

Historiography 1918-Today (India)

By [Florian Stadler](#)

Summary

This article details the historiography of South Asian involvement in the First World War. It traces the process from early examples, such as the battle histories written by J.W.B. Merewether and Frederick Smith, and by James Willcocks shortly after the end of the conflict to present day analyses. The article raises questions as to why the significant contribution of Indian soldiers and non-combatants has remained little known until recently and why the past two decades have led to a resurgence in interest to bring this narrative to the attention of wider public audiences.

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Introduction

[Post-war memorialisation](#) of the contributions of the combatants and non-combatants from [British India](#) (now the independent nations of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan) in the First World War has, until recently, been scant. This is also reflected in the chequered historiography about their involvement in the conflict written by historians in India and [Britain](#) over the past century. Yet, particularly in Britain, the history of South Asian contributions to the First World War is increasingly given more attention: it has become an important focal point, especially in the run-up to the centenary commemorations in 2014. This is in part premised by interest from public service broadcasters such as the BBC, with its remit to represent Britain in all its diversity, and the manner in which museums are allocated public funding with similar conditions attached. Religious holidays such as the Eid or Vaisakhi are now often accompanied by documentaries on radio and television, as are the yearly

commemorations on Remembrance Sunday and Black History Month every October. At the *Chattri* monument in Patcham, the cremation site for Hindu and Sikh wounded who died in the hospitals on Britain's southern coast, an annual memorial service takes place in June. South Asian soldiers are also commemorated at the [Menin Gate](#) in Ypres; in several cemeteries in [France](#) and Flanders; and the All India War Memorial – designed by [Edwin Lutyens \(1869-1944\)](#) – now known as the India Gate in New Delhi. Strikingly, for all Commonwealth troops no common memorial existed in Britain until the opening of the Memorial Gates on Constitution Hill in London in 2002, dedicated to the soldiers of the British Empire who fought in the First and Second World War.

Nonetheless, knowledge has still not percolated through into wider public consciousness in either Britain or India of the crucial roles played by 1,440,437 South Asians¹ (both combatants and non-combatants, who were recruited into the British Indian Army during the war years), or the over 1 million men who were sent overseas.

The historiography of the cataclysmic events of the First World War remains relevant to Britain, India and Pakistan today. Indeed, one might argue that the war was one of many triggers that set British India on its long path to political self-determination in 1947 and brought profound structural changes to the make-up of the British Indian Army and its organisation. For Britain, it ushered in a loosening of ties in its relationship with what was commonly referred to as the “Jewel in the Crown” of the British [Empire](#). Why, then, did the important contributions of South Asian soldiers disappear from public consciousness and why is it only now that we encounter a resurgence in interest, slowly bringing into view this story through a long-drawn-out process that began in the late 1970s?

Current South Asian historiography in Britain

Britain's increasingly diverse population demands perhaps a broader approach, away from parochial Anglo- and Euro-centric battle histories, towards a more inclusive way of commemorating the First World War. Academics too have increasingly rediscovered this narrative in the colonial archive in Britain and India. In this respect, the work of community organisations, historians and museums is invaluable. Indeed, for a younger generation of South Asian descent, born and living in Britain today, such a refocused angle on this event may perhaps generate a new understanding of this shared history, which is one of the key defining moments for Britain in the 20th and 21st century. This goes hand-in-hand with the development of a more diverse historiographical methodology away from battle histories towards economic, social and cultural histories that are increasingly looking into the key involvement of the British Indian Army from new perspectives, and also focus on the

economic impact the First World War had on India.²

Current South Asian historiography in India

In India, however, where the involvement and loyalty to Britain of millions of Indians in both World Wars does not fit neatly within the historiography of its [nationalist](#) movement and the road to independence, this story is fraught and often marginalised. The year 1947 marked a new beginning for the nation – its “zero hour”. The First World War and Indian involvement in it was part of a British colonial legacy from which India felt the need to distance itself. Furthermore, the partition of British India into the newly independent nation states of India and Pakistan, and the resulting division of the British Indian Army made any process of joint commemoration more complicated and vexed. In Britain, the end of the Raj in India too meant a new beginning with efforts concentrating on rebuilding the country after the Second World War, and a wider process of [decolonisation](#) which in effect dismantled the British Empire and brought with it the genesis and evolution of the Commonwealth of Nations in the latter half of the 20th century. These circumstances partly explain how the story of Indian soldiers in the First World War fell under the radar and was buried in the colonial archive.

