

# Warfare 1914-1918 (India)

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## Summary

This article reconsiders the military role and performance of the British Empire's Indian Army overseas in the First World War. It argues that the Indian soldiers were adaptive within a global network of Indian expeditionary forces that learned and applied lessons of modern war. It also suggests how sociocultural or political studies of the Indian Army point towards new areas of military study.

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## Introduction

During the First World War 1.5 million Indian officers and men served in the British Empire's Indian Army.<sup>1</sup> Two-thirds of them were "combatants" ("[sepoys](#)" in the [infantry](#), "sowars" in the [cavalry](#), "sappers" in the engineers, and "gunners" or "drivers" in the [artillery](#)), and one-third "non-combatants" (such as doctors, stretcher-bearers or laborers). They had 9,500 British officers, distinct from Indian officers, a secondary layer of regimental leadership.<sup>2</sup>

[India](#) effectively entered the war on 5 August 1914 when a British war council in London decided the Indian Army would fight overseas.<sup>3</sup> Up to November 1918, approximately one million Indian troops served overseas, largely within seven [Indian Expeditionary Forces](#) (IEFs) that had a majority of Indian Army units and a minority of British Army.<sup>4</sup>

IEF "A" went to [France](#) and [Belgium](#), or the [Western Front](#), with 85,000 Indian combatants and 50,000 Indian non-combatants for the [British Expeditionary Force](#) (BEF). Of these Indian

servicemen, approximately 34 percent were infantrymen and engineers of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Indian Divisions, which formed the BEF's Indian Corps of 1914-1915; 15 percent were cavalrymen of its Indian Cavalry Corps of 1914-1916 (re-formed into British cavalry divisions in 1916-1918); 20 percent were non-combatants of its [Indian Labour Corps](#) of 1917-1918; 13 percent were other combatants attached to the British and Australian armies in 1917-1918; and 18 percent were other non-combatants.

IEFs "B" and "C" went to [East Africa](#) with 40,000 Indian combatants and 12,000 Indian non-combatants.

IEFs "D", "E" and "F" went to the [Middle East](#): D to Ottoman Iraq (or "Mesopotamia") and south-west [Iran](#) (or "Persia"); E and F to [Egypt](#), joining the British Empire's [Egyptian Expeditionary Force](#) to Ottoman Palestine and Syria. Out of IEF E came IEF "G", sent to south-west Europe, to the [Gallipoli](#) peninsula with the Empire's Mediterranean Expeditionary Force. Altogether IEFs D, E, F and G had the great majority of the Indian forces overseas, approximately 80 percent, made up of 430,000 Indian combatants and 330,000 Indian non-combatants.

Many further Indian contingents served elsewhere, from Cameroon, Somalia, the Sahara Desert, [Italy](#) and [Greece](#) to the Caucasus, Yemen, Oman, the Indian Ocean, Central Asia and [China](#).

Of the Indian troops serving overseas in 1914-1918, officially 50,000 were killed and 64,000 were wounded.<sup>5</sup>

Since 1917, historians have often credited Indian battle performance, typically focusing on one front, especially the Western Front. They have praised Indian bravery,<sup>6</sup> citing Indian soldiers' [medals](#) for valor (totaling eleven Victoria Crosses, one hundred Military Crosses, 968 Indian Orders of Merit and 3,231 Indian Distinguished Service Medals).<sup>7</sup>

An equally long tradition, more pronounced since 1947, has criticized the Indian Army for poor battle performance or "failure". It rests on descriptions of the pre-1914 Indian Army as archaic, partly because Indian units' fighting experience consisted not of "regular warfare" (between modern armies like the British, German, Turkish or Indian armies organized on western lines, and also known as "modern", "conventional", "European", "symmetric", "high intensity" or "industrialized" warfare), but of "small wars" (usually between regular armies and irregular forces not organized on western lines, and also known as "colonial", "asymmetric", "low intensity" or "counter-insurgency" warfare). The pre-1914 Indian Army, the argument goes, was an imperial reserve in colonial backwaters, adrift from modern

standards.<sup>8</sup> The arguments on Indian “failure” have fixated most on IEF A’s Indian infantry on the Western Front in 1914-1915, with focuses on self-inflicted wounds,<sup>9</sup> running away from battle,<sup>10</sup> demoralization by the winter weather,<sup>11</sup> and an apparent lack of recruits from India to replace infantry casualties<sup>12</sup> – all reasons, it has been argued, that the British by December 1915 removed them from the Western Front and abolished the Indian Corps.<sup>13</sup> Historians have also criticized IEF B’s botched seaborne invasion of German East Africa in November 1914,<sup>14</sup> and IEF D’s Indian 6<sup>th</sup> Division’s surrender at [Kut al-Amara](#) in April 1916.<sup>15</sup> Many have blamed British staff officers for failing to realize the requirements of regular [warfare](#).<sup>16</sup>

