

Non-European Soldiers

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Summary

This article examines the use by Great Britain and France of colonial subjects from their empires to fight during the First World War. Other Great War soldiers hailed from locations outside of Europe, but these men stood apart not only for their geographical origins, but also their racial identity. By war's end, over two million soldiers from India, Africa, Southeast Asia, and beyond served on battlefields in Europe and all over the world, contributing importantly to the global nature of the conflict. Moreover, their service helped shape the meaning of empire and colonialism for both these men and those who interacted with them during and long after the war.

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Introduction

Combatant nations mobilized some 65 million soldiers during the First World War, of whom more than 6 million were from outside Europe. Men from places such as the [Indian subcontinent](#), [the United States](#), [Canada](#), [Australia](#), [New Zealand](#), all regions of [Africa](#), Central and Southeast Asia, [the Middle East](#), [Japan](#), the Caribbean, and the Indian and [Pacific Oceans](#) served on the [battlefields](#) of Europe, Africa, and Asia, as well as on the world's [oceans](#).¹ Thus the story of all non-European soldiers who served everywhere between 1914 and 1918 is as large as the global story of this world-wide conflict. Yet the non-European men from Asia and

Africa who served in the largest numbers in areas outside their regions of origin captured the most attention from contemporaries. Not only were they strangers to the areas in which they were serving, but their racial identities set them apart in distinct and sometimes dramatic ways. This article will focus on these soldiers—men from British India and from French colonies in Africa and Asia who served in Europe and the Middle East—to highlight the extent to which what started as a general European war was also a global war because of, and for the cause of, [empire](#).²

The service of these men also highlighted the sense of displacement and strangeness that so marked the impressions of many of the war's participants, whether they hailed from Europe or beyond. German soldier [Ernst Jünger \(1895-1998\)](#) was astonished in 1917 to discover that his opponents were not French or English, but "Indians...come from far across the ocean to bash their skulls against the Hanoverian Fusiliers on this godforsaken piece of earth." Adding to the strangeness, the Indians spoke French, and, "The pageant—the laments of the prisoners mixed with our cheers—had something prehistoric about it. This was no longer war; it was an ancient tableau."³ For French soldier [Henri Barbusse \(1873-1935\)](#), the presence of Moroccans among his comrades lent the war an exotic air. They were "intimidating and even a little frightening," "devils...made for attacking...real soldiers."⁴ Yet for many of these soldiers from Africa and Asia, it was Europe—its people, culture, and war—that was so strange. Indochinese Sergeant Am wrote that the war was "made under strange conditions," while his comrade Corporal Ham noted, "war is made in the air, under the ground; trenches are dug, from which enormous projectiles are fired, which fall like rain on the enemy trench."⁵ "Days seem like years," one Indian soldier wrote of his experiences in [France](#). A [veteran](#) of previous campaigns along British India's volatile border with [Afghanistan](#), the man struggled to put his experiences to words. "I have no confidence for five minutes what will happen."⁶

For all of these soldiers, the war was a strange and unprecedented experience, and the mixing of peoples in new spaces only enhanced the impressions created by the scale of violence, [technologically](#) advanced [weapons](#), and industrialized slaughter. The existence of globe-spanning empires and the resort to their [manpower resources](#) to wage this worldwide conflict ensured that interethnic contact would be a critical component of what scholars have come to call the era's *culture de guerre*, or [war culture](#). No [colonial empires](#) did more to inform this aspect of the war culture than the world's two largest, the British and the French.

This is in some ways ironic, since plans to use colonial subjects as soldiers in a European conflict were not particularly well developed before 1914. Both empires deployed colonial subjects in uniform primarily as agents of further colonial conquest or control in [Africa](#) and

Asia. Some in France had debated fielding a *Force Noire* of African soldiers in a [future war](#), but most military and political officials in both nations had regarded colonial recruitment as a way to ensure [imperial](#) control and free European personnel for deployment elsewhere. Nonetheless, colonial recruitment put men at the disposal of French and British authorities, and the scale, intensity, and desperation of the early fighting propelled early resort to these so-called “reservoirs of men.”⁷

British Empire Soldiers

Army Recruitment in India

At the start of the war, the [Indian army](#) constituted the only overseas professional force available to [Great Britain](#). In 1914 the Indian army numbered 239,561 men, of whom 193,901 were Indians serving as [combatants](#) in segregated battalions led by British officers. Between August 1914 and December 31, 1919, the Indian army [recruited](#) another 877,068 combatants and 563,369 non-combatants, of whom more than 1 million served overseas.⁸ India’s contribution in soldiers to the imperial war effort was greater than that of all of Britain’s colonies and [Dominions](#) combined, therefore. The war claimed the [lives](#) of 53,486 Indian soldiers. 64,350 were wounded. Indian soldiers had collected more than 12,000 [decorations](#). A dozen men had received the Victoria Cross, the Empire’s highest military honor for “gallantry of the highest order.”