South Asian historiography from 1917 to the 1980s

However, it is important to note that the concerns regarding the commemoration of the Indian contribution to the First World War are nothing new and preoccupied historians as well as army personnel as early as the end of hostilities in November 1918. This issue led General Sir [James Willcocks \(1857-1926\)](#), who commanded the Indian Corps in the First World War, to write a book, *With the Indians in France* (1920). This is an elaborately detailed history, which he describes in his dedication as “an earnest endeavour to record their loyalty and unperishable valour on the battlefields of France and Belgium”.³ The book is prefaced with his poem, “Hurnam Singh”, first published in the conservative Scottish literary magazine, *Blackwoods* in December 1917. Yet in his introduction to the book, Willcocks voices his doubt as to whether the story of the Indian soldier in the First World War would be recorded properly for posterity. Willcocks’s account is not a comprehensive military history, but he restricts himself to the Indian Corps in France alone. Willcocks’s is a more personalised account than [J.W.B. Merewether \(1867-1943\)](#) and [Frederick Smith’s \(1872-1930\)](#) *The Indian Corps in France*. First published in December 1917, the book was a bestseller and was reprinted twice: in March and April 1918. Following extensive feedback from readers, the authors brought out a revised and updated second edition in January 1919. The book is entirely focused on Indian involvement on the [Western Front](#), despite the British Indian Army’s deployment in much greater numbers in the [Middle East](#) and Africa. The aim of the

book was to generate what Lord [George Curzon \(1859-1925\)](#) in his introduction to it termed “well-earned recognition of its great achievement”.⁴ Lord [Horatio Herbert Kitchener \(1850-1916\)](#) appointed the historian Frederick Smith to the staff of the Indian Corps in France in 1914 with the purpose of preserving a permanent historical record out of which resulted this book. In what is a classic battle history, Merewether and Smith meticulously trace the Indian Corps’ involvement in 1914-15 up to their withdrawal after the Battle of Loos, including the first [battle of Ypres](#), the battles of Neuve Chapelle, Festubert, Givenchy, and the Second Battle of Ypres. While offering much detail, their efforts were hampered by the [censor](#) who refused the authors permission to mention a single battalion by name. Yet, some of this would be rectified in the second edition. Their book offers an immediate snapshot record for posterity and remains an important entry route for all historians working on British Indian Army units which fought in France. Any further major studies of the British Indian Army’s involvement were not forthcoming until the 1970s when interest in this area revived.

There was however an important fictional intervention: [Mulk Raj Anand’s \(1905-2004\)](#) novel, *Across the Black Waters*, first published in 1940 by Jonathan Cape. Anand wrote the book as part of a trilogy, charting the life of Lalu, a Punjabi villager, and embeds his life story in a wider narrative of India’s move towards independence. The novel was largely drafted while Anand was in [Spain](#), fighting for the Spanish republican cause in its civil war in 1937. Despite being a fictional account of the horrors of [warfare](#), it offers an important response to the conflict by an Indian living in Britain to events twenty years earlier. Moreover, it was published at a time when Britain was engaged in a renewed conflict with [Germany](#) as the Battle of Britain raged after the evacuation from Dunkirk. Indeed, *Across the Black Waters* was a timely reminder to the British public of the wider Indian contributions made to the war effort, when India’s support was called on once again in Britain’s hour of need. In this respect, this fictional account of the experience of Indian soldiers on the [Western Front](#) was an important intervention in wider public discourses and stands as a pertinent reminder of the indispensable support offered by British India to Britain then, and yet again, at another crucial juncture. Dedicated to his father, a Subedar in the 2/17th Dogra Regiment, the novel is Anand’s indictment of the horrors of warfare, evocatively capturing the claustrophobia of the trenches; the tensions between men; the inequalities the [sepoys](#) encountered; as well as the ever-present probability of death and destruction. On the one hand, Anand captures the specific experience of the Indian sepoy on the Western Front and on the other, writes a powerful universal statement on the futility of war through his hard-hitting descriptions of the outrageous brutality his characters encounter. It remains an important literary attempt to give the sepoy a voice and tell the story of the war from his perspective, especially when considering that, at the time of the novel’s publication, the censored [mail](#), which are such an invaluable source to researchers today, remained under lock and key.

