



Activity 1 - the Indian Army in Europe and the Middle East

For a century and a half before the First World War, the British Empire relied on the manpower of the Indian Army for keeping the peace all across its vast imperial possessions. India made the largest commitment of manpower of any of the territories under the British crown to the war effort—over 1.4 million Indians were engaged as soldiers or non-combatant staff.¹ Such a large mobilisation of manpower and resources undoubtedly led to massive shifts taking place in imperial society. Indian soldiers were called upon to perform roles that, in times of less severe crisis, would have been denied to them. Additionally, the war allowed for cultural encounters which threw the relationship between the Indians and the British into stark contrast. By the end of the war, India was in the seemingly contradictory position of being both a more militarised, imperially-connected country, and a country with a strengthened anti-colonial opposition to British rule.



Indian lancers, France, 1917

Opportunities in military service

The Indian Army was recruited from the 'martial races'—cultural groups considered by the British to be naturally best suited to soldiering. It was a symptom of the nineteenth-century British obsession with race and racial classification. In India, this justification generally followed from the necessities of colonial governance: most of the 'martial races' were found in the north of the country, as this was where the British found themselves fighting most of their wars. This was reflected in the early, enthusiastic response to the outbreak of the Great War: the largest group by far represented among First World War soldiers of the Raj were Punjabi Muslims, 136,000 of whom served. They were followed by Sikhs (88,000), Rajputs (62,000), Gurkhas (55,000) and Jats (54,000).² As the war continued and the appalling casualty count mounted, administrators had to find other ways to keep recruitment up and incentivise military service.

These incentives included providing free uniforms and rations, improvements to the pension and a 25% bonus in pay for soldiers serving in Europe. These inducements, accompanied by bribes and force in some areas, managed to attract new recruits; however, it still became necessary to open up the army to non-'martial races'. 5,586 Bengalis, previously considered too 'effeminate' and 'over- educated' to make good soldiers by the authorities, served between mid-

¹Santanu Das, "Indians at home, Mesopotamia and France, 1914-1918: towards an intimate history" in Das, Santanu, ed., *Race, Empire and First World War Writing* (Cambridge, 2011), p. 70

²Stephen P. Cohen, *The Indian Army: Its contribution to the development of a nation* (Delhi, 1990), p. 69



1916 and 1918, and by July 1918 there were 11,884 high-caste Brahmins—who were previously less favoured by recruiters than other castes—in the forces.³ The largest Indian presence in the European theatre was between October 1914 and the end of 1915, when reinforcements were sent from the Western Front to Mesopotamia. In 1915, half of the British line at the Battle of Neuve-Chapelle was formed of Indian soldiers, and a memorial commemorates them at the site.

Commonwealth War Graves Commission page on the memorial:
<http://www.cwgc.org/find-a-cemetery/cemetery/144000/NEUVE-CHAPELLE%20MEMORIAL>

Indian soldiers in Europe have been studied extensively by Santanu Das and David Omissi, who find that in the surviving correspondence, their initial awe at their new surroundings quickly gave way to disillusionment and frustration with European ideas of racial superiority. Indian soldiers saw, for example, that French colonial troops from Algeria and Vietnam were generally accorded better treatment than they were. The cross-cultural exchanges between European and Indian soldiers were not all negative, however.⁴ For the first time, volunteer soldiers — ordinary people, not professional fighters — from Britain and India could interact with one another: "The First World War was a significant moment of interracial encounter. For the first time, for example, a man from Cornwall could find himself in a trench with a Punjabi Muslim man".⁵

Question 1: How important do you think these encounters might have been for subsequent developments in the British Empire? Examine some of the sketches and descriptions of Entente soldiers produced by the French portraitist Eugène Burnand. What do they tell us about the kinds of assumptions Europeans made about colonial subjects?

