

Mary Joannou on a war-time whitewash

## War Stories

When I was a little girl growing up in London, I remember my father telling us stories about the Cypriot contingent at Dunkirk. I listened spellbound. My mother used to sing a song about brave little Cyprus defeating wicked Mussolini. It took me a long time to realise that Dunkirk was a defeat not a victory, longer to discover that the little island where my parents had come from was not the centre of the allied resistance to fascism, that it was hardly on the map.

Ben Bousquet and Colin Douglas's study of the West Indian women who joined the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) in the second world war, **West Indian Women At War** (Lawrence and Wishart pbk £9.99) will be of use to historians but more so to ethnic groups trying to recover their own stories which have been written out of eurocentric histories. Starting with the powerful pro-slavery West India lobby in parliament, and working through the strikes and anti-colonial uprisings that swept through the Caribbean in the 1930s, Bousquet and Douglas uncover the deeply embedded racist attitudes that West Indian women, who volunteered, encountered. These were to be found not only at the heart of the Third Reich but also among those themselves supposedly fighting the racist ideology of fascism. The conflict between the Colonial and War Office over black recruitment that they bring to light is not a pretty story.

In 1941 Miss L. Curtis from Bermuda applied to join the ATS and was accepted subject to passing her medical. There was no legal colour bar in Britain but the War Office, which was responsible for the ATS, operated an unofficial veto on black recruitment and used Jim Crow attitudes within the American services to justify its own racism. It refused outright to accept Curtis and only gave in after a long, acrimonious and, until Bousquet and Douglas's account of it, little publicised battle with the Colonial Office, which feared for morale and

stability in the West Indies if the colour bar became known.

Curtis was eventually given a place in 1943 and became one of 100 West Indian women recruits who came to Britain. All the 200 West Indian members of the ATS who were sent to Washington were white. One might ask why any black women wanted to join? 'We were taught that England was our mother country', says Connie Mark, one of eight West Indian veterans interviewed, 'And if your mother had a problem you went to help her'. When Britain went to war it was



natural for women like Connie to view it as their war. They emerge as robust and indefatigable survivors from the racism and sexism that they experienced first-hand in the forces.

*West Indian Women At War* has been painstakingly put together from documents in the War and Colonial Offices and interviews in Britain and the Caribbean. It ably explores what the second world war meant to some of its non-European participants. It thus provides us with a deeper, richer, understanding of that war and is a welcome antidote to the eurocentrism that reduces it to an engagement between white European powers. •