

Lascar

By [Florian Stadler](#) and [Rozina Visram](#)

Lascar seamen and other sailors from the British Empire were deployed on vessels of the merchant marine and ocean liners to transport goods and passengers across the world. Hired predominantly by European and American shipping companies as cheap labour, they performed a vital role in the First World War to keep cargo flowing across sea routes.

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Definition

The term “lascar”, a European corruption of the Urdu term *Lashkar*, meaning an army or a camp, was first used for Indian sailors by the Portuguese. Adopted by the British, “lascar” did not refer to ethnicity, but terms of employment, as laid out in so-called Lascar Articles, documents listing their wages and areas of work. Lascars comprised men of diverse religious and regional backgrounds, though the majority were Muslims. They were traditionally recruited from the maritime regions of Gujarat, the Malabar Coast and East Bengal. However, as demand increased, recruitment was extended to land-locked agricultural areas of the Punjab, the North West Frontier Province, Bengal and Assam. Most signed on in the major port cities of Bombay and Calcutta.

Context

Originally recruited by the East India Company from the 17th century in small numbers as able seamen and cooks to bridge the manpower gap due to the death and desertion of European sailors, lascar employment was restricted by law (Navigational Laws) to a quarter of the total crew. Their numbers steadily rose in the 19th century as free trade and the expansion of the British shipping industry allowed owners to employ labour profitably.

With the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the introduction of steam navigation, which created totally new categories of labour in the engine rooms, lascars became indispensable as firemen and trimmers to stoke the furnaces, work shunned by European mariners. Nearly half the total number of seamen afloat were firemen, highlighting the importance of lascars in this sector of labour. Without their stamina, the British shipping industry would have ground to a halt.

Paid one-fifth to one-quarter of a British sailor’s wage, lascars inhabited a world deeply marked by racial division, which determined their pay, treatment and work. They found themselves at the bottom of the imperial hierarchy of maritime labour. Lascars were employed on the merchant ships of the [United States of America](#), [India](#), and many European nations. But the majority (over two-thirds) worked on British-registered ships, comprising 51,000 people or 17.5 percent of the total labour force

by 1914.

Lascars in the First World War

The pressures of war led to a further increase in lascar recruitment. They played a significant role in keeping hospital and supply ships afloat, carrying cargo, [food](#) and [ammunition](#) through danger zones and facing significant military risks. Targeted by [U-boats](#), they came under sustained [torpedo attacks](#). Yet lascars were not deterred.

According to the India Office Records, some 1,200 Indian sailors were imprisoned in enemy countries, the majority in [Germany](#). Officially, they fell into three categories:

1. lascars serving on British ships destroyed by enemy action who were taken prisoner;
2. those on British ships seized in enemy ports in 1914 who were then interned; and
3. those on enemy ships who were interned in enemy countries after the outbreak of war.

A significant number of lascars were deployed on German and Austrian shipping lines. For example, the Hansa Line recruited 4,000 lascar sailors annually before 1914, making the company the second largest recruiter of lascars after P&O in Bombay. Lascars employed on German and Austrian vessels were either discharged and repatriated by British consuls or made civilian [prisoners of war](#). The latter fell into the third category mentioned above.

Official records list the hundreds who died or were captured and interned due to enemy action. The majority were imprisoned in Zossen-Wünsdorf, Havelberg and Güstrow. Lascar letters and interviews reveal the inadequate living conditions, ill-treatment, hard labour and lack of food in prison camps. They were often made to work in munitions factories. Owing to a lack of medical care, numerous men died of tuberculosis or lung disease, possibly aggravated by the living conditions in the camps; some became disabled due to accidents at work. Charitable organisations sent parcels of food and warm clothing to imprisoned lascars, similarly to the arrangements made for interned soldiers. The [Red Cross](#) distributed these parcels.

However, reports also record some instances of good treatment – for example in the Hahn'sche Eisenrohrwerke in Grossenbaum near Düsseldorf, where 239 Indian civilians transferred from Zossen-Wünsdorf and Havelberg to work in the iron works.

Another issue that arose was the question of the wages of interned lascars. Bureaucrats in London and India debated whether lascars' wages should cease when the ships were sunk or continue to be paid until they were repatriated to [India](#). They also considered compensation and pensions due to the families of deceased lascars. Along with the British Board of Trade, the India Office drew up compensation rules. The lascars' wage scale determined the level of compensation or pension. For example, at the outbreak of war, a serang (boatswain and intermediary between Asian and European crew) was paid thirty-five rupees per month; a donkeyman (engineer responsible for the auxiliary or "donkey" boilers) twenty-five rupees; a greaser (responsible for greasing machinery) twenty rupees; and a fireman (responsible for firing the engines) twenty rupees. Additionally, all ranks were paid a daily allowance of one shilling and ten pence for accommodation and food. The Widow's Pension was divided into four classes: those whose husbands had earned more than thirty-five rupees monthly received a monthly pension of twelve rupees; those on twenty-five to thirty-five rupees, ten rupees; those on twenty to twenty-five rupees, eight rupees; and those on under twenty rupees, six rupees. Any pension ceased when a [widow](#) remarried. An extra allowance of one rupee per day was paid to all classes for each child up to the age of fourteen, when many joined the labour force. Given the inadequate recordkeeping by ship owners' agents as well as misspelt names in lists provided by German authorities, the India Office had difficulty tracing next of kin, causing delays in payment.

It is difficult to reliably estimate the number of lascars employed, interned and killed, due to a lack of accurate record keeping by shipping companies in the ports of Calcutta and Bombay especially – for Chittagong, no records are available at all. India Office Records estimate, however, that the lascar population in India at the time of the war was approximately 80,000. War casualties were recorded as 3,427, which roughly amounts to 4 to 5 percent of the total lascar population.

Legacy

In the aftermath of the First World War, the British Board of Trade and the India Office organised the repatriation of Indian seamen who had been taken prisoner or injured.

There was no significant amelioration of lascar working conditions. Indeed, while the British Maritime Board raised the pay rate for British sailors in 1917, lascar wages depreciated even further.

Very few individual memorials to lascar sailors exist in [Britain](#). In Dover, P&O commissioned a memorial to the twenty-two lascar seamen who lost their lives when the SS *Maloja* was sunk in the English Channel. In February 1917, it was suggested that lascars should be included in proposals to grant war medals to the Mercantile Marine. Lascars were to be eligible for the medal under the same conditions as other British seamen. This was also seen as a useful recruitment tool.

A group of Indian sailors was present at the unveiling of the Tower Hill Memorial in London on 12 December 1928 to honour the merchant mariners who lost their lives in the First World War. The memorial commemorates over 3,300 sunken ships and a loss of over 17,000 lives from Britain and the empire. However, the vital contributions of lascars to the war effort have remained largely unrecognised.

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