This article reconsiders the Indian Army fighting overseas, addressing Eurocentricism in the [historiography](#). Since 1914, controversies about the Indian infantry on the Western Front – who amounted to just 3 percent of all the Indian troops overseas – have tended to dominate. While this article considers those controversies, it places the Indian infantry on the Western Front in a global context. Cross-fertilizing research on multiple fronts, it compares all seven IEFs, showing how these formed a global network learning and applying lessons of [modern war](#). In doing so, this article views the Indian Army as an important instrument of British world power from the pre-war years, a period of Indian military modernization that accelerated up to 1918. Further, it addresses the relative lack of primary, published or audio source material by Indian recruits,<sup>17</sup> drawing on recently recovered sources including veteran interviews and family memories.<sup>18</sup>

## The Pre-War Indian Army

In July 1914 the Indian Army had 150,000 Indian combatants, 32,000 Indian non-combatants, 35,000 Indian reservists and 2,400 British officers, plus 20,000 affiliated Indian “Imperial Service Troops” of India’s princely states.<sup>19</sup> Rather than as a second-rate army, it can be seen as a leading professional force.

A majority of the pre-1914 Indian regiments can be described as higher quality. Their commonly long-serving officers and men had high training standards both for regular warfare and for small wars, using, from around 1900, modern training manuals, [rifles](#) and artillery like the British Army. They included cavalry trained to reconnoiter and to gallop with lances lowered. A minority of the Indian battalions were lower quality. They had less exacting officers and low training standards.<sup>20</sup>

Almost annually from 1895 to 1913, in small wars from Somalia and India’s mountainous

Afghan frontier to Tibet and north China, the higher quality Indian regiments used their training to attack in disciplined small groups under enemy rifle or artillery fire, dig trenches or detonate land mines.<sup>21</sup>

In those small wars, the British exercised the Indian Army's capability to launch overseas expeditionary forces – a capability acquired through long experience of cooperation between the Indian staff, Indian regiments, British regiments, the Royal Navy, Royal Indian Marine and British Merchant Marine. In 1910-1912, in expectation of the Indian Army fighting [Germany](#) or Turkey by 1915, the Indian General Staff planned for three Indian infantry divisions and four Indian cavalry brigades to mobilize in India and move to France or Iraq.<sup>22</sup>

The pre-1914 Indian Army was oriented most towards small wars, but its professionalism and training both for regular warfare and for small wars gave it qualities useful on any battlefield. It probably had the most experienced, active and adept regular mountain troops in the world. Its overseas expeditionary experience and capability were unparalleled. "In no Army", asserted the Indian General Staff in 1906, "can be found officers and men who are better prepared to immediately undertake expeditions in any corner of the globe".<sup>23</sup>

## August 1914 to mid-1915

IEFs A to France and G to Gallipoli fought primarily for British security in Europe. The other IEFs served more to secure or expand the British Empire. In mobilizing in India and moving overseas by April 1915, the IEFs together covered approximately 25,000 miles by land and sea, embodying the Indian Army's pre-war expeditionary capability. For example, IEF A efficiently got to Flanders in eighty days as the Indian staff followed pre-war plans and regimental officers used their pre-war overseas campaign experience.<sup>24</sup>

On the Western Front, IEF A helped to prevent a German victory in 1914. In the last week of October 1914, during the first [First Battle of Ypres](#), the German Army tried to break through for victory in the west. IEF A provided one-third of the British forces in the front line, holding the same proportion of the BEF's trenches, some twelve miles. The BEF, to hold that ground and the other two-thirds of its own line while depending on the French and Belgian armies to defend the wider Allied position, was nearly exhausted. Since August 1914 it had lost 70 percent of its original British Army numbers. It had very few ready reinforcements available from the British Isles, and, apart from IEF A, it had none on hand from the wider British Empire. IEF A probably saved the BEF from overstretch and defeat at the First Battle of Ypres. Thereby it was vital to preventing a German breakthrough to capture the northern French seaboard and perhaps win the war on land in the west in 1914.<sup>25</sup>

