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Prisoners of War (India)

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During the First World War South Asian combatants and non-combatants were taken prisoner in France, Belgium, Mesopotamia, East Africa and other theatres of war. The conditions under which POWs were captured differed enormously in terms of housing, food, disciplinary rules, medical treatment, social and cultural facilities. Usually, the men were segregated not only according to their military ranks, but also to ethnic, social and religious criteria. South Asian prisoners were exposed to intensive propaganda. In Germany they also became the target of scholarly interest when German anthropologists and linguists carried out studies in camps.

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Introduction

With the "cultural turn" in First World War studies, the focus of research has shifted from predominantly military questions to a greater interest in the social and cultural aspects of the war. At the same time, there is greater engagement with the global dimensions of the conflict, particularly the responses to and experiences of the war in non-European regions, colonies and dominion

territories.^[1] Within this context, experiences of imprisonment have become a focus of research: captured soldiers have been viewed as social actors and the prisoner of war camp seen as a social space with hierarchies and conflicts, as well as encounters and exchange between people from different regional, religious, cultural and social backgrounds.^[2] Scholars have also dealt with prisoners as targets of [propaganda](#) or of political negotiations between the warfare sides.^[3] Studies on South Asian prisoners of war (POWs) have focused, among other aspects, on questions of encounters shaped by hierarchies and violence based on "racial" and social differentiations or on the militarization of labour in the context of war. Scholars have also examined social experiences in imprisonment, including strategies of survival and insubordination.^[4] However, because of the availability of archival source-material, more research has been done on the Indian POWs in Europe than in Mesopotamia, though most of the [Sepoys](#) fought in the latter theatre.

The sources which historians can study to explore the life and experiences of South Asian prisoners are predominantly German documents for the prisoners captured on the [Western Front](#) and mostly British sources for the Mesopotamian context. They comprise official military and political papers, camp reports given by the [International Red Cross](#) or other inspections and camp newspapers and accounts by other non-colonial prisoners of war who shared captivity. Besides these sources, scholars can find some individual documents such as letters, petitions, and memoirs as well as visual and audio documents. Recent studies on a limited amount of censored and extracted letters of the Sepoys, mostly from those fighting in Europe, have led to a new understanding of the Sepoys' own experiences and perceptions.^[5] However, while these letters written by South Asian soldiers from the front or the hospitals in England were documented by a special system of [censorship](#) and thus survived, we do not have the same information about letters from South Asian POWs elsewhere. Despite the fact that there was a special system for postal control for instance in the *Halbmondlager* (Halfmoon camp) in Wünsdorf where most of the Indian POWs from the Western Front taken by Germany were held, and suspicious letters were translated and commented upon by the Seminar for Oriental languages (*Seminar für Orientalische Sprachen, SOS*) in Berlin, no special content-related reports on POWs' letters written in South Asian languages have been discovered so far. Experiences of former prisoners can also be traced through interviews or interrogations of ex-prisoners conducted in England after the war. However, memoirs by South Asian combatants taken as prisoners of war are rare.^[6]

In recent years, a new extraordinary source has come into light which throws new light on the history of South Asian POWs: voices of POWs in the real sense of the word can be heard from a collection of sound recordings produced during 1915-1918 in German POW camps by the Royal Prussian Phonograph Commission. Most of them are now stored in the *Lautarchiv* of the Humboldt University in Berlin and contain prescribed texts that prisoners were asked to read as well as personal statements, songs and stories.^[7] Visual sources depicting the life of prisoners – for instance, [Otto Stiehl's](#) (1860-1940) photograph collections in the *Museum Europäischer Kulturen* in Berlin – have created new possibilities for the study of Indian POWs.^[8]

Daily life in captivity

About 1.4 million South Asians, including combatants and non-combatants, took part in the conflict in the different theatres of the First World War, mostly in Mesopotamia and [France](#) and [Belgium](#), but also in [East Africa](#), [Gallipoli](#), [Egypt](#) and Palestine. Of the total figure of South Asians involved in the war, around 140,000 were sent to Europe, including 90,000 soldiers and 50,000 labourers. By the end of 1915, however, most of the South Asians, with the exception of the cavalry who remained at the Western front, were sent to Mesopotamia where they fought several major engagements such as, fighting at [Kut al-Amara](#) from January 1916. Nearly 600,000 South Asians served in Mesopotamia.

