

## DECEMBER 17, 1918 AND THE BIRTH OF THE CARIBBEAN NATION

Caribbean nationhood was born in Taranto, Italy, on this day (December 17) in 1918 when West Indian soldiers came together to form the Caribbean League, calling for independence for the West Indies and the creation of West Indian federation.

The soldiers- members of the British West Indian Regiment - were brought to Italy after having served in France and other European theatres, and as well as in Egypt, Palestine and Mesopotamia (Iraq). The men complained bitterly of having been subjected to racial discrimination, especially at the hands of South African officers. Things took a turn for the worse in Italy, where the West Indians were made to clean latrines, among a host of other menial tasks.

The formation of the Caribbean League came in the wake of a 4-day mutiny, which was only suppressed when machine gun units were brought in. The so-called "ringleaders" of the revolt were hastily tried and several were sentenced to prison terms of up to twenty years; one man was executed.

But imprisonment and an execution did not put the authorities' mind at ease: they worried that the "boys" will return home and stir up trouble.

Therefore, many of these boys were strongly "encouraged" to go Cuba. Some heeded that advice, but the majority returned home and some went on to make trouble.

In Grenada an ex-soldier by the name of Tubal Uriah Butler ( he fought in Egypt) was in the thick of things within a few weeks of his return from the war: Butler (1897-1977) formed an ex-soldiers' organization and he agitated for civil and political rights for the black masses.

Tubal Butler's campaigns coincided with a spate of fires and robberies in the Grenadian capital, St George's. These robberies seemed especially bold, for the robbers left a neatly typed note at the scene of every one of their crimes. The note read: "Sir/Madam, You had a visit from TTT Gang"; the idea came from a movie that was then playing at the Grenada Electric Theatre.

Panic broke out and the Grenadian constabulary started to point accusatory fingers at Tubal Butler. With the police on his case, Tubal packed up and left Grenada in January 1921 to join an older brother in Trinidad. The rest is written in the history of Trinidad and Tobago.

December 17 is a very special day in the evolution of a Caribbean consciousness

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