An idea that in 1914 the Indian troops in France were issued modern rifles for the first time and were confused by these<sup>26</sup> is open to debate. IEF A's Indian and British troops both arrived from India with pre-war modern Lee-Enfield Mark II rifles; they both received Mark IIIs, very similar to the Mark II and similar to modern rifles the Indian Army had used since 1900, in order to draw on the BEF's Mark III ammunition.<sup>27</sup> The Mark II remained serviceable; Indian and British troops used it on other fronts.<sup>28</sup>

As to Indian self-inflicted wounds and running away from battle on the western Front in 1914-1915, hundreds of Indian soldiers did one or the other.<sup>29</sup> This has been seen as proof of a special Indian inability to cope with battle in Europe, characterizing Indian "failure". From 1914 to the 1950s, British critics held this view in portraying Indians as racially inferior to white troops.<sup>30</sup> Since the 1960s, historians have argued the view on the basis of Indian recruits' background, describing them as unprepared "illiterate peasants" from Punjab and other rural areas of northern India whose "pre-industrial culture" made them intrinsically unsuited to industrialized warfare,<sup>31</sup> which they "could not understand".<sup>32</sup> On an alternative view, the Indians' self-inflicted wounds and running away showed them to be the same as white or black troops. In this view, a minority of men in all armies on the Western Front injured themselves or ran away as common human responses to modern firepower. Further, the Indians who injured themselves or ran away were predominantly a small minority of the Indian Corps, and their doing so was concentrated in three short periods: first, 23 October to 2 November 1914 at Ypres, when Indian infantry were unusually exposed in recently occupied, shallow or flooded front trenches and heavily bombarded; second, 20 December 1914 near Givenchy, in similar circumstances; and third, the last week of April 1915 at Ypres, under [poison gas](#) attack for the first time when the BEF had no gas masks. On balance, it can be argued, the significance of Indian troops self-wounding or running away should not be overstated.<sup>33</sup>

The traditional view on Indian responses to the cold and wet Western Front weather of 1914-1915 is that the sepoys, in particular from Punjab, were used to dry cold with bright sunshine and were exceptionally demoralized by the damp, darker cold of northern Europe.<sup>34</sup> On another view, the European weather was not such a problem. This view points to one in two of the Indian infantry in France in the winter of 1914-1915 being from mountainous or Himalayan regions where sub-zero cold, rain and snow were common. It also emphasizes that from November 1914, when the winter set in after a relatively mild autumn, the Indian infantry received equipment and [medical help](#) against the cold and wet like they had in pre-1914 campaigns in more extreme Chinese and Tibetan winters. They had not only warm

or waterproof clothing and trench braziers, but also Indian Medical Service care to protect their feet from illness or injuries caused by cold, rain or snow.<sup>35</sup> BEF medical records indicate that in late 1914 Indian troops suffered from “trench foot” and frostbite half as much as British troops whose feet were less well cared for.<sup>36</sup>

Up to mid-1915, the Indian General Staff (headquartered in British India) packed higher quality pre-war Indian regiments into the IEFs to France, Iraq, Egypt and Gallipoli. On joining battle from October 1914, these regiments frequently proved adaptive, drawing on their pre-war professionalism and skills.

On the Western Front, Indian infantry and engineer units assaulted German-held villages, farms or trenches at pace in disciplined, flexible small groups, cooperating with British artillery much as they had in small wars. They countered German attacks with rifle and [machine gun](#) fire (at the First Battle of Ypres the Punjabi machine gunner [Khudadad Khan \(1888-1971\)](#) became the first Indian soldier to win a Victoria Cross). Also like they had in small wars, they dug trenches; they stuck together under fire in cohesive companies or smaller groups, either holding ground or falling back in open battle; they laid and detonated land mines; and they reconnoitered [no man's land](#) and killed German snipers.<sup>37</sup>

In Iraq near the head of the Arabian Gulf, Indian infantry and artillery skirmished to capture Basra and outlying Turkish trenches, and Indian cavalry reconnoitered in the desert. In Egypt along the Suez Canal, Indian units defended trenches against Turkish and German attack. At Gallipoli, they climbed cliffs to capture Turkish trenches and dexterously fired artillery guns from rocky hillsides.<sup>38</sup>

In German East Africa, IEF B had lower quality Indian infantry, rejected as inadequately trained for other IEFs in Europe or the Middle East. They did not perform close to the levels seen in France, Iraq, Egypt and at Gallipoli. For instance, at [Tanga](#) in November 1914 whole Indian battalions fled at the first German shots.<sup>39</sup>

Meanwhile, across the fronts the IEFs' Indian non-combatant or logistical units used their pre-war training. In France, Indian stretcher-bearers evacuated wounded troops. At Gallipoli, Indian mule corps shifted ammunition.<sup>40</sup>