The demand for manpower fell disproportionately on Punjabis. Between August 1914 and the November 1918 Armistice in Europe, about 60 percent of all combat troops raised in India hailed from Punjab. This was the product of a prewar racialized recruitment strategy carried into wartime called the “[martial race doctrine](#).” One commentator noted, “It is one of the essential differences between the East and the West, with certain exceptions, only certain clans and classes [in India] can bear arms; the others have not the physical courage necessary for the warrior.”⁹ The Indian army and its recruiters earmarked only select groups for military service – Sikhs, Muslims, Dogras and Hindu Jats of the Punjab, Pathans from the North West Frontier, [Gurkhas](#) from Nepal. The overwhelming majority of Indian men were expressly barred from military service. As a consequence of racial policy, by 1918, Punjabi Sikhs, who made up less than 1 percent of the population of British India, had supplied 90,000 combatants, or one-eighth of the 621,224 combatants deployed overseas. Bengal, with a male population of roughly 23 million, had only a single combat battalion at the front at the end of the war.¹⁰ India’s wartime experience differed considerably from that of the British Isles, therefore, where men from England, Wales and Scotland enlisted at comparable rates ([Ireland](#) was a notable exception).

What motivated men from South Asia to serve in the armed forces of the colonizer? Martial race doctrine held that Sikhs and Pathans joined the military because of a natural predilection for military service, but the story of the Indian soldier in World War I is as much a story about making a living as anything else. Cash-strapped and debt-ridden peasant families in the Punjab sent their sons or fathers to the war to supplement the family income and to secure the continued patronage of the (British-run) government of India.¹¹ In the Punjab, the government set aside 180,000 acres of canal-irrigated land for Indian officers and men who served with distinction in the field. As the war dragged on, government and army authorities introduced new inducements to lure men to the ranks, such as free [rations](#), improved pay and pensions. Starting in late 1917, a new recruit could expect a Rs. 50 signing bonus. [Michael O'Dwyer \(1864-1940\)](#), the Punjab's Lieutenant Governor, noted, "These measures did much to overcome the hesitation of the would-be recruit and the opposition of his family."¹² Poverty-stricken districts tended to more readily provide soldiers than prosperous ones. Jhelum and Rawalpindi, for example – two otherwise impoverished, majority-Muslim districts in Punjab – each supplied over 30,000 soldiers in the final year of the war out of a combined male population of 250,000. Each district received in return some £15,000 to £20,000 monthly in remittances.

Although the government of India never resorted to conscription like England, Canada, or New Zealand, Indian army recruiting became systematically coercive in the final year of the war, during which time, India dramatically increased recruiting efforts to meet the army's expanding need for manpower. In May 1918, Lieutenant Governor O'Dwyer – tasked by the government of India with raising 200,000 more recruits – assigned quotas to each district (and within each district to each tehsil, and within each tehsil to each village). Thereafter the entire civil administration went to work finding new recruits. Bureaucrats who did not meet their quotas were sacked. Tax collectors administered public beatings or slapped fines on villagers unwilling to furnish young men for the army. Other villagers who resisted recruiting efforts were prosecuted under the Defense of India Act. An investigation conducted by the Indian National Congress after the war led [Mahatma Gandhi \(1869-1948\)](#) to conclude that "the methods adopted for securing recruits [in 1918] ... travelled far beyond the line of moral or social pressure."¹³ Conscription would have been "infinitely better" than the "so-called volunteerism" that took place in 1918, he said.¹⁴

The Indian Army in the Field, 1914-1918

Between 1914 and 1918, Indian soldiers deployed to three continents. At any given time, they participated in the operations of no less than seven [expeditionary forces](#) sent overseas by India during the war – to France and [Belgium](#) (Indian Expeditionary Force A, or IEFA); to

[East Africa](#) (IEFB and IEFC); to [Mesopotamia](#) (IEFD); to the Sinai and Palestine (IEFE and IEFF); to [Gallipoli](#) (IEFG); and other theatres. The Indian army's expeditionary forces ultimately fulfilled three vital functions as part of Britain's imperial war effort: they reinforced the British Expeditionary Force in France; they helped secure vital imperial holdings like the Suez Canal in [Egypt](#) and [oil](#) pipelines in the [Persian Gulf](#); and they spearheaded the conquest of Mesopotamia in 1916 and 1917, and then Palestine in 1918, ultimately knocking Turkey out of the war.