<http://www.eugene-burnand.com/pastel%20selection.html>

Of course, the purpose and major preoccupation of colonial soldiers in Europe was combat: poorly equipped and unsuited to the horrors of modern industrial warfare on the one hand, and belittled by their white commanders on the other, the Indian soldier had more than just the Germans to contend with on the Western Front: one of the few Indian officers, Thakur Amar Singh, wrote:

“Whenever we fail in the slightest degree anywhere people raise a hue and cry whereas if the British troops fail under the same circumstances no one mentions it. The Indian troops had done very well... Plainly the thing is that if there is a success it is due to the British element but if there is a reverse then it is all put down to the Indian troops.”⁶

The motivations of the Indian Great War soldier, part, as he was, of the largest volunteer army in the world at the time, were complex and multitudinous. Drawn from a huge, diverse country, and increasingly from many different castes and religions, the Indian Army was not a homogeneous force. It was also a long-established, effective and trustworthy asset of the British Empire. Stereotypically, the Indian soldier was driven by his *izzat*, his sense of honour and duty, above all else.

³ James E. Kitchen, *The British Imperial Army in the Middle East: morale and military identity in the Sinai and Palestine Campaigns, 1916-18* (London, 2014), pp. 189-90

⁴ Das, "Indians at home, Mesopotamia and France", p. 82

⁵ Anne Bostanci and John Dubber, "Remember the World as well as the War", British Council, 2014, p.23

⁶ Das, "Indians at home, Mesopotamia and France", pp. 76-77



Question 2: Does this sound like a convincing justification to you? How do you think contemporary people would react if called on to fight for national and personal honour? Think about current conflicts; are they ever portrayed in this way?

There were other factors at work as well — not least given the background of increasing dissatisfaction that existed in India with the British overlords. According to Santanu Das and others, there is evidence that many Indians looked upon their war service in a more mercenary mode — that it was explicitly different to indigenous cultural forms of military distinction and honour.⁷ Some nationalists believed that a demonstration of imperial loyalty and competence would lead to greater self-determination for India in the empire.

Question 3: Read more about these justifications below. Which seem convincing to you? Broadly considered, what were Indian soldiers fighting for?

<http://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/the-indian-sepoy-in-the-first-world-war>

Another unprecedented advance made by Indians — subject to very specific conditions — was their long-awaited acceptance into the previously all-white officer corps of the Indian Army. Beginning in 1917, it was proposed to promote a small number of Viceroy's Commissioned Officers (Indians authorised to command other Indian troops, but still subordinated to British officers) to hold the King's commission, and stand on an equal footing with European officers. Lieutenant Rana Jodha Jang Bhadur, an officer of sappers, became the first Indian combatant officer while serving on the Western Front, and later, as battalion commander, had three British captains working under him.⁸ This would have been unheard of before the war. Think about the potential costs and benefits to the British and the Indians of commissioning Indian army officers.

Question 4: Can the decision to accept Indians in the officer corps be explained by military necessity? Refer to the context document; could officers and administrators' belief in the 'civilising mission' have played a role? Could it have been a cynical concession to the demand for self-determination?



The 6th Jats on the Western Front. French civilians look on

⁷Das, "Indians at home, Mesopotamia and France", p. 77

⁸Maj. Gen. Partap Narain, *Subedar to Field Marshal* (Delhi, 1999), p. 42



While the most loyal and experienced men were selected, they still encountered discrimination and hardship along the way. Doubtless the opinions and interests of many Indian officers mirrored those of the British. The majority did not involve themselves with politics, desiring only the ability to do their job on equal terms. According to one Indian lieutenant-general, however, class and racial antagonism might have driven previously apolitical officers into the nationalist camp: "Only when the British were antagonistic did the Indians think about independence and getting rid of the British, especially the bad ones."⁹ Following the war, increasing numbers of Indian officers were commissioned, and this new corps formed the core of the independent armies of India and Pakistan for much of the twentieth century. Partly because of the stigma associated with pro-British elements following independence, and partly because the institutional mentality of the British officer was supposed to instil aloofness, even disdain for politics, this early generation of Indian officers represents something of a historical silence, in an area with only scanty source material to begin with.

The conditions for rank-and-file sepoy at war are, however, even more difficult to determine.