During the war, a sizeable number of South Asians were taken prisoner. In German camps, around 1,000 South Asian military POWs and approximately the same number of civilian South Asians (students, businessmen, travellers or seamen) were detained.^[9] The number of South Asian prisoners in Mesopotamia was much higher. Although the exact figures are difficult to establish, it is estimated that around 10,000 South Asian men were captured by the Ottoman Army in the Mesopotamian campaign.^[10] There is little information about Indian combatants captured in East Africa after the [Battle of Tanga](#) in November 1914 where Indians participated in fighting the German troops.^[11]

South Asian soldiers who were captured by [Germany](#) on the Western Front were first taken to various POW camps in Germany and, from the beginning on 1915, concentrated in the *Halbmondlager* at Wünsdorf, one of two large "propaganda camps" for Muslim prisoners, the other being the *Weinberglager* at Zossen near Berlin. Within the *Halbmondlager*, a so-called *Inderlager* (Indian camp) was erected which separated the South Asian prisoners from others, mostly French colonial soldiers from North Africa.^[12] In spring 1917, the South Asian POWs, together with others, were transferred to a camp in Morile-Marculesti in [occupied](#) southern Romania from where they were repatriated after the end of the war.^[13] Besides the South Asian combatants captured at the Western front, Indian civilians in Germany were also interned during the war, for instance in Havelberg, [Ruhleben](#) and Wittenberg.^[14] South Asian combatants and non-combatants (members of labour and porter corps) captured in Mesopotamia were taken, among other places, to the camps at Ras-el-Ain and at Nisibin.^[15] In East Africa, South Asians were imprisoned as well, for instance in one case at a camp near Tabora.^[16]

Despite the fact that the fighting nations had pledged to follow the [Hague Convention](#) concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land of 1907, the actual conditions under which the POWs were held captive differed enormously in terms of housing, food, disciplinary rules, medical treatment, social and cultural facilities. It is extremely difficult to reconstruct the everyday life of the South Asian prisoners of war in the various camps. In Germany, captured men were segregated not just according to their military ranks, but also in terms of "racial", ethnic, social and religious criteria. In Ottoman-controlled Mesopotamia, British and Indian soldiers were initially held captive together

whereas Indian and British officers were treated separately.^[17] After General Charles Townshend's (1861-1924) surrender on 29 April 1916 at Kut-el-Amara, the captured soldiers were forced to march together from Kut-al-Amara via Baghdad and Mosul to the POW camp at Ras-al-Ain. A high number of prisoners died from exhaustion and starvation on the long "death march."^[18] Everywhere for the South Asian POWs, imprisonment meant submission, control and observation, a constant threat of violence and punishment. However, if one compares the situation in Germany with that in Mesopotamia, a higher degree of violence against South Asian POWs is to be found in Mesopotamia.^[19]

Prisoners of war in First World War Germany were often **forced to work** within and outside the camps. They became an important economic factor at a time when local men were fighting in the war. In Germany by 1916, most POWs were forced to work. Prisoners worked in agriculture, mining or small enterprises but also in large industrial concerns. Indian POWs from the camp in Großenbaum near Duisburg, for instance, worked for the Hahn Company (Hahnsche Werke) which later became a part of the Mannesmann Company.^[20] Initially, most military POWs had to work and civilians only in exceptional cases but the picture changed throughout the war because of the growing labour-shortage. South Asian other-rank non-Muslim POWs (especially Christians and Hindus) captured in Mesopotamia were forced to work under extremely difficult conditions on the Berlin-Baghdad railway lines whereas Muslim and British other-rank prisoners were separated and brought to other camps.^[21]