Indian logistical units struggled with shortages of supply or equipment that the colonial government had barely invested in before the war. At the First Battle of Ypres, IEF A's field [hospitals](#) were under-equipped.<sup>41</sup> In Iraq, IEF D lacked river transport and adapted by

commandeering local craft, to which the Indian staff added boats hurriedly bought in India.<sup>42</sup>

All the while the higher quality Indian regiments in France, Iraq, Egypt and at Gallipoli were developing their regular warfare skills. In France and at Gallipoli, the Indian infantry and engineers learned new ways to fortify and to hold front trenches with only a few men to save lives, and to make [grenades](#) and mortars. “We came to know many new techniques of war”, said Mansa Singh, a Sikh veteran.<sup>43</sup>

## Mid-1915 to mid-1916

From mid-1915 to mid-1916, the Indian Army regularly took the offensive within British Empire field armies. Its standard forms of attack were twofold. First, in France, Iraq and at Gallipoli, on battlefields where space was restricted by close opposing trenches, it made frontal attacks. Second, in Iraq, at Gallipoli and in East Africa, in larger and more open spaces, it attacked from various directions.

In France from March to September 1915, the Indian Corps’ 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Indian divisions fought in the BEF’s initial four offensives: the battles of Neuve Chapelle (10 to 12 March 1915), Aubers Ridge (9 May 1915), Festubert (15 to 25 May 1915) and Loos (25 September to late October 1915). Drawing on familiar pre-war British battle doctrine (the *Field Service Regulations*) and BEF tactical circulars, their Indian staff and units experimented and learned from experience to carry out increasingly sophisticated combined arms attacks.<sup>44</sup>

The Indian Corps’ first offensive strike at Neuve Chapelle on the morning of 10 March was a tactical success. It opened with a Royal Artillery (British Army) “hurricane” half-hour preliminary bombardment. This widely neutralized its target German front trenches, allowing Indian assault troops – armed with Lee-Enfield rifles, new factory-made grenades and Vickers machine guns which they had been trained to use according to the latest BEF technique, and following instructions involving timetables and maps based on British aerial [photography](#) – to capture their target front trenches and, with the adjacent British IV Corps, Neuve Chapelle village beyond. The offensive then stalled. After the preliminary bombardment, the Royal Artillery lacked light field radio or other reliable means of instant communication with troops at the front of the battlefield to re-target its guns onto intact German machine gun posts and artillery, both of which up to 12 March 1915 shot down all further attacks.<sup>45</sup>

At Aubers Ridge, the Indian Corps’ forty-minute preliminary bombardment failed to damage the German front line. There were multiple Royal Artillery gunnery problems: reduced fire on the front line in order sooner to target guns behind; worn gun barrels causing inaccuracy;

shortage of trench-blasting high-explosive shells; dud shells; and strengthened enemy parapets. German gunners shot down every Indian assault unit in no man's land.<sup>46</sup>

At Festubert, the Indian preliminary bombardment was lengthened to forty-eight hours for greater effect, but the gunnery problems persisted. The Indians were again shot down.<sup>47</sup>

At Loos, the Indian preliminary bombardment was further lengthened. Now it had four twelve-hour spells over four days to allow time for improved accuracy, partly through radio whereby British aviators radioed to the artillery reports of shell-fall. The bombardment had a renewed focus on the German front line; more and better guns and shells; novel artillery fire at point-blank range from the Indian front line; and support from a land mine detonation. The bombardment wrecked its target trenches, like at Neuve Chapelle. Indian troops penetrated further than any previous BEF offensive, to the third line of German trenches. They went with more firepower in their hands than before, including French machine guns. They used new phosphorus bombs spewing white screening smoke, and wore gas masks as British poison gas was released for the first time. In reaching the German third line, the Indians followed orders to rush through any gaps in German lines. Yet they went too far, too quickly. They did not have enough support from re-targeted artillery to keep their gains. They were overwhelmed by German counter-attacks and lost all their captured ground.<sup>48</sup>

