Slaves in Red Coats: The British West India Regiments, 1795–1815.

Professor Buckley has done students of West Indian history a service by producing his survey of the twelve West Indian Regiments which were raised and disbanded between 1795 and 1815. He relates his account of the regiments to the civil and military circumstances in the Caribbean at the end of the eighteenth century.

The size of the local white population, the incapacity of the troops recruited in England to survive their drinking of raw rum, and the need to hold Jamaica and the islands to the southeast, all dictated the recruitment of Africans into the British army, not as mere laborers which had long been the practice, but as fighting men. But if the military circumstances dictated the recruitment of Africans, the civil circumstances made the implementation of this policy slow and difficult. The planters were not averse to the short-term recruitment of their slaves for service within their island, but objected to their being sent overseas. The way around that was to recruit the men for the regiments directly from Africa as slaves. The decision was made at the cost of delaying the abolition of the slave trade and at the cost of conflict with the white colonists.

Professor Buckley helps us understand the grounds of the conflict between the colonists and the administrators and the irony of using an army of slaves to protect a plantation against slave attacks. On the evidence he provides, the author seems to overestimate the extent to which the existence of the regiments modified the slave order. But we hope that his book will bring historians to work on the thousands of military slaves who were manumitted and who settled in the islands.

Buckley’s pioneering work has a table of the ethnic origins of African-born recruits as well as appendixes which include a contract to supply the army with African slaves and the text of the ordinance authorizing the recruitment of a Negro corps in St. Domingue in 1795.

University of the West Indies

Roy Augier