In many prisoner of war camps, up to several thousand men were housed, fed and clothed for a period of several years. The prisoners had to face hunger and cold; tuberculosis, typhoid and respiratory diseases were rampant. The mortality rate among the South Asian POWs in Germany was comparatively high. For thousands of men from various ethnic, social and religious backgrounds, a rigid daily routine was organized within the limited camp space. While so far little information has been discovered about camp life in Mesopotamia and East Africa, we know a lot more about the camps in Germany. The composition of the South Asian inmates in the POW camps mirrored the religious, ethnic and military structure of the Indian Army. Muslims were captured together with Hindus, Sikhs and Christians; **Gurkhas** together with Rajputs, Punjabis or Pashtuns. In the Wünsdorf camp, the South Asians as well as French colonial soldiers of North African origin were detained together. As this was a propaganda and show camp, more cultural and physical activities as well as facilities for religious practices were provided than in other camps. The camp had a library with books in various languages. Propaganda lectures were a regular occurrence.^[22]

South Asian POWs in Germany as targets of propaganda efforts

South Asian prisoners in World War I Germany were, like the prisoners from other regions, exposed to intensive propaganda activities. These measures were part of a comprehensive strategy related to the "Orient" which aimed at propagating anti-colonial uprisings to weaken the imperial control of

Britain, France and Russia.^[23] With regard to the Indian soldiers, German propaganda strategy was based on both a nationalistic strand of argumentation to strengthen anti-colonial feeling among South Asian prisoners and to make them renounce Britain, but also on a pan-Islamic strand, subordinated to the concept of *jihad*, which was proclaimed by the Turkish Sultan and supported by Germany. According to Max von Oppenheim's (1860-1946) idea of "revolutionising" the Islamic territories of Germany's war enemies, prisoners were to be persuaded to agree to be sent to Constantinople to join the Ottoman army and fight the armies of the Entente. In order to coordinate these propaganda activities, a special bureau within the Foreign Office was opened by von Oppenheim, the *Nachrichtenstelle für den Orient* (NfO, Information Centre for the Orient). Among the tasks laid down for the NfO were the following related to soldiers at the front or to prisoners of war:

- to write leaflets in "Oriental" languages to be used at the front or in the 'Orient'
- to edit newspapers for the Muslim POWs in Germany
- to supply the prisoners of "Oriental" nations with books, to organise lectures, accommodate their religious needs while taking into account their different origins
- to control and monitor the correspondence of the Muslim prisoners ^[24]

In order to implement these measures, the NfO established contacts with politically active intellectuals and revolutionaries from India, Egypt, Georgia, Ireland and Iran (some of them happened to be in Germany at the outbreak of the war) who were willing to collaborate with Germany in order to carry out anti-colonial propaganda activities. Relying on German political and economic power as well as the deep-seated German interest in India, some of the South Asian exiles from different political and religious backgrounds saw in their co-operation with Germany an opportunity to fight for an independent future for their country. To coordinate their activities in Berlin, an Indian Independence Committee (IIC) was founded - one among several national exile committees in Berlin collaborating with the NfO. Besides propaganda related to Indian troops in different theatres of the war, several members of the committee were actively involved in propaganda among the South Asian POWs in the German camps. Much of the propaganda was directed towards the special propaganda camps, the twin camps of Zossen (*Weinberglager*) and Wünsdorf (*Halbmondlager*) built at the end of 1914. This region to the south of Berlin had been a large military complex from the beginning of the 20th century. During the First World War, German troops were trained there and sent to the Western front from Wünsdorf railway station.

