

Making Sense of the War (India)

By [Claude Markovits](#)

Summary

Although India was not a theatre of war, World War I produced a major inflexion in a historical trajectory that had been marked since 1815 by a certain degree of insulation from the ebb and flow of the rivalries of the great powers. As India's relatively small peacetime army expanded enormously, the reverberations of the conflict were felt in the economy, society and politics of the country. The connection between India and Britain emerged paradoxically weakened from a period in which India's resources had been mobilized as never before in service of empire.

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Introduction

Given the growing scholarly interest in the global aspects of World War I, the role of [India](#) in the conflict is receiving closer attention. Although the subcontinent was never a theatre of war, it figures prominently in recent general histories of the conflict such as [Hew Strachan's](#) major survey.¹ Indian participation is no longer seen as one element in the overall mobilization of the British Empire but is perceived as worthy of more detailed attention *per se*. A recent volume entitled "The World in World Wars"² has five of a total of eighteen regional articles dealing specifically with the case of India. In spite of the continuous increase in the body of literature devoted to India in World War I, there remain gaps in our understanding of the impact of the conflict on the subcontinent. This article will argue that the war accelerated trends already at work in the Indian body politic and Indian society but that it also ushered in a whole new stage in India's relationship with Britain and the world at large. Starting with an attempt at locating the war in the *longue durée* of Indian history, the article moves on to an examination of its impact on the rise of nationalism, before presenting

some reflections on its economic and social consequences.

World War I in the *Longue Durée* of Indian History

Since the end of the Franco-British conflict of the late 18th and early 19th century in which it had been involved quite directly both as a theatre of war and as a base for British naval expeditions, India had not been embroiled in any large-scale foreign wars outside of its immediate neighbourhood, as in the case of the two Afghan wars of 1839-1842 and 1878-1879 and the three Burmese wars of 1824-1826, 1852-1853 and 1885-1886. Although India's armies had also participated in many British colonial expeditions to various parts of Asia and Africa³ and a small Indian contingent had even been dispatched to Europe at the time of the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878, the repercussions of these conflicts in India had been limited. Only the [sepoys](#) (native soldiers) and their immediate entourage as well as a few military contractors had been involved in these expeditions. The bulk of India's population, deemed by the British [theory of "martial races"](#) as unfit for military service, had remained largely unaffected. The Great War, however, was to engulf large swathes of India's population, directly or indirectly, in its fiery furnace. As a result, the war was to modify the trajectory of Indian history in a way no event since the Great Revolt of 1857 had done.

The reasons why a country not involved in a theatre of war was so profoundly affected are worth briefly underlining. First, India was such a vast reservoir of human and material resources for the British Empire that imperial decision-makers, faced at the outset of the war with a shortage of manpower, had no other choice than to tap that reservoir, whatever their own reservations regarding its worth. Over time, India contributed more men, a total of some 1.5 million, to the war than any other country of the empire, apart from Britain itself. An expeditionary force of four divisions was sent from India to [France](#) to take part in the war on the [Western Front](#) even though the reigning pre-1914 British military doctrine specifically excluded the participation of Indians in a European conflict.⁴ A plan prepared by [Douglas Haig \(1861-1928\)](#) while he was Commander-in-Chief in India in 1909-1911, which provided for the dispatch of Indian troops to Europe in case of a European conflict, had been shelved on the instructions of the Secretary of State for India and had escaped destruction only by chance.⁵ It was hastily dusted off in 1914 and served as a blueprint for the deployment of the Indian army on the Western Front. It deserves notice in passing that the Germans indicted both the British and the French for a breach of "civilized" norms of warfare in bringing "savage" colonial warriors to take part in a conflict between European nations. Although the two Indian [infantry](#) divisions were withdrawn in January 1916, after having suffered some 8,000 casualties, and dispatched to [Mesopotamia](#), the cavalry remained in France until March 1918. Nor was India's material contribution to the overall war effort of the British Empire negligible,

even if it remained inferior to that of the much richer white Dominions such as [Australia](#) and [Canada](#).