Indian soldiers belonging to IEFA arrived on the [Western Front](#) just in time for the [Battle of Ypres](#) in late October 1914. The outcome of the war remained anybody's guess. Holding trenches that were really nothing more than "a thin scrawl of more or less detached posts," the Indians fought against an enemy superior in manpower and weaponry. Everywhere the Germans held the high ground. Inexperienced British officers commanding Indian units did not know how to properly deploy their troops, overloading frontline trenches and exposing the men to unnecessary dangers.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the 24,000 soldiers of the Indian 3rd and 7th Divisions held on. "The resistant power of the British Army, cruelly outnumbered, and exhausted by constant fighting against superior [artillery](#) and a more numerous [equipment of machine guns](#), was almost overrun," military observers noted. "And except for the Indian Army there were no other trained regular soldiers in the Empire available at that moment for service."¹⁶ Between October 1914 and the close of 1915, when commanders withdrew the [infantry](#) for the growing war in the Middle East, Indian soldiers fought for control of villages and towns up and down the British sector of the Western Front: Ypres, Festubert, Givenchy, Neuve Chapelle, Second Ypres, and Loos. They never dislodged the Germans from France, but they provided critical manpower when no other was to be had.¹⁷

Indian soldiers also deployed to Africa and the Middle East for the length of the war, where they secured vital British Empire holdings. Indian Army operations in the Middle East began in earnest in November 1914 when the Indian 6th Division deployed to Basra in the Persian Gulf to secure the oil fields in nearby Abadan, in neutral Persia. At the same time, Indian forces gathered in Egypt alongside British imperial troops to protect the Suez Canal, Britain's lifeline to Asia. In January 1915, this well-entrenched and well-provisioned force repulsed a Turkish attack on the Canal. Additional brigades of infantry from India and another from Egypt joined the 6th Division in Basra in March 1915, where reports of an approaching [Ottoman force](#) alarmed Indian Army Command. General [John Nixon \(1857-1921\)](#) took command of a force 20,000 strong and in April, his men repulsed an Ottoman attack at Shaiba, ensuring the British war machine's uninterrupted access to the oil upon which it relied.

The Indian army's operations in Mesopotamia proved its most ambitious and tortuous, producing alternatively disaster and, in 1917 and 1918, one knockout blow after another. In late summer 1915, IEFD began a slow advance up the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers into the heart of Mesopotamia. A victory against Turkish forces at [Kut](#) on the Tigris in late September opened the 100-mile road to Baghdad. At a time in the war when very little was going the Allies' way (the German's remained lodged in France; the Turks held the high ground at Gallipoli), the capture and occupation of the city became a pressing priority.¹⁸ Yet Turkish forces checked the advancing Indian 6th Division south of Baghdad at Ctesiphon in November 1915 and the division's commander, General [Charles Townshend \(1861-1924\)](#), ordered a hasty retreat to Kut. 13,000 Indian and British soldiers dug in and withstood a siege until starvation forced their surrender in April 1916.

Reorganized, reequipped, and under new leadership, IEFD punched its way through the Turkish lines and captured [Baghdad](#) in March 1917. At the same time, Indian soldiers embedded in a larger imperial force under the command of the hard-fighting [Edmund Allenby \(1861-1936\)](#) set out from Egypt to commence the invasion of Palestine. In November and December, Allenby's soldiers took [Gaza](#) and Jerusalem. IEFD mopped up remaining Turkish forces in what is now northern Iraq. When the Allied Supreme War Council convened at the start of 1918, it concluded that the Allies should endeavor to knock Turkey out of the war that year. Command set its sights on Aleppo in Syria, a distance of some 300 miles from the Indian force in Palestine. Allenby's army was thorough reorganized – "Indianized," they called it. White soldiers deployed to Europe. Indian troops rushed to Palestine. Now Allenby commanded an Indian army. Indians fought that summer for control of the Jordan Valley. In September, they broke through Turkish defenses at Megiddo. Indian [cavalry](#) soldiers, who spent more time in France in the trenches than in the saddle, now put their mounts to good use and exploited the breach. Allenby's pursuit led to the capture of Damascus, Beirut and Aleppo in rapid succession in October. The Turks agreed to an [armistice](#) on October 30, 1918. In the Middle East and Palestine, this Indian army had become a formidable army of conquest.¹⁹

Indian Experiences

The wartime experiences of the Indian soldiers are best revealed in the [letters](#) they wrote from various battlefronts. When Indian soldiers deployed to France in 1914, British army authorities arranged for the systematic translation and [censorship](#) of the soldiers' letters. Many of these letters – housed in and freely available in digital format through the British Library, constitute an invaluable source. They speak to the [everyday](#) anxieties and fears, hopes, prayers, courage and [sacrifice](#) of men at war.²⁰ They reveal, among other things, that

the conditions under which Indian soldiers performed the dirty work of war owed as much to [geography](#) and climate as they did to the availability of the materiel of war, the competence and capability of commanders, and the tenacity of the enemy. In France and Flanders, Indian soldiers acclimated to trenches and stalemate as well as any Frenchman, Englishman, or German. "It rains without ceasing every day, & many men have been killed by the cold," wrote one Sikh of the fighting in France. In the Middle East, battle lines at times witnessed far greater fluidity than those along the Western Front. "Day and night we are in the saddle," wrote one cavalry soldier in 1916. In some ways, war proved a great leveler. Combat in France could exhilarate and terrify from one moment to the next no more and no less than it could in East Africa or the Middle East. The encounter between human tissue and high explosives was always a one-sided affair. The carnage of a battlefield – be that in Flanders or a stones-throw from Jerusalem – defied all prior experience. "The war is very terrible. Men are dying in thousands," one soldier wrote of the Western Front.²¹

