



International Journal of Innovations in Liberal Arts



<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15565459>

Forgotten Valor: The Role and Legacy of Indian Troops in World War I

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Received: JAN. 11, 2025

Accepted: FEB. 06, 2025

Published: FEB. 28, 2025

Abstract

This paper investigates the pivotal yet often overlooked role of Indian soldiers in World War I, emphasizing their contributions, lived experiences, and the long-term socio-political implications of their involvement. Over 1.3 million Indian troops served in various theaters of war—from the Western Front to Mesopotamia—demonstrating extraordinary valor under harsh conditions. Despite their substantial participation and sacrifices, Indian soldiers have been marginalized in mainstream global historiography. Using a combination of primary sources, including wartime letters, military archives, and recent scholarly analyses, this study explores the conditions these soldiers faced, their motivations for enlistment, and the impact of their wartime experiences on India's political awakening. The paper further examines how colonial attitudes shaped the inadequate recognition and limited commemoration they received post-war. By highlighting the erasure of Indian narratives from dominant war histories, this research calls for a critical reassessment of India's place in the global memory of World War I and broader imperial conflicts.

Keywords: Indian soldiers, World War I, colonial army, battlefield contributions, post-war legacy, historiography, recognition, commemoration, British Empire, global conflict narratives

1. Introduction

World War I (1914–1918) was a global conflict that drew in nations and colonies from across the world. Among the most significant yet often marginalized contributors were the Indian troops serving under the British Empire. Over 1.3 million Indian soldiers and labourers participated in the war, serving in diverse roles from infantrymen to stretcher-bearers in theaters ranging from the Western Front to East Africa and Mesopotamia (Corrigan, 2011). Despite their critical role and sacrifices, their narratives remain largely absent from dominant Western historical accounts.

This paper aims to shed light on the involvement of Indian troops in World War I, exploring their military contributions, the conditions they endured, and their post-war treatment. Through an interdisciplinary lens, incorporating historical records, literature, and post-colonial critique, this study repositions Indian soldiers from the periphery to the center of WWI discourse.

2. Statement of the Problem

This paper aims to shed light on the involvement of Indian troops in World War I, exploring their military contributions, the conditions they endured, and their post-war treatment. Through an interdisciplinary lens, incorporating historical records, literature, and post-colonial critique, this study repositions Indian soldiers from the periphery to the center of WWI discourse.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The Call to Arms: Recruitment and Deployment

India's involvement in WWI was not incidental but strategic. As the crown jewel of the British Empire, India was expected to support the war effort both economically and militarily. Within weeks of the war's outbreak, Indian Expeditionary Forces were dispatched to Europe. The British Indian Army, which had undergone reforms post-1857, was seen as a reliable imperial force (Roy, 2006).

Recruitment drives targeted rural populations, particularly in Punjab, Rajputana, and other martial races identified by colonial ethnography. While some enlisted willingly due to loyalty, adventure, or economic reasons, others were coerced through pressure from local elites and colonial officials (Omissi, 1999).

By the end of the war, more than 1.3 million Indians had served. Indian troops formed a substantial part of the British Expeditionary Forces in France and Belgium and were instrumental in battles like Neuve Chapelle (1915) and the Somme (1916). They also fought in Gallipoli, Mesopotamia, and East Africa.

3.2. Experiences on the Battlefield

Indian soldiers faced harsh climatic conditions, language barriers, racial discrimination, and inadequate medical facilities. Despite these adversities, they displayed remarkable bravery and resilience. Letters sent home, many of which were intercepted and translated by British censors, offer intimate insights into their lives during the war. These letters reveal a blend of stoicism, spiritual reflection, and disillusionment (Das, 2011).

On the Western Front, Indian soldiers were ill-prepared for trench warfare and European winters. Nonetheless, they won accolades for their bravery. Khudadad Khan, a member of the 129th Baluchis, became the first Indian to receive the Victoria Cross for his actions in Belgium in 1914.

The Indian troops' performance in campaigns across Mesopotamia and Africa also proved critical to British successes. However, logistical shortcomings and mismanagement by British commanders led to significant casualties, notably in the disastrous siege of Kut (1915–1916).