The war effort put enormous stress on India's fragile economic fabric, with long-term consequences that proved significant. Because communications with Britain were severely impaired, the tendency to growing economic self-sufficiency, already at work since 1905 with the onset of the *Swadeshi* movement (geared towards the substitution of locally-produced goods for imported ones), received a further boost. Similarly, the war reawakened political forces hostile to British [imperialism](#) that had been dormant for a few years but found new opportunities to make their voice heard. India was unique in the pre-1914 British colonial empire ([Ireland](#) aside) in that it had a nationalist movement that, although not yet endowed with a mass base, nevertheless had been able to mount significant challenges to imperial rule in the first decade of the 20th century, culminating in the bold attempt at killing the Viceroy of India [Charles Hardinge, Baron Hardinge of Penshurst \(1858-1944\)](#) in Delhi in December 1912 at the time of his solemn entry into the new capital of British India. The immediate pre-war years however had seen an uneasy calm prevail in India. The next section focuses on the way in which the war contributed to the rise of Indian [nationalism](#).

World War I and Indian Nationalism

The existence of a direct correlation between World War I and a powerful surge in anti-colonial nationalism on a global scale is well established in the [historiography](#).⁶ The main argument adduced in support of that thesis is that the bloody inter-European conflict exploded once and for all the myth of the superiority of Western civilization⁷ by placing in full light its dark underside of violence and even its barbarity. In the case of India, this theme had a particular resonance, as the violence inherent to the materialist ethos of the west had been at the heart of a devastating critique of Western civilization developed by an influential group of Indian publicists, starting with [Swami Vivekananda \(1863-1902\)](#) in his famous intervention at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. That critique was deepened in the following decades and found expression in particular in the pamphlet written in 1909 by a South Africa-based Indian lawyer, [Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi \(1869-1948\)](#), under the title of *Hind Swaraj* (Indian Home Rule).⁸ In the pamphlet, which had not been widely disseminated in India because of [censorship](#), the future Mahatma had forcefully argued against Indians choosing the path of armed violence to fight British domination, as some [revolutionaries](#) were then advocating in word and deed. The thrust of his argument was that, by following the path of violence, Indians would actually mimic the west and could not therefore attain true *Swaraj*, which for him meant a return to an idealized pre-colonial India in the form of a self-sufficient rural utopia.

By exposing in full view the horrors of Western industrialized [warfare](#), World War I gave added power of persuasion to the Gandhian message. At the same time, it subjected the revolutionary path to a severe reality check. Taking a leaf from the book of Irish nationalism with its famous dictum that “England’s difficulty is Ireland’s opportunity,” a few Indian revolutionaries tried to take advantage of the war to instigate anti-British risings with little success. Some, like the legendary [Jatin Mukherjee \(1879-1915\)](#), challenged the Raj on Indian soil and met with a tragic end.⁹ Others operated from abroad. Two different groups of exiles were involved in anti-British conspiracies which eventually failed but gave the British a fright. One group was based in [Germany](#) and known under the name of “Berlin committee.” It was directly supported by German intelligence and composed mostly of Bengalis and Muslims; it had a propagandist agenda, directed firstly at Indian soldiers who had been taken prisoners by the Germans on the Western Front.

The other group, known as the [Ghadr \(revolution\) Party](#), was based in California and recruited mostly amongst Sikhs. It revolved around a newspaper that was widely circulated amongst the small but rapidly growing Sikh diaspora. By 1917, it was clear that the attempts by both groups at instigating an anti-British revolt in India had been a failure. Hundreds of *Ghadrites* returning from North America had been arrested in the Punjab and in a riot in Budge-Budge near Calcutta. Attempts at smuggling arms through the Dutch East Indies with German support had also been quashed. But, by then, in spite of the failure of armed risings, the war had become increasingly unpopular in India and had started to feed a rising wave of mass discontent. The growing trend of opposition to the war was due firstly to economic causes which will be elaborated upon later. But the large-scale losses suffered by Indian troops in [East Africa](#) and Mesopotamia, the two theatres of war in which they were involved after the departure from France of most of the [Indian Expeditionary Force](#), also contributed to making the war unpopular, particularly in the province of Punjab which had supplied the bulk of the troops.¹⁰ It is remarkable to note that the Punjab, which had been one of the provinces least affected by the rise of nationalism before 1914, emerged after the war as a major trouble spot, as it went through a quasi-insurrectional phase in 1918-1919 that led to the [Amritsar massacre](#) in April 1919.