The British had longstanding misgivings and nagging doubts about the loyalty of Indian soldiers, stemming from their experience in the 1857 Rebellion. Between 1914 and 1918, most Indian soldiers performed their duty from start to finish. At war's end, they had collected more than 12,000 decorations. A dozen men had received the Victoria Cross. None of this is to say that soldiers did not harbor grievances against wartime policy. They grumbled that their pay was inadequate. In 1915, wounded soldiers openly [protested](#) when they discovered that they were bound for the frontlines again, pending their satisfactory recovery in [hospital](#). One soldier, Victoria Cross recipient Mir Dast (1874-1945), even presented a petition to [George V, King of Great Britain \(1865-1936\)](#) urging, "That when a man has once been wounded, it is not well to take him back again to the trenches."²² When Germany's ally, the Ottoman Sultan, [Mehmed V, Sultan of the Turks \(1844-1918\)](#) proclaimed a [jihad](#) in November 1914, some in the government of India wondered if Muslim soldiers could be counted on to perform their duty. Indeed, some Muslim soldiers refused to deploy against the Ottoman Turks. In France, a small number of Indian Muslim soldiers deserted their trenches in 1915, lured by the assurances they read in [German propaganda](#) that they would receive safe welcome and a chance to return home, courtesy of [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#). The Germans even built special [prisoner-of-war camps](#) for Muslim soldiers, south of Berlin, where soldiers endured a relentless propaganda campaign aimed at securing their allegiance to the Central Powers. As many as 200 more Indian soldiers fighting in the Middle East had deserted to the Turks. Ultimately, [Germany](#) and Ottoman Turkey's efforts to spread sedition among Indian soldiers fell flat, and most Muslim soldiers were willing to fight against fellow Muslims, whatever misgivings they may have harbored.

Plenty of British and Australian memoirs written by men who fought alongside Indian soldiers

praise the courage and effectiveness of Indian troops. Indian soldiers deployed to France found their French hosts welcoming, and Indian soldiers, in turn, overcame barriers of language and custom as they integrated themselves into the fabric of wartime French communities. But racial integration was never what the British intended. Indian Corps commanders went to great lengths to prevent Indian men from seeking romantic encounters with white French women, for example. General [James Willcocks \(1857-1926\)](#) prescribed corporal punishment for any Indian soldier caught absent without leave, "when there is reason to believe that the offence was due to immoral relations, actual or intended, with a European woman."²³ When the *Daily Mail* published a [photograph](#) in May 1915 showing an English [nurse](#) standing at the bedside of wounded Indian soldier at a hospital in England, the War Office promptly "condemned absolutely and totally the employment of nurses with Indian troops" and ordered the withdrawal of all nurses from the Indian hospitals behind the Western Front, stipulating, "Anyone who knew anything about Indian customs would have prevented this scandal by forbidding the services of women nurses with Indian troops."²⁴ Indian soldiers also had to suffer the routine bigotry of their white comrades in arms. British Tommies fighting on the Western Front sometimes hurled epithets at Indian soldiers forced to withdraw from untenable positions. And after the surrender of the Indian 6th Division at Kut in 1916, angry British soldiers formed gangs and attacked Indian soldiers, all under the watch of Turkish guards. "They say that it is because of the Indians that they lost at Kut!" one Indian soldier recalled. "It's unimaginably vile. The astonishing thing is that even when complaints are taken to the British officers, they do nothing."²⁵

Soldiers from the French Colonies

Recruitment across "Greater France"

France turned to military manpower from its colonial empire just as quickly as Great Britain did. Beginning in early August, French troops stationed in [North Africa](#) embarked for the metropole. These troops included both Europeans and what the French army called *troupes indigènes*, that is men native to the colonies in French uniform. North Africans participated in fighting on the French and Belgian frontiers as early as the third week of August. [West Africans](#) joined the fighting by September. Although only a small part of the vast forces joined on the Western Front, these troops loomed large in the public imagination. Accounts in the press intended to praise their [heroism](#) backfired somewhat when rumors spread that "African troops" were "always put in the most dangerous positions" in the front line, potentially causing concern among *troupes indigènes* and their families.²⁶

Upon the outbreak of war, some 90,000 *troupes indigènes* were in French uniform. As

casualties mounted and manpower needs became dire, French officials embarked on intensive recruitment across the empire. Colonial ideology justified this call to these “reservoirs of men” as a “blood tax” on indigenous populations that allegedly enjoyed the benefits of the French colonial “civilizing mission”. By the end of the war, this tax bill would amount to nearly 475,000 men: 166,000 from West Africa, 46,000 from Madagascar, 50,000 from [Indochina](#), 140,000 from Algeria, 47,000 from Tunisia, and 24,300 from Morocco. Smaller numbers of colonial subjects from French possessions in [Somalia](#), New Caledonia, Central Africa, and elsewhere joined as well. Just as in British India, recruitment intensified as the war went on—from approximately 47,000 recruits each year in 1914 and 1915, the number jumped to over 133,000 in 1916, 103,000 in 1917, and over 143,000 in 1918, with some variation in intensity across different regions.²⁷ By the end of 1918, some 500,000 *troupes indigènes* served outside their colonies of origin.