The fate of the Indian Corps after Loos is possibly the central controversy in the historiography. The traditional view that the British withdrew the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Indian Divisions from the Western Front as "failures"<sup>49</sup> can be seen as unconvincing. It appears to be supposition, no primary evidence having been cited of a British decision to remove either division for any "failure". Rather, the evidence is that on 1 September 1915 the British Cabinet ordered the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Indian Divisions to remain on the Western Front as two of the BEF's most experienced and adapted battle units,<sup>50</sup> the Indian General Staff having concluded that they were sufficiently prepared to remain there indefinitely.<sup>51</sup> Part of that conclusion was the availability of casualty replacements from India. Between October 1914 and September 1915, the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Indian Divisions received 30,000 Indian drafts to replace their 18,000 Indian casualties, and after Loos their Indian battalions averaged up to 1,000 men each, 25 percent more than in 1914<sup>52</sup> – products of the Indian staff's widening of Indian Army [recruitment](#), increasing the annual average of new Indian recruits from 15,000 before the war to 95,000 by 1915.<sup>53</sup> The Cabinet only reversed its 1 September 1915 order after intensive Indian government lobbying for the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Indian Divisions to transfer from France to Iraq,

along with a British division in Egypt, for the specific purpose of boosting IEF D's operations towards Baghdad. It was to this end that the Cabinet sanctioned their transfer on 24 October 1915.<sup>54</sup> The traditional view of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Indian Divisions' departure from France as "failures" does not account for their tactical evolution in 1914-1915, their surge in troop numbers, nor the sequence and substance of Cabinet decision-making – nor the ongoing Western Front service of the majority of IEF A, indicating no special Indian incapacity to serve there.

In mid-1916, IEF A's two Indian cavalry divisions fought in the BEF's fifth offensive, the [Battle of the Somme](#). Equipped with new ring-pull grenades, French machine guns and gas masks, they used their experience fighting dismounted since 1914 to hold front trenches during the battle. "We learned how to use the different weapons skillfully", commented one cavalry veteran, Bakhtaur Singh.<sup>55</sup> The Indian cavalry also used their mounted skills at the Somme, having trained in France to ride over trenches and attack on horseback in cooperation with artillery. They galloped to kill German troops with their lances before dismounting to set up machine gun posts. Their actions were minor extensions of the BEF's main attacks by British corps, which in places advanced further than at Loos, but failed to coordinate infantry and artillery for any breakthrough.<sup>56</sup>

Between mid-1915 and mid-1916, IEF B went on the offensive from southern British East Africa into northern German East Africa, cooperating with South African and other British Empire forces. Strengthened since 1914 by higher quality Indian battalions which had local training in bush warfare, IEF B's Indian infantry and artillery now competed effectively with German forces, occasionally outmaneuvering them.<sup>57</sup>

In Iraq, north of Basra, IEF D went on the offensive hundreds of miles up the rivers Tigris and Euphrates, led by the Indian General Staff and cooperating with the Royal Artillery and Royal Navy gunboats. On the Tigris in mid-1915, the 6<sup>th</sup> Indian Division, commanded by [Charles Townshend \(1861-1924\)](#), adeptly attacked Turkish posts from one direction near the river before attacking from another out of the desert to attain local victories. Then the 6<sup>th</sup> and other Indian divisions became overstretched in attacking trenches south of Baghdad in November 1915 at the Battle of Salman Pak and up to April 1916 at the siege of Kut. The Turkish Army defeated them as the Indian staff failed to concentrate enough troops and artillery for any decisive attack. For example, to lift the siege of Kut from the outside, the Indian staff inventively arranged attacks by IEF D relief forces from different directions out of the desert. However, these attacks were too rushed after Townshend, in contact with the relief forces by radio, prematurely warned of his men's starvation in Kut. This prompted the

relief forces to hurry their attacks in insufficient numbers every few weeks or so, each time wasting their latest reinforcements from Egypt and elsewhere, rather than waiting to build these up into an overwhelming force.<sup>58</sup>

At Gallipoli in mid-1915, the Indian General Staff of IEF G's single infantry brigade adapted in cooperating with other British Empire armies and with naval artillery to organize wide frontal attacks on Turkish trenches. All of these attacks failed for lack of infantry and artillery, and of cooperation between the two. During one Gallipoli offensive in August 1915, the 6<sup>th</sup> Gurkhas capably marched six miles in seventy-two hours from beaches up ravines, cornfields and scrub-smothered hills to capture the heights of Sari Bair overlooking the peninsula and the seaway to Constantinople (Istanbul) – only to lose the heights after wayward [New Zealand](#) artillery shelled them, and British and Australian troops failed to support them, lost on the march.<sup>59</sup>

Across the fronts from mid-1915 to mid-1916, the IEFs' logistical services adapted erratically. On the Western Front, London increased its spending on the BEF, improving IEF A's [logistics](#). By September 1915, IEF A's Administrative (or logistical) Staff provided its Indian battalions with a full diet, well-equipped first aid posts, and an innovative light railway for evacuating the wounded as fast as possible to state-of-the-art hospitals for bodily injuries – altogether the most efficient medical care the Indian Army had ever had.<sup>60</sup>