One of the central means of propaganda among the POWs was a special newspaper produced under the control of the NfO for the prisoners in Wünsdorf and Zossen. The newspaper with the title *El-Jihad* was planned to be produced by the NfO in several languages: Arabic, Russian, Turko-Tatarian, Georgian, Hindi and Urdu. For the Indian languages, however, the title was changed into Hindustan on the intervention of the Indian Independence Committee. Produced under the control of the NfO with the help of South Asian propagandist intellectuals, *Hindustan* included war news, pro-

German and anti-British propaganda as well as nationalist ideas and (in the Urdu edition) pan-Islamic thoughts. A particular aim of propaganda among the South Asian POWs was the formation of an "Indian Legion" for Afghanistan. In spring 1915, two members of the Berlin *Indian Independence Committee* – Mohammed Barkatullah (1854-1927) and Virendranath Chattopadhyaya (1880-1937) – were involved in preparations for an expedition to Turkey from where a part of the group would proceed to Kabul. Their aim was to convince the Emir of Afghanistan to allow the launching of an Indian battalion which would force its way into India from his territory. The expedition led by the German diplomat Otto Werner von Hentig (1886-1964) on behalf of the German Foreign Office and Raja Mahendra Pratap Singh (1886-1979) also included six Afridi POWs. The whole mission was unsuccessful: the Emir of Afghanistan did not allow for a force to attack India from Afghanistan.^[25]

South Asian prisoners of War as the focus of academic interest

The presence of men from many parts of the world including North Africa and Central and South Asia in the POW camps attracted a great deal of attention from German scholars during the war. Anthropologists and linguists regarded the camps as laboratories and - sanctioned by political and military authorities - carried out research there. These activities were allowed as long as they did not come into conflict with relevant military and political considerations. The Royal Prussian Phonographic Commission, founded in October 1915 under Wilhelm Doegen (1877-1967), recorded POWs languages, dialects and traditional music. Between December 1915 and December 1918, a total of 2,672 audio recordings were produced. Among them were nearly 300 in South Asian languages, including Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali, Garhwali, Baluchi, Nepali and Gurung.^[26] With regard to the South Asian POWs, German scholars like the Indologist Helmuth von Glasenapp (1891-1963) and the expert in Islamic studies Josef Horovitz (1874-1931) played a double role in the field of research as well as in the field of political consultation. Glasenapp was a member of the NfO and regularly published in the propaganda organ of the NfO, the *Korrespondenzblatt* (later renamed into *Der neue Orient*), which dealt with political, economic and intellectual issues related to the "Orient".^[27] Glasenapp also was a leading figure in the production of the camp newspaper *Hindustan*, and he selected books and journals for the camp library at the Halbmondlager. Von Glasenapp accompanied Mahendra Pratap during his stay in Berlin in spring of 1915. As a scholar with excellent knowledge of and interest in Indian languages and as a member of the Phonographic Commission, von Glasenapp carried out linguistic research and recording of sound samples in the camps. Josef Horovitz strongly supported von Oppenheim's strategy of pan-Islamic agitation among the Indian Sepoys. From his point of view, it was important to organise propaganda among the Indian prisoners that would include pan-Islamic ideas and take into account their purported sympathies for the Caliphate of the Ottoman Sultan. As a member of the Phonographic Commission, Horovitz carried out recordings in Hindustani and Baluchi in the prisoner of war camps.^[28] Beside linguistic research, anthropological research was also conducted in POW camps during the war. Felix von Luschan (1854-1925), who was also a member of the Phonographic Commission, and his doctoral candidate Egon von Eickstedt (1892-1965) together with other anthropologists travelled through

POW camps in Germany and Austria-Hungary in order to undertake body measurements and plaster casts of faces. In December 1916, von Eickstedt carried out body measurements among South Asian prisoners in Wünsdorf. After most of them had been transferred to Romania, Eickstedt continued his measurements there.^[29] Thus, Andrew Evans argues, prisoner of war camps in Germany and Austria became "veritable laboratories for the study of race".^[30] These scientific endeavours during the First World War have to be contextualised within the development of racial theory in Germany which later became a cornerstone of national socialist ideology.

Conclusion

By focusing on the conditions and experiences of South Asian Sepoys in captivity during the First World War, this article contributes to the on-going research, understanding and debates about the First World War as a "global" and "total" war, particularly from the perspective of social and cultural history. Scholars have begun to examine questions of captivity in a comparative and broader scale, but only a few works have dealt with the perspective of non-European prisoners so far. And even with regard to the captivity of South Asian POWs during the First World War, there is still a great imbalance between our knowledge about the various theatres of the war. Whereas the situation of South Asian POWs in Germany is well-documented and researched, less work has been done on Mesopotamia or East Africa. Further case studies are required in order to compare the experiences of the prisoners across various regions as well as the way captivity was instrumented in war propaganda and the development of racial politics. Furthermore, the lives of POWs after the war and their role in India remain an important and substantial but under-researched area.