Methods of recruitment varied, reflecting the patchwork of administrations that made up the French empire. The army had introduced limited conscription regimes in Algeria and West Africa in 1912, and expanded the practice during the war, but many thousands joined as [volunteers](#). The French administration in Tunisia had adopted the beylical system of conscription well before the war in this protectorate, and voluntarism played an almost negligible role. Morocco, not yet fully conquered and also a protectorate in which French officials felt the need to respect the nominal sovereignty of the indigenous ruler, produced only volunteers and no draftees.

In Madagascar and Indochina, enlistments were supposed to be exclusively voluntary, but in these colonies as everywhere in the empire, the line between coercion and voluntarism was blurred, at best. In some areas, notably West Africa and Indochina, colonial and military officials relied on local “chiefs” or notables to produce so-called volunteers. Often responding to demands for quotas of recruits, these indigenous elites designated men who were poor, younger sons, sick (helping to meet the quota but likely to be rejected for service later), or otherwise marginal or dispensable in the community. It is fair to regard such men as conscripts. The same is true for men recruited by hired agents, a practice common in Algeria and Madagascar. Bounties encouraged these agents to obtain “volunteers” by hook or by crook. Finally, the circumstances of colonial rule, in which many indigenous people endured land expropriation, [forced labor](#), and participation in the market economy, which created poverty and precarity, left many men with little or no choice but to pursue the dangerous mercenary occupation of soldiering. Some no doubt voluntarily sought money, status, adventure, and opportunity through military service, but it is safe to say that the vast majority of colonial subjects who put on the French uniform during the war did so under some form of coercion.²⁸ And colonial subjects were under no illusions about either the methods or

the consequences of wartime recruitment—as Senegalese soldier Yoro Diaw put it, “It is never good for someone to tell you to ‘come and die.’”²⁹

French demands for manpower sometimes provoked [resistance](#) among indigenous peoples across the empire. In some cases, this took the form of flight from recruiters. More acute resistance was sometimes rooted in longer-standing dissatisfactions with colonial rule, as in limited uprisings in Indochina and Madagascar in 1916. More serious rebellions occurred as well, with recruitment sparking or significantly exacerbating them, particularly in Algeria and West Africa.³⁰ In the end, though, French coercive power was too great for resistance to impede recruitment seriously. As one West African recounted,

when the *Tubabs* (French recruiters) first came, there was resistance. But the people of the village only had very old rifles...muskets. But when...they saw that the *Tubabs* had very modern rifles—they decided to run away. But some of them were killed before they ran.³¹

So when indigenous peoples made it clear that, in the words of some men from the Comoros Islands, “If the whites need us as *tirailleurs*, they will have to take us by force,” French military and colonial authorities proved willing to do so.³²

Troupes Indigènes at War

Despite some unrest in the colonies, then, France incorporated nearly half a million colonial subjects into its army during the war, and deployed these men as *tirailleurs* (“skirmishers” or “riflemen,” a term applied in this era only to colonial subjects in the army, with colony of origin appended: *tirailleurs algériens*, *tirailleurs indochinois* etc.) on several fronts. West African troops invaded German Togoland at the beginning of August 1914, in a combined French and British operation that resulted in the conquest of the German colony. These [tirailleurs sénégalais](#) (soldiers from French West Africa were known by this name, even though Senegal made up only a small part of this huge federation) also played a prominent role in the capture of German Cameroon in early 1916.³³ These operations were typical of prewar colonial campaigns, featuring large numbers of *troupes indigènes* staffed and commanded by a smaller number of European officers and men.

Morocco also saw the deployment of significant numbers of colonial subjects in uniform. Resident General [Hubert Lyautey \(1854-1934\)](#) sent units with large number of indigenous Moroccan men to the Western Front, allowing him to keep other troops to maintain order in this only partially-conquered colony. The war provoked renewed resistance to French rule, and Lyautey had always been clear about the best way to meet this resistance, writing before

that war of his need for “strapping young [French] men, legionnaires, *tirailleurs*, and blacks.”³⁴ He did maintain and even extend control over Morocco with these troops, but sometimes at very high cost. For example, a brash and ill-advised attack in mid-November 1914 in the Atlas Mountains resulted in disaster: two-thirds of the French force of 1230 men were [killed](#), and 380 of the dead were *troupes indigènes*.³⁵