Yet in Iraq IEF D had some of the least efficient. The Indian government managed IEF D and into 1915 persisted in its pre-war military economy. It neglected to ensure that IEF D in late 1915 had adequate supplies for advancing on Baghdad, which the Indian General Staff attempted in reckless disregard of logistical shortages. The result was most extreme suffering among IEF D's troops from the Battle of Salman Pak to the 6<sup>th</sup> Division's surrender at Kut.<sup>61</sup>

In East Africa and at Gallipoli, the Indian forces' logistical support was also below Western Front standards. London directly controlled its [Empire](#) forces in both theaters, but did not supply them with the resources to overcome local logistical problems, such as lengthening lines of communication into central German East Africa where there were supply shortages of all kinds, or contaminated drinking water at Gallipoli causing dysentery.<sup>62</sup>

Up to mid-1916, numerous Indian staff officers deemed insufficiently adaptive to combined arms fighting and its logistics were sacked, such as [James Willcocks \(1857-1926\)](#), pre-war India's most senior field commander who in September 1915 departed the command of IEF

A's Indian Corps. Into their places stepped peers or younger generals considered better adapted, often with multi-front experience. In Iraq in July 1916 the British Army's [Stanley Maude \(1864-1917\)](#) became IEF D's commander-in-chief, known for his energy and meticulous staff work on the Western Front, at Gallipoli, in Egypt and in Iraq.<sup>63</sup>

Overall, by mid-1916, the overriding feature of the Indian Army's performance globally can be seen as its staff and units' increasing movements between the fronts, forming an emerging global network that was learning and applying lessons of modern war. For example, between January and August 1915 on the Western Front, over 50 percent of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Indian Divisions' original Indian battalions were individually redeployed as reinforcements to other fronts – Gallipoli, Egypt's Western Desert, East Africa, Yemen, Iraq, Iran and India – and were replaced in France by Indian units from Gallipoli, Egypt, India and China.<sup>64</sup> At their new postings in 1915-16, Indian battalions from the Western Front used the trench fighting skills they had developed there.<sup>65</sup> “[My men's] France experiences stood them in good stead, and they were very cool and collected”, wrote one of the Indians' British officers, a veteran of the First Battle of Ypres like some of his men, in East Africa in 1916.<sup>66</sup>

Simultaneously Indian units which had not been to the Western Front were gaining their own multi-front experience by mid-1916. One was IEF E's 23<sup>rd</sup> Sikh Pioneers. Since 1914 they had fought the Turks in the Red Sea, Yemen, Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula, at times under shell fire, and developed new skills of machine gunnery, trench construction, and camel-riding for desert fighting.<sup>67</sup>

## Mid-1916 to November 1918

From mid-1916 into 1918 on the Western Front, IEF A played a minor role as the BEF and other Allied forces gradually defeated the main German Army. For instance, in 1917 at the Battle of Cambrai, Indian cavalymen fought in close cooperation with [tanks](#).<sup>68</sup> In East Africa, experienced IEFB Indian infantry and artillery helped British imperial and Allied forces overrun German territory.<sup>69</sup>

The Indian Army's main operations were in west Asia. Here it was the world's most powerful army fighting outside Europe by 1918. Two trends underlay this from around mid-1916. First, the British mobilized increased resources for the IEFs, partly through unprecedented Indian government spending. The Indian Army in 1916-1917 roughly doubled its 1914-15 intake of Indian recruits to 210,000; by 1918 its annual recruitment target was 500,000; total wartime

Indian recruitment was 877,068 combatants and 563,396 non-combatants.<sup>70</sup> The production of war materials for the IEFs dramatically expanded.<sup>71</sup>

The second trend was that IEF D in Iraq, and IEF E with the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF), became better prepared for regular battle. Their Indian staff evolved with promotions for experienced and adaptive officers. The staff managed Indian battalions' improvement for battle in various respects: receipt of more equipment including British Lewis machine guns; training at Iraqi or Egyptian desert camps in the latest combined arms tactics to attack trenches (by means of closely cooperating waves of assault troops in tandem with the Royal Artillery); re-distribution of long-serving or seasoned British and Indian regimental officers with Western Front, East African, Iraq, Gallipoli or other experience, spreading them to help new recruits learn the Indian Army's lessons since 1914; and enhanced logistical support. In parallel the Royal Artillery in Iraq and Egypt grew stronger in equipment and in training, for example to use new Western Front techniques to target enemy artillery quickly as battles developed, such as "sound-ranging", a science of translating the sound of enemy gun fire into map coordinates of the gun's location.<sup>72</sup>