Some of the pre-1914 “extremist” nationalists took advantage of this wave of mass discontent to make a political comeback. This was the case in particular of [Bal Gangadhar Tilak \(1856-1920\)](#), who played a major role in the creation of so-called “Home Rule leagues,” loose organizations inspired by the Irish example that substituted themselves largely for a Congress that appeared moribund at the time. They did not directly oppose the war, but tried to take advantage of it to advance a political agenda of self-rule. The same path was followed by the man who was to emerge after the war as the uncontested leader of the Indian

nationalist movement, Gandhi, after he returned to India in 1915. In spite of his own belief in non-violence, he called on Indians to enlist in the army, in the hope that such loyalty would be rewarded after the conflict with significant political concessions. Although a declaration in August 1917 by the Secretary of State for India Sir [Samuel Montagu \(1879-1924\)](#) promised in very vague terms a measure of self-government for India after the war, it did not signal a major change in British policy. The disappointment felt by Gandhi led him to enter into open opposition to the Raj in 1919 by launching the Rowlatt *satyagraha*, a protest movement directed against a repressive wartime legislation, his first attempt to apply to India the lessons learnt in South Africa in the organization of non-violent resistance.

One can therefore link Gandhi's change of attitude towards the British Empire to the impact of the war on him, not so much in confirming his already formed negative view of western civilization as in destroying for good his faith in British trustworthiness. Although the 1919 movement was a failure, it made Gandhi a household name all over India. As early as 1920, he was able to mount a new challenge to the British with his non-cooperation movement. Its success, which surprised even Gandhi, can be partly explained by a definite change in the political atmosphere. More specifically, the mindset of a section of the middle classes appears to have been transformed. While members of this group used to be loyal to the British before the war, many of them came to share Gandhi's view of British rule as oppressive and doomed. It is plausible, although speculative, inasmuch as only a few middle-class youngsters had been given commissions in the army towards the end of the war to palliate a penury of British officers, that the spectacle of the war and of the difficulties faced by Britain had contributed to this change of heart in no small way. The prestige of the Raj had taken a blow that was to prove irreparable and Gandhi was able to take advantage of it. With the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to argue that World War I contributed significantly to the rise of a mass-based nationalist movement that was capable of mounting a direct challenge to British rule. The war also tended to discredit ideas of an armed revolution and therefore contributed indirectly to the ascendancy of ideas of non-violent resistance. However, other changes in the economic and social fabric of colonial India were perhaps of even greater importance.

The Impact of World War I on the Indian Economy and Indian Society

The war put an end to a period of relative prosperity based on a growing integration of India into the world capitalist economy. That prosperity, which never reached the mass of the population, rested basically on the export of a number of cash crops, mostly jute, cotton and tea, to Europe, North America and [Japan](#). While the production of tea was almost entirely in the hands of big British companies which employed a mass of poorly paid coolies, cotton and

jute were grown mostly by small Indian farmers and commercialized by Indian intermediaries who sold the produce to big British, European and Japanese trading firms based in the port-cities of Bombay and Calcutta. Apart from commercial agriculture, other sectors which had been expanding in the pre-war years were coal mining, largely dominated by British firms, and manufacturing industry. The latter was dominated by textiles, cotton and jute. While jute mills in Calcutta were in the hands of British (mostly Scottish) capitalists, the cotton industry was more dispersed (Bombay being the largest centre) and dominated by Indian capitalists. In the ten years from 1905-1914 some Indian firms had diversified from textiles into other industries such as cement or steel. Most spectacular had been the foundation of a steel industry in the jungles of Bihar by the great Bombay Parsi firm of Tatas.