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Notes

1. ↑ Papers on the impact of the two world wars in Asia and Africa are collected in: Liebau, Heike et al. (eds.): *The World in World Wars. Experiences, perceptions and perspectives from Africa and Asia*, Leiden et al. 2010. Case studies on Chinese, Vietnamese, Indian, West African and other soldiers' perspectives on the war are comprised in: Das, Santanu (ed): *Race, Empire and First World War Writing*, Cambridge 2011.
2. ↑ See for instance: Höpp, Gerhard: *Muslimen in der Mark. Als Kriegsgefangene und Internierte in Wünsdorf und Zossen 1914-1924*, Berlin 1997; Nagornaja, Oxana S.: *Drugoj voennyj opyt. Rossijskie voennoplennye Pervoj mirovoj vojny v Germanii (1914-1922)* [Another experience of war. Russian POWs in First World War Germany (1914-1922)], Moscow 2010; Jones, Heather: *Imperial captivities: colonial prisoners of war in Germany and the Ottoman empire, 1914-1918*, in: Das (ed.), *Race, Empire and First World War Writing* 2011, pp. 175-193.

3. † For a general overview on camp newspapers as means of propaganda see: Poeppinghege, Rainer: *Im Lager unbesiegt. Deutsche, englische und französische Kriegsgefangenenzeitungen im Ersten Weltkrieg*, Essen 2006; On POWs as targets of propaganda efforts see also: Jones, Heather: *Violence against Prisoners of War in the First World War. Britain, France and Germany 1914-1920*, Cambridge 2011, pp. 29-69.
4. † Especially on South Asian Sepoys see, for instance: Das, Santanu: *Indians at Home, Mesopotamia and France, 1914-1918: towards an intimate history*, in: Das, Race, Empire and First World War Writing 2011, pp. 70-89; Singha, Radhika: *Front Lines and Status Lines: Sepoy and 'Menial' in the Great War 1916-1920*, in: Liebau et al.: *The World in World Wars 2010*, pp. 55-106.
5. † See: Omissi, David: *Indian Voices of the Great War Soldiers' Letters, 1914-1918*, Houndsmill et al. 1999; Markovits, Claude: *Indian Soldiers' Experiences in France during World War I. Seeing Europe from the Rear of the Front*, in: Liebau et al.: *The World in World Wars 2010*, pp. 29-53.
6. † Das, *Indians at Home 2011*, pp. 75-81.
7. † See the website of the Lautarchiv: <http://www.sammlungen.hu-berlin.de/schlagworte/8/Lautarchiv> (retrieved 06.03.2013). Another part of the collection is hosted in the Phonogramm-Archiv within the *Ethnologischen Museum in Berlin*. Mahrenholz, Jürgen: *Recordings of South Asian Languages and Music in the Lautarchiv of the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin*, in: Roy, Franziska/Liebau, Heike/Ahuja, Ravi (eds.): "When the war began we heard of several kings". *South Asian Prisoners in World War I Germany*, New Delhi 2011, pp. 187-206.
8. † See for instance: Kahleyss, Margot, *Indian Prisoners of War in World War I. Photographs as Source Material*, in: Roy/Liebau/Ahuja: "When the war began..." 2011, pp. 207-230.
9. † Roy, Franziska: *South Asian Civilian Prisoners of War in First World War Germany*, in: Roy/Liebau/Ahuja (eds.), "When the war began..." 2011, pp. 53-95, esp. p. 56. Ahuja, Ravi: *The Corrosiveness of Comparison. Reverberations of Indian Wartime Experiences in German Prison Camps (1915-1919)*, in: Liebau et al.: *The World in World Wars 2010*, pp. 131-166, here pp. 146-148.
10. † Das, *Indians at Home 2011*, p. 78; Jones, *Imperial captivities*, in Das (ed.), *Race, Empire and First World War Writing 2011*, pp. 177, 178.
11. † Steinbach, Daniel, *Challenging European Colonial Supremacy: The Internments of 'Enemy Aliens' in British and German East Africa during the First World War*, in Kitchen, James E./Miller, Alisa/ Rowe, Laura (eds.): *Other Combatants, Other Fronts: Competing Histories of the First World War*, Cambridge 2011, pp. 153-175.
12. † Ahuja, Ravi: *Lost Engagements? Traces of South Asian Soldiers in German Captivity, 1915-1918*, in Roy/Liebau/ Ravi : "When the war began we heard of several kings", pp. 17-52, here p. 20.
13. † On South Asian POWs in Germany see the collection of articles: Roy/Liebau/Ahuja: "When the war began we heard of several kings" 2011.
14. † Roy, *South Asian Civilian Prisoners*, in: Roy/Liebau/Ahuja (eds.), "When the war began..." 2011.
15. † Jones, *Imperial Captivities*, in Das (ed.), *Race, Empire and First World War Writing 2011*; Das, *Indians at Home*.
16. † Steinbach, *Challenging European Colonial Supremacy in Kitchen/Miller/Rowe (eds.), Other Combatants, Other Fronts 2011*, pp. 163, 164.

