, again suggests that "white" minorities encountered racist prejudice before and during the World War II only if they came from countries at war with Canada. If they changed their names – as Betty's family apparently did – and became "Canadians," they could easily escape detection.

Yet, academic studies of World War II reveal that such discrimination was widespread. Munitions plants employed large numbers of women from minority groups – not just African Canadians – precisely because the work was dangerous and unpleasant. As Dionne Brand points out in her essay entitled "We weren't allowed to go into factory work until Hitler started the war," the war did open factory doors to African Canadian women workers. By the time that most African Canadian and other minority women obtained factory jobs, however, the country was experiencing severe labour shortages. Many of those who responded to recruitment campaigns in the war's later years were prairie-born women of eastern and southern European origin. They also included African Canadians from the Maritimes and Native women from Northern Canada. Yet, Jewish women were still not hired by some Toronto factories, African Canadian women were kept out of the automobile industry, and Indian agents were reluctant to send Native women who sought to acquire new skills to factories in southern Ontario, directing them to domestic service instead. White collar jobs in war production and elsewhere also remained closed to immigrant women from Europe's peripheries and their daughters, as well as to African Canadian women. Admittedly, given that Victory Munitions appears to have had few office jobs, it may have been impossible to show such discrimination in the television series.

We know relatively little about minority women because unlike the vehement protests against the entry of "foreign" men into manufacturing jobs early in the war, women who followed did not face protest of this kind. Acquiescence to the women's presence in the factories was not simply because many jobs could not otherwise be filled, but rather because many men – employers and fellow workers – did not view the women as permanent competitors. But the weakness of protest against the women probably also had to do with the fact

that Anglo Canadians did not generally see them as potential saboteurs or spies, with the exception of Japanese Canadian women who worked in British Columbia fish canneries. Some British Columbians feared that they would poison canned herring intended for British soldiers. Thus, ignoring the specific circumstances of racialized minority women, the series researchers and writers may have been guided by the silence of many archival sources and professional historians on the subject. The only sources that shed light on the history of minority women workers are often those created by minority groups and individuals themselves.

As engaging as *Bomb Girls* is (and I am a fan), by paying scant attention to the obstacles that prevented male minority workers from moving freely within Canada's workforce and by disregarding racist employment discrimination against minority women altogether, the series discounts the experience of a substantial segment of workers in wartime Canada. Ensuring that the history of such marginalized groups in Canada will form part of our national history is one of the tasks that social and labour historians have long espoused. But there are two additional reasons that lead me as an academic historian to note the discrepancy between *Bomb Girls*' take on minority workers in wartime and the results of studies by academic historians. First, the show's neglect of racist discrimination against workers of eastern and southern European origin reinforces the contemporary, ahistorical view of skin colour as the sole criterion for racial classification. By denying the historical construction of the idea of race, this view is dangerous because it essentializes "race." Demonstrating the fluidity and arbitrariness of criteria determining racial assignment has long been an important weapon in the arsenal of anti-racist campaigners. I see it as our task as historians to advance their aims. A second reason for underlining the racialization of southern and eastern Europeans in the 1940s is that the racist discrimination they faced – alongside African, Japanese, and South Asian Canadians, and First Nations peoples – motivated minority activists to mount human rights campaigns in the 1940s and 1950s that made Canada more inclusive and tolerant of diversity.