From December 1916 the Indian Army took the offensive in west Asia. IEF D, fielding 275,000 mostly Indian troops and starting south of Kut, annihilated the Turkish Army in Iraq up to November 1918. It advanced northwards over 350 miles using Indian infantry, cavalry and engineers combined with British infantry, artillery, aircraft and armored motor vehicles. It did so in stages painstakingly planned by Maude and his protégés on the IEF D staff, again and again breaking into Turkish lines before substantial infantry reserves exploited initial successes to capture Kut, Baghdad, Samarra, Ramadi, Fallujah and Mosul.<sup>73</sup>

IEF E was part of the 340,000-strong EEF, commanded up to June 1917 by the British Army's [Archibald Murray \(1860-1945\)](#) and then by [Edmund Allenby \(1861-1936\)](#), assisted by Indian General Staff officers with Western Front experience. From mid-1916 to late 1917, the EEF attacked out of Egypt across the Sinai Peninsula and up the eastern Mediterranean seaboard, into southern Palestine. Its IEF E units were a minority alongside its majority of other British Empire forces including Australian airmen, British tanks and Caribbean troops, its French and Italian contingents, and its increasingly well-supplied logistical services. The EEF's Indian units fought in all its battles up to December 1917 to push back the Turkish Fourth, Seventh and Eighth Armies and the German Asia Corps past Beersheba, Gaza and Jerusalem.<sup>74</sup>

In early 1918, the British Cabinet ordered the "Indianization" of the EEF, meaning the removal of the majority of the EEF's white British Empire troops for the Western Front, and their replacement by Indian troops joining IEF E from France, Iraq and India. By August 1918

the EEF had tens of thousands of Indian assault troops, mostly young wartime recruits in eight divisions, and large numbers of Indian non-combatants.

In September 1918, north of Jerusalem at the Battle of Megiddo, the EEF's Indian units made the Indian Army's most powerful offensive strike of the First World War. They combined with the EEF's other forces to annihilate the Turkish and German armies in Palestine. On a twenty-mile front, a Royal Artillery hurricane fifteen-minute preliminary bombardment – experience having taught that such short bombardments, as at Neuve Chapelle in 1915, were the most effective to achieve surprise – neutralized the initial target trenches. The EEF's assaulting infantry, mostly young Indian recruits, broke into the Turkish and German positions and captured them using an abundance of trench fighting equipment.<sup>75</sup> Indian cavalry broke through. They rode north over eighty miles in two days towards Nazareth and Haifa, cooperating with British armored cars and [airplanes](#). Many of these Indian cavalymen were among the world's soldiers most experienced and skilled in trench warfare. They had served overseas since 1914, including veterans of the Somme and Cambrai.<sup>76</sup>

By November 1918, IEF D stretched from Basra to Mosul, and IEF E from Cairo to Damascus. Their logistical services were beginning seriously to strain, making it uncertain how they would have coped with many more of India's recruits still awaiting overseas postings.<sup>77</sup> Still, the victories of IEFs D and E since late 1916 had confirmed the Indian Army's transformation into a globally experienced mass army skilled in modern warfare. One of its battalions, the 89<sup>th</sup> Punjabis, had served on seven fronts since 1914 – a world record.<sup>78</sup>

## Conclusion

The decisive theaters for bringing about the German and Turkish armistices in late 1918 were respectively the Western Front and the Balkans. The Indian victories in west Asia were most directly significant to British imperial expansion. By 1918, the Indian Army was the prime tool of British colonial conquest, fighting to realize the British Empire's territorial zenith: on one estimate it was 27 percent larger on land than in 1914.<sup>79</sup> Ultimately, the Indian Army was vital to the British war effort as an imperialist endeavor.

It is important to recognize socio-cultural<sup>80</sup> or political studies<sup>81</sup> of the war's meaning to Indian servicemen as colonial subjects, through [prose](#), poetry, images, song and oral memories; through Punjab, Indian Ocean and other regional perspectives; or through examining the subordinate place of Indian officers and their part in another type of "Indianization": the gradual reform of the Indian Army's officer corps by 1918 in the direction of equal rights of command for British and Indian officers.

Such studies can point towards new areas of military research on all the fronts. These areas might include: how colonial era British writings or histories deal with Indian military performance and have influenced subsequent interpretations; how British rewards and discipline motivated or compelled Indian combatants' military behavior; how "loyal" the Indian ranks were in the context of their following (or not following) British orders to fight, covering the role of Indian small unit leaders as transmitters of those orders; how the Indian Army functioned overseas as a force of [occupation](#) in Iran, Iraq, Germany and elsewhere; how the Indian Army served in British India, sometimes attacking Indians; or how Indian casualty statistics were compiled (accurately or otherwise) and have been represented.