Indian soldiers in their own words

While primary sources for Indians in the First World War are scarce, the reminiscences of a few do survive. In the Mesopotamian campaign, the letters and diaries of two Indian members of the ambulance corps are highly illustrative of the complex colonial interactions that characterised Indian soldiers in the First World War. The campaign began on 6 November 1914, when the Indian Expeditionary Force D landed at Fao, on the present-day Iran-Iraq border, in order to protect the strategically-vital British oil concessions in Persia from the Ottomans. The campaign progressed well for the Indians until November 1915, when following a battle at Ctesiphon the force withdrew to Kut-al-Amara, 99 miles from Baghdad. They remained under siege there until surrendering in April 1916. The 13,000 survivors were taken prisoner, and well over half subsequently perished at the hands of their Ottoman captors. Among the survivors were Captain Kalyan Mukherji and orderly Sisir Prasad Sarbadhikari, of the Ambulance Corps. The differing conditions of camp life between Indian and British soldiers are remarked upon by Sarbadhikari:

"The discrimination that is always practised between the whites and the coloured is highly insulting. The white soldier gets paid twice as much as the Indian sepoy. The uniform of the two is different—that of the whites is better... In fact, whatever little provisions can be made are made for the Tommy. Even the ration is different—the Tommies take tea with sugar, we are given only molasses"¹⁰

After capture by the Ottomans, the British officers insisted on receiving better treatment than the Indians. Some Indian soldiers, however, were able to form affinities with their captors, subverting the structures of imperial warfare. Sarbadhikari records his interactions with his Turkish jailors:

"We used to talk about our country, about our joys and sorrows... One thing, they always used to reiterate. What is your gain in this war? Why are we cutting each other's throats? You live in Hindustan, we live in Turkey, we don't know each other, we don't have any quarrel between us... There was one more thing noticeable amongst them — that was a common hatred of the Germans"¹¹

⁹Cohen, p. 123

¹⁰Das, "Indians at home, Mesopotamia and France", p. 80

¹¹Ibid., pp. 80-81



Captain Mukherji's writing shows repudiation of violence, but also of empire. His conflation of imperial and anti-imperial violence, however, illustrates that his criticism is not straightforward:

“The patriotism that the English have taught us all this time, the patriotism that all civilised nations have celebrated—that patriotism is responsible for this bloodshed. All patriotism—it means snatching away another's country. Therefore patriotism builds empires, kingdoms. To show patriotism, nationalism, by killing thousands and thousands of people and snatching away a bit of land, well, it's the English who have taught us this.”¹²

It is an interesting counterpoint to the opinion of one British officer, that the subordination of Indian officers was "calculated to impair any initiative or leadership they may have originally possessed".

Question 5: Think about the sentiments which fed post-war disaffection in Europe; could this experience have been mirrored in the colonies?¹³

It is impossible to infer the mentalities of a large and diverse force from the testimony of two soldiers, and the survival of these sources makes them, by definition, unrepresentative of wider experience. Many Indian soldiers, especially those who did not go through the ignominy of capture by the enemy, were proud of their military service and expected their contributions to be honoured by their countrymen and the empire. These examples are, however, illustrative of the complexities encountered by Indian soldiers.

Question 6: John Keegan and others characterise the First World War in the African and Asian theatres as a 'sideshow', though one with immense local importance. The British Council study, on the other hand, ties the global experience of the First World War to recent conflicts including the Rwandan Civil War, the war in Yugoslavia, the Israel-Palestine conflict, the Troubles in Northern Ireland, and the Cold War generally. How credible do you think these connections are? Is it particularly important or necessary to examine the First World War as a political conflict, as opposed to a humanitarian tragedy or a catalyst for social change? As you review these resources, think about the explanations and justifications you have heard for fighting the First World War. Are they consistent with the war aims of the powers in the Middle East?

<http://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/britishcouncil.uk2/files/remember-the-world-report-v4.pdf>

<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=V1A1kaDBsYC&pg=PP1&vq=John%20Keegan&dq=John%20Keegan&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false>

¹²Das, "Indians at home, Mesopotamia and France", p. 79

¹³Pradeep P. Barua, *Gentlemen of the Raj: The Indian Army Officer Corps, 1917-1949* (London, 2003), p.16