The French army deployed large numbers of these troops in the Dardanelles and Balkans campaigns. Most military and political officials were hesitant to commit North African troops to the force that landed at Gallipoli in spring 1915 to fight directly against the Ottomans, fearing the effects of the Ottoman and German calls to *jihad* against the Entente colonial powers. Even though these appeals largely fell as flat among North African soldiers as they had among most Indian troops, French authorities such as [Charles Lutaud \(1855-1921\)](#), Governor General of Algeria, argued against using North African Muslims to invade Ottoman territory. Muslims, he asserted, considered the land “veiled in mystery: it is for the Islamite a sacred land, a land of holy places...any hand foreign to Islam that falls on it is a sacrilegious hand.”³⁶ Yet long-standing French views of Islamic belief south of the Sahara allowed officials to contemplate deploying West African troops, many of whom were Muslim, in the Dardanelles with more equanimity. The *islam noir* of these men was allegedly less fanatical than North African Islam, which was supposedly inveterately hostile to the West.³⁷ So in the end, *tirailleurs sénégalais* made up more than a quarter of the French expeditionary force, with the proportion rising to half and even higher in the later stages of the campaign. *Islam noir* simply did not haunt the French imagination in the same way that North African, or “Arab” Islam did. A general at Gallipoli responded “with indignation” when superiors in Paris expressed doubt about the loyalty of the West Africans, arguing that “even those of the Muslim race,” were above suspicion.³⁸

After they withdrew from Gallipoli in failure in the first days of 1916, French troops reinforced the [Armée d'Orient](#) fighting in the Balkans. North African troops eventually joined this campaign, fighting against the Christian [Bulgarians](#). More surprisingly, by later in the year North African Muslims were fighting against Ottoman forces in the Middle East itself. French authorities now felt safe deploying these troops because [Husayn ibn 'Ali, King of Hejaz \(-1931\)](#) and Sharif of Mecca, rebelled against Ottoman rule in June 1916, aided by Great Britain and France. The French army eventually sent over 1,000 North African soldiers to aid the revolt directly. Later, some 2,500 North Africans served with the French expeditionary force in Palestine in 1917.³⁹ In the end, French authorities were confident in sending North Africans to the Middle East only when there was significant resistance from within the Islamic world to the Ottomans and their call to holy war against the Allies.

Several thousand soldiers from Indochina and Madagascar joined West and North Africans in the Balkans between 1916 and 1918. Overall, *troupes indigènes* made up a significant proportion of the *Armée d'Orient* : on August 1, 1918, they numbered 37,591 of an overall force of 259,132, or 14.5 percent.⁴⁰ This was certainly a higher percentage than these troops ever made up on the Western Front, but nevertheless it was in Europe that their service was most extensive, important, and notable. North Africa was the first area of the empire to contribute soldiers directly to the war effort in August 1914. West Africans were not far behind, deploying first in September and then in greater numbers from October. The second year of the war saw continued use of soldiers from these parts of Africa, but it was really in 1916 when more widespread and intensive deployment occurred. This was, not coincidentally, a critical year of the war in France. At [Verdun](#), *tirailleurs sénégalais* achieved notoriety for their participation in the reconquest of Fort Douaumont in October, while *tirailleurs algériens* played a prominent role in the final fighting of December that sealed the (arguably Pyrrhic) French victory.

West Africans paid a high price for their reputation as ferocious warriors in spring 1917, when they figured prominently in the plans of Generals [Robert Nivelle \(1856-1924\)](#) and Charles Mangin (1866-1925) for an offensive on the Chemin des Dames. Deployed in cold, wet weather in a deeply flawed battle plan, they suffered terribly in the futile and wasteful offensive. Known as aggressive fighters as a result of long-standing racial stereotypes, men from North and West Africa most often served as combat troops, frequently deployed as attacking “shock troops” and suffering predictably high casualty rates. The same sort of racial thinking relegated [Indochinese](#) and Madagascans to support roles, since they allegedly lacked robust fighting qualities. Nonetheless, work as “staging troops” close to the front could be dangerous; Indochinese soldiers proved unexpectedly useful as truck drivers at the [Somme](#) in 1916, while Madagascans found a prominent role in the heavy artillery as the war went on; and two Indochinese battalions and one Madagascan battalion did see extensive combat. All told, by the end of the war several hundred thousand men from the colonies had worn the French uniform and contributed extensively to the nation’s defense in Europe.

Colonial Men in the Metropole

What did this service mean to the men who traveled to the metropole, to the native French people whom they encountered, and to the structure and future of the French colonial empire? Colonial subjects suffered the same sort of hardships as all soldiers of the Great War. Many of these men, accustomed to tropical climates, suffered particularly from the climate—in a [letter](#) home, an Indochinese soldier at Verdun repeated an observation made many times by *troupes indigènes*, writing simply, “It is very cold here.”⁴¹ An Algerian *tirailleur*

provided more detail: "Rain and snow never stop falling, the fog and the clouds rule all the time, the sun makes an appearance only on rare occasions."⁴² The realities of industrialized warfare also attracted the men's attention. "The French fight in all ways, with terrible explosives, [airplanes](#), [submarines](#), [barbed wire](#), [mines](#), [gas](#)," an Indochinese soldier wrote.⁴³ And something of the suffering, [death](#), and fear comes through in another comrade's simple account: "We are in the midst of the French soldiers and we attack with them. There are Annamites [Indochinese] dead and many wounded in the course of our fighting; it's not fun, far from it."⁴⁴ A West African soldier who fought in the Balkans would no doubt have agreed:

...after the bombing of the artillery we started to advance toward the Germans. And when we arrived near their trenches we found that the threads—the barbed wire—were not cut. And that's where many soldiers died because they could not go any further. And the Germans were shooting us (with their machine guns), and we lost almost all of our soldiers there.... The dead bodies were lying on the ground like leaves under a tree.⁴⁵

Tirailleurs' experiences of combat did not differ substantially from those of European soldiers—a French sergeant who commanded Algerian soldiers noted that Great War soldiers were "all in the same shit."⁴⁶ But some of the experiences of *troupes indigènes* were different and distinctive, and resulted from their status as colonial subjects and racial "others" serving an imperial European nation engaged in a war that, despite its genuinely global scope, was a struggle for supremacy among European nations and empires. Although *troupes indigènes* did enjoy chances for promotion in rank, the opportunities were strictly limited (restricted for all intents and purposes to captain, and promotion to that rank was very, very rare), and colonial subjects could not command white European soldiers. The French army did strive to accommodate diversity with its ranks to the extent possible in order to maintain morale, but did not trust *troupes indigènes* to speak proper French, observe the tenets of Muslim faith without rendering their loyalty to France suspect, mix with French women without provoking significant racial anxieties, or take up the privileges of French citizenship in return for having defended the nation.⁴⁷

The refusal to offer an eased path to naturalization or at least enjoyment of enhanced political rights was a particularly glaring irony, recognized by many soldiers and others, in light of strong French republican principles that linked political rights to service to the nation, especially service in uniform. The idea that colonial subjects owed this service as a "blood tax" in return for the benefits of enlightened colonial rule did not convince soldiers such as Tunisian Sergeant bel Gassem Soultan, who wrote in 1917, "We are in France made perfectly aware that we are FOREIGNERS, and we fight every day; we die like dogs."⁴⁸ And yet other

colonial subjects were just as vocal about the opportunities they found in France and in the army, so much greater than anything available in the colonies. For instance, officials would not have been alarmed by the extensive romantic interaction between colonial men and white women if these women, and in many cases their families, had not failed to display inveterate racial animosity. That French officials even debated offering colonial subjects citizenship in return for military service, as they did repeatedly throughout the war, suggested that the republican principle had at least some influence. This openness, as limited as it was, helps explain impressions of service in France as different from Soultan's as those of Madagascan Corporal Ramananjahary, who wrote in that same year of 1917, "I believe that Malagasy kings would not be as well treated as we are here in France."⁴⁹ The impressions of both men, as contradictory as they are, tell the story of *troupes indigènes* in the French army during the war.

Conclusion

All told, roughly 2.2 million men from India, Africa, Southeast Asia, and beyond served in the British and French armies during the Great War. Although this amounted to just under 3.5 percent of the total number of soldiers mobilized worldwide during this global conflict, the numbers involved were still large and the service of colonized peoples had great significance at the time and in the following years. In the short term, the importance of this service was obvious from events of the immediate postwar years. France deployed *troupes indigènes* in continuing hostilities in [Turkey](#) and [Syria](#), and Indian troops deployed on such diverse missions as occupying [Palestine](#), suppressing the Egyptian revolution of 1919, and violently securing British control over [Iraq](#) in 1920. In Europe, among the French troops [occupying the German Rhineland](#) after the Armistice were soldiers from Africa, provoking intense racist resentment on the part of Germans and resulting in an international campaign against "Black Shame" and "Horror" of colonial men allegedly violating the purity of white European women. These supposed horrors were fabricated for propaganda purposes, but they revealed one of the most salient cultural phenomena to emerge out of the presence of these colonial soldiers in Europe: intense anxiety over the possibility that their alleged primitive [sexuality](#) would lead to racial pollution and degeneration.⁵⁰ British authorities feared romantic contact across the color line involving Indian soldiers during and after the war perhaps even more than their French counterparts. At stake, of course, was white prestige and the future of the colonial order that rested upon it.⁵¹

Over the longer term, in both Britain and France authorities interested in maintaining imperial control felt, often with good reason, that they had much to fear about the future. The use of troops from the colonies so far outside their areas of origin, especially in Europe, was

an experiment born of expediency. It resulted in arguably the largest, most widespread, and most diverse rapid (albeit temporary) mass migration in history up to that point. Peoples had mixed in unprecedented numbers and diversity, in innumerable contexts. Hierarchies had been strained or even overturned, expectations altered or created, perspectives irrevocably changed. All of this could not fail to have important effects on non-European soldiers and the colonies from which they came. In some cases, the experience of soldiering for their colonial masters raised expectations and changed outlooks and life trajectories. An Algerian remembered long after the war the altered demeanor of a *tirailleur* after he returned from the front: the veteran “came back completely transformed, as much in the way he dressed as in how he thought.... He was struck by the technical power of the French and he firmly committed to learning from them. He said, ‘That’s why the French are so powerful; we must do as they do.’”⁵²

