

Honour and Fidelity: India's Military Contribution to the Great War 1914–1918 by Amarinder Singh, New Delhi:

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Three days after the 'Great War' was declared at midnight on the 4–5 August 1914, mobilisation orders were issued to marshal what would become the largest expeditionary force of that war and, arguably, of all wars till date. These instructions were issued by Lord Hardinge—the then Viceroy of India—resulting in Expeditionary Force 'A' that embarked for France within the month. Subsequently, there would be an alphabetical array of an amalgamation of Indian troops from all over the country fighting in all major theatres of World War I, including East Africa (Expeditionary Forces B and C), Mesopotamia (Expeditionary Force D), Egypt, Palestine and Syria (Expeditionary Forces E and F), and Gallipoli (Expeditionary Force G).

This is the take-off point for Amarinder Singh's book, *Honour and Fidelity: India's Military Contribution to the Great War 1914–1918*. The author is a former officer of 2nd Battalion of the Sikh Regiment of the Indian Army. This battalion had seen action in a different avatar hundred years ago—as a part of the Lahore division—and was part of the first batch of Indian troops to get involved in war.

Written in the fashion of traditional military history, replete with details and evidencing painstaking research, the book does exceedingly well to capture the facts of war, and also succeeds in its agenda to

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highlight India's military contribution to World War I—something that has been overlooked by indigenous as well as international historians. This is perhaps owing to the fact that 'over a million Indians fought on the side of the British empire makes it an uncongenial subject; South Asian historians of all stripes are more interested in people who resisted the imperial power than those who collaborated with it', as pointed out by Srinath Raghavan in his review of this book.¹

Military history aficionados would do well to have a look at this book; it will give them a hitherto unseen picture from an Indian tour d'horizon. Each prominent theatre of the Great War saw participation of Indian troops of various heritages. The book ensures consistency by keeping the Indian jawan at the centre of these battles and draws out their contribution without compromising on the role played by British troops and officers as well as the courage showed by the enemy. Personally, I was attracted to the reconstruction of entire campaigns with key tactical episodes described in sound detail, including the geographical layout (supplemented, where possible, with line maps).

The book does not disappoint readers, especially those looking for nuggets of extraordinary courage, humour, tactical ingenuity and instances of poignancy—moments that make war stories worth narrating. Several such events have been captured in the book, such as Naik Ayub Khan of the 129th Baluchis hiding his rifle and simply appearing on the German trench parapet shouting 'Mussalman!', at the risk of being bayoneted, gassed or shot, then turning himself over, professing to have deserted and promising to bring in another 20 Baluchis for 20 rupees a head. The unsuspecting Germans released him and Naik Khan reached his battalion and reported to his officers exactly what he saw, including information about German strength and gun emplacement layouts.

There is also a mention of Colonel Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, in charge of defending the port city of Tanga, a strategic point in the German East Africa defence. He remained undefeated and kept fighting all four years of the war until 1918 when, under the conditions of the 14 November armistice, he was asked to surrender his undefeated remainder of troops. Upon returning home, he led what was left of his officer cadre—the legendary 'Schutztruppe'—in a victory parade, the contingent marching in their tattered tropical uniforms symbolising a touching contrast of victory amidst defeat. Later on, he showed the same stoicism by refusing to join Hitler.

Nature too played havoc on Indian troops in unsuspecting ways. In one of the initial offensives on Tanga, the British Expeditionary Force faced an unlikely enemy—bees—who caused the disintegration of the Imperial Service Brigade that included troops from the 13th Rajputs, 3rd Kashmir Rifles and 3rd Gwalior.

There are also amusing stories like that of the history of the 47th Sikhs (part of the Jullunder Brigade committed to action in France). Raised in 1901, they were known as the *madra* or short battalion because the Sikh battalions before them had a minimum height requirement of 5 feet 9 inches. The short Sikhs who had lost out protested that they were just as brave as their taller compatriots and the whole business of height was unfair. Therefore, when raising the 47th, the upper limit was fixed at 5 feet 9 inches! The 47th went on to serve with distinction in Flanders.

In the din and obscurity of trench warfare seen in France, the 2/8th Gurkhas devised a novel way of distinguishing friend from foe. The Gurkha would challenge with the word '*koho?*', meaning 'who?', and if the reply was anything but '*mon*', meaning 'me', the ignorant German and his compatriots would be immediately treated to the Gurkha bayonets.

While flushing out Germans from the villages of Neuve Chapelle, British and Irish troops of the Rifle Brigade were greeted with the sight of a Gurkha soldier entering a house and taking eight burly Germans prisoner singlehandedly! For this act, Rifleman Gane Gurung (of the 2/3rd Gurkhas) won an Indian Order of Merit (IOM) and three loud cheers from the brigade.

The composition of brigades gives an idea as to their pan Indian representation, a mark that the Indian Army carries till this day. A fine example of this was the Imperial Service Brigade comprising of the Mysore Lancers, Hyderabad Lancers, Jodhpur and Patiala Lancers, and had Bhavnagar and Kashmir Lancers as sub-units. Lieutenant Colonel B. Chamraj Urs Bahadur, Commander of the Mysore Lancers, and Colonel Dalpat Singh, Commander of the Jodhpur Lancers (fondly known as the 'Jo Hukams'—meaning 'as you command'), were recognised for their key role in the victory at Haifa (present-day Israel). The brigade's capture of Haifa on 23 September (1918) is remembered till this day as Haifa Day and is one of the last cavalry charges that resulted in a victory in a modern war.

However, these gallant acts came at a heavy price. India lost 74,000 men and 67,000 were injured, many of whom would die later of wounds.

The book is intended as a tribute to the known and unknown Indian soldiers and succeeds in paying a fitting eulogy.

This book is a welcome step towards addressing the lack of proportionate recognition given to India in the light of its contribution to Britain's war effort. Almost 1.5 million Muslim, Sikh and Hindu men from regions such as the Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Bihar, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Kashmir and Punjab participated in the Great War. The country also supplied 170,000 animals, 3.7 million tonnes of supplies, and a loan equivalent of about £2 billion today to the British government.

Having said that, recent efforts in the light of events commemorating the centenary of the war, the United Kingdom (UK) has begun to understand that it can only gain from developing a global understanding of what was a global conflict with global consequences, and from understanding specific countries' experiences, such as India's. The recent television series, *The World's War*, reveals the experiences of the 'Forgotten Soldiers of Empire', with explicit reference to soldiers from India. And for those interested in original documents rather than commentary, the British National Archives have made 171 World War I diaries of the Indian infantry units deployed to the Western Front available to download via the First World War 100 portal.

Finally, as Lord Bikhhu Parekh summarised in one of his addresses: commemorating tectonic events like World War I by highlighting the critical role non-British people have played makes 'the British people realise what they owe to Indians. [That] their history was not enacted just by them.... Throughout Britain's history, they are as much the architects of British history as the British themselves.'²

NOTES

1. See Srinith Raghavan's review of the book at <http://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/books/the-forgotten-army/#sthash.qqfZ9koa.dpuf>, accessed on 27 September 2015.
2. Lord Parekh's speech at the Asia House, London on the occasion of the centenary celebrations of the First World War, 2014, available at <http://asiahouse.org/lord-parekh-contribution-india-world-war-one-colossal/>, accessed on 28 September 2015.