17. ↑ Jones, Imperial Captivities, in Das (ed.), Race, Empire and First World War Writing 2011, p. 185.
18. ↑ Jones, Imperial Captivities, in Das (ed.), Race, Empire and First World War Writing 2011; Das, Indians at Home.
19. ↑ Jones, Imperial Captivities, in Das (ed.), Race, Empire and First World War Writing 2011, p. 178
20. ↑ Roy, South Asian Civilian Prisoners, in: Roy/Liebau/Ahuja (eds.), "When the war began..." 2011.
21. ↑ Jones, Imperial captivities, in Das (ed.), Race, Empire and First World War Writing 2011, p. 185,188.
22. ↑ On the propaganda activities see: Liebau, Heike: The German Foreign Office, Indian Emigrants and Propaganda Efforts among the "Sepoys", in: Roy/ Liebau/ Ahuja (eds.), "When the war began we heard of several kings", pp. 96-129.
23. ↑ For the global geopolitical context of the German policy on colonial POWs see: Jenkins, Jennifer: 'Fritz Fischer's "Programme for Revolution": Implications for a Global History of Germany in the First World War,' Journal of Contemporary History, 48/2 (2013), pp. 397-417.
24. ↑ Liebau, The German Foreign Office, in: Roy/ Liebau/ Ahuja (eds.), "When the war began we heard of several kings" 2011, pp. 100-102.
25. ↑ Liebau, The German Foreign Office, in: Roy/ Liebau/ Ahuja (eds.), "When the war began we heard of several kings" 2011, pp. 122-125.
26. ↑ Mahrenholz, Recordings of South Asian Languages, in: Roy/ Liebau/ Ahuja (eds.), "When the war began we heard of several kings" 2011.
27. ↑ The whole title is: Der neue Orient: Halbmonatsschrift für das politische, wirtschaftliche und geistige Leben im gesamten Orient. ("The new Orient, half-monthly journal on the political, economic and intellectual life in the entire Orient").
28. ↑ Mahrenholz, Recordings of South Asian Languages, in: Roy/ Liebau/ Ahuja (eds.), "When the war began we heard of several kings" 2011, pp. 198-200; Liebau: The German Foreign Office, pp. 108, 117.
29. ↑ See: Lange, Britta, South Asian Soldiers and German Academics: Anthropological, Linguistic and Musicological Field Studies in Prison Camps, in: Roy/ Liebau/Ahuja (eds.), "When the war began we heard of several kings" 2011, pp. 149-184.
30. ↑ Evans, Andrew D.: Anthropology at War. World War I and the Science of Race in Germany, Chicago 2010, p. 139.

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