[DeWitt C. Ellinwood \(1923-2002\)](#) and S.D. Pradhan's intervention in the debates with their edited collection, *India and World War 1*, is a seminal collection that once again brought to the fore the lacuna in public and academic circles – the lack of a systemic study that examines the multiple aspects of India's history of the war. More crucially, it highlights the social, political and economic impact that the conflict had on India. Published in India in 1978 by Manohar Publications and coinciding with the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the First World War, the collection brought together historians from India, Britain and the [USA](#) and offered a comprehensive overview of the various aspects of Indian involvement in the conflict. Among the contributors, Judith M. Brown focused on the effect the First World War had on the colonial relationship between Britain and India. S.D. Pradhan offers an invaluable overview of the dramatic changes the British Indian Army experienced in terms of its organisation and recruitment patterns as the army grew from 316,514 in 1914 to over 1.4 million in 1919, and outlines the re-organisations it underwent in the inter-war period. Pradhan also offers valuable insights into South Asian contributions to the East African campaign. N. Gerald Barrier refocuses the book's lens onto the subcontinent and on war propaganda and its effect in British India during the war, offering an important insight into the colonial "Home Front" to evaluate the structures and processes of political control exercised by the Government of India, particularly to contain radical activism. The Government of India engaged more and more with government offices in London to develop its own publicity and [propaganda](#).⁵ This was increasingly important in the face of German wartime propaganda aimed at Muslim soldiers in the Indian Army.

South Asian historiography from the 1980s

In 1987, Shyam Narain Saxena published *Role of Indian Army in the First World War* in India, based on his doctoral thesis. He drew extensively on the War Diaries which are now deposited with the Undivided Historical Section of the Ministry of Defence, Government of India, New Delhi. Saxena's book is an important intervention – beyond Ellinwood's and Pradhan's edited collection, very little material on the Indian army's war effort was published in India, although a number of official publications by the Army Department exist. Saxena, who was Lieutenant Colonel in the Indian army, brings together in this book his expertise as a soldier of the post-independence Indian army as well as a trainee historian at the University of Lucknow. Saxena's monograph focuses on the wider narrative of the war, theatre by theatre. Invaluable are the ways in which he traces where one Corps was deployed and redeployed in a number of theatres, making these units visible to the reader. He used extensively the Ministry of Defence Library, Delhi, the Headquarters Central Command Library, Lucknow, as well as the undivided Historical Division of the Ministry of Defence and the National Archives of India. Saxena's book offers a comprehensive overview focusing on the theatres in France and [Belgium](#), Africa, [Egypt](#), Palestine and [Mesopotamia](#). The author did

not however access relevant materials in British or German archives, so the book relies solely on sources from India and is a straightforward battle history that emphasises the Indian army's achievements. Saxena offers a favourable assessment of the involvement of Indian soldiers and a tentative analysis of the impact their contribution had on India during and after the war. He suggests that the war was a shaping agent for a new political and social consciousness, based on their experience of fighting side by side with British and other soldiers from the Empire, as well as encountering the local populations in France and Britain.