3.3. Socio-Political Implications of Indian Soldiers' Involvement in World War I

India's extensive contribution to World War I, involving over 2.5 million soldiers—the largest volunteer army in history—had far-reaching socio-political consequences. While the immediate objective was imperial defense, the war profoundly altered India's internal dynamics and accelerated the momentum toward independence.

One of the most significant implications was the politicization of returning soldiers. Having fought alongside British, American, and other Allied troops across Europe, Africa, and Asia, many Indian soldiers returned with a heightened awareness of global political ideologies, including democracy and nationalism. Exposure to racial discrimination abroad, coupled with the realization of the empire's dependence on Indian manpower, deepened resentment toward colonial rule (Barua, 2006). Veterans often became vocal participants in post-war political movements, notably the Indian National Congress and regional nationalist organizations.

The Quit India Movement of 1942, which occurred during the war, was a major inflection point. The British response to the movement—imprisoning leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and suppressing dissent—exacerbated tensions. Simultaneously, the recruitment and use of Indian soldiers without an explicit national mandate was viewed by many as an abuse of imperial authority (Brown, 1994). This disjunction created a paradox where India was fighting for democratic ideals abroad while being denied the same at home.

Another critical outcome was the emergence of the Indian National Army (INA), led by Subhas Chandra Bose. Formed from Indian POWs captured by the Japanese, the INA symbolized armed resistance against British colonialism. Though militarily unsuccessful, the INA trials in 1945–

46 galvanized nationalist sentiment and led to widespread public support for independence (Fay, 1993).

Moreover, the economic strains of the war contributed to domestic unrest. War-time inflation, shortages, and the Bengal Famine of 1943—which claimed millions of lives—highlighted the exploitative nature of colonial policies and further alienated the Indian populace (Mukerjee, 2010). These grievances fueled mass protests and strikes, particularly among the urban working class and demobilized soldiers.

In summary, Indian soldiers' participation in World War II acted as a catalyst for socio-political change. Their experiences abroad, coupled with domestic hardships and ideological awakenings, played a vital role in undermining the legitimacy of British colonial rule and accelerating the push for independence.

3.4. Post-War Disillusionment and Legacy

Despite their contributions, Indian soldiers received little recognition after the war. Promises of political reform and greater self-governance remained unfulfilled, leading to widespread disillusionment. The post-war period saw the rise of nationalist sentiments, partially fueled by the realization of colonial exploitation (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2012).

The return of war veterans to India added a new dimension to the independence movement. Some became active in political movements, while others shared their experiences in oral histories and regional literature. However, their stories were largely excluded from official British histories of the war.

Memorials such as the India Gate in New Delhi and the Neuve-Chapelle Memorial in France acknowledge their sacrifice, but public awareness remains limited. Recent scholarship has begun to reclaim these narratives, emphasizing the need for inclusive remembrance (Singh, 2014).

3.5. Representation and Remembrance

The erasure of Indian soldiers from mainstream WWI narratives reflects broader colonial attitudes toward race and imperial hierarchies. Western historiography traditionally focused on European troops, marginalizing colonial contributions.

In recent years, there has been a renewed effort to document and commemorate the role of Indian soldiers. Projects like the United Kingdom's "Legacy of Valour" and exhibitions in the Imperial War Museum have spotlighted these forgotten heroes. Literature, films, and digital archives are also playing a role in reshaping public memory (Tan, 2015).

Academic initiatives are working to integrate colonial soldiers into the broader narrative of WWI, not merely as footnotes but as central agents of

history. These efforts challenge Eurocentric perspectives and promote a more nuanced understanding of global conflict.

4. Conclusion

The contribution of Indian soldiers in World War I was substantial, both in manpower and in spirit. Yet their valor remains under-recognized in historical and public discourse. This paper has sought to illuminate the sacrifices, experiences, and legacy of Indian troops, advocating for their rightful place in the history of the Great War.

The centenary of WWI has sparked important conversations about inclusivity in remembrance. It is imperative that Indian soldiers are not just remembered but understood in their full historical context. Recognizing their role is not only a matter of historical accuracy but also of justice.

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