The war impacted the economy in many ways, mostly negatively. Massive requisitions of cereals, in particular for the needs of the cavalry, led to a rapid rise in the price of food that hurt the urban poor and agricultural labourers who depended on the market for their daily needs. Producers did not derive many benefits from higher prices, as intermediaries reaped most of them. A thriving black market developed, as always in times of war, in which fortunes were made. Exports of cash crops, especially jute, suffered from the loss of the German market and from the obstacles to communications with Britain due to the threat of German [submarines](#). The main beneficiary of the war was the domestic manufacturing industry, especially the cotton mills which profited from the decline in imports of Lancashire piece-goods which dominated the market before the war. The production of piece-goods was 50 percent higher in 1917-18 than in the pre-war years.¹¹ The Tata steel mills were saved from looming bankruptcy by a contract to supply rails to Mesopotamia where the British built 1,500 miles of railway lines to transport troops and material.¹² From a longer-term perspective, Indian capitalists benefitted from the fact that British businessmen felt powerfully the pull of loyalty to the homeland and tended as a result to somewhat reduce their involvement in the Indian economy, a trend that would only accelerate throughout the interwar period. All in all, while some operators, both British and Indian, reaped handsome profits from war contracts, the mass of the population suffered a fall in an already low purchasing power. Although the 1920s saw the return of a modicum of prosperity, the dynamics of the colonial economy had been somewhat broken and it would never recover its pre-1914 shine (however misleading that shine may have been in many ways). The role played by India in the imperial economy was clearly diminished. In particular, India's contribution to the overall imperial balance of payments, so crucial before 1914,¹³ was soon eclipsed by that of Malaya and Northern Rhodesia.

While the economic consequences of the war are fairly easy to chart, it is much more difficult to appraise the societal changes it may have brought about. Firstly, it should be recalled that

the immediate post-war period saw a demographic disaster of first magnitude. Between June 1918 and June 1919, the [influenza pandemic](#) is thought to have resulted in 17-18 million deaths in India, i.e. one-third of the total death toll of the pandemic worldwide. Its long-term consequences remain subject to speculation. As to the direct consequences of the war, focusing on the soldiers who took part in the conflict is one way of opening the field. The almost 1.5 million men who were enlisted during the war, enormously swelling the ranks of an Indian Army which had only 150,000 men in 1914, were not entirely recruited from the “martial races” that had been favoured by recruiters in the post-1858 era. Although almost half hailed from the Punjab, mostly Muslims and Sikhs, the British Army was forced to tap new sources in areas of Northern India such as Gahrwal but also in South India.¹⁴

Apart from soldiers and a host of “followers,” some 50,000 [labourers](#) were also recruited for the Western Front and the majority of them came from the tribal areas of Northeastern India (Nagaland, Mizoram). This had significant consequences for these “backwards” areas. While the total casualties (65,000 dead) suffered by India’s military were low compared to figures in Europe, the departure of so many young men nevertheless disrupted life in many rural communities where women had to take up tasks that were traditionally reserved for men. In the Punjab and the Northwest Frontier Province, as revealed in letters intercepted by military censors,¹⁵ some men who had not enlisted took advantage of the absence of male members in some households to press their claims in property disputes against helpless women, thus sowing the seeds of enduring feuds.

As to the question of whether the participation of so many young men in a worldwide conflict and their discovery of foreign countries in Europe, Africa and the [Middle East](#) led to an expansion of their horizons and the absorption of new ideas, the answer remains open. Examination of the censored correspondence of Indian soldiers in France reveals a great curiosity and a generally positive appraisal of certain features of Western societies, such as a greater presence of women in public spaces¹⁶ in comparison with India. There is no clear indication, however, that, on their return to their villages, war veterans were behind a movement towards greater gender equality, a sign that there remained a gap between discourse and actual social practice. There are scattered indications that participation in the Great War contributed to opening India up to new emancipatory ideas which were spreading worldwide in the wake of the [Russian revolution](#). While this did not result in the emergence of a revolutionary movement, it did give a more radical tinge to nationalist politics and thus had significant long-term consequences.

The Great War exposed India to global currents in a novel way. Within a period of four years, more Indians left for faraway lands than in the preceding one hundred years. Excepting the

tens of thousands who died on foreign soil and the much smaller number who remained abroad because they had found love, most of these men came back from their travels. Thus, the war was linked to circulation more than to migration. One item, whose circulation proved fatal to millions, was the virus of the influenza pandemic which originated in the United States and created more havoc in India than all the home-bred epidemics of plague and cholera. This large-scale circulation, though not so much of the virus, was to be repeated at the time of the Second World War on an even larger scale. While the First World War gave a boost to Indian nationalism, the Second World War brought Indian independence in its wake, a reminder that India's history is part of a broader international framework.

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External Links

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