Saxena's 1987 study appears to be narrowly focused at a time when wider interest in the history of Indian soldiers and their contribution to the First World War was gathering pace in the UK, led by archivists, community historians and educationists. After the Second World War, with independence and partition in 1947 and the forced migration of South Asians from [East Africa](#) in the 1970s, the increasing size of the Asian community in Britain would generate an important impetus to change and adapt the history curriculum in schools. It was not until the early 1980s that, spurred by a growing sense of frustration by educationists of Indian heritage, the issue about the omission from official curricula of the social, economic and cultural impact of South Asians on Britain was raised. This led historian, Rozina Visram to explore the subject initially in the context of two school books, and research for the Inner London Education Authority. It culminated in her 2002 study, *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History*. Visram draws on the extensive archival and photographic collections of the India Office Records (now housed at the British Library, St Pancras, London; the National Archives at Kew; and the Imperial War Museum). Her research provides important new insights, particularly into the treatment of South Asian soldiers in hospitals in Britain and the relationships between South Asians resident in Britain at the time - including [Mahatma K. Gandhi \(1869-1948\)](#) and poet and activist, [Sarojini Naidu \(1879-1949\)](#) - and their support for the war effort. Visram also highlighted the important involvement of pilots like [Indra Lal Roy \(1898-1918\)](#), who flew with the Royal Flying Corps in the later stages of the conflict, bringing to the fore stories which had previously been buried in the archives or were omitted from standard battle histories.

One of the most helpful contributions to the field was [David Omissi's](#) *Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldier Letters, 1914-18* (1999), an edited collection of extracts (translated into English) from the censored letters written by the sepoys, and archived in the India Office's Military Department. The letters are mostly from the Western Front and the various hospitals in England where the sepoys were cared for, along with some from Mesopotamia. The collection generated new interest in the subject. Omissi's project was to give voice to the experience of Indian soldiers, largely in Europe, through extracts from the censored mail; he privileged letters from soldiers with combat experience, rather than ancillaries such as supply and transport regiments. The collection is a counterpoint to the heroic account offered by

Willcocks and Merewether and repeated in the battle histories that followed. Indeed, what Omissi's collection does so eloquently is to give voice to what had always been presumed "silent" witnesses to the events of 1914-1915 on the Western Front and the experience in the war hospitals in England. These letters not only comprise an important historical document but also open a window on the psychological effect of warfare as they are eyewitness accounts in their expression of lived experience.⁶ Their writers left important records of their reactions to the cataclysmic events they found themselves involved in, and their responses to various aspects of European life, from its agricultural and industrial modernity to its education, food, culture and attitudes towards women. It is however important to note that the fragments of the letters are heavily meditated. The letters were often dictated by the soldier to a scribe, then translated and extracted by the colonial censors for their reports. These translated extracts, compiled by the censors, are what remain, and are collected in the volume.

South Asian historiography in the 21st century

A recent and valuable intervention in the debates around the historiography of the First World War comes from the "In Flanders Fields" Museum in Ypres. In 2008, it curated the exhibition, "Man, Culture, War: Multicultural Aspects of the First World War". The book derived from the exhibition, *World War I: Five Continents in Flanders*, charted for the first time the fifty different cultures from across Europe and the wider world that were present in Flanders and northern France. The book highlighted the many facets of encounter in the trenches, revealing the area as an important contact zone in the middle of conflict. It offers a different perspective by stressing the international dimension of the war as both France and Britain in particular mobilised troops from their respective colonial empires. Here, the narrative of South Asian soldiers is embedded in a larger context that invites new comparative studies on the subject.

[Santanu Das'](#) *Race, Empire and First World War Writing* (2011) and his research into the Indian war experience in particular, has contributed much over the past years to the discussion of the experiences and memories of the First World War in a multicultural and international framework.⁷ There is a recuperative aspect to this type of work: the different angle of vision on this history in the new contemporary contexts of migration, globalisation and postcoloniality opens up different analytical frames that facilitate pan-European, international and socio-cultural dimensions of the war which resonate today. *When the War began we heard of several kings: South Asian Prisoners in World War I Germany*, edited by Franziska Roy, [Heike Liebau](#) and Ravi Ahuja, was published in the same year (2011). Although tightly focused on the experiences of the [South Asian prisoners](#) in the camps of

Wünsdorf and Zossen, it was an important intervention in the field, in terms of both the material and the methodology.⁸ The work of [Radhika Singha](#) on the [Indian Labour Corps](#) – in both France and in Mesopotamia – has also persistently revealed fresh insights on this important but little-known aspect of the First World War.⁹

Conclusion

One might wonder why the Indian experience of the First World War has remained off the radar of historians for so long. Indeed, the advents of Indian independence and partition of the Indian subcontinent brought to a close Britain's colonial presence in South Asia. It resulted in the division of the British Indian Army into that of India and Pakistan, and certainly had some bearing on this imperial story being buried in the archives, with the new nation states privileging a more nationalist approach to historiography. Yet this doesn't belie the fact that the archives in both India and Britain contain manifold and important material traces, including photographs, artefacts, letters and diaries, and official records. The India Office Records at the British Library, St Pancras, London, offer invaluable material in this regard, not least the censored mails. The centennial commemoration of the outbreak of the conflict has resulted in a fresh surge of interest in the colonial dimensions of the conflict, particularly the South Asian experience, both in Europe – particularly the UK – and in India. Fresh materials are being uncovered, and a major conference was organised in Delhi on "India and the First World War" in March 2014 by the United Services Institution, with participation from both military personnel and academics. As this article goes to press, new monographs on the subject are being published.¹⁰ It remains of crucial importance for researchers to return to the archives to unearth these materials in national and international collections and develop fresh lines of analysis. This will enrich and renew the crucial dialogue and underscore the global dimension and impact of the events of 1914-1918 and their on-going ramifications.

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Notes

1. War Office: Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire during the Great War, 1914-1920, London 1922, p. 777. ↑
2. See Das, Santanu (ed.): Race, Empire and First World War Writing. Cambridge 2011; Omissi, David: Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers' Letters, 1914-18, Basingstoke 1999; and Visram, Rozina: Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History, London 2002 for discussions of the economic impact of the First World War see Saini, Krishnan G.: The

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3. Willcocks, James: *With the Indians in France*, London 1920, p. v. ↑
 4. Merewether, J. W. B. / Smith, Frederick: *The Indian Corps in France*, Second edition, London 1919, p. xiii. ↑
 5. Ellinwood, DeWitt C. and Pradhan, S. D. (eds): *India and World War 1*, New Delhi 1978, p. 86. ↑
 6. Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War* 1999, p. 22. ↑
 7. See Das, Santanu: *The Singing Subaltern*. In: *Parallax* 17/3 (2011), pp. 4-18; and Das (ed.): *Race, Empire and First World War Writing* 2011. ↑
 8. Roy, Franziska / Liebau, Heike / Ravi, Ahuja: *When the War Began We Heard of Several Kings: South Asian Prisoners in World War I Germany*, New Delhi 2011. See also Liebau, Heike et al. (eds): *The World in World Wars: Experiences, Perceptions and Perspectives from Africa and Asia*, Leiden 2010. ↑
 9. Singha, Radhika: *Finding Labour from India for the War in Iraq*. In: *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 49/2 (2007) pp. 412-445. ↑
 10. Singh, Gajendra: *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy*, London 2014. See also Morton-Jack, George: *The Indian Army on the Western Front: India's Expeditionary Force to France and Belgium in the First World War*, Cambridge 2014; and Das, Santanu: *India, Empire and the First World War: Words, Objects, Images and Music*, Cambridge 2015. ↑
 11. I am grateful to Rozina Visram and Santanu Das for sharing their expertise with me and to the curators and archivists at the India Office Records collection at the British Library, particularly Penny Brook. This research stems from the AHRC-funded projects *Making Britain: South Asian Visions of Home and Abroad, 1870-1950* [Grant No.: AH/E009859/1] and *Beyond the Frame: Indian British Connections* [Grant No.: AH/J003247/1]. ↑

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External Links

- [Chattri Memorial \(sikhmuseum.com\) \(Institutional Website\)](http://sikhmuseum.com)
- [Das, Santanu: The Indian Sepoy in the First World War, February 2014 \(British Library\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Indian Troops \(British Pathé\) \(Video\)](#)
- [Kant, Vedica: India and WWI: Piecing together the impact of the Great War on the subcontinent \(LSE\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Memorial Gates \(Institutional Website\)](#)
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- [Willcocks, James: With the Indians in France, London 1920 \(Internet Archive\) \(Book\)](#)

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