



Labor History and Military History: A Forum

Posted on November 22, 2025 by Rosemary Feurer

This recorded forum is an exciting follow-up to Justin Jackson's blog, [The Specter of War in Labor History](#) on the Labor: Studies in Working Class History forum on labor history and military history, [Up for Debate: The Wages of War: Debating Military and Labor History](#). This session produced a truly generative discussion of issues raised by the participants in their individual submissions. These essays from Volume 22, Issue 3 are all available from behind the paywall thanks to Duke University Press until January 26, 2026.

Justin F. Jackson is a lecturer and visiting scholar at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He is the author of [The Work of Empire: War, Occupation and the Making American colonialism in Cuba and the Philippines \(2025\)](#). Jackson initiated the Labor forum with the opening provocation, [Class/War: Do Labor and Military History Work Together?](#) and responded to the commentaries from the three other scholars who joined the forum with [A "Terrible Swift Sword": Truths About Military Labor Go Marching On?](#)

Reena Goldthree is associate professor of African American Studies at Princeton University. She is the author of [Democracy's Foot Soldiers: World War I and the Politics of Empire in the Greater Caribbean \(2025\)](#). The book reveals how the crisis of World War I transformed

Afro-Caribbeans' understanding of, and engagements with, the British Empire. Her work has also in the Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History, The American Historian, and Radical Teacher. Goldthree's essay for the Up for Debate forum is [Conceptualizing the "Wages of War"](#).

John W. Hall is the inaugural holder of the Ambrose-Hesseltine Chair in US Military History and a past president of the Society for Military History. His work lies in the literal and figurative borderlands of the early republic of the United States, straddling the fields of military and American Indian history. He is the author of numerous essays on early American warfare and Uncommon Defense: Indian Allies in the Black Hawk War (2009). His present book project is "Dishonorable Duty: The U.S. Army and the Removal of the Southeastern Indians." Hall's contribution to the Labor forum is [Mars Before Marx: The Problem and Promise of Military Labor in the Colonial Era and Early Republic](#).

Tejasvi Nagaraja is assistant professor of labor history at Cornell University in the ILR School. He is writing a book about America's World War II experience and generation. It reconstruct a transnational war-within-the war among Americans themselves, linking economic and racial and foreign policy contentions. Nagaraja's writing has appeared in American Historical Review and H-Diplo. Nagaraja's contribution to the Labor forum is [Gotta Study War Work More](#)

Guide to the recording

0:00–

The forum introduction is not presented here because of recording instability at the opening. We instead start with Justin's opening remarks, which situate the forum in relationship to the big ideas and conceptual consideration, as well as an introduction to theory and historiography. He discusses the exciting issues that can be plumbed by looking at military labor and war production from a genuinely sociological and historical arc. He explains three ways that military labor is a specific kind of labor, in terms of status, function and politics. And he presents the "surplus theory of violence" ideas that are at the heart of his opening provocation, and that speak to the "violence work" that soldiers do and its relationship to the state and capitalism, but also the too often neglected recognition of women's role in war-making.

6:55

Tejasvi Nagaraja responds to Jackson who discusses his thinking about World War II with a frame of a “composite workforce across armed and unarmed labor” and how that changes our perspective if we see the labor of this, especially in the China-Burma-India theater, from the work and labor perspective. He raises the term the “wager of war,” and claims making for citizenship and anti-colonial initiatives.

13:00

John W. Hall joins in with a perspective of how important this discussion for the field of military history, suggesting how the essays might contribute to military history as well as the field of war and society studies. As a scholar of early American borderlands and a military historian, he explains that his focus is on thinking of the relationship between pre-capitalist and, pre-state origins of warfare in relation to Jackson’s provocation.

25:00

Reena Goldthree discusses her approach to the forum and how it related to her study of a regiment in Palestine that was comprised of British West Indies soldiers who performed non-combatant work such as building roads and moving supplies or carrying out the wounded and dead even though they were trained as combat troops. She expands on Justin’s use of DuBois’ concept of the psychological wage because of the fact that these troops were colonial subjects who volunteered for service. What are the kinds of compensations that exceed the material that we can consider when examining the intersection of labor and military history? Goldthree added thoughts on the violence that soldiers are expected to perform and to be subjected to as well under the terms of their labors

36: 00

The forum continued with several exchanges, and everyone felt that they could have continued with the discussion for another hour. It continued with a rich exchange, though Justin concluded that the most important part left out was a more robust discussion of women and gender as an element of rethinking these connections. One of the topics that was part of this discussion is thinking about the relationship of the current use of soldiers deployed to cities and bombing boats in relationship to the forum.

Authors



[Rosemary Feurer](#)

Rosemary Feurer is Professor of History at Northern Illinois University. She is the author of *Radical Unionism in the Midwest, 1900-1950*, among other books and essays. She is working on *The Illinois Mine Wars, 1860-1940* and a new biography of Mary Harris "Mother" Jones.



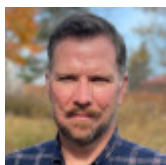
• [Justin F. Jackson](#)

Justin Jackson is a Lecturer and Visiting Scholar with the Department of History at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. His book, *The Work of Empire: War, Occupation, and the Making of American Colonialism in Cuba and the Philippines*, was published this year by the University of North Carolina Press. His article "The Empire of Military Necessity: General Orders 100, Atrocity, and the Law of Occupation between the Civil and Philippine Wars," is forthcoming in the *Journal of American History*.



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