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## Notes

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4. The statistics given for the IEFs' numbers of Indian troops are based on The Fourth Supplement to the London Gazette, 28 July 1919; on War Office, Statistics 1919; and on Government of India: India's Contribution to the Great War, Calcutta 1923. [↑](#)
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12. E.g. Beckett, Ian: The Great War, Harlow 2007, p. 94. [↑](#)
13. E.g. Greenhut, Imperial Reserve 1983, pp. 57, 68; or Omissi, David: The Sepoy and the

- Raj, Basingstoke 1994, pp. 150-151. ↑
14. E.g. Anderson, Ross: *The Forgotten Front*, Stroud 2014, pp. 30-63. ↑
  15. E.g. Townshend, Charles: *When God Made Hell*, London 2010, pp. 180-249. ↑
  16. E.g. Gardner, Trial 2003, pp. 177-182; or Sarkar, Sumit: *Modern India, 1885-1947*, New York 1989, p. 169. ↑
  17. All such Indian sources exist to an extent, but Indian recruits' childhoods usually under colonial rule widely left them without school education or developed literacy skills. They little wrote or recorded personal war experiences like western soldiers. ↑
  18. BL, APAC, Private Papers Mss Eur F729, "Transcripts of interviews with former Indian soldiers". Also, correspondence and conversation with descendants of Indian soldiers of 1914-1918, who have kindly shared family memories and documents. I am grateful to Rana Chhina and Adil Chhina for their input on such research. ↑
  19. Government of India: *The Army in India and Its Evolution*, Calcutta 1924, p. 219. ↑
  20. Morton-Jack, George: *The Indian Army on the Western Front*, Cambridge 2014, chapter 3. ↑
  21. E.g. *The Officers of the Regiment: History of the 1st Sikh Infantry*, volume 2, Calcutta 1903, pp. 87-88. ↑
  22. Morton-Jack, *Indian Army* 2014, pp. 110-114. ↑
  23. Army Headquarters: *Frontier Warfare and Bush Fighting*, Calcutta 1906, p. 71. ↑
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  31. Greenhut, *Imperial Reserve* 1983, pp. 69-70. ↑
  32. Keegan, John: *The First World War*, London 1999, pp. 141, 213. ↑
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36. TNA (PRO), WO 159/16, *War Office Reports on Health of Indian Troops in France (1914-15)*. [↑](#)
37. Morton-Jack, *Indian Army* 2014, chapter 9. [↑](#)
38. Morton-Jack, *Indian Empire* 2020, pp. 196-197, 199, 223-227; and Stanley, Peter: *Die in Battle, Do Not Despair*, 1915, Solihull 2015. [↑](#)
39. Hardinge, Charles: *My Indian Years*, London 1948, p. 101. [↑](#)
40. Alexander, Heber: *On Two Fronts*, New York 1917, pp. 149-209. [↑](#)
41. Harrison, Mark: *The Medical War*, Oxford 2010, pp. 52-58. [↑](#)
42. Morton-Jack, *Indian Empire* 2020, p. 359. [↑](#)
43. BL, APAC, Private Papers Mss Eur F729, "Transcripts of interviews with former Indian soldiers". [↑](#)
44. Corrigan, *Sepoys* 1999, chapters 7, 9, 10; and Morton-Jack, *Indian Army* 2020, chapters 10-11. [↑](#)
45. *Ibid.*, pp. 226-233. [↑](#)
46. *Ibid.*, pp. 233-236. [↑](#)
47. *Ibid.*, pp. 236-238. [↑](#)
48. *Ibid.*, pp. 239-242. [↑](#)
49. See note 13 above. [↑](#)
50. Cambridge University Library Department of Manuscripts and Archives (CUL/MD), Papers of Baron Hardinge of Penshurst, Letter from Sir James Willcocks to Hardinge 2 September 1915; and Letter from Hardinge to Sir John Nixon, 12 September 1915. [↑](#)
51. BL, APAC, IOR, L/MIL/17/5/3096, IEFA War Diary (Simla, June 1915), p. 32, appendix 50. [↑](#)
52. BL, APAC, IOR, L/MIL/17/5/3100-01, IEFA War Diaries (Simla, October to December 1915). [↑](#)
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56. Morton-Jack, *Indian Empire* 2020, pp. 349-352. [↑](#)
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61. Morton-Jack, *Indian Empire* 2020, pp. 301-305. ↑
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