Yet of course many soldiers were also disappointed that the French and British nations did not provide more concrete expressions of gratitude for their service, in the form of increased [economic](#) and political opportunities. These disappointments could take spectacular and notorious forms such as the British massacre at [Jallianwala Bagh](#) and Gandhi’s subsequent harder turn toward a national independence struggle for Indians. Where Gandhi had been a (not-uncritical) supporter of the imperial war effort before 1919, after the massacre he wrote that it was “the duty of every Indian soldier ... to sever his connections with the government” as it was “contrary to national dignity” for any Indian to serve as a soldier for a government “which has brought about India’s economic, moral and political degradation and which has used the soldiery ... for repressing national aspirations.”⁵³ Or disappointment could take the quieter but no less profound form of disillusionment of *tirailleurs algériens* who returned home and realized “that nothing had really changed,” propelling some of them and their fellow Algerians toward the [nationalism](#) that would, later, inform an independence movement.⁵⁴ It would take several decades and another catastrophic global war of empires before such resentment and anger would mature fully into a global process of [decolonization](#). But the decision by the two largest colonial powers of the day to use colonial subjects to fight for the cause of empire between 1914 and 1918 was heavy with implications for the future.

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Notes

1. A truly full accounting would include, to take two more examples, Brazilian army and

naval personnel, some of whom saw combat, and even soldiers and support personnel from Siam, among the many men mobilized in all corners of the world between 1914 and 1918. And of course this accounting takes no note of the workers mobilized the world over to contribute to the war effort, who contributed further to the racially diverse, multicultural conflict in important ways. [↑](#)

2. See Jarboe, Andrew Tait / Fogarty, Richard S.: *Empires in World War I. Shifting Frontiers and Imperial Dynamics in a Global Conflict*, London 2014, and Gerwarth, Robert /Manela, Erez (eds.): *Empires at War, 1911-1923*. Oxford 2014. [↑](#)
3. Jünger, Ernst: *In Stahlgewittern*, Stuttgart 1961, pp. 165-166. [↑](#)
4. Barbusse, Henri: *Le feu*, Paris 2012, pp. 89-91. [↑](#)
5. Service Historique de la Défense (SHD) 7N995: Commission de Contrôle Postal de Marseille, "Annamites en France, Note" 2 janvier 1917. [↑](#)
6. India Office Records [hereafter IOR] L/MIL/5/825/1. [↑](#)
7. This term, as well as "Force Noire" were made famous by French officer Charles Mangin, whose prewar work *La Force Noire* (Paris, 1910) spurred debate over the role of, in particular, African soldiers in a future conflict. [↑](#)
8. *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire*, London 1920, p. 777. [↑](#)
9. MacMunn, George: *The Armies of India*, London 1911, pp. 129-130. [↑](#)
10. O'Dwyer, Michael: *India as I Knew it, 1885-1925*, London 1926, p. 223. [↑](#)
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20. See Omissi, David: *Indian Voices of the Great War. Soldiers' Letters, 1914-18*, New York 1999, pp. 4-8; Singh, Gajendra: *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars. Between Self and Sepoy*, London 2014, p. 6; and Das, Santanu: *India, Empire, and*

the First World War, Cambridge 2018, p. 13. [↑](#)

21. For the full collection, see India Office Records (hereafter IOR), Reports of the Censor of Indian Mails in France, Vol.1-Vol.3, L/MIL/5/825-827. [↑](#)
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25. See Das, India, Empire, and the First World War 2019. [↑](#)
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28. Fogarty, Race and War in France 2008, pp. 15-54. For further details on specific colonies, see Michel, L'Appel à l'Afrique 1982; Lunn, Joe: Memoirs of the Maelstrom. A Senegalese Oral History of the First World War, Portsmouth 1999; Meynier, Gilbert: L'Algérie révélée. La guerre de 1914-1918 et le premier quart du XXe siècle, Geneva 1981; Maghraoui, Driss; Moroccan Colonial troops. History, Memory and the Culture of French Colonialism, PhD dissertation, University of California, Santa Cruz 2000; Bekraoui, Mohammed: Les Marocains dans la Grande Guerre 1914-1919, Rabat 2009; Valensky, Chantal: Le soldat occulté: Les Malgaches de l'Armée française, 1884-1920. Paris 1995; Razafindranaly, Jacques: Les soldats de la grande île. D'une guerre à l'autre, 1895-1918, Paris 2000; Favre-Le Van Ho, Mireille: Un milieu porteur de modernisation: Travailleurs et tirailleurs vietnamiens en France pendant la première guerre mondiale, 2 vols., Thèse de doctorat, École nationale des chartes 1986; Eckert, Henri: Les militaires indochinois au service de la France (1859-1939), 2 vols., Thèse de doctorat, L'Université de Paris IV 1998; and Hill, Kimloan: Coolies Into Rebels. Impact of World War I on French Indochina, Paris 